

**Testimony of John Verdon, President
Friends of Pool 9, Upper Mississippi River Refuge
Submitted to
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
April 28, 2009**

Re. National and local refuge concerns, financial and otherwise, Fiscal Year 2010.

To: The Chair and Subcommittee Members,

My name is John Verdon and I represent citizens from the heartland of America. I want to thank the committee for allowing me to speak on issues of concern that relate to our national wildlife refuges. I'm President of a fairly recent Friends group (Friends of Pool 9, Upper Mississippi River Refuge) that Incorporated in January, 2006. The Upper Mississippi River is sectioned by the Lock and Dam System that creates lakes or pools backed up above each dam. Our cause was and continues to be to protect and enhance a 31-mile-long and three-mile-wide stretch of the Mississippi River above Lock and Dam #9, commonly referred to as Pool 9. Local passion and concern was created during meetings between local citizens and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during the Comprehensive Conservation Plan in 2004 (mandated by Congress every 15 years). Our Friends group formed as a result of the interactions of these two groups, and consists largely of residents from the states of Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin that border the river. We presently have over 500 members representing 16 states and two foreign countries.

Our mission is simple and straight-forward; *to conserve the cultural and natural resources within Pool 9, and to foster wise public use and enjoyment of the Refuge and the Upper Mississippi River.* We have since broadened our scope to include the entire 261-mile-long Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, from Winona, Minnesota to Savanna, Illinois. We are a grass-roots organization that does not charge dues, but instead simply asks for a commitment to work on projects that will protect and promote the river resource. We were recently named the **Friends Group of the Year** and honored in Washington, D.C. by the National Wildlife Refuge Association in late February, 2009.

I'm here today to inform you of my concerns for our local refuge and all refuges across this great nation. I'm here today to ask you to fund the National Wildlife Refuge System at **\$514 million for Fiscal Year 2010**, the amount advocated by the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement and the House National Wildlife Refuge Caucus. The Midwest Region (Region 3) of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuge System covers eight states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin). The Upper Mississippi River Refuge is over 261 miles long, and is the most visited national wildlife refuge with over 3.7 million visitors annually. Since fiscal year 2004 the refuge system has operated at a relatively static annual base budget. At the same time, costs for personnel and operations continued to increase due to inflation. This resulted in staff reduction policies, and coupled with the appearance of invasive species and other environmental issues and concerns has dealt a severe blow to our refuge system. The Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge in northeast Iowa is presently without a manager/biologist, and there are three other vacancies on the Refuge due to funding shortfalls. The financial shortfall was/is critical to an otherwise healthy refuge system. The Refuge is

presently understaffed as determined by the national model and the recently completed CCP. There are currently 39 staff employed as full time equivalents (FTE's), which is drastically below the national staffing model level of 73 FTE's and the 64 FTE's recommended in the CCP. Recent Congressional funding increases in 2008 and 2009 have helped slow the downward trend, but to reverse it and establish an upward movement will require even more dollars.

A commitment of \$514 million in FY2010 will begin to put the Refuge System on track to reach **the necessary basic funding level of \$765 million by Fiscal Year 2013**. Without this basic initiative the National Wildlife System will fall further behind as operations and maintenance costs escalate, staff reduction plans are again implemented, invasive species management and long term monitoring are limited, and fewer opportunities will be available for the American taxpayer to use and enjoy our remarkable national refuges. Simply stated, **we need to invest in the future of America and our children** (the future conservation stewards of our resources) before it's too late.

On a similar note, the **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)** needs to be secured at the full amount of \$900 million annually to support the purchase of properties adjacent and intrusive to refuges. A small tract of land (130 acres) that is privately owned (in southeastern Minnesota) intrudes into Pool 9, Upper Mississippi River Refuge. It represents a disruption to the continuity of management to the refuge system, and needs to be purchased and added to the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge System as soon as possible. The **current funding level of \$500,000 for 2009** has already been spent, there is a need for an **additional \$2 million** for tracts from willing sellers that are in appraisal or offer status. There are many land parcels throughout the 549 national refuges that must be purchased when they become available. If not, developers will acquire the property and further impact the effectiveness of this and other refuges for many years to come. A continued lack of funding equates to lost opportunities. The **Land and Water Conservation Fund needs to be funded at the full amount of \$900 million annually** so that acquisitions can be made as they become available. I ask that you secure this level of funding for the sake of our refuges and future generations.

Invasive plant and animal species are making a rapid and destructive appearance in the Upper Miss Refuge as they are in many other refuges nation wide. The Asian carp, Zebra mussel, Purple Loosestrife, and Emerald Ash Borer will change the riverine ecosystem dramatically in the next few years if left unchecked. The Asian carp (a high-jumping fish) has already reached critical mass on the Illinois River (where it represents 80% of the biomass) and has been found in the Mississippi River as far north as La Crosse, Wisconsin, upstream of Pool 9. In addition to their voracious appetite and trend toward dominance in the aquatic world, they represent a danger to boaters since they leap into the air when agitated by boat traffic. Many are over 20 pounds and striking a boater traveling 20 miles per hour could prove to be fatal. If left uncontrolled their very existence will create a fishing mono-culture and have a lasting effect on the diversity and abundance of all fish species. Research is critical to finding a method of population control of this and all invasive species. The Upper Miss Refuge has a **current budget of \$0 for invasives work and needs at least \$250,000 to implement a basic research and monitoring program**. The Upper Midwest Environmental Center (UMESC) Pest Management Program for Aquatic Invasive Species research lab at La Crosse (part of the U.S. Geological Survey) is desperately trying to find a solution to the Asian carp invasion. However,

they are grossly under-funded to adequately address these issues. I'm asking that you inform **USGS Acting Director, Dr. Suzette Kimball of the urgency of this matter and the need to increase the UMESC budget by \$3 million annually.** Their research efforts would also benefit many other refuges struggling with invasive fish.

