

2024 STATE OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM | WHERE WE THRIVE



PRESENTED BY
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December 18, 2024

AMERICA'S WILDLIFE AT RISK

The National Wildlife Refuge System stands as a vast and vital network of public lands and waters where wildlife and people thrive. However, growing environmental pressures, limited funding, and outdated infrastructure are putting the system's ability to protect these natural treasures that benefit all people at risk.



VAST PUBLIC LANDS

850 MILLION ACRES

573 NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

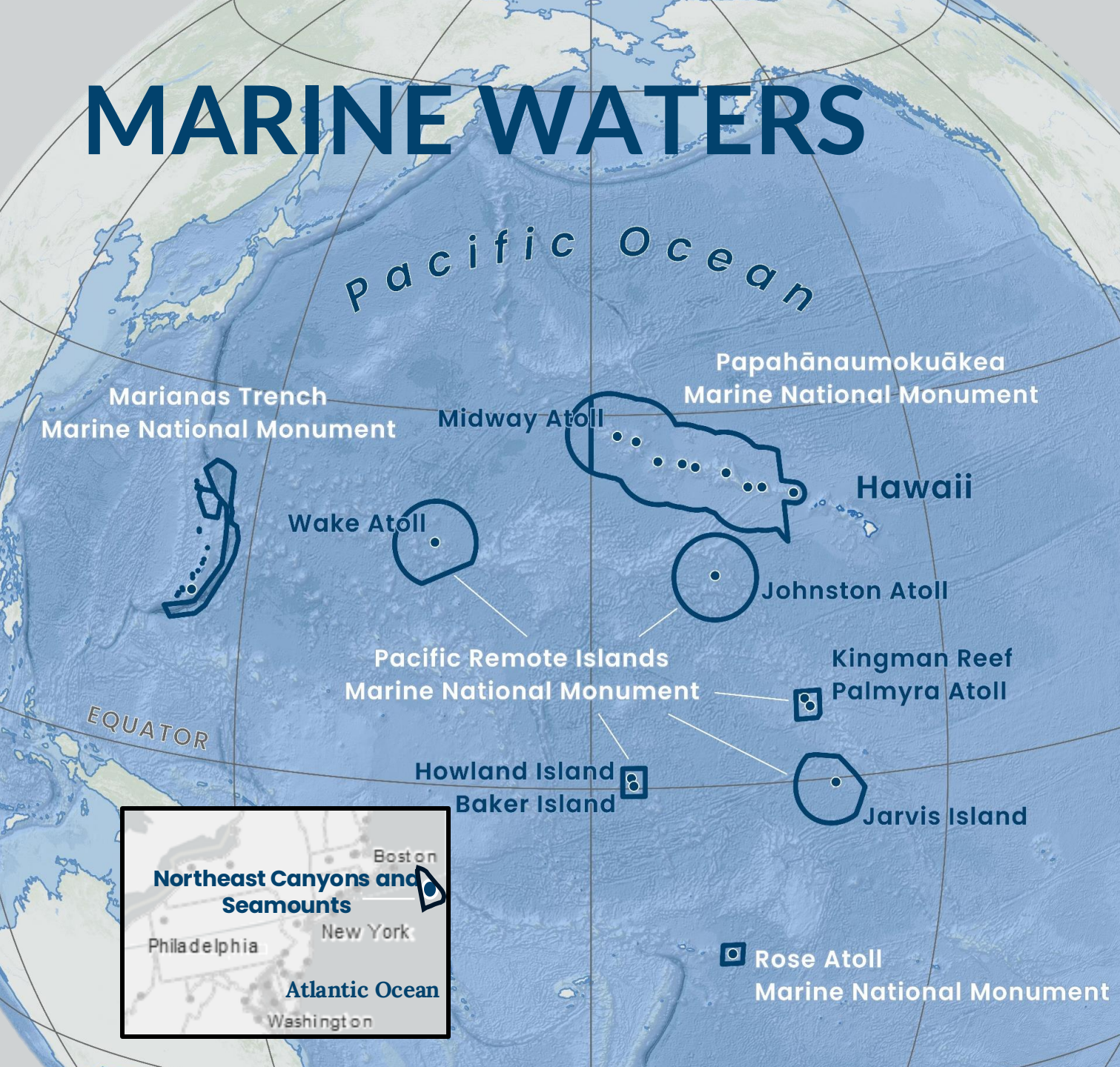
38 WETLAND MANAGEMENT DISTRICTS

491 OPEN TO RECREATION



2,500+ employees stewarding **millions of acres** of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife conservation.

MARINE WATERS



760 MILLION
ACRES SUBMERGED
LANDS AND WATERS

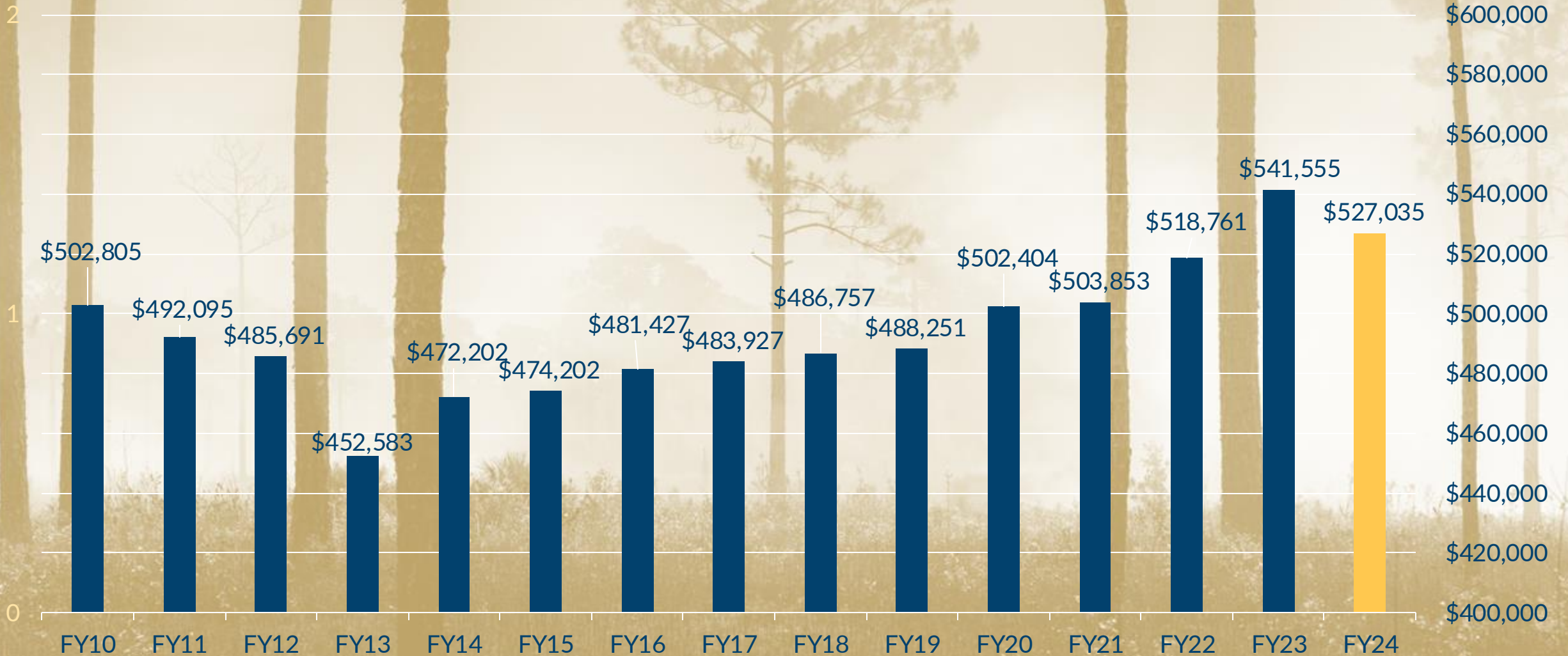
5 MARINE
MONUMENTS

150+ MARINE PROTECTED
AREAS AS PART OF A
WORLDWIDE EFFORT

181 COASTAL AND
MARINE REFUGES

WILDLIFE REFUGES AT RISK

BUDGET TRENDS FY10-FY24 (in thousands)



VITAL FOR RESILIENCE

50%

of prescribed burns within the Department of Interior

100s

of POLLINATORS support the nation's food systems

109K

Added ACRES with funds from LWCF and Duck Stamp and other funding sources.

