

Testimony of Stephen Guertin
Deputy Director for Policy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior,
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
On
H.R. 6427, Red River National Wildlife Refuge Boundary Modification Act; H.R.
6734, Keep America’s Refuges Operational Act of 2022; H.R. 7025, Advancing Human
Rights-Centered International Conservation Act of 2022

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Stephen Guertin, Deputy Director for Policy for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) within the Department of the Interior (Department). I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on three bills regarding international and domestic conservation.

The Service’s mission is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Our efforts to achieve this mission span a wide variety of programs and include on-the-ground work with partners across the globe.

The National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), which is the focus of two bills under consideration today, is key to conserving many of our nation’s species and their habitats. The Refuge System’s mission is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and the habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. With more than 560 refuges spanning the country, the Refuge System plays a key role in protecting diverse ecosystems and species and providing access to nature for millions of Americans.

As the third bill before the Subcommittee today addresses, threats to global biodiversity take the Service’s work beyond our borders to species, habitats, and local communities around the world. Multiple programs across the Service work with international partners to implement on-the-ground conservation, support local people and indigenous communities, build capacity and expertise, implement international wildlife treaties and trade policy, track and interdict the illegal wildlife trade, and investigate wildlife crimes with a focus on transnational criminal organizations involved in wildlife trafficking. This work comes with both challenges and opportunities for the Service.

We appreciate the Subcommittee’s interest in the Service’s important work. The Service supports the legislation before the Subcommittee today and would welcome the opportunity to work with you on suggestions regarding H.R. 7025 and H.R. 6427. We offer the following comments on the three bills under consideration today and look forward to discussing our views with the Subcommittee.

H.R. 6427, Red River National Wildlife Refuge Boundary Modification Act

The Service supports H.R. 6427, which would modify the acquisition boundary at Red River National Wildlife Refuge (Red River NWR). This legislation would expand Red River NWR's acquisition boundary by approximately 3,300 acres to include a tract of land owned by Ducks Unlimited known as the Campbell Tract. The Campbell Tract is located in Caddo and Red River Parishes near the refuge's Bayou Pierre Unit and is one of only a few areas in this part of Louisiana that holds large numbers of wintering waterfowl. H.R. 6427 would help facilitate future efforts to conserve this prime wildlife habitat for generations to come. This legislation would not immediately add any land to Red River NWR, nor would it confer any new restrictions, conditions, or requirements on the landowner within the acquisition boundary. The bill would authorize the Service to acquire lands for the refuge within the new boundary area. The Service only purchases lands from willing sellers.

Red River NWR was added to the Refuge System in 2002 following the enactment of the Red River National Wildlife Refuge Act (P.L. 106-300). The refuge consists of more than 15,800 acres divided amongst a headquarters unit in the Shreveport/Bossier City metroplex and four additional units throughout the Red River Valley. By law, the Service may acquire up to 50,000 acres of lands and waters within a five-parish area of the Red River Valley. The Service may only purchase fee title or conservation easements within the refuge's approved acquisition boundary.

While the Red River Valley is one of the most altered ecosystems in Louisiana, Red River NWR is situated in protected bottomland hardwood forests and wetlands in the northwestern portion of the state. This area provides important habitat for migrating ducks and geese that use the Central and Mississippi flyways, and one of the refuge's primary goals is to protect and re-establish bottomland hardwood forests for migrating and wintering waterfowl, songbirds, and other wildlife.

In addition, Red River NWR offers premier recreational opportunities to the American public. In 2020, Red River NWR welcomed more than 209,000 visitors to hunt, fish, canoe, kayak, and observe and photograph wildlife. According to a 2017 report, visits to Red River NWR generate more than \$1.8 million annually in economic output and more than \$500,000 annually in job outcome.

H.R. 6427 would facilitate the Service's ongoing collaboration with Ducks Unlimited to protect key habitat for wintering and migratory waterfowl. If acquired, the lands and waters in the expanded acquisition boundary would advance refuge management objectives by providing food and sanctuary to support continental waterfowl populations. Such acquisitions would create additional acreage for waterfowl hunting as well as for bird watching. Additionally, these acquisitions would increase access to nature for surrounding urban communities and support the America the Beautiful initiative, which aims to conserve 30 percent of U.S. land and water by 2030.

Although the Service has the authority to modify the refuge's acquisition boundary administratively, this legislation would accelerate conservation efforts by eliminating the time and expense associated with an administrative expansion. The boundary expansion would not

result in the immediate acquisition of land and water for the refuge; rather, it would provide an additional option for future land acquisition, provided the availability of funding and a willing seller. This legislation would not confer any additional restrictions on Ducks Unlimited, or any future owners of the property, instead providing them with another option for use of their land.

Red River NWR consists of five separate units. The Campbell Tract, if acquired, would create an additional separate unit. However, the Service notes that there is a possibility of connecting the acquisition boundary of the Campbell Tract to the existing refuge acquisition boundary for the Bayou Pierre Unit due to the close proximity of the Campbell Tract to the Bayou Pierre Unit. Depending on availability of funds and the presence of willing sellers, this could enhance habitat connectivity and create new wildlife corridors. The Service would welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Subcommittee and sponsor the possibility of additional modifications to the acquisition boundary to achieve this goal.

H.R. 6734, Keep America's Refuges Operational Act of 2022

H.R. 6734 would amend the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 to reauthorize appropriations for the Refuge System's volunteer programs, community partnerships, and education programs for fiscal years 2022 through 2026. It would also reauthorize provisions authorizing the Department to accept and use gifts, devises, and bequests for the benefit of the Service.

These programs were first authorized by the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnerships Enhancement Act of 1998 (Enhancement Act), which amended the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956. Recognizing the value of volunteer, partner, and education programs in bolstering the Refuge System's limited resources and fostering greater public awareness of national wildlife refuges, the Enhancement Act codified and expanded the Service's authorities to administer these programs. It also authorized \$2,000,000 for each fiscal year 1999 to 2004 to carry out these activities. This funding has since been reauthorized several times through bipartisan legislation.

The Service supports H.R. 6734. Refuge System volunteer, partnership, and education programs greatly enhance the Refuge System's ability to meet its mission and play a key role in connecting communities to nature.

Volunteers are essential to the Service's administration of the Refuge System. Representing a wide range of ages, backgrounds, and interests, volunteers do everything from building and maintaining trails to leading tours and field trips to restoring degraded habitats. Their commitment to the Refuge System adds up in a major way. Even during the pandemic, in fiscal year 2021, more than 11,000 volunteers donated 68,879 hours of their time to benefit the Refuge System. This was equivalent to 318 full-time Refuge employees and amounted to an economic contribution of more than \$18.5 million dollars. Our volunteers' generosity and commitment to the Refuge System enables important work that otherwise would not be accomplished.

Community-based partnerships with refuge Friends organizations similarly enhance the Refuge System's capacity to meet its statutory mission. Nearly 200 locally organized, non-profit organizations are dedicated to supporting the mission of their local refuge or refuge complex. By building strong connections between communities and refuges and providing valuable

fundraising, advocacy, and volunteer services, Friends groups make the Service's conservation efforts go further.

Refuge System education programs are similarly important in connecting families and people of all ages to the outdoors and building a new generation of environmental stewards. National wildlife refuges are living laboratories that help students learn science, math, local history, and language arts through hands-on experiences in nature. In typical years, more than 700,000 students and teachers use refuges as their outdoor classrooms.

H.R. 7025, Advancing Human Rights-Centered International Conservation Act of 2022

H.R. 7025 would establish processes and procedures for the Department, Service, and Service grantees to respond to credible allegations of human rights violations in foreign countries. H.R. 7025 would provide the Service and the Department additional tools to respond to credible allegations of violations of human rights. The Service supports the goals of H.R. 7025 and would welcome the opportunity to discuss the matters addressed in this testimony as well as additional clarifying suggestions with the sponsor and the Subcommittee.

H.R. 7025 would prohibit the Service from supporting a foreign security force if there is a credible allegation of a human rights violation, unless effective steps have been taken to bring the offender(s) to justice and prevent violations in the future. The Service would welcome the opportunity to discuss some of the terms and definitions used in these sections to ensure clarity.

H.R. 7025 would require the Service and Department of State to share lists of all foreign security forces receiving financial support from the Service and to vet those individuals and units. The Service agrees that vetting of foreign security forces supported by the Service should occur. We support the goal of this provision and would welcome the opportunity to discuss alternatives to ensure the most effective and efficient implementation of vetting of foreign security forces supported by the U.S. government.

The legislation would require grantees of the Service to implement a social safeguards plan and procedures to address violations of the human rights policy of the organization. H.R. 7025 would establish a process for grantees to report credible allegations of human rights violations to the Service, and for the Service to report those allegations to the Inspector General and foreign governments. The Service would welcome the opportunity to discuss potential unintended consequences of these provisions.

H.R. 7025 would also require the Service to perform financial and programmatic audits of grantees and ties financial award agreements made by the Service to existing regulations. The Service would welcome the opportunity to discuss existing regulations and authorities with the sponsor and Subcommittee.

Global biodiversity faces ever-growing and evolving threats, including climate change, wildlife trafficking, rapid habitat loss, and disease, which are pushing species to extinction and threatening human well-being in many parts of the world. Congress has tasked the Service with conserving the world's at-risk species and habitats with financial-assistance programs such as the Multinational Species Conservation Acts. Additionally, Congress has provided foreign assistance funding through annual appropriations to provide financial assistance to partners to combat

wildlife trafficking, conserve great apes, and support implementation of United States Agency for International Development's Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE). The Service is the lead federal agency for conserving wildlife, fish and habitat, and our work is critical to stemming global biodiversity loss and conserving some of the world's most iconic wildlife species, including African and Asian elephants, tigers, rhinoceros, great apes, sea turtles, scarlet macaws, and cheetahs.

The Service has long recognized the importance of not only investing in wildlife internationally, but also in people. Without the support of local communities in the areas we work, conservation efforts will not last. We recognize that these local communities are the stewards of their own natural resources, and our approach is to work with and support them in their efforts to conserve wildlife and habitat. In particular, we acknowledge the need to strengthen partnerships with indigenous communities, and we are committed to engaging those communities in a way that addresses both wildlife conservation and historic injustice.

Additionally, the nature of our international work comes with complexities and risk factors beyond those directly related to conservation, and far different than those typically encountered in our domestic work. Many of the areas that are home to species with the greatest conservation need are also plagued by long histories of socio-political conflict and weak governance systems. Some of the areas where the Service works deal daily with violence and organized criminal activity. The Service's investments in these areas can provide improved safety, governance, and stability for local communities. However, there is also an inherent risk in working in these regions that can impact the Service's work, including human rights abuses, corruption, or abuse of power.

Despite these challenges, the Service continues to strengthen our work to consider the well-being not only of wildlife, but also of the broader environment, and the people who live with and depend on both. We are reassessing our approach to our international conservation work and the systems and processes within which we execute our mission. We have taken steps to implement better safeguards to protect against human rights violations, but we need to do more. We need an approach to conservation that acknowledges the impacts of our role, recognizes the complicated nature of our work today, and charts a path towards a more just and inclusive conservation future. We are working closely with other federal agencies to identify best practices and policies. However, there are practical limitations to what we can implement, and meaningful improvements will require additional policy changes, regulatory action, and additional authorities from Congress such as those included in H.R. 7025. The Service supports the goals of H.R. 7025 and would welcome the opportunity to discuss the legislation with the sponsor and the Subcommittee.

Conclusion

We appreciate the Subcommittee's interest in advancing fish and wildlife conservation both at home and abroad. As species and ecosystems around the world face mounting threats, the Service is committed to working collaboratively with partners to secure a brighter future for both wildlife and people. Thank you for your continued interest in the Service's important mission and we look forward to working with you on these and future legislative efforts.