

Friends Partnership Mentoring Program Action Plan



Friends Partnership Mentoring Program Action Plan

Mentoring Subteam
Community Partnerships Implementation Team
Conserving the Future

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
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The purpose of the Friends Partnership Mentoring Program is to help Friends partnerships flourish, and in turn increase the overall ability of the Service to carry out its mission through viable and sustainable partnerships with Friends organizations.

FRIENDS MENTORING PROGRAM RE-DESIGN BACKGROUND

Evaluating the Friends Mentoring Program began in the Refuge System Headquarters in late 2011. A focus group, consisting of 20 refuge staff including project leader, regional office staff, and 11 Friends from across the country, formed to assist with the effort. On a parallel track, the Community Partnerships Implementation Team of the Conserving the Future vision process identified Friends mentoring as one of its top priorities and established a Friends Mentoring Subteam. Between January and March 2012, the two efforts were merged and the new Friends Mentoring Subteam began working with the focus group to initiate the mentoring program evaluation and redesign process.

In May 2012, the subteam sought input from the focus group by asking them to complete a mentoring needs assessment consisting of several questions: 1) which priority needs should the mentoring program focus on? 2) what are creative ways to deliver mentoring? and 3) how can we best leverage resources and partners to expand mentoring? From that input, the subteam drafted a mentoring vision, which went through multiple revisions based on the comments received from the following review processes:

- *Internal USFWS review in September 2012: sent to over 60 people including the original focus group of staff and Friends, the Community Partnerships Implementation Team, Regional Friends Coordinators, Regional Visitor Services Chiefs, national visitor services chiefs and the National Wildlife Refuge Association;*
- *Vision Implementation Team Co-chairs in December 2012;*
- *AmericasWildlife.org for open public comment in March 2013;*
- *Regional Chiefs and Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System in November 2013.*

This final Action Plan incorporates over a year of work with input from a broad array of Service staff and Friends and presents a broad overview of how the Service can work together with others to develop and implement a more effective and sustainable Friends Partnership Mentoring Program.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Action Plan has been prepared by the Friends Mentoring Subteam, one of five subteams of the Community Partnerships Implementation Team, and directly supports recommendation 11 below from the Refuge System's *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation* vision (2011).

Recommendation 11: "Develop and nurture active and vibrant friends groups or community partnerships for every staffed refuge or refuge complex."

This Action Plan outlines a new mentoring program for Friends partnerships within the National Wildlife Refuge System. The new plan, building off of the former national friends

mentoring program developed 15 years ago, recommends an expanded mentoring approach to address the needs of a larger and growing Friends program.

The former mentoring program ended in 2009 and was administered largely out of the Refuge System's headquarters office with finite resources. The former program was not meeting the demand for mentoring and was losing its cost-effectiveness. The new plan still includes coordination by the headquarters office but enlists additional commitments of funding and staff time from both the Regions and field sites to provide the needed expansion and execution of the program.

The investigations of this subteam concluded that the best long-term solution to maintaining strong and viable Friends partnerships is to develop a new mentoring program that addresses the priority needs of Friends Partnerships. The new approach keys on four goals:

- 1) address the priority partnership needs of both the Friends and Service;
- 2) engage all levels of the Service in mentoring activities;
- 3) capitalize on the expertise within our own Friends community to mentor and coach; and
- 4) decrease response time for the delivery of mentoring visits.

The new approach also suggests a variety of locally-driven complementary activities critical to the nurturing of healthy Friends partnerships that if done routinely, can head off the need for formal problem-solving mentoring. In a nutshell, the new plan promotes vibrant Friends Partnerships by focusing on proactive methods to strengthen and sustain Friends partnerships through building relationships and sound business practices between the Friends organizations and Service staff. It builds a program that redistributes the primary formal responsibility for nurturing Friends partnerships to the local level, with regional and national support, guidance, and standards.

The cost-benefit of this modest investment in Friends partnerships cannot be overstated, especially in times of tight budgets and limited resources. Robust Friends partnerships are vital to achieving our mission, maintaining strong connections to local communities, and encouraging grass roots support for wildlife conservation. Implementing this plan will require a commitment of funding and/or staff time from both the Regions and field stations. The goal is to implement the new Friends Partnership Mentoring Program beginning in 2014.

FRIENDS MENTORING HISTORY

The former Friends Mentoring Program was launched in the late 1990s as part of a larger strategy to strengthen Friends organizations through the development and delivery of a number of formal support programs. It was agreed that Friends were critical to the protection and perpetuation of the National Wildlife Refuge System and that Friends needed formal developmental support programs to sustain themselves. The benefits of the growing Friends program were being realized but newly forming Friends organizations were struggling with basic issues in building a relationship with the Service, and many

established Friends organizations were in need of nurturing and advice beyond the earliest stages of forming. The former mentoring program was born out of these needs and was developed as a face-to-face coaching and information sharing venue between a trained mentor team, refuge staff, and board members.

Over the nearly 12 years that the program was actively running, from 1999-2009, a highly variable number of applications were received annually, anywhere from two to two dozen. Applications were generally split between mentoring needs for start-up organizations and capacity building. The program did not intentionally mentor for sustainability issues, but the mentors found themselves in the midst of mentoring for those issues during a number of mentoring visits. The program was also very “Friends” focused, emphasizing more the Friends organizational issues rather than a combination of joint partner issues.

Nonetheless, the former national mentoring program was considered a highly effective support program for our Friends partnerships, but began to suffer in cost-effectiveness. With a singular headquarters budget and program coordinator, the program mentored less than 5% of our total Friends partnerships annually. The national mentoring program became a top-down single source support program with a finite capacity, and as such, was not a long-term sustainable model for today’s much larger Friends program. The overall goal of the new mentoring program is to increase the long-term cost-effectiveness, sustainability, and vibrancy of the Friends program by engaging all levels of the Service and knowledgeable Friends in formal mentoring.

DEFINING THE NEW FRIENDS PARTNERSHIP MENTORING PROGRAM

This section defines the mentoring program, describes its purpose, and establishes key goals on which to focus efforts.

DEFINITION

The Friends Partnership Mentoring Program is a standardized support program that includes face-to-face peer-to-peer coaching, and information sharing between a trained mentor team, refuge staff, and board members. It is designed to nurture and add vibrancy to Friends partnerships of all ages and sizes, from start-up partnerships in the formative stages to well-established partnerships seeking sustainability.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Friends Partnership Mentoring Program is to help Friends partnerships flourish, and in turn increase the overall ability of the Service to effectively carry out its mission through unique partnerships with Friends organizations.

GOALS

1. ADDRESS PRIORITY PARTNERSHIP NEEDS

The mentoring program is redesigned to address specific priority needs to help both Friends and Service staff clearly understand their respective roles in the partnership, effectively communicate with one another, work together to routinely strengthen organizational management and systems, address critical life cycle stage

issues, and make timely transitions in the face of ever present change. These needs are organized into four distinct categories and discussed below. They apply to Friends board members, Refuge Managers, and Service Liaisons overall, but apply most specifically to the collaborative working relationships between an individual Friends organization and local Service staff. Please note that Friends serving as mentors are better suited to help address the Friends-focused needs as a part of the mentoring process (e.g. obtaining 501(c)3 status, bylaw development). Priority needs generally are of four types:

- **FRIENDS ORGANIZATIONAL CORE MANAGEMENT** – obtaining 501(c)3 status, board development, bylaw development, operating guidelines, fiscal operations, board communications, enhancing meeting effectiveness;
- **DEVELOPING AND/OR STRENGTHENING JOINT PARTNERSHIP ELEMENTS** - defining roles, responsibilities, and scope of the partnership; developing purpose, goals, and objectives; understanding the operational management differences of the Service and nonprofit organizations, accountability, and recognition;
- **DEALING WITH CHANGE/TRANSITION** – Service staff changes, board changes, repurposing, reevaluating; and
- **TRIAGE/CRASH CART ASSESSMENT** – revitalizing a partnership in decline and in danger of collapse.

2. ENGAGE ALL LEVELS OF THE SERVICE IN MENTORING ACTIVITIES

If Friends are to be fully successful, it is vital that all Service staff working directly with Friends take ownership in the formal mentoring program and/or the partnership maintenance activities identified in the *Locally Driven Complementary Activities* section later in this Action Plan. Whether it be a Regional Friends Coordinator scheduling mentor site visits, a Refuge Manager giving Friends an annual orientation, or a Friends organization coordinating a get together with other nearby Friends organizations; this Action Plan redistributes responsibilities of formal mentoring and other partnership maintenance responsibilities throughout the Service and existing Friends organizations instead of the former top-down, one-way delivery approach. While this model will require more resources from Regions and field sites, an expanded active involvement in Friends support is essential in sustaining these relationships through time.

For Service staff that serve as mentors, the training and mentoring experience in itself will also increase the Service skillset of embracing and working effectively with Friends partnerships, which further addresses *Conserving the Future* recommendation 11.

3. CAPITALIZE ON THE EXPERTISE WITHIN OUR OWN FRIENDS COMMUNITY TO MENTOR AND COACH

Friends organizations have been working in tandem with the Refuge System for well over 30 years. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience within our own Friends organizations. This Action Plan encourages experienced Friends to serve as mentors and incorporates suggested activities, such as *Friends Peer-to-Peer*

Coaching mentioned later in this document to build avenues for Friends to learn from each other. This is even more crucial in light of government travel and conference restrictions that have recently sharply curtailed the Service’s ability to host major Friends face-to-face networking and sharing events.

