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Janet Tennyson 202-219-3861

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE APPOINTS NEW CHIEF OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

The Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced Richard A. (Rick) Coleman has been appointed the new chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the nation's only network of federal lands dedicated to wildlife conservation. The 94-year-old Refuge System comprises 92 million acres of prime wildlife habitat in all 50 states and U.S. territories.

Coleman, a 17-year veteran of the Refuge System and current supervisor of national wildlife refuges in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, will officially take on his new post in August. He replaces Robert Shallenberger, who transferred in March to Midway Island in the North Pacific to manage the newly acquired Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge.

"Rick is the ideal person for this position," said John Rogers, Acting Fish and Wildlife Service Director. "His depth of experience in the Refuge program, coinciding with his partnership philosophy and demonstrated strong leadership talents are just what the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service needs to help lead the National Wildlife Refuge System into the next century."

Coleman previously managed the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, served as a biologist in the Refuges Division at Service headquarters in Washington, and managed several national wildlife refuges in Hawaii and the Pacific Islands. He has worked on several national task forces on refuge issues, such as compatibility reviews and refuge operations. Coleman earned a Ph.D. in Forestry from Pennsylvania State University, and Master's and Bachelor of Science degrees in Wildlife Biology from Michigan State University.

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AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES...
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“It’s an exciting time to take the helm of the National Wildlife Refuge System with so many important milestones looming on the horizon,” Coleman said.

Congress is currently considering legislation on the National Wildlife Refuge System that would clearly define for the first time in its history the mission and priority public uses of refuge lands. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 has been endorsed by the Clinton Administration and has passed in the House of Representatives. The absence of comprehensive statutory authorities on managing the Refuge System had increasingly led to debate among Service constituencies over the last two decades, especially in regard to public uses. The pending bill defines wildlife conservation as the core mission of the Refuge System and establishes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation as priority public uses of refuge lands.

Coleman said he looks forward to working with the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), a diverse group of environmental and sportsmen’s organizations that have recently joined forces to combat the \$805 million funding shortfall for basic maintenance and operations on refuges. “The CARE group’s efforts on the funding issue are tremendously important since the maintenance and operations backlog represents a major threat to the Refuge System,” Coleman said.

Another important effort underway regarding partnerships is the “Friends” Initiative, involving the establishment of community-based citizens coalitions that help national wildlife refuges carry out their missions. This initiative is supported by partnerships with the National Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Refuge Association. There are currently 60 local coalitions assisting refuges, one of which supports the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge which Coleman managed for 7 years.

Coleman said he is eager to boost this initiative due to his “fantastic experiences” working with The Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, a Friends group of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. “Like the CARE group,” he said, “Friends groups epitomize what can be done working with partners who can really help the Refuge System.”

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In addition, Coleman said, “the Refuge program is the Fish and Wildlife Service’s entree to relate across the fence with private landowners and other land management agencies, to work with them to conserve fish and wildlife through cooperation. The success of the Refuge program rests largely with refuge managers’ ability to extend their reach beyond refuge perimeters through voluntary work with partners, including all other Fish and Wildlife Service programs,” he said.

Another top priority for Coleman is improving communications between refuges and the public, among refuges, and internally within the Service. “The success of any program is dependent in large part on communication,” he said.

Coleman hopes to step up public awareness efforts for the Refuge System, saying he is “committed to reversing the National Wildlife Refuge System’s history of anonymity.” He believes increasing public awareness will ultimately help refuge managers face their many challenges because “understanding and appreciation naturally lead toward pathways to overcome these challenges. Our business is really about people--everything we accomplish on behalf of wildlife we accomplish on behalf of and through the support of the American people.”

Coleman’s commitment reinforces public awareness efforts called for in a 1995 Service proclamation designating an annual celebration of National Wildlife Refuge Week the second week of October, provisions of an Executive Order on the Refuge System signed by President Clinton in 1996, and the Refuge System legislation now pending in Congress. “We know that the American public supports wildlife conservation, so it’s up to us to let them know what we do and why we do it,” he said.

Coleman also hopes to improve internal communications to help support field employees. “One of the primary things I want to communicate is what I have on my door now and will have on my door in Washington: ‘If it doesn’t happen in the field, it doesn’t happen.’ I have that there to remind me of the need to be responsive to the field, to make a significant difference, every day, at the field level. I also want to increase the quality and strength of our national leadership,” Coleman said.

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The National Wildlife Refuge System began with President Teddy Roosevelt's establishment of 3-acre Pelican Island in Florida as a protected area for waterbirds. The Refuge System now includes 511 units in all 50 states and U.S. territories, representing the world's most diverse network of lands and waters set aside for wildlife. Hundreds of national wildlife refuges located along the four major "flyways" serve as vital stepping stones for migratory waterfowl and other birds, while others are safe havens for endangered species. All of them are part of America's rich natural heritage where plants, fish, mammals, amphibians, and other wildlife live and thrive.

For more information on the National Wildlife Refuge System, call 1-800-344-WILD; visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's homepage at www.fws.gov and click on National Wildlife Refuge System; or better yet, visit a national wildlife refuge.

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