



2016 Wildlife Refuge Policy Priorities

for America's Wildlife and the National Wildlife Refuge System



National
Wildlife Refuge
Association

refugeassociation.org

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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 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 41st 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, ranchers, 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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Cover: Top: USFWS biologist Brian Collins counts the eggs of nesting elegant terns at San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, CA | Ian Shive / USFWS.

Bottom right: Refuge manager Lamar Gore speaks with a visitor at John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum, PA | Ian Shive / USFWS.

Bottom left: Volunteers participate in habitat restoration at San Diego National Wildlife Refuge, CA | Ian Shive / USFWS

This page: Connecticut River at Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, NH | Lisa Densmore



Dawn Thistle at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, FL | David Moynahan



Cape May Warbler at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, FL | Sandy Selesky



Moose and calf at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, AK | Sandra Noll

WILDLIFE REFUGE 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 563 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.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association respectfully requests that Congress:

- 1 Protect Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska by passing S. 2341 and H.R. 239 to designate the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as wilderness and oppose any effort to drill for oil and gas in the refuge;
- 2 Protect Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska by opposing any effort to build a road through the refuge;
- 3 Pass H.R. 4558, the Fish and Wildlife Resource Protection Act;
- 4 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;
- 5 Pass the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (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);
- 7 Pass the Bipartisan Sportsmen's Act;
- 8 Reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund;
- 9 Reauthorize the following programs: Partners for Fish and Wildlife; North American Wetlands Conservation Act; Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act;
- 10 Reauthorize the National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Improvement Act and Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.



Refuge staff band a blue-winged teal at Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge, MT | USFWS

Flip Book Over
to learn about the
Refuge Association's
Wildlife Refuge
Funding Priorities!





2016 Wildlife Refuge Policy Priorities

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, AK | Nancy Loon

PROTECT 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 "pro-

tect 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.

In 2015, President Obama announced new protections for the Arctic by proposing 12.28 million acres of the refuge be protected as wilderness, and he sent a formal recommendation to Congress to permanently designate most of the refuge as wilderness. Companion bills in the House and Senate would designate the coastal plain as wilderness, but efforts to open the refuge to oil and gas drilling are still a looming threat.

The Refuge Association urges Congress to expand and pass H.R. 239 and S. 2341 to permanently protect the Arctic refuge by designating the entire refuge as wilderness and oppose and any effort to open the refuge to oil and gas drilling.

PROTECT 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 more than 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, walrus, 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.

The Refuge Association urges 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.



FISH AND WILDLIFE RESOURCE PROTECTION ACT

As it stands, when someone damages property of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Service is not allowed to seek compensation from the responsible parties who caused the damage to public property. Instead, the Refuge System must get additional taxpayer money through an appropriation from Congress to repair or replace the damaged property, or use funds from the appropriated budget for the affected refuge, often at the expense of other refuge programs. This inefficient system results in lost projects, or damages that are not repaired.

In stark contrast, since 1991, 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. And the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has similar authority under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.

Taxpayers should not be responsible for damages caused by those who knowingly harm refuge resources. The Refuge Association urges Congress to pass H.R. 4558, 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 1991 and to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 1988.



Bear cub at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge, NC | Joyce Walton

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 113 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 any effort to move Refuge System strategic growth to Washington, D.C. and away from local communities, and urges Congress to reject such a move.



National Wildlife Refuge System Federal Wildlife Officer Ray Portwood patrols National Elk Refuge, WY, on his horse Griz. | 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, in the past five years, the acreage that the Service managed with prescribed fire dropped by over 45 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 Wild-fire Disaster Funding Act (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 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 \$50 million for the Refuge Fund in FY 2017 Interior Appropriations bill to make up for shortfalls.



Prescribed burn at Carolina Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge, SC | Janice Tripp

BIPARTISAN SPORTSMEN'S ACT

America's sportsmen are some of the most dedicated conservationists working to protect wildlife habitat through support of recreation fees, volunteerism and advocacy on behalf of America's national wildlife refuges and other public lands.

The Bipartisan Sportsmen's Act would protect and enhance opportunities for recreational hunting, fishing, and shooting on public lands including America's wildlife refuges. The bill would provide access to hunting, fishing and shooting on public lands, except in designated wilderness areas or during closures.

The Refuge Association urges Congress to pass the Bipartisan Sportsmen's Act but remove a provision that prohibits the Service from finalizing a rule to regulate non-subsistence hunting of wolves, bears, and other large carnivores on national wildlife refuges across Alaska.



REAUTHORIZATION OF THE 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. As we use one natural resource, we will protect another. 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, the chronic underfunding of this program means that there is a substantial backlog of easements and federal land

acquisition needs. Many of these places include vast stretches of habitat in areas vulnerable to development such as Florida's Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area or have a vast network of community support, such as the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge in four New England states.

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.”

In December 2015, Congress provided a short-term reauthorization of LWCF for three years, and funding will now expire on September 30, 2018.

The Refuge Association calls on Congress to permanently reauthorize and provide full and mandatory annual funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund at \$900 million.



Hunting for waterfowl at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, UT | Ted Steinke



REAUTHORIZATIONS — CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

Congressional authorizations for many important conservation programs have expired or are set to expire and we urge Congress take swift action in 2016 to reauthorize the following programs at the recommended levels:

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 ask Congress to reauthorize the Partners Program at \$75 million annually.



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 \$190.6 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.

Top: A sub-adult short-tailed albatross at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in the Pacific | Daniel Clark.
Center: Photographing butterflies and thistle at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, UT | Wayne Watson/USFWS.
Bottom: Volunteer documents manatee calf at Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, FL | Carol Grant



REAUTHORIZATIONS: HELPING REFUGE FRIENDS AND VOLUNTEERS

Congressional authorizations for programs that promote American citizens to support the Refuge System through volunteerism have expired and we urge Congress take swift action in 2016 to reauthorize the following programs at the recommended levels:

National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Improvement Act

Volunteers are the lifeblood of the National Wildlife Refuge System, annually adding a boost to the workforce by 20 percent. At a time when Refuge System budgets are operating at about \$84 million less than what they had in FY 2010 when factoring in inflationary costs, the help from volunteers and refuge Friends organizations is more important than ever.

Passage of a new National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Improvement Act is intended to increase opportunities for citizens to volunteer on our national wildlife refuges and bolster the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to implement a national strategy for coordinating volunteer efforts. This can then turn the growing number of refuge visitors into passionate volunteers helping care for our public lands and waters.

Refuge visitation is growing and is expected to continue. In the past ten years, visitation to the Refuge System has increased by approximately 27%. However, due to recent funding cuts in the past five years, refuges lost valuable staff committed to visitors and volunteers. The number of volunteers during the deepest funding cuts (FY12 – FY14) dropped by 11 percent; a particularly troubling statistic considering volunteers provide a 20-percent boost to the workforce. Refuges rely on volunteers for welcoming and greeting visitors, maintenance, interpretation, and much more. Volunteer service, however, is only possible if the System is reasonably staffed and thus able to extend requisite volunteer training and oversight.

The ability of Americans to contribute their volunteer time and expertise is directly tied to adequate annual appropriations by Congress. We appreciate the additional \$500,000 provided in the FY 2016 appropriations bill specifically to help the Service oversee volunteers and we hope to build on that for future efforts.

The Refuge Association urges Congress to reauthorize the National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Improvement Act at \$4 million annually.

Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) allows the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal land management agencies to charge a fee for recreational use of public lands at approved sites. Fees paid by visitors at these sites are largely retained by the collecting site and used to improve the quality of the visitor experiences.

As refuge visitation has grown, so too has the demand for facilities and services along with the need to protect natural and cultural resources. Fees collected through FLREA assist the Service in meeting visitors' needs for parking, toilets, and the delivery of quality recreation, heritage and wilderness opportunities.

Sponsored by Rob Bishop (R-UT) and Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), H.R. 1991 would extend, through FY 2017, the authority for those agencies to collect fees and use them on those sites.

The Refuge Association urges Congress to reauthorize the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.

For more information about our policy priorities, please contact our Vice President of Government Affairs, Desiree Sorenson-Groves, at dgroves@refugeassociation.org.



External Affairs staff person Nikolai Kleven teaches students how to bait hooks at Long Meadow Lake in Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, MN | USFWS