



# 2015 Conservation Policy Priorities

for America's Wildlife and the National Wildlife Refuge System



National  
Wildlife Refuge  
Association

1975-2015 | Celebrating 40 Years  
of Wildlife Refuge Conservation

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## About the National Wildlife Refuge Association

The National Wildlife Refuge Association occupies a special niche as the only non-profit organization focused exclusively on promoting the world's largest wildlife conservation network, the National Wildlife Refuge System. Since 1975, the Refuge Association has worked hand-in-hand with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to protect, conserve and restore the ecological integrity of the 568 million acres for which the Refuge System is responsible. This incredible network of lands and waters supports 2,170 species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, hosts 47 million visitors each year, and generates \$2.4 billion of economic return for America. In our 40th year, the Refuge Association continues to accomplish our mission and raise the stature of the Refuge System. The Refuge Association engages thousands of supporters as diverse as the System itself — members of Refuge Friends groups, private landowners, hunters and anglers, educators and students, wildlife enthusiasts, hailing from all walks of life: urban, rural, suburban, and international. In addition, the Refuge Association leads a coalition of 23 diverse organizations called the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE). Our combined 16 million members urge the U.S. Congress to provide robust annual funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The National Wildlife Refuge Association is committed to the goals, objectives, and strategies articulated by “Conserving the Future,” the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s vision for the future of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge Association’s role as a non-partisan, incentive based, and transparent organization that works with diverse constituencies in Washington, D.C. and across the country positions us well to advance this ambitious agenda.

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Chincoteague NWR | Steve Hillebrand, USFWS



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Muskoxen, Arctic NWR | USFWS

## CONSERVATION POLICY

The National Wildlife Refuge System is responsible for over 568 million acres of some of the most extraordinary wildlife and habitats on the planet. From the newly expanded Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, to the pristine wilderness of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Refuge System is the world's largest and most diverse collection of lands and waters managed for fish, wildlife, and their habitats.

The world's largest network of wildlife lands and waters needs strong policy from the U.S. Congress to ensure these valuable assets are available for the American public — now, and in the future. This report summarizes the National Wildlife Refuge Association's legislative policy priorities that we believe are essential to ensuring that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Refuge System have the tools they need to succeed in managing the 562 national wildlife refuges and 38 wetland management districts around the country. The vitality of the Refuge System directly serves 47 million annual visitors who rely on wildlife refuges for recreation, hunting, fishing, bird watching and education. The Refuge System also provides a boost to the economy returning nearly \$5 for every \$1 appropriated — this return on investment could be even higher with the proper legislative policies in place.



Volunteers at Ninigret NWR | USFWS

The National Wildlife Refuge Association respectfully requests that Congress:

- 1 Protect the Arctic and Izembek National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska
  - a. Pass H.R. 239 and Senate companion to designate the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as wilderness;
  - b. Oppose H.R. 339 or any effort to drill for oil and gas in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and oppose any effort to build a road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge;
- 2 Pass a new transportation bill which authorizes \$100 million annually to provide public access to the Refuge System through its network of roads and trails;
- 3 Reject any proposal to remove the Department of the Interior's ability to create or expand units of the Refuge System through a public process;
- 4 Pass the Fish and Wildlife Service Resource Protection Act;
- 5 Pass the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2015 (S. 235 and H.R. 167);
- 6 Pass comprehensive legislation to move the Refuge Fund and Revenue Sharing program into the Payment in Lieu of Taxes program (PILT); and
- 7 Reauthorize the following programs: Land and Water Conservation Fund, North American Wetlands Conservation Act; Partners for Fish and Wildlife; Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act; and the Volunteer and Community Partnership Act.

### Flip Book Over

to learn about the Refuge Association's Conservation Funding Priorities!