5 M

Acres in easements that extend land protections where they are most needed

FORTIFYING LANDSCAPES

Managed refugelands and waters boost resilience and make landscapes more adaptable to change.



ENGINEERED WITH NATURE

National Wildlife Refuges engineer with nature through habitat restoration, netting durable solutions often at a savings to the taxpayer.

LOWERING RISK

GREAT DISMAL SWAMP NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, *Southeastern VA and Northeastern NC*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has installed 46 water control structures in 150 miles of old drainage ditches since 2012, using the structures to "re-wet" the swamp, retain carbon-rich peat soil and lower the risk of catastrophic wildfire and flooding.

MCFADDIN AND TEXAS POINT NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES, *Texas Coast*

On the coast of Texas, these two refuges protect the community and oil industry from dangerous impacts of flooding, preventing severe weather events from creating contaminants disasters, while also providing waterfowl hunting opportunities.



GREAT DISMAL SWAMP NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE



MCFADDIN NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE



LANDS AND WATERS AT RISK

- Invasive species are increasing
- Front lines of sea-level rise and increasing natural disasters
- Inability to maintain or restore degraded habitats
- Limited planning compliance results in decreased ability to adapt to changing conditions and provide public access.

VITAL FOR WILDLIFE

800

BIRD SPECIES

200

MAMMAL SPECIES

1,250+

FISH, REPTILES
AND AMPHIBIAN
SPECIES

IMPACT

- Critical nurseries for spawning fish.
- 350 refuges provide habitat for threatened and endangered species.



WILDLIFE AT RISK

- Increasing wildlife diseases pose a threat to both wildlife and humans.
- Decreasing water and air quality threatens human, livestock, and wildlife health.
- Only 27% of T & E species documented on refuges are monitored, potentially leading to more species loss.

VITAL FOR PEOPLE



NEARBY NATURE

Some wildlife refuges are tourist destinations, but most are accessible public lands that nearby communities enjoy regularly.

GATEWAY TO OUTDOOR RECREATION

Nearly 70 Million Annual Recreation Visits

43.1 M

WILDLIFE OBSERVATION
& PHOTOGRAPHY

8.3 M

FISHING

2.7 M

EDUCATION & NATURE
PROGRAMS

2.6 M

HUNTING



IMPACT

Refuge recreation generates approximately \$3.2 billion in local economic activity each year.



DESIGNATED HIGH IMPACT SERVICE PROVIDER

Due to the volume of local and tourism visits, refuges are High-Impact Service Providers per the Office of Management and Budget. This means FWS is mandated to improve the virtual and in-person customer experience. This includes:

- Recreational trip planning and electronic fee collection
- Welcoming signage
- Accessibility



VITAL FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES



ECONOMIC IMPACT

Recreational visits to refuges generate an estimated \$3.2 billion in local economic activity annually.



WILDLIFE TOURISM

RENEWABLE RESOURCE FOR LOCAL BUSINESSES

Refuges issue hundreds of special use permits to big game guides, fishing guides, ecotours and kayak companies each year providing a valuable renewable resource for local business owners, often in rural communities.

BIRDING FESTIVAL PARTNERS

Refuges partner with local chambers of commerce and many others to support birding and other wildlife festivals, bringing much needed revenue to communities, often during shoulder seasons.



