



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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Megan Durham 202-208-5650

HUNTING WILL CONTINUE ON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES;
REFUGE FUNDING, COMPATIBILITY REVIEWS CONTINUING

No hunting programs on national wildlife refuges will be halted this fall, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Mollie Beattie said today.

"I wish to clarify this situation for the many sportsmen and women who have become concerned by inaccurate reports that the Fish and Wildlife Service is planning to end hunting on national wildlife refuges," Beattie said.

"The Service must continue with its review of refuge funding and compatibility issues, but will not be making any final decisions until late this year," Beattie said. "Therefore we will not be halting any refuge hunting programs this fall. Any changes I propose to make in refuge public uses as a result of our funding review will be submitted to the Congress for review according to the rules of the appropriations process. In addition, we will involve the States and the affected public before proceeding on any decisions that affect public use of refuges," Beattie said.

"I want to emphasize that the Fish and Wildlife Service has not changed its longstanding policy of supporting compatible outdoor recreation such as hunting and fishing within the National

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Wildlife Refuge System," Beattie said. "Hunters and anglers have been in the vanguard of the wildlife conservation movement since its very beginning, and have willingly provided enormous financial support for wildlife management programs. There is no way we are going to turn our back on this vital constituency."

About half of the 499 refuges are open to hunting and fishing. For the 1993-94 season, the Fish and Wildlife Service opened eight new hunting programs and three new fishing programs on refuges.

Beattie said the public concerns are being generated by two separate reviews the Fish and Wildlife Service is conducting: one on the "compatibility" of recreational and economic activities permitted on national wildlife refuges, and the second on refuge funding.

The "compatibility" review is being conducted by refuge managers to comply with the requirements of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act and the Refuge Recreation Act, as well as the terms of a compatibility lawsuit settlement agreement. The lawsuit, settled in October 1993, was brought against the Fish and Wildlife Service by several environmental groups who charged that contrary to the requirements of federal wildlife refuge law, the Service was permitting recreational and economic activities on refuges that were not "compatible" with the purposes for which those refuges were established. Under the Refuge System Administration Act and the Refuge Recreation Act, activities are not to be allowed within wildlife refuges unless they have first been found to be compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. Refuge managers are now making these required compatibility findings in writing. The refuge managers also must certify in writing under the Refuge Recreation Act that adequate funds are available to manage recreational programs that are not directly related to the primary purposes and functions for which a refuge was established.

"The fact is that the Service has made compatibility and funding determinations about recreational programs on refuges for years," Beattie said. "The difference now is that we are making sure we have all of these determinations in writing. I also want to stress that the compatibility review applies to all economic and recreation activities on refuges, not just hunting and fishing. We do not expect this review to turn up more than a small handful of wildlife-dependent recreation programs that are incompatible."

Beattie said the Service is conducting a review of refuge funding unrelated to the requirements of the Refuge Recreation Act because the 91-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System is experiencing strains brought about by the growing number of new refuges and environmental mandates and other increases in the costs

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of doing business. As a result, the Service has been reviewing activities on refuges to ensure the limited funds and staff are being used to address the highest priority fish and wildlife conservation needs.

Beattie said she has instructed Service regional directors not to staff 30 recently established national wildlife refuges and to leave some staff positions at existing refuges and central offices vacant until further notice, in order to focus resources on high priority activities at existing refuges.

"In the past, we have often taken money from established refuges to meet the costs of opening new refuges. This practice simply robs Peter to pay Paul," said Beattie.

Beattie said the Service will not proceed with any other major decisions on refuge funding adjustments until after the compatibility and Recreation Act funding determinations are completed under the lawsuit settlement agreement.

Beattie said the Fish and Wildlife Service will continue to acquire land as authorized by the Congress and the Cabinet-level Migratory Bird Conservation Commission.

"Often the opportunity to acquire important wildlife habitat comes along only once, and you must take advantage of those opportunities when they occur," Beattie said. "Therefore we do not believe it would be wise to halt our land acquisition program, and we will continue to acquire lands for those refuges authorized by the Congress and the migratory bird refuges approved by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission."

The National Wildlife Refuge System presently includes 499 national wildlife refuges, 51 coordination areas, and many waterfowl production areas that together encompass some 91 million acres throughout the United States, its commonwealths, and territories. The Refuge System has grown by more than 3.6 million acres and 76 new refuges in the last decade. While operational funding has nearly doubled during this period, from \$64.6 million in FY 1984 to \$112.4 million in FY 1994, purchasing power per refuge has been eroded by inflation, start-up costs for new refuges, and other factors, despite efforts made by the Service to save funds through reduced travel, deferral of equipment replacement, and other actions. Although some refuges generate entrance and user fees, in fact these revenues equal less than 1 percent of the annual budget of the refuge system. Also, these fee programs are often costly and inefficient to administer. By law, only 30 percent of entrance fees collected are returned to the Fish and Wildlife Service to offset administrative costs.