



November 22, 2024

Joan Mooney
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Management and Budget
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Deputy Assistant Secretary Mooney,

As Members of Congress representing the four states encompassing the boundaries of the Connecticut River Watershed and the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge (Conte Refuge), we are writing to respectfully urge the Department of Interior to seek additional funding for the Conte Refuge from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) in the President's Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) Budget Request.

The Conte Refuge, bounded by the Connecticut River Watershed, is the only multi-state watershed-based refuge in the United States' vast system of federal refuges. This diverse refuge stewards over 50,000 acres of land in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, and is bolstered by the Connecticut River Watershed Partnership, a unique coalition of over 75 stakeholders and partners. Formed in 2005, this network of public and private partners is dedicated to forging partnerships that benefit wildlife, people, and environmental quality in the Connecticut River Watershed.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge staff, in partnership with the Connecticut River Watershed Partnership, have identified approximately 24,000 acres of priority land conservation project opportunities in fiscal years 2025 and 2026 within the Conte Refuge, valued at more than \$51 million. This unmet need underscores our call for robust funding to support critical projects in this region. We greatly appreciate your commitment to land conservation in the Conte Refuge, which has consistently been prioritized for LWCF funding in the President's Budget Request. These critical opportunities, however, far outstrip what has been possible with annual funding to date.

Because of the many local, state, and federal partnerships in this watershed, the Conte Refuge presents a unique opportunity to leverage and integrate significant non-federal funding into an existing 1.8-million-acre conservation mosaic. Land trusts also routinely assist the refuge in identifying critical projects and working with willing landowners toward conservation of these lands, thus reducing staff time and overall costs to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Land conserved by the Conte Refuge enhances the quality of natural resources and

expands recreational opportunities for the more than 2.4 million people who live in the 396 communities in the watershed and another 70 million who live within a day's drive of these lands. The no-cost educational and recreational opportunities that the Conte Refuge provides to all – including those from the many underserved communities within its boundaries – in concert with networks of riverside parks and trails, help to build support for stewarding the natural world and provide important physical and mental health benefits.

Investing in National Wildlife Refuges also supports a robust tourism economy and healthy communities. On average, wildlife refuges nationwide return \$4.87 to local economies for every \$1 Congress provides in federal funding,¹ which helps our rural communities create jobs and enhances recreational opportunities for visitors. In aggregate, the outdoor economy generates a total of \$564 billion in consumer spending and supports 4.9 million American jobs.² In New England, outdoor recreation is a significant economic driver, supporting 195,000 jobs and contributing over \$21 billion to the Gross Domestic Product of the four watershed states.³ Sustaining and growing these economic benefits is vitally needed as our region rebounds from the deep impacts of the pandemic.

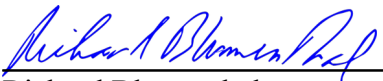
The Conte Refuge/Connecticut River Watershed is also one of the major climate corridors for northward movement of species in the Northeast and plays an essential role in creating both resilient human and natural communities. Our watershed is unique – both 74% forested containing some of the most intact and connected landscapes in New England, and home to 396 communities where approximately 2.4 million people reside, 84% of whom live in cities. The proximity of human and natural communities makes this an ideal place to invest in conservation outcomes.

There is currently a tremendous need and opportunity to support the Conte Refuge and its watershed partners by funding the backlog of critical land conservation projects in the Connecticut River Watershed. To meet this demand, build upon last year's momentum, and capitalize on available opportunities, we encourage the President's FY26 Budget Request to reflect the need for robust funding to address the slate of ready-to-go projects in the Conte Refuge. We look forward to working with you and our colleagues in Congress to maximize investment in this critical landscape.

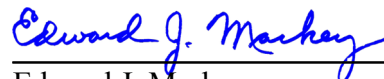
Sincerely,

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator

¹ “Operations & Maintenance Funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System,” National Wildlife Refuge Association, <https://www.refugeassociation.org/operationsmaintenancefunding>.

² Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022,” News Release, November 17, 2023, <https://www.bea.gov/news/2023/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2022>.

³ Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022,” <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>.