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**MEDIA CONTACTS:**

Desiree Sorenson-Groves, VP, NWRA, (202) 290-5593

Ralph Gilges, President, Friends of Bon Secour NWR, (251) 540-7950

## **Refuge Association Announces Grants to Assist Gulf Coast Refuges** *First Grant Awarded to Friends of Bon Secour for Dune Planting Project*

**Washington, D.C.**—The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) has announced the award of a \$3,000 grant to the Friends of Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Gulf Shores, Alabama, for a project to stabilize the refuge's fragile sand dunes and attempt to keep oil out of fragile wetlands. Bon Secour NWR is one of the first Gulf coast wildlife refuges to be impacted by the BP oil gusher that began April 20. The Refuge Association's grant is the first to be awarded from a special fund set up to aid refuge "Friends" groups responding to the Gulf disaster. Other refuge Friends groups along the Gulf coast can apply for funding for spill-related work by contacting Joan Patterson (202-292-2422). Applications will be accepted on an ongoing basis with no deadlines, and will be reviewed by NWRA staff.

More than 30 volunteers from the Friends of Bon Secour NWR—including a local sixth-grade class—braved 105-degree heat indexes for a week in June to plant stabilizing beach grasses on newly enhanced dunes at six locations within the refuge. They planted 5,000 native sea oats plants, along with other vegetation. Once established, the sea oats' 20- to 30-foot-deep root systems will help prevent the sand from being blown away and oil from washing in. "Our volunteers played a critical role in getting this done," says Ralph Gilges, President of the Friends of Bon Secour NWR. "The refuge didn't have either the funds or the staff to accomplish this on their own. They called on us, and we were able to step in. We're extremely grateful to the National Wildlife Refuge Association for this grant, which covers our direct costs for 3,000 sea oats plants."

Since the first days of the BP disaster, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) has been alerting its supporters to the fact that as many as 36 refuges in the path of the spill could be adversely affected by the spreading oil. Many of those supporters have sent donations. "Even at the best of times, national wildlife refuges rely on the efforts of dedicated volunteers for as much as 20 percent of the work that gets done in these special places," says Evan Hirsche, President of the Refuge Association. "In a catastrophe like this one, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff charged with managing refuges are overwhelmed, and the need for volunteers is even more critical. This new grant program is part of our commitment to help FWS and other Friends groups of Gulf coast refuges respond to the disaster."

Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, whose name means "safe harbor" in French, is small but important. Its 7,000 acres provide vital habitat for shorebirds and for more than 350 species of migratory birds. As one of the largest undeveloped parcels along Alabama's coast, Bon Secour's fragile dunes, beaches and marshlands are home to a variety of species, including critically endangered Kemp's Ridley sea turtles, the endangered Alabama beach mouse and piping plover, and rare least terns.

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**Additional media resources: Video of beach stabilization:** <http://www.refugeassociation.org/new-issues/delta.html>

*The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries that secure its ecological integrity. NWRA works across the U.S. to conserve the most biologically sensitive landscapes, enlisting the support of local citizens and diverse state and federal partners. In addition, NWRA provides training and guidance to more than 250 local refuge "Friends" volunteer groups that are vital to creating public support for national wildlife refuges and wildlife conservation.*

[www.refugeassociation.org](http://www.refugeassociation.org)