

## **Proposal to Expand Refuge Lands in the French Creek Watershed**

The Service is looking to establish French Creek National Wildlife Refuge in portions of Erie, Crawford, Venango and Mercer Counties in northwestern Pennsylvania and a portion of Chautauqua County in southwest New York. The area has long been valued for its rich aquatic diversity system of freshwater mussels and fish, aquatic diversity and unique habitats that protect water quality of French Creek and its tributaries. The planned refuge would also protect critical habitat for other species including high quality habitat for waterfowl, migratory birds, and other wildlife.

### **The proposed French Creek National Wildlife Refuge has numerous goals:**

- To establish a new national wildlife refuge in northwest Pennsylvania and southwest New York to protect high quality habitat for freshwater mussels and fish and other wildlife along French Creek, its tributaries and supporting lands;
- Protect and manage French Creek and its tributaries and associated wetlands along with forest habitats to support water quality and protect waterfowl, migratory birds, and threatened and endangered species;
- Provide opportunities for public use in ways of wildlife observation and photography, hunting, fishing, environmental education and interpretation;
- Collaborate with partners to protect and enhance biodiversity and water quality within the French Creek watershed, benefiting both humans and wildlife; and
- Ensure healthy wildlife populations for the benefit of Pennsylvanians and New Yorkers and all Americans.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### ***What are national wildlife refuges?***

The National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service on behalf of the American people and is the largest assemblage of lands and waters devoted to fish and wildlife conservation in the world. It consists of 568 refuges across all 50 states and 5 U.S. territories, encompassing 95 million land acres, 760 million acres of submerged lands and waters, 38 wetland management districts, and 5 marine national monuments. Of the total number of refuges, 63 contain and protect designated wilderness areas.

### ***Why did the Service focus on French Creek for a new refuge?***

It is well established that French Creek, its tributaries and wetlands provide critical habitat for freshwater mussels, fish and wildlife, support migrating waterfowl and protect water quality. Establishing the refuge would enable federal land protection for endangered species and ensure the watershed retains the qualities that twice earned it “Pennsylvania’s River of the Year” recognition. In 2010, the Service approved a preliminary proposal to establish the French Creek National Wildlife Refuge, but that proposal was delayed due to higher priorities nationally and limited funding.

### ***What is the process for establishing the refuge and opportunities for public input?***

The Service will follow a two-step process to establish the refuge and both steps include opportunities for the public to weigh in. Public listening sessions will present the purpose and need of the refuge and a conceptual map. The sessions will be held in late April. Following public input, a draft Land Protection Plan (LPP) and an Environmental Assessment (EA) will be developed and made publicly available for review and comments later in summer 2023. The LPP informs landowners and interested stakeholders of the proposal to establish the refuge. The Service prepares the EA as required by the National Environmental Policy Act to analyze different strategies for land protection in the area.

***Does the creation of the refuge immediately protect lands within it?***

No. The only immediate change is the Service will then have the authority to purchase land and easements. If established, the Service and its partners will work with willing landowners to establish the French Creek National Wildlife Refuge through several methods, including purchasing land at fair market value and development rights through conservation easements. The Service and its partners will also work with communities and others to achieve added protection through best management practices and other conservation-minded land management.

***How does the Service acquire land for the refuge?***

The Service follows customary real estate practices including title searches, land inspections and independent fair market appraisals. Conservation easements will also be considered if desired by a landowner and the Service will propose and negotiate the terms and conditions of easements. Easement acquisition also follows customary real estate practices including appraisals.

***My land is POTENTIALLY within the refuge, what does that mean?***

The rights of a private landowners are not affected by the establishment of the refuge. The Service will work with willing sellers to acquire lands as opportunities and funding allow. Landowners have no obligation to sell their land or otherwise participate in the proposed refuge at any time.

***If I decide I want to sell my land or an easement over my land, how will that work?***

Once the refuge is established, property owners can contact the Service to express interest in selling their property or an easement. Service acquisition priorities will be based on interested sellers, available funding and resource values of the property.

***What if the Service wants to buy my land, and I do not want to sell?***

You don't have to sell your land as part of this proposal. You would be unaffected by the establishment of the refuge.

***What types of activities will be allowed on the refuge?***

The Service supports wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation. However, the opportunities for these activities will be limited until the Service is able to acquire a sufficient land.

***How would tax revenue be affected if lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System?***

The Federal Government does not pay property tax. However, the Service annually reimburses counties to compensate for lost revenue, based on a formula that is the greater of: 75 cents per acre; three-fourths of one percent of the fair market value; or 25 percent of the net receipts collected from operation and management of the refuge. Use of these funds must first be approved by Congress. Also, Congress may appropriate additional funds to compensate local governments. Federal purchase of easements typically have less or no impact on property tax revenue for communities. Other economic benefits typically associated with refuge lands include tourism, improved property values adjacent to the refuge, and access to federal grants to name a few.

***Where does the money come from to buy private land in a time of tight budgets?***

The Service anticipates funding for this project will be provided through the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. These funding sources are not derived from traditional tax revenues but are collected from the sale of Federal Duck Stamps, entrance fees from certain national wildlife refuges, import duties on arms and ammunition (Migratory Bird Conservation Fund), and from the sale of offshore oil leases (Land and Water Conservation Fund). Funding from these sources is intended to support conservation of land across the nation.

***What is the timeline for completing the refuge?***

This is a long-term effort that may take decades to complete. The number of willing sellers and availability of funding will determine the timeline for completing the land protection for the Refuge.

***What are the next steps?***

In summer of 2023, the Service will present the public with the Draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment, complete with detailed maps showing where the Service would like to create the proposed refuge. The Service will provide an opportunity for the public to review and comment on the proposal. Once the public review and comment period ends, the Service will evaluate the comments and make any changes needed before developing a final plan, which will be approved by the Service Director.

***Schedule for Establishing the Proposed French Creek National Wildlife Refuge***

Develop Draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment  
Spring 2023

Conduct Public Review and Comment on Proposal  
Spring 2023

Evaluate the Comments and Develop Final Plan for Approval  
Summer 2023

**For more information:**

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Questions/Comments can also be sent to [FW5frenchcreekplan@fws.gov](mailto:FW5frenchcreekplan@fws.gov)

Project Website

<https://www.fws.gov/project/proposed-new-refuge-lands-french-creek-watershed>