

‘Fiscal cliff’ threatens wildlife refuge system

CONSERVATION GROUP CONCERNED WITH ‘DEVASTATING EFFECTS’ TO KILAUEA REFUGE, PAPAHA NAUMOKUAKEA

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LIHU‘E — If Congress does not reach a compromise in the next six weeks, the Budget Control Act of 2011 will go into effect when the clock turns to midnight on Dec. 31, setting up a chain reaction which will likely leave many government programs short-funded. That would include the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world’s largest system of lands and waters protected for wildlife.

“The fiscal cliff that we are all facing right now is most likely going to have a devastating effect on America’s wildlife refuges, and that includes some that are basically in your back yard,” said Jerilyn Schweitzer, a public relations volunteer at the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Marine Conservation Institute. The Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge and the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument would be among the places affected, she said.

Funding cuts to the nation’s wildlife refuges, already operating on a “shoestring budget,” according to Schweitzer, would represent an additional 10 percent reduction to NWRS and would affect more than protected wildlife — it would also have a ripple effect on local economies.

“It’s going to affect how many people who work there, which is going to affect how many visitors can come and see the wildlife at Kilauea Point,” she said.

Emily Douce, conservation advocate at the Marine Conservation Institute, states in a press release Monday that the funding cuts are “likely to have a deleterious effect on the

500,000 people who visit Kilauea Point each year, not to mention the effect the loss of so many tourists will have on the economy of Kaua‘i.”

A 10 percent cut to NWRS would mean approximately \$50 million in reduced revenues, according to a report released Monday by a group called CARE, or Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement. CARE is a national coalition of 22 wildlife, sporting, conservation and scientific organizations representing more than 15 million Americans.

In October, the budget for Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, which is part of Papahānaumokuākea, suffered a \$1 million cut. The reduced funding resulted in cancellation of ecotourism and many other activities there, according to Schweitzer.

“They can’t afford to give out permits for it,” she said. “They’re not giving out permits anymore for national history tours or photographers or university visits.”

Schweitzer said the Marine Conservation Institute joined CARE, becoming one of the 22 conservation, sports and pro-gun organizations in the coalition asking the federal government not to cut NWRS funding.

“The National Wildlife Refuge System is not a bloated bureaucracy that can absorb such cuts — the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages the 150 million acre system on a shoestring budget of only \$3.24 per acre,” according to CARE’s report.

Approximately 45 million people visit refuges each year, generating more than \$4.2 billion in revenues and nearly 35,000 jobs, the report states.

“Economists estimate that each 1 percent reduction in refuge visitation would cut \$16.9 million from local economies,” the report states. “Without the funding needed to keep refuges open and recreation programs running, the economic loss to local communities could be devastating.”

Schweitzer said the fiscal cliff is not set in stone, and it’s possible that Congress could pass something to keep it from happening.

However, she said, “Congress hasn’t really passed much of anything in the last four years; there has been so much fighting between the House and the Senate, that the Democrats and the Republicans have pretty much blocked each other on every turn.”

CARE’s report lists the top-10 fiscal cliff impacts to NWRS as:

- Closed refuges and visitor centers;
- Lost hunting and fishing opportunities;
- Volunteers turned away;
- Lost revenue in local economies;
- Increased poaching, vandalism and drug smuggling;
- Lost opportunities for birding and wildlife watching;
- Spread of invasive species;
- Halted habitat restoration and fire management;
- Delayed response to hurricane and natural disaster devastation; and
- Termination of the inventory and monitoring program.

Visit www.fundrefuges.org for the complete CARE report and www.marine-conservation.org for more information.

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