



Highlights of [GAO-08-797](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The National Wildlife Refuge System, which is administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service in the Department of the Interior, comprises 585 refuges on more than 96 million acres of land and water that preserve habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other wildlife. Refuges also provide wildlife-related activities such as hunting and fishing to nearly 40 million visitors every year.

GAO was asked to (1) describe changing factors that the refuge system experienced from fiscal years 2002 through 2007, including funding and staffing changes, and (2) examine how habitat management and visitor services changed during this period. We surveyed all refuges; visited 19 refuges in 4 regions; and interviewed refuge, regional, and national officials.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Department of the Interior made technical comments that we have incorporated as appropriate.

GAO is not making recommendations in this report.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-797](#). For more information, contact Robin Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

WILDLIFE REFUGES

Changes in Funding, Staffing, and Other Factors Create Concerns about Future Sustainability

What GAO Found

Between fiscal years 2002 and 2007, the refuge system experienced funding and staffing level fluctuations, the introduction of several new policy initiatives, and the increased influence of external factors such as extreme weather that threaten wildlife habitat and visitor infrastructure. Although core funding—measured as obligations for refuge operations, maintenance, and fire management—increased each year, inflation-adjusted core funding peaked in fiscal year 2003 at about \$391 million—6.8 percent above fiscal year 2002 funding. Inflation-adjusted core funding ended the period 2.3 percent below peak levels, but 4.3 percent above fiscal year 2002 levels by fiscal year 2007. Core refuge staffing levels peaked in fiscal year 2004 at 3,610 full-time equivalents—10.0 percent above the fiscal year 2002 level—and then declined more slowly than funding levels. By fiscal year 2007, staffing levels fell to 4.0 percent below peak levels, but 5.5 percent above fiscal year 2002 levels. Through fiscal year 2007, the number of permanent employees utilized by the refuge system declined to 7.5 percent below peak levels. During this period, refuge system officials initiated new policies that: (1) reduced staff positions and reallocated funds and staff among refuges to better align staff levels with funding; (2) required refuge staff to focus on a legislative mandate to complete refuge conservation plans by 2012; (3) shifted to constructing a larger number of smaller visitor structures, such as informational kiosks, and fewer large visitor centers to spread visitor service funds across more refuges; (4) increased the number of full-time law enforcement officers and their associated training and experience requirements; and (5) resulted in additional administrative work. During this period, external factors that complicate refuge staffs' ability to protect and restore habitat quality also increased, including severe storms and development around refuges.

Our survey showed that the quality of habitat management and visitor service programs varied across refuges during our study period. Habitat conditions for key types of species improved about two times more often than they worsened, but between 7 percent and 20 percent of habitats were of poor quality in 2007. Certain habitat problems increased at more than half of refuges during this period, and managers reported that they increased the time spent on certain habitat management activities, such as addressing invasive plants, despite declining staffing levels. However, several managers we interviewed told us that staff were working longer hours without extra pay to get work done, and managers expressed concern about their ability to sustain habitat conditions. While the quality of four key visitor service programs was reported to be stable or improving between fiscal years 2002 and 2007 at the vast majority of refuges, the other two key programs—environmental education and interpretation—were considered poor quality at one-third of refuges in 2007. Changes in the time spent on visitor services varied considerably across refuges, and managers noted that visitor services generally are cut before habitat management activities when resources are limited. Managers are concerned about their ability to provide high-quality visitor services in the future given staffing and funding constraints.