

**Conservation in Action Summit  
Keynote Welcome, May 24, 2004  
The Honorable Gale A. Norton**

Thank you all for the dedication you are showing by being here for what will prove to be a momentous week.

You are here to conduct some important work. Over the course of the week, you will put your heads together to map out the beginnings of the next century of the National Wildlife Refuge System. This is no small charge. Often, it helps to look back at the past before stepping into the future, and hold before us those ideas that have endured.

A century ago, we came up with such an idea with the creation of the first refuge and the seed of what would grow to become the National Wildlife Refuge System.

This is the legacy that Paul Kroegel and friends tapped into when they convinced Theodore Roosevelt of the legitimacy of their concern – that the natural resources of Pelican Island were being seriously threatened.

Pelican Island was no island unto itself. It was representative of what was happening elsewhere in the country. As a nation, we had been blessed with a great treasury of natural resources, including abundant wildlife. Roosevelt recognized that we were at risk of squandering this treasury.

The system began to take root at just the right time.

During its first few decades, we were experiencing the vast deforestation of the eastern United States in the early part of the 20th century; the wanton slaughter of waterfowl and other bird populations by market hunters; and the ravages of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

We needed to move quickly to conserve and restore the riches of our land and its wildlife.

Another great idea behind Theodore Roosevelt's creation of the refuge system and his founding of the Boone and Crockett Club was that responsible hunters should help in conservation of wildlife populations.

This idea reached its full flower through the wonderful innovation of the Duck Stamp, as well as the excise tax programs benefiting fish and wildlife programs.

The results of these two great ideas – creating a refuge system and tapping into the willingness of wildlife enthusiasts to personally participate in protecting wildlife – have been phenomenal.

Who would have guessed that, 100 years after designating tiny Pelican Island, we would have a system of 544 refuges covering 95 million acres?

These special places include an array of habitats from barrier islands to bogs, caves to coastal lagoons, ponds to prairies, and mountains to meadows. We provide homes for wildlife – from waterfowl and warblers, to turtles and elk.

During the centennial year, I was privileged to attend centennial events at refuges all over the country. My visits ranged from a visit to Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge in the Virgin Islands to a celebration in Kenai, Alaska where I was elated to have the opportunity to release an eagle into the wild.

Thank you for culminating that year of celebrations with something even more important – careful thought about the future of our treasured refuge lands.

### ***Budget***

When I came into office, I inherited a \$300 million refuge operating budget. Your good efforts have yielded significant increases in funding for the refuge system—an additional \$88 million. This is a 30 percent increase in the refuge budget. During this timeframe, the Department's budget as a whole increased by only four percent.

In addition, over my time in office we have increased personnel at refuges from almost 2700 in 2001 to a proposal of 2980 in our 2005 budget.

Just a few weeks back, I had the immense pleasure of dedicating what had once been described as "the most polluted square mile on earth" as the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

The arsenal, located in Commerce City, Colorado, about 10 miles northeast of downtown Denver, is one of the largest cleanup sites in the country. In 1942, Rocky Mountain was built to manufacture chemical weapons to be used in World War II as a war deterrent. In

1946, some of the facilities were leased to private industry for the production of industrial and agricultural chemicals.

The Arsenal later became a site for chemical agent demilitarization programs. Since 1985, the sole mission of the Arsenal has been environmental remediation. In 1987, the site was listed on EPA's Superfund National Priorities List.

I had been personally involved and interested in the work at the refuge since the early 1990s, when I was serving as the attorney general of Colorado. Then, we successfully ensured that the arsenal received a higher standard of cleanup than it otherwise would have.

Working together, we transformed a vestige of the Cold War into a permanent home for bald eagles, mule deer, white pelicans and hundreds of other species of wildlife. We have also provided people a unique area near an urban setting to enjoy and learn about wildlife and its habitat.

The arsenal is still undergoing cleanup of its soil and groundwater. The April 17th ceremony marked the formal transfer of nearly 5,000 acres out of the 17,000 acres of land at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal from the U.S. Army to the National Wildlife Refuge System. Eventually, when the clean-up of the arsenal is complete, the Army will transfer a total of 15,000 acres to the Service.

Refuges embody the notion that a healthy environment can not only coexist with a healthy economy, but that it is in fact essential for a healthy economy. More than 40 million people visit refuges annually, and pump more than \$800 million into local economies. It is evident that conservation and the recreation are valuable.

### ***Healthy forests***

Early this year, for example, I went to Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge in the Pacific Northwest.

Turnbull is an example of national wildlife refuges, that are using the tools provided by the Healthy Forests Initiative to improve habitat, protect species, and reduce the threat of

wildfires. The refuge is doing a great job of restoring the biological health of the forest ecosystem.

Several years ago, the forested habitat at Turnbull refuge was in an unhealthy condition due to decades of fire suppression and selective harvesting of the ponderosa pine. Today, they are using mechanical thