

Friends, good evening. Welcome, and thank you for being here.

I'd like to invite you to close your eyes. Let go of the breath you're holding and take a deep one in. Let it out, feel your body relax, and your mind quiet.

Now, in your mind's eye, find yourself at **Malheur National Wildlife Refuge**. Look around—you may see upland sagebrush, wetlands or meadows, rocky rims that hint at a geologic history beyond our imagining. All of it under wide skies, with Steens Mountain silhouetted on the horizon.

What you see is magnificent. What you smell is distinct. What you feel is awe—and inspiration.

We are inspired by the sweep of cranes overhead, by pronghorn bounding across the desert, and by the stories of generations—tribal communities, ranching families, scientists, and birders—who have cherished and protected this place.

Malheur inspires us because it reminds us that wild lands and wild creatures still have a home in America. But that inspiration also calls us to responsibility.

Federal funding for public lands and refuges like Malheur faces real turmoil. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the Refuge System, receives roughly **\$602 million** to care for over **96 million acres of land** and **760 million acres of marine areas**—funds that have not kept pace with inflation for over a decade. These dollars pay for staff, infrastructure, maintenance, and even restroom cleaning—and they are shrinking.

In 1993, Malheur had 38 staff members. Today, just 13 shoulder that same workload. Yet the refuge's needs have never been greater—maintaining water flows, protecting habitat for endangered species, and welcoming visitors who come to learn, birdwatch, and simply breathe in the beauty of this place.

And as we sit here tonight—on day 18 of a federal government shutdown—our nature store and visitor center are closed. Volunteer weekends, events, and projects improving bird-safe windows and managing aging trees have all been canceled. We face uncertainty once again.

Looking ahead to the **10th anniversary of the Malheur Occupation**, we're reminded how deeply people across the nation care about this refuge and what it represents. That difficult chapter tested us, but it also proved something powerful: Malheur endures, and so does the community that rallies around it.

That's where **Friends of Malheur** comes in. Our community of more than 1,400 members is committed to ensuring that Malheur's story is defined not by division, but by resilience, stewardship, and hope.

We exist because Malheur deserves more than survival, it deserves to thrive. Through education, habitat restoration, volunteer projects, and partnerships, the Friends provide what federal funding cannot. We bridge the gap between what is needed and what is possible.

When you give to the Friends, you're not just donating—you're making a difference. You fund seasonal biologists who double the Refuge's field capacity each summer. You invest in schoolchildren discovering their first owl. You support dark-sky initiatives, retrofit outdated lighting, and bring educational programs—like the GO STEM mobile planetarium—to local students and families. You enable a renewed and deepening relationship between the Refuge and Tribal youth through the Burns Paiute Tribe's Youth Opportunity Program and regional Tribal Stewardship Program.

Your contributions sustain our work and allow us to say “yes” when the Refuge has a need. You are investing in the cranes that return each spring, in sunrises over Steens Mountain, and in the promise that future generations will stand where we stand today—still inspired by Malheur.

So ask yourself: What kind of legacy will we leave? Will we let shortfalls and uncertainty diminish one of the crown jewels of our refuge system—or will we be the community that acted because we were inspired?

I believe it's the latter. Malheur calls us to step forward—not just as visitors, but as stewards.

Tonight, I invite you to join in that commitment. Whether through a donation, your time, or by sharing Malheur's story, you can ensure this refuge remains a place of inspiration, resilience, and hope.

Supporting Malheur isn't just about saving a landscape, it's about preserving something within ourselves: our connection to the wild, our faith in the future, and our belief that beauty and life are worth protecting.

Malheur has inspired us. Now it's our turn to act—and to ensure this refuge continues to thrive for the land, the wildlife, and every generation yet to come. Thank you.