



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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INTERIOR, CONSERVATION GROUPS RESOLVE LAWSUIT

The Interior Department today announced settlement of a lawsuit filed by conservation groups concerning recreational and commercial activities on nine National Wildlife Refuges and the process for approving public use of the refuge system as a whole.

Under the settlement, Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to issue written evaluations of all recreational and commercial activities permitted on refuges, with appropriate compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

The Service also will determine whether sufficient funds are available to develop, operate, and maintain recreational uses not directly related to the purposes of each refuge, as required under the Refuge Recreation Act.

Recreational activities such as fishing, boating, birdwatching, and hunting, as well as commercial activities such as haying, grazing, timber harvest, or mining are considered secondary uses of a refuge. Under existing law, any secondary use on a refuge must be compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

The lawsuit was filed in October 1992, by the National Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, Defenders of Wildlife,

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the Black Hills Audubon Society, and Alan D. Riley. It alleged incompatible secondary uses were being permitted on nine refuges and that the Department was failing to follow legal requirements in allowing similar uses throughout the refuge system.

Refuges named in the suit were: Cabeza Prieta NWR (National Wildlife Refuge) in Arizona, Camas NWR in Idaho, Crystal River NWR in Florida, Great Meadows NWR in Massachusetts, Havasu NWR in Arizona, McNary NWR and Turnbull NWR in Washington, Monte Vista NWR in Colorado, and Umatilla NWR in Oregon and Washington.

"The vast majority of activities on refuges are non-controversial and don't harm the refuge or the wildlife," said Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. "But where we do have problems, we will do what we can to eliminate them. Settlement of this lawsuit clearly signals the Interior Department's intent to protect our National Wildlife Refuges."

"In most respects, this agreement builds upon initiatives the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has already undertaken to enhance management of secondary uses on refuges," Service Director Mollie Beattie said. "It is also an important first step in reaching the goals outlined for the refuge system in 'Refuges 2003,' the draft plan and environmental impact statement released earlier this year."

An internal survey conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1991 found that just 2 percent of the more than 6,000 secondary uses in the system were incompatible, and that half of these were beyond the Service's jurisdiction to control. The majority of these incompatible uses have since been terminated and others are being phased out.

Each year the Refuge System records more than 6 million visits for recreational hunting and fishing, and more than 30 million visits for other wildlife-oriented recreation, such as birding and wildlife photography. Public demand for a wide diversity of recreational activities on refuges continues to increase.

Commercial activities, such as grazing and farming, have been allowed on many refuges since the early part of this century, both to accommodate local agricultural interests and as tools to enhance habitat for wildlife.

On eight of the nine refuges singled out in the lawsuit, the Department agreed it will discontinue the alleged incompatible uses unless they are found to be compatible after a written assessment and compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

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These activities include grazing at Monte Vista NWR, Camas NWR, and Turnbull NWR; some non-wildlife-related recreational activities at Crystal River NWR, McNary NWR, Great Meadows NWR, Havasu NWR, and Umatilla NWR.

In the case of Cabeza Prieta NWR, the Department agreed to evaluate its legal authorities to control military operations affecting the refuge and to act accordingly.

A separate lawsuit filed at the same time sought to end the use of Sea Lion Rock at Copalis National Wildlife Refuge as a practice bombing target by the Navy. The plaintiffs were Defenders of Wildlife, the National Audubon Society, The Wilderness Society, the Natural Resources Defense Council, American Oceans Campaign, and the Washington Environmental Council. The Navy, which had been using the small island as a target since 1944, halted bombing operations there in March, 1993. In August 1993, the Interior Department rescinded permission for the Navy to bomb the island, rendering the lawsuit moot.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest and most diverse collection of lands and waters set aside specifically for wildlife. Its 491 refuges cover more than 91 million acres in all 50 states and several territories.