# 2015 Conservation Policy Priorities

Izembek NWR | Kristine Sowl, USFWS

## PROTECT ALASKA WILDLIFE REFUGES

### Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Alaska is home to some of the nation's most iconic national wildlife refuges. But the one that tops the charts is the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, referred to as "America's Serengeti." At 19.3 million acres in northeast Alaska, the Arctic refuge is a vast ecosystem the size of South Carolina. Its stunning biodiversity represents 45 species of land and marine animals, 42 species of fish, and over 200 species of birds from all 50 states and six continents that nest in the refuge.

The Arctic refuge is only one of two wildlife refuges nationwide that includes all three species of North American bear: black, brown, and polar. The refuge is home to fully half of all polar bear den sites in the United States. Along with bear, the refuge teems with muskoxen, wolves, Dall sheep, and caribou. The coastal plain of the refuge is a vital calving ground for the Porcupine caribou herd.

Created in 1960 by President Eisenhower, the Arctic refuge was established to "protect wilderness character," yet its very purpose is threatened by ongoing efforts to open the refuge to oil and gas drilling in its biological heart, the coastal plain. The Arctic refuge currently has eight million acres designated as wilderness and the President has proposed adding 12.28 million more.

**We urge Congress to pass H.R. 239 and Senate companion bill to permanently protect the Arctic refuge by designating it as wilderness and oppose H.R. 339 and any effort to open the refuge to oil and gas drilling.**

### Izembek National Wildlife Refuge

The Izembek National Wildlife Refuge on the Alaska Peninsula, also created by President Eisenhower in 1960, and designated a wetland of global importance by President Reagan, is a biological hotspot and home to over 200 species of wildlife and 9 species of fish. The entire world population of emperor geese and the entire Pacific population of black brant depend on one of the world's largest eelgrass beds found in the heart of the refuge — the Izembek lagoon ecosystem.

Izembek also hosts five species of salmon, wolves, foxes, wolverines, moose, brown bears, shorebirds, seabirds, and 5,400 caribou. The refuge's productive waters support harbor seals, sea otters, walruses, and threatened Stellar's sea lions. Gray, minke, killer, and humpback whales live in Izembek or pass through.

In December, 2013, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell determined that a proposed road through the refuge was not in the public interest. A road is unnecessary, would fragment pristine habitat, and violate the refuge's wilderness designation. Proven and less costly transportation solutions exist for people living in the area, such as a hovercraft, ferry, or Coast Guard helicopter.

**We urge Congress to uphold Secretary Jewell's Public Interest Determination and oppose any effort to build a road through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge and its designated wilderness.**

## TRANSPORTATION

Transportation infrastructure including roads, trails and bridges, is critical to providing the American people safe access to their lands and waters. Wildlife refuges provide nearly \$5 in economic output for every dollar invested by Congress, creating an impressive \$2.4 billion return for taxpayers, and a competitive return on investment. America's wildlife refuges also support 37,000 local jobs. To accommodate the 47 million annual refuge visitors and their recreational needs along with the safety of employees, the Refuge System must maintain and improve roads, trails and other transportation infrastructure. Transportation enhancement projects can also significantly reduce vehicular collisions with wildlife with appropriate crossings and signage.

**The Refuge Association calls on Congress to pass a national transportation bill which includes \$100 million annually for roads, trails, and alternative modes of transportation on our nation's wildlife refuges.**

## ESTABLISHMENT AUTHORITY

National wildlife refuges are currently created through a combination of science-based planning and an extensive stakeholder engagement process that seeks local support, input, and opinion on new refuge proposals, according to guidance by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Legislation requiring that only Congress may establish or expand refuges would bring the expansion of the Refuge System to a halt, and completely change a system that for 112 years has called for community support as part of the process.

The Service has a proven track record of engaging local stakeholders in the process of establishing wildlife refuges, which enjoy the support of tens of thousands of Friends, landowners, and conservation organizations. Refuge proposals and expansions that have demonstrated local support have been successful, while those that did not seek or gain community input have been shelved, regardless of their conservation merit. Excellent examples of successful projects that built strong local support include the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area, the Blackfoot Challenge, the Dakota Grasslands Conservation Area, the Rocky Mountain Front, and the Everglades Headwaters. Congressional proposals to remove the authority of the Service to establish wildlife refuges would move the refuge creation process to Washington, D.C. and thus introduce national politics into what has been a locally-led, community-based process.

**The Refuge Association strongly opposes such a move, and urges Congress to reject any effort to move Refuge System strategic growth to Washington, D.C. and away from local communities.**

## FISH AND WILDLIFE RESOURCE PROTECTION ACT

As it stands, when someone damages property of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the money to fix it is drawn from the operations and maintenance budget. This system results in lost projects, or damages that are not repaired. Since 1996, the National Park Service has had the authority to seek and retain compensation directly from responsible parties who injure park resources, whether through vandalism, encroachment, or chemical spills. The Refuge System has no such authority; fines levied for most types of damage to wildlife refuge resources currently go to the General Treasury and can only be made available to the Service to repair or replace those resources with further congressional action.

**The Refuge Association urges Congress to pass the Fish and Wildlife Resource Protection Act—budget-neutral legislation that grants the Service the same common-sense authority that was given to the National Park Service in 1990 and to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 1988.**



Top: Wildlife crossing | USFWS • Above: Illegal off-roading damaging sensitive wetlands | USFWS



## FIRE

The Service is responsible for more than 75 million burnable acres and manages fire on more land management units than any other federal agency. However, from 2009 to 2014, the acreage that the Service managed with prescribed fire dropped 44 percent, largely for lack of resources. The Service increasingly finds itself having to “borrow” funds from other programs to fight fires or do prescribed burns. This means funds get diverted from projects like visitor centers and educational programs. To solve this problem, the Service needs dedicated funding authorized for fire management *and* fire suppression, both prescribed and unplanned. Prescribed fires usually move slowly and reduce hazardous wildland fuels. Removing or modifying combustible plant and other material that can fuel fires is cheaper than fighting unplanned, intense wildfires that are very costly to control.

**The Refuge Association urges Congress to pass the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2015 (S. 235 & H.R. 167) which would treat catastrophic wildfires like other natural disasters and enable federal agencies to tap into emergency funds instead of operations and maintenance dollars to address unplanned wildfires.**

## MOVING REFUGE REVENUE SHARING FUND TO PILT

A flourishing Refuge System is built upon trust and being a good neighbor and partner in local communities. A key part of that partnership involves recognizing that federal land is exempt from real estate taxes. These taxes are a major revenue source for most local governments across the country, funding services like schools, parks, libraries, streets, sewers, law enforcement, and fire protection. Fortunately, in 1935, Congress acknowledged that relationship and enabled wildlife refuges to “give back” to their local communities.

The Refuge Revenue Sharing Program offsets lost local tax revenue by providing payments to local governments from net



Chincoteague NWR | Donna Eaton

income derived from permits and wildlife refuge activities. Funds come from the sale of products like timber; privileges like grazing permits; and leases for facilities not in conflict with refuge purposes and are deposited in the National Wildlife Refuge Fund. The Service pays localities using a formula created by Congress. At times, the Service pays localities more than they would have collected from taxes if the land were privately owned. However, declining revenues and appropriations shortfalls have resulted in the Service only able to pay less than 50 percent of its tax-offset obligations since 2001.

**The Refuge Association urges Congress to move the Refuge System into the Payment in Lieu of Taxes Program (PILT) and until that time, appropriate \$60 million for the Refuge Fund in FY 2016 Interior Appropriations bill to make up for shortfalls.**





Great Dismal Swamp NWR | USFWS



Landowner with biologist | Joe Milmoe, USFWS

## REAUTHORIZATIONS

Congressional authorizations for many important conservation programs have expired or are set to expire and we urge Congress take swift action in 2015 to reauthorize the following programs at the recommended levels:

### Land And Water Conservation Fund

Created by Congress in 1965, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) was a bipartisan commitment to safeguard natural areas, water resources and our cultural heritage, and to provide recreation opportunities to all Americans. It was a simple idea: invest a small portion of federal offshore drilling fees towards protecting important land, water, and recreation areas for all Americans. Yet today, the promise of LWCF has been broken.

Each year \$900 million from offshore royalties should be deposited in the LWCF account in the federal treasury — yet over the years, more than \$17 billion of those funds have been diverted elsewhere. The money was intended to create and protect national wildlife refuges and other public lands from development. Yet, nearly every year, Congress breaks its own promise to the American people and diverts much of this funding to other uses.

As a result, there is a substantial backlog of federal land acquisition needs estimated at more than \$30 billion—including

places vulnerable to development such as Florida's Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area.

LWCF can be used to acquire lands for hunting, fishing and birdwatching but it can also be used to secure conservation easements from farmers and ranchers in places like the Blackfoot Challenge in Montana or the Flint Hills of Kansas. On January 27, 2015, Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., called it “dollar for dollar perhaps the most effective government program we have.”

**The Refuge Association calls on Congress to permanently reauthorize and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund at \$900 million annually.**

### Partners For Fish And Wildlife

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife program (Partners Program) is one of the Service's most effective tools for building partnerships between public agencies and private landowners to conserve America's expansive working landscapes. This highly successful program consistently leverages federal dollars for conservation, generating nearly \$16 in economic return for every \$1 appropriated for programs. The Partners Program is also playing a key role in conserving greater sage-grouse habitat in the intermountain west.

**The Refuge Association and landowner-led Partners for Conservation asks Congress to reauthorize the Partners Program at \$75 million annually.**



Top: Wood duck at Upper Mississippi River NWR | Ted Steinke • Above: Parula warbler | Sandy Selesky

### North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA)

NAWCA supports habitat restoration, water quality improvements, and carbon sequestration projects developed by landowners and organizations at the community level for the benefit of continental mallards, northern pintail, other waterfowl, and declining migratory bird species. Over \$1 billion in NAWCA funds have leveraged an additional \$3 billion in matching funds and over 2,000 projects have contributed to the successful conservation of over 27 million acres of habitat in North America.

**The Refuge Association requests that Congress reauthorize the North American Wetlands Conservation Act at \$75 million.**

### Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA)

Many migratory birds are protected within the boundaries of national wildlife refuges; however, they need protection along their migration routes outside wildlife refuges. The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA) authorizes grants to nations and organizations to conserve habitats that neotropical birds use along their migration north and south and in their wintering range throughout the Caribbean, Central, and South America. Since 2002, more than \$50 million in grants has leveraged an additional \$190 million to support 451 projects in 36 countries — impacting more than 3.7 million acres of habitat.

**The Refuge Association requests that Congress reauthorize the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act at \$6 million annually.**



## Volunteer And Community Partnership Act

The Volunteer and Community Partnership Act encourages the use of volunteers to assist the Refuge System in tasks ranging from removing invasive species to delivering recreation opportunities to the public. The Act also facilitates partnerships between the Refuge System and non-federal entities to promote conservation and awareness. In 2014, 36,000 volunteers donated more than 1.4 million hours, a 22-percent boost to the National Wildlife Refuge System workforce. This vital contribution was the equivalent of an additional 681 full-time equivalent employees and valued at \$32 million.

**The Refuge Association asks Congress to reauthorize the Volunteer and Community Partnership Act.**



Volunteers at Ohio River Islands NWR | USFWS

## CONCLUSION — 2015 CONSERVATION POLICY PRIORITIES

The Refuge Association believes that with sound conservation policy, adequate funding resources, and the power of over 40,000 dedicated volunteers, the Refuge System can fulfill its mission to provide wildlife dependent recreation for Americans and protect the habitat for more than 700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, 250 reptile and amphibian species, and more than 1,000 species of fish. We look forward to working with Congress in 2015 to accomplish this goal.

For more information about our priorities, please contact our Vice President of Government Affairs, Desiree Sorenson-Groves, at [dgroves@refugeassociation.org](mailto:dgroves@refugeassociation.org).





*Flip book over* to read about our Conservation **Funding** Priorities!