VITAL FOR CITIES

80% of U.S. Population Lives in Cities

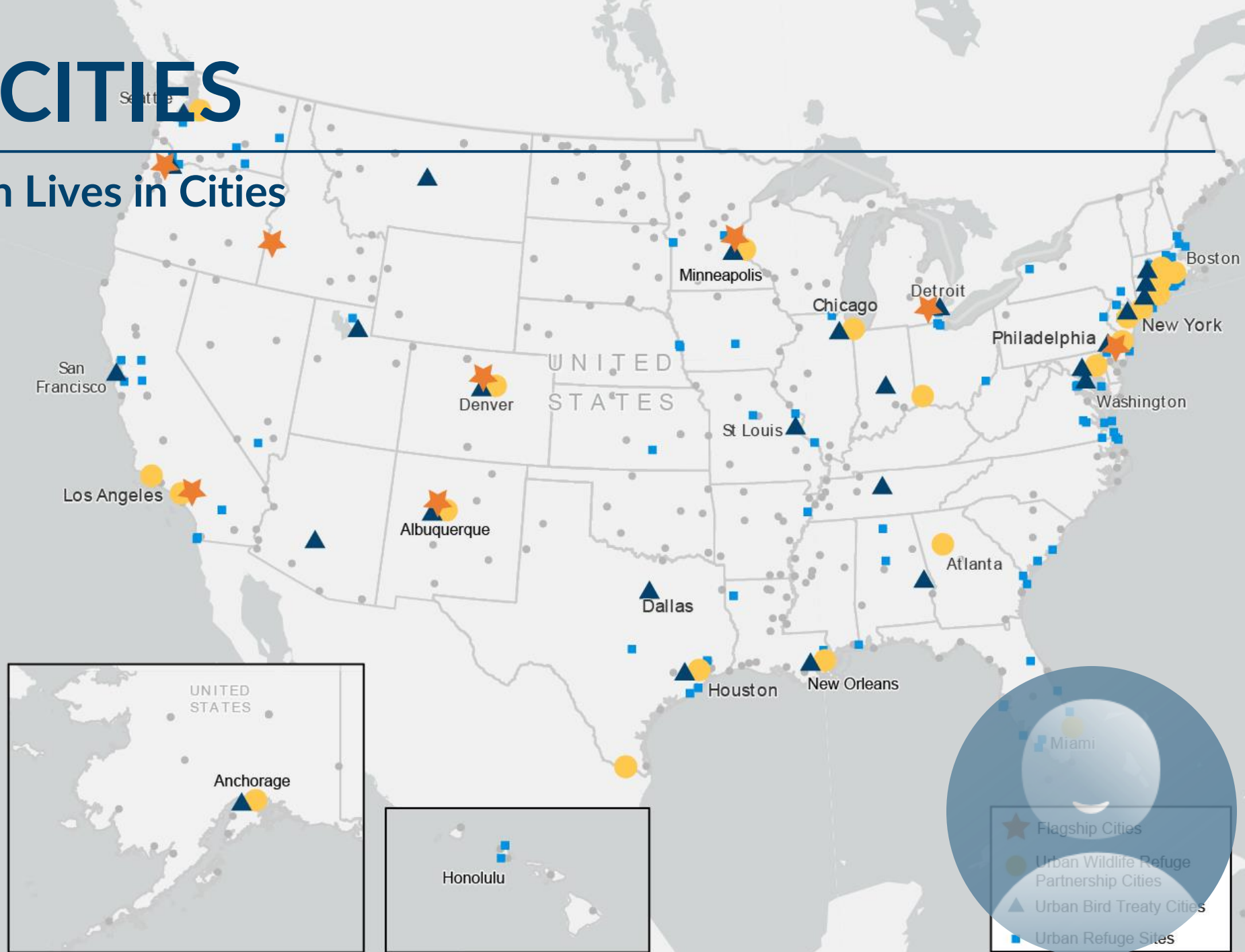
■ 101 URBAN NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

★ 8 FLAGSHIP SITES

● 32 PARTNER CITIES
26 WITH NEARBY URBAN REFUGES

▲ 31 URBAN BIRD TREATY CITIES

● 573 NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES



BUILDING OUTDOOR SKILLS AND FOOD SECURITY

Outdoor Skills Development (Recruit/Retain/Reactivate)

National Wildlife Refuges are great places to recruit new hunters, anglers, boaters, and birders. They are easily accessible public lands with a variety of opportunities. Refuges regularly partner with states and local sporting groups to offer skill building and mentoring programs, often for youth and veterans.

