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Wittman's Bipartisan Effort to Protect American Wildlife Refuges Passes the Senate

WASHINGTON – Last night, the Keep America's Refuges Operational Act, a bill introduced by Reps. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) and Rob Wittman (R-VA) and Senators Carper (D-DE) and Barrasso (R-WY), passed the Senate and now awaits the president's signature. In December, H.R. 3979 passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support, under suspension of the rules, by a vote of 371-14. This legislation will reauthorize the National Wildlife Refuge System volunteer, community partnership and education programs that help ensure Americans can visit, explore, fish, hunt, and study wildlife for generations to come.

“Once a species is extinct, there is no turning back,” **Rep Jeffries said.** “Like the Founding Fathers of our great country, we must protect American wildlife and the ecosystems they depend upon. The Keep America's Refuges Operational Act is a commonsense measure that will prove to be a strong step in that direction.”

“This is a big win for our refuge volunteers. National Wildlife Refuges host nearly 50 million visitors each year supporting local economies, however that would be impossible without the valuable contribution of volunteers and community groups,” Wittman said. **“Reauthorizing these programs will ensure that our nation's refuges will continue to be enjoyed by tourists, sportsmen and women, and conservationists for years to come. I urge President Trump to sign this legislation so that we may reauthorize these important programs.”**

America's 566 National Wildlife Refuges are located in all 50 states and the five

territories. They make up 150 million acres of pristine public lands dedicated to the conservation of fish and wildlife. Wildlife refuge volunteers are individuals who want to give back to their communities, parents who want to be good stewards of the land and set examples for their children, retirees willing to share their wealth of knowledge, and dedicated organizations whose continued efforts raise awareness of refuges so that they may be enjoyed by all. Their contribution is significant: in Fiscal Year '16, 40,000 volunteers donated 1.4 million hours. The value of their time contribution is equal to \$30.6 million. The loss of their service would also be significant: volunteers and groups make up 20% of the total service work product, or the equivalent of 649 full-time employees.

"The Keep America's Refuges Operational Act will reauthorize the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer, Community Partnership and Education programs," **said Dan Ross Virginia state chairman for Ducks Unlimited.** "Without refuge work accomplished by volunteers to maintain the 561 National Wildlife Refuges, including the 14 refuges in Virginia, these natural resources and waterfowl havens would be hard pressed to stay productive, open and operational."

Other sponsors include Rep. Frank LoBiondo (NJ-2); Rep. Garrett Graves (LA-6); Rep. Raul Grijalva (AZ-3); Rep. Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (I-NMI); and Rep. Mike Thompson (CA-05).

The bill is supported by: The American Bird Conservancy; American Fisheries Society; American Hiking Society; American Sportfishing Association; Boy Scouts of America; U.S. Chamber of Commerce; Defenders of Wildlife; Ducks Unlimited; Izaak Walton League of America; Marine Conservation Institute; National Audubon Society; National Wildlife Federation; National Wildlife Refuge Association; The Corps Network; The Nature Conservancy; The Wilderness Society; Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership; and Trout Unlimited.

Congressman Rob Wittman represents the 1st District of Virginia. He serves on the House Natural Resources Committee and the House Armed Services Committee, where he is the Chairman of the Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee.