

REFUGE FRIENDS, INC.

WITNESS

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Mr. Petzel. Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Randy Petzel, president of the Refuge Friends, Incorporated, which is the friends organizations that is affiliated with Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

In the midst of 4 million people down the road from the largest shopping mall in America, a neighboring major international airport sits a critical piece of Minnesota wilderness. The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge was created in 1976 to provide habitat for a large number of migratory water fowl, fish, and other wildlife species threatened by industrial and commercial development, and to provide environmental education, wildlife recreational opportunities, and interpretive programming for Twin Cities residents. Considered one of the premiere urban refuges in the National Wildlife System, the 14,000-acre refuge is part of corridor of land and water that stretches for 70 miles along the Minnesota River.

St. Paul, Minneapolis, and the surrounding suburbs represent a rich diversity of cultures with a rapidly-growing population of color, expected to make up at least 4-percent of the population in 2040. Yet refuge visitation does not reflect this diversity. Unless refuges, like Minnesota Valley, welcome communities of color and identify barriers to participation, the future of conservation is at risk. Personal connection and experience with nature is the foundation from which a conservation ethic is built for future generations.

Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge also provides a superior environmental education environment in the Twin Cities. Through partnership and training programs, the refuge served over 9,000 students and teachers in fiscal year 2018. Refuge staff provided expert outdoor lessons for students, trained dozens of new teachers in the skills of teaching students outdoors, and mentored recent college graduates to become the next generation of environmental educators.

The resource needs of the refuge system at large are largely reflected locally at Minnesota Valley, and I would like to highlight a few examples. Law enforcement. The refuge has only one wildlife officer, and he is shared with a neighboring refuge covering much of the State of Minnesota. In addition, this one officer has been detailed to the southern border for 6 weeks in the last 6 months. During these times, the natural resources of the refuge and the safety of our visitors are compromised. Previously, the refuge had enough resources to fund three officers, and the demands of the urban population are only growing.

Operation and maintenance funds. Minnesota Valley, like all refuges in the system, is poorly underfunded. It is actually

estimated that nationally we are receiving only 50 percent of the needed operation and maintenance money. The visitor center in Bloomington is an aging resource. It is extremely valuable to our community. Important updates, including new doors, upgraded security cameras, solar lights, the parking repairs to our wheelchair lift and elevators are all outside of our present maintenance budget.

Finally, urban program. We are connecting with a multitude of cultural and civic groups to engage with new audiences. Partnerships with local artists, art education nonprofits, and cultural organizations connect nature, art, and culture in an annual eco-arts fest, which the refuge hosts, incorporating perspectives from Hispanic, Somali, and Karen communities. English language learner hikes led by bilingual staff and local interns introduce new visitors to the unfamiliar habitats of the wildlife refuge.

These unique approaches and partnerships are just the tip of the iceberg. However, Minnesota Valley has only three-fourths of an employee focused on urban outreach. If the vision of providing urban refuges is reinstated, this is a program that began in 2012 with 14 refuges, only 4 have been funded so far. And we are hopeful that Minnesota Valley may be the next in line for that extra funding.

Finally, this country's 567 wildlife refuges are a national treasure. They provide clean air and water, a haven for wildlife, and a place for people to connect with nature. At this time when America's children are suffering from too few outdoor opportunities, the work at the Minnesota Valley Wildlife Refuge and refuges around the country is especially important. I urge you to provide adequate maintenance and operation funding, law enforcement funding, and urban funding so these refuges throughout our system can survive and thrive in the 21st century.