Digital Passes and Permits

Some permits for hunting and fishing opportunities on national wildlife refuges are managed in cooperation with states or provided electronically on easy-to-use platforms like Recreation.gov.





SERVICE DELIVERY TRENDS

FY11-FY23

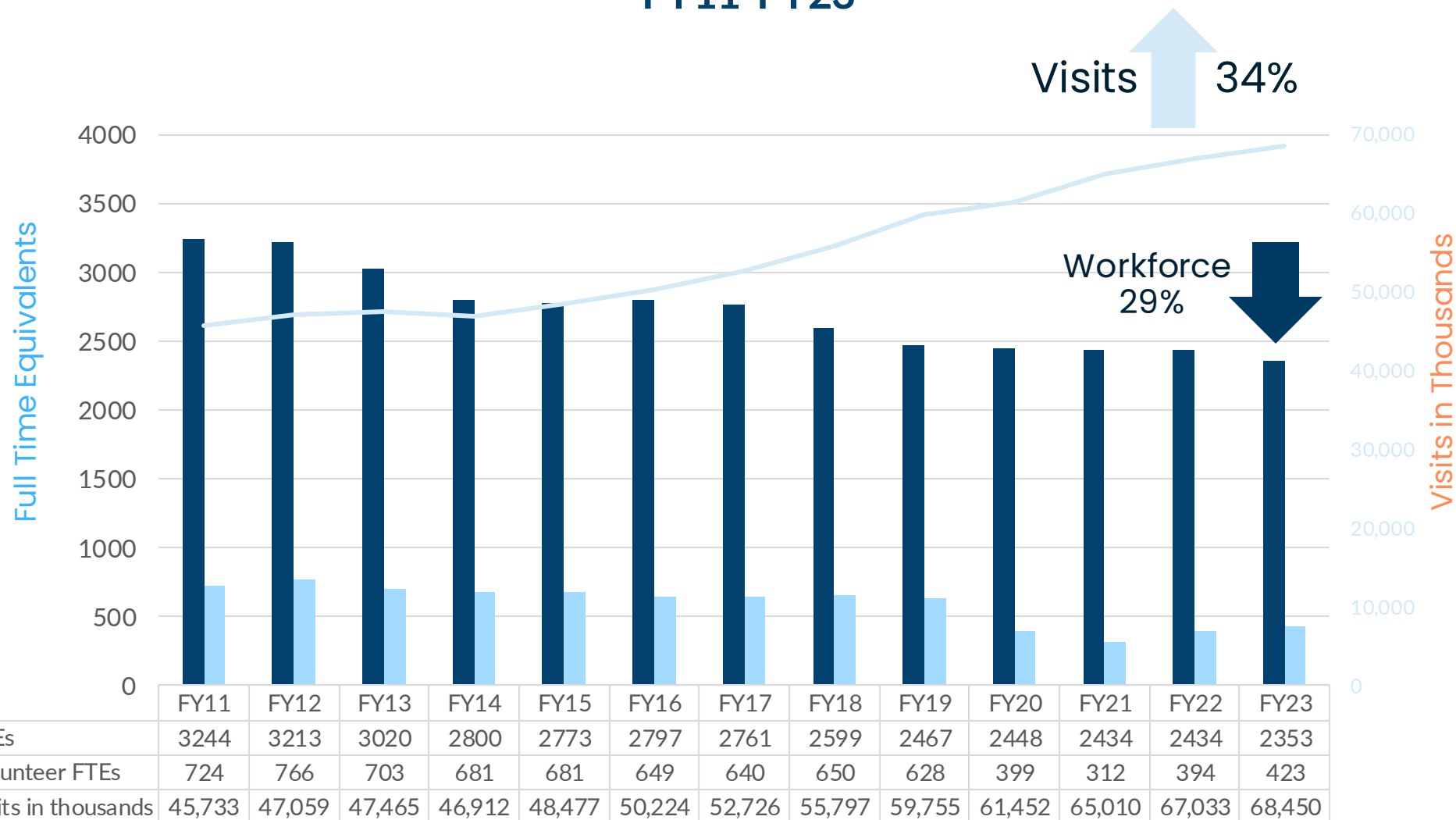
SINCE 2010

+ 21 new refuges

+ 549 million acres
in marine areas

+ 6 million acres for
hunting and fishing

+ 23.96 million
annual visits





CUSTOMER (CX) EXPERIENCE AT RISK

- Diminished visitor experience
- Safety concerns
- Increased wildlife disturbance and illegal activity
- Loss of community engagement
- Impact on local economies

