



Board of County Commissioners Agenda Request

7A
Agenda Item #

Requested Meeting Date: January 3, 2023

Title of Item: Friends of Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REGULAR AGENDA <input type="checkbox"/> CONSENT AGENDA <input type="checkbox"/> INFORMATION ONLY	Action Requested: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approve/Deny Motion <input type="checkbox"/> Adopt Resolution (attach draft) <i>*provide copy of hearing notice that was published</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Direction Requested <input type="checkbox"/> Discussion Item <input type="checkbox"/> Hold Public Hearing*
--	--	---

Submitted by: Brittany Searle	Department: Administration
---	--------------------------------------

Presenter (Name and Title): Walt Ford - Refuge Manager	Estimated Time Needed: 10 Min
--	---

Summary of Issue:
Letter of Support to restore one permanent staff position at Friends of Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Alternatives, Options, Effects on Others/Comments:

Recommended Action/Motion:
Approve Motion to sign letter of support.

Financial Impact:
 Is there a cost associated with this request? Yes No
 What is the total cost, with tax and shipping? \$
 Is this budgeted? Yes No *Please Explain:*

Friends of Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge

36289 State Highway 65
McGregor, MN 55760

November 29, 2022

US Department of the Interior

Secretary Deb Haaland
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Congressional representation:

Senator Tina Smith
515 West First Street, Suite 104
Duluth, MN 55802

Senator Amy Klobuchar
Olcott Plaza Room 105
820 9th St. N
Virginia, MN 55792

Representative Pete Stauber
23 West Central Entrance
Duluth, MN 55811

USFWS

Mr. Tom Kerr
USFWS Regional Office
5600 American Blvd., Suite 990
Bloomington, MN 55437

Mr. Steve Karel
Sherburne NWR
17076 293rd Ave. NW
Zimmerman, MN 55398

Dear Secretary Haaland, Senators Smith and Klobuchar, Representative Stauber, and USFWS Supervisors,

We the undersigned wish to express our great concern for Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) located near McGregor, MN. As you may be aware, the level of staffing at all NWRs has been steadily decreasing. The level of staffing for our refuge has significantly decreased over the past few years and is critically low, and no longer adequate to serve the refuge's mission. In 2005, there were 7 permanent staff. Currently there are only 2 permanent staff- a manager and a maintenance employee.

Rice Lake NWR provides extremely valuable wildlife habitat on its over 18,000 acres, especially for migrating waterfowl. In the 2019 fall waterfowl survey, for example, 896,000 waterfowl were counted- including 883,000 Ring-necked Ducks! The refuge provides habitat that supports countless migratory songbirds, mammals, and a great diversity of other species including

characteristic Northwoods species such as Gray Wolves, Moose, and Common Loons. Our refuge has been designated by BirdLife International and the Audubon Society as Important Bird Area, because of its importance to migrating waterfowl. Despite the abundance and diversity of species present on the refuge, biological surveys and data collection have almost completely ceased because there is no biologist nor biological technician. Long-term datasets languish, and the status of much of the refuge's wildlife and their habitats is unknown.

In cooperation with local tribes, the refuge provides stewardship of sacred Native American cultural sites within the refuge. Local Ojibwe people depend on its clean waters for the fish and wild rice they harvest per their treaty rights. Locals visit the refuge often, and it is also a destination for birders and photographers from all over the country. The refuge provides an outdoor classroom for local schools and other groups of people. McGregor, and indeed Aitkin County, enjoy the economic benefits that refuge usage and visitation provide. However, valuable opportunities to connect with local people and Rice Lake's many thousands of other visitors who travel to the area are missed when the office is inaccessible because of lack of staff. The Friends of Rice Lake NWR group has a nature store that visitors often can't access. Educational programs that were scheduled in the past no longer have staffing to support the volunteers who would hold them.

Day-to-day maintenance also suffers. This past summer, volunteers had to be trained to operate USFWS machinery to keep the public areas cleared. Importantly, staff safety is threatened because there are only two employees. When the manager is away from the office and the other employee is using power tools and heavy equipment, that employee is subject to unacceptable risk.

Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge deserves adequate staffing to fully meet its mission, and to properly serve the people who visit and the wildlife who call it home. To partly remedy this urgent situation, **we are requesting the restoration of at least one permanent staff position: Biological Technician.**

Thank you for your kind attention to this matter.

Sincerely,