While increases in the budget recently have begun to address some critical needs of the refuge system, namely staff and facilities, others remain obscured and unfunded. **Volunteerism and education** needs to become more widespread throughout our national refuges and with the American people. It's a stated goal of President Obama and the new Administration, and could have far reaching benefits. Just this past weekend our Friends group completed our annual Pool-wide Clean-up of all 90 square miles (over 56,000 acres) of Pool 9. Over **200 volunteers, four government agencies, and four private enterprises** cooperated in a day of river clean-up and restoration. Rusted and rotting shoreline vessels were removed from the river corridor, as were thousands of pounds of tires, metal tanks, lawn chairs, and other debris from the Upper Iowa River flood of last year. U.S. Coast Guard navigation buoys were removed from the backwater and returned to the navigation channel shoreline for Coast Guard pickup. Hundreds of plastics in the form of water bottles and barrels were recycled. Volunteers worked tirelessly to protect and enhance their little corner of the world. Pool 10, located down river from Lansing, Iowa, also completed their river clean-up this past weekend as well. These are major volunteerism events that are supported by the cooperating government agencies (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Iowa and Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources), and are financed by grants, donations, and Friends of Pool 9. This endeavor tends to serve as a method of building local citizen leadership, and creates responsibility, ownership, and stewardship for the resource by all who participate.

Another highly successful event is the Mississippi River Adventure Day (MRAD), sponsored by Friends of Pool 9 and the same cooperating government agencies listed above, as well as the National Audubon Society, the Genoa National Fish Hatchery, and the Allamakee County Community Foundation.. It places 200 kids and their parents in a Tom Sawyer/Huck Finn day of adventure. Some of the activities include polly-wogging for mussels, seining for fish, and catching frogs. Eight stations lead by government professionals enlighten the kids with stories, information, and hands-on activities at each site. The purpose for the day is to stimulate interest and enthusiasm for the river resource. It also helps kids and parents become better stewards of the refuge. All costs of transportation, food, and materials are paid by grants and Friends of Pool 9. Participants have a day on the Mississippi River they will long remember, and hopefully open the door to other family experiences that will enhance awareness and appreciation of nature.

I would like to see a financial commitment from **government agencies to promote volunteerism on a grand scale.** With 549 refuges nation wide and only 220 Friends groups there is much yet to be done. While volunteers exist to support all 549 refuges, budgets and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff are not available to organize and foster the development of many of these Friends groups. On the 261-mile-long Upper Mississippi River Refuge we are trying to form groups in all eleven Pools (4-14). With 3.7 million visitors annually including boaters, fishermen, hunters, bird watchers, campers, and all other sorts of outdoor enthusiasts, the pool of volunteers is large. Across the nation a volunteer support base is present to form numerous Friends groups, but financial support is not present. District Managers

have more immediate and pressing issues of resource and operational needs to attend to. There is a need to increase staff in each District so that a USFWS staff member can be assigned (as part of their job description) to initiate the development of citizen involvement, through the formation of Friends groups. Volunteers cannot actively assist the refuge resource if Fish and Wildlife Service staff is not available. **The budget should be increased even more than the proposed \$514 million for the formation of Friends groups in every refuge.**

While the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska is thousands of miles away from Iowa, an issue there hits very close to home. I am concerned about one of the projects approved by passage of the recent Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-11). While the overall spirit of the bill is to protect habitat for wildlife, one provision would remove wilderness protection and send a message nationwide that no wilderness area is sacred, and that development is possible anywhere. **The bill would allow internationally significant Wilderness lands in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge to be removed from federal protection in order to construct a road between the Alaskan communities of King Cove and Cold Bay.** I consider this a “keystone” case, upon which other nation-wide refuge issues will be compared and decided. It sends the message that even the most important wildlife areas in the world are available for development. The Izembek Lagoon Complex was originally designated a wetlands of international importance during the Ronald Reagan Administration recognizing the area’s global significance. I would ask that you relay my concerns to Secretary of Interior, Ken Salazar. **The project can be stopped if it is found to not be in the public interest.** Its provisions are contrary to the generations-long American commitment to protect our treasured lands. Our Friends of Pool 9 motto is that **we can, we will, and we have, had an impact on the world.**

Thank you for taking the time to read and hear my concerns for our national wildlife areas and the Upper Mississippi River Refuge. I honestly feel there are things that ordinary citizens can do to “give back” a little of themselves to nature. This is our heritage and I hope the legacy of Friends of Pool 9. **The need exists to enhance childhood outdoor experiences and get kids back to nature. This is the final, and perhaps most important reason to increase the funding level to \$514 million.**

Thank you, from the Friends of Pool 9, Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association.

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