VITAL FOR HISTORY & CULTURE

Cultural and Historic Resources

17K

ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SITES

2.5K

HISTORIC
BUILDINGS

6.8M

MUSEUM OBJECTS

IMPACT

22 Cultural Resources staff are responsible for tracking these resources. 86% of their time is spent on Section 106 compliance.

Oldest known image of the St. Marks
Lighthouse, ca 1854/United States Archives

VITAL FOR CULTURE

Tribal Nations, Indigenous Communities

532

ANCESTORS IN
OUR CARE and 7.8K
associated objects

29

Co-stewardship
Arrangements in
2024

IMPACT

bison conservation, seed collection,
habitat restoration, and streamlined
permitting for Tribal exports

VITAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Nearly 47,000 ASSETS valued at over \$61.8 Billion

5,300

BUILDINGS

8,800

WATER CONTROL
STRUCTURES

18,000

ROADS, BRIDGES,
& TRAILS

9,800

*OTHER
STRUCTURES

ECONOMIC IMPACT

- \$1 invested generates \$3.12 in economic activity.
- The \$42.9 million in deferred maintenance appropriations generates \$133 million in economic value plus 768 jobs in state and local economies.

* All Others captures assets including utility systems, marinas, aviation systems, railroads, ships, monuments, fortifications, towers, amphitheaters, etc.

** Data current as of 30 June 2024



The average age of NWRS assets is **42.7 years**



Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Utah



INFRASTRUCTURE AT RISK

- Increased vulnerability to deterioration due to environmental conditions.
- Most infrastructure is near or past its useful lifespan.
- Limited capacity compounds repair backlog.



LIFE-CYCLE MANAGEMENT

- Prioritizes regular maintenance through innovative maintenance action teams
- Leverages funding from multiple sources



We Strategically Leverage GAOA Funds and Projects

- Obligated over \$235M out of \$378M of consumable budget
- FWS has the highest obligation rate (47%) of the four DOI GAOA bureaus (NPS, BLM, BIE, & FWS).
- Over 700 projects to date with an estimated \$27.5M savings over contracting-out the work
- Return on GAOA investment is estimated at 1:1.3
- Funds allowed us to support the 77-person Maintenance Professional Strikeforce team for additional in-house project completions.





We Strategically Leverage IRA Funds and Projects

- Obligated over 98% of the \$121M for projects on more than 50 NWRs and 20 State Wildlife Management Areas.
- Restored 4,207 acres of wetland and upland habitat in Prairie Pothole region.
- Upgraded infrastructure to improve management capability of bison herds.

Orphan Wells Plugged and Abandoned:

- 61 orphan wells at 5 refuges in 2024
- 161 orphan wells at 6 refuges in total since 2022



Technical Assistance for NRCS Projects:

- \$15 million
- 22 states
- 33 new employees



Ditch Plug



Ann Lake WPA after enhancement



PARTNERSHIPS ARE VITAL TO REFUGES

180

FRIENDS
GROUPS

50+

YOUTH
EMPLOYMENT
PARTNERS

23,000

VOLUNTEERS

1000s

STATE, PRIVATE,
TRIBAL PARTNERS

COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

- Refuges support nearly 800 youth interns with living-wage internships.
- Our partners bring exponential value to the National Wildlife Refuge System in a myriad of ways.



Savannah Refuge, South Carolina



COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION AT RISK

Declining staff capacity threatens our ability to build and maintain healthy partnerships and could result in:

- Severely reduced conservation impact
- Eroded public trust
- Jeopardized future of the Refuge System

Let's work together to ensure that these vast and vital landscapes remain vibrant and essential for generations to come.