4. DECREASE RESPONSE TIME FOR THE DELIVERY OF MENTORING VISITS

Providing timely mentoring for partnerships in critical need and being able to meet the demand for mentoring are two important aspects that the new mentoring program is designed to address. Expanding the program to include 15 trained mentor pairs and a year-round open application process will help meet the needs of a growing Friends program in a timely manner.

EXECUTING THE NEW FRIENDS PARTNERSHIP MENTORING PROGRAM

MENTORING FREQUENCY

This Action Plan calls for completing 30 mentoring events per year. The Refuge System is currently supported by about 230 Friends organizations; therefore the program proposed in this Action Plan would allow for a mentoring session about once every seven years for each individual Friends Partnership if all partnerships are mentored. This is considered a minimal program at this stage and experience gained with the program over time will determine whether this frequency of mentoring activity is adequate.

MENTOR SELECTION

Mentors will be carefully selected and will have a 3-year term limit. Mentors will commit to conducting two mentor visits annually for two years, then, help coach new mentors their third year. Staggering term limits will allow veteran mentors to coach new mentors. Mentors may include a variety of staff and Friends positions including a biologist, a Project Leader, a Friends Vice President or Friends staff person. The key in obtaining mentors would be to seek the right people with the right skills, abilities, and time. The mentoring role requires strong and organized individuals with sharp listening, communication, writing and facilitation skills as well as a strong foundation of Friends partnership experience. Mentor positions would be selected and allotted per Region based on the number of Friends partnerships in their Region. For example:

- One Mentor Pair Each - Regions 1, 6, 7, and 8;
- Two Mentor Pairs – Region 2; and
- Three Mentor Pairs Each - Regions 3, 4 and 5.

MENTOR TRAINING

The Refuge System Headquarters will select and work with a professional mentor training contractor to develop and deliver mentor training for a total of 30 mentors, or 15 pairs. The training development team will include the National Friends Coordinator, a couple of

A mentoring guide will be developed as a “step-down plan” of this Action Plan. It will include much more detailed information than what is included in this overview Action Plan and will serve as the handbook for administrators and mentors in the program.

Regional Friends Coordinators, a couple of former mentors, and the contractor. Mentors will be required to successfully complete the mentor training program prior to mentoring Friends partnerships.

MENTOR PAIRING

Mentor pairs will consist of one Service staff person and one Friends member. The Regional Friends Coordinator will identify the appropriate mentor pair for each mentor visit, and will then work with the field station site to schedule and coordinate the mentor visit according to a national standardized protocol. The pairing of mentors would be fluid with no rules governing the pairing process other than they should attempt to stay within their own Regions as possible to reduce overall programmatic travel expenses and facilitate long-term peer-to-peer networking within regions.

MENTORING APPLICATION PROCESS

The Refuge System Headquarters will work with the Regions to develop and implement a standardized, on-line, formal mentoring application. An initial push for applications will be followed by an open, year-round application process to facilitate timely review and scheduling of mentor visits.

LOCALLY DRIVEN COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES

In addition to the formal mentoring program detailed above, finding ways to get Friends together to learn and share best practices is crucial to maintaining active and vibrant Friends partnerships. Below are a few activities that we believe will serve as “raw materials” to strengthen Friends partnerships at the local level. They include a combination of networking, instituting routine orientation practices, and expanding use of on-line tools to learn, share, and connect.

FRIENDS PEER-TO-PEER COACHING

Friends peer-to-peer coaching, involving Friends and staff from neighboring Friends partnerships, is critical for a successful Friends partnership program. Two very strong advantages to peer-to-peer coaching are: 1) it usually involves multiple board members from each organization, while only a single board member typically represents the organization at the larger trainings, and 2) there can be reduced travel costs if planned so that most participants can drive instead of fly. Getting Friends and staff together at the local level is a very effective way to provide training, share best management practices, create support networks, and revive enthusiasm.

Peer-to-peer coaching is already occurring and some Friends have even acquired grant funding specifically to host these meetings. To demonstrate the importance of these local trainings, we will work with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to expand the Refuge Friends Grant Program to include grant funding to help Friends willing and able to coordinate peer-to-peer coaching sessions. Another way to help reduce overall peer-to-peer coaching costs and ensure productive outcomes is to provide formal facilitator training to regional Friends coordinators or designees, who can then serve to assist Friends and field sites with the facilitation of these peer-to-peer trainings as needed.

To further support this effort, we will include sample agendas to assist Friends in the coordination of peer-to-peer coaching sessions. While each training agenda can be customized to suit the individual partnership needs, it is strongly recommended that the needs identified in the goals section of this document be given priority consideration before customizing an agenda. If we all work in unison to address common priority needs first, we can potentially head off the need for more formal mentoring.

In addition to the sample agendas, template post-meeting evaluations will also be developed for peer-to-peer coaching sessions to help ensure the outcomes of the meeting are followed through and maximized.

PARTNERSHIP MAINTENANCE AT THE FIELD SITE LEVEL

It is incumbent upon the individuals within the partnership (both Service staff and Friends) at the field station level to jointly perform certain tasks on a regular basis. These include an annual orientation for Friends and staff, orientation for new board members and staff, and annually reviewing the partnerships purpose and goals. Thoughtful completion of these tasks is critical to sustaining a successful collaborative partnership. Below is a non-inclusive list of tools that the mentoring subteam developed, to be part of an overall mentoring packet, to help facilitate partnership maintenance tasks at the field station level.

- Standardized PowerPoint presentation for annual Friends orientation;
- Standardized PowerPoint presentation for staff regarding working with Friends;
- Welcome packet for new board members;
- Fact Sheets: Understanding nonprofit organizational life cycle stages, celebrating successes/recognition ideas; and
- Partnership self-assessment checklist.

EXPANDING USE OF ON-LINE TOOLS

In most cases, formal mentoring can be effectively accomplished only through face-to-face communication, but the Service also must continue to engage in on-line communicating across our vast national network of Friends partnerships. On-line tools can meet a variety of needs in a timely manner and possibly head off the need for more formal mentoring. Below are on-line tools that are already being utilized to support Friends partnerships. These will be strengthened to complement the new mentoring program.

- RefugeFriendsConnect.org, an on-line website managed by the National Wildlife Refuge Association for Service-Friends partnerships to share and network
- Friends of National Wildlife Refuges Facebook group page managed by the Service
- On-line training for Friends and staff through the National Conservation Training Center;
- Webinars and Webcasts to share information and offer training on priority needs; and
- Friend-to-Friend e-mail and Facebook networking through groups such as Friends Academy alumni

SUMMARY

The crux of the new mentoring Action Plan is that it will require a new commitment of Regional funding and staff time to expand mentoring capabilities. The Headquarters office does not have the resources to maintain this program alone now that the Friends program is twice the size that it was when the original mentoring program was established 15 years ago. Additionally, it would not be cost effective to implement a renewed Friends mentoring program without across the board Regional support to devote staff time and travel funding to underpin the effort.

If there is not Regional support to fully implement this new Friends Partnership Mentoring Program, we will be able to only partially implement this action plan. A partial implementation would apply the existing headquarters mentoring budget to hire a contractor to conduct ad hoc mentoring for emergency cases only, or for those partnerships in danger of immediate collapse. This would leave us with a very limited program that is not much more than the suspended Friends mentoring program that we had at the outset of the development of this Action Plan.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES NEEDED

- Mentor training – existing Cooperative Agreement with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Refuge System Headquarters
- Peer-to-Peer Coaching grants – existing Cooperative Agreement with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Refuge System Headquarters
- Mentor travel – new Regional commitment of funding
- Facilitation training for Regional Friends Coordinators – worked into Individual Development Plans as critical skill development

HUMAN RESOURCES NEEDED

- Thirty mentors (15 staff and 15 Friends) - each committing approximately two weeks per year for up to three years for mentoring duties (includes training, pre-visit planning, travel, site visit, post-visit report development and evaluation tasks)
- National Friends Coordinator to lead team to develop mentor training, mentor guidebook, and execute mentoring application processes
- Additional time for Regional Friends Coordinators to administer mentoring program - administration of this program will require an additional time commitment from Regional Friends Coordinators and support from their supervisors (there may need to be an evaluation of duties for some Regional Friends Coordinators).

MENTORING IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

When	What	Who
November 2013	Form developmental team	National Friends Coordinator
December 2013	Select mentor training vendor	National Friends Coordinator
January 2013 - June 2014	Develop mentor training and other programmatic resources	Team of: Training contractor, National and Regional Friends Coordinators, former mentors, vendor
January - March 2014	Recruit/select mentors	Team of National and Regional Friends Coordinators
July - September 2014	Attend mentor training at NCTC; Execute mentoring application process	Mentors; Regional Friends Coordinators
September - December 2014	Begin scheduling conducting first round of mentors visits	Regional Friends Coordinators and mentors
March 2015	Program evaluation and annual program push for applications	Team of National and Regional Friends Coordinators
Ongoing 2015	Schedule and conduct mentor visits as needed	Regional Friends Coordinators and mentors

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Wildlife Refuge System

www.fws.gov/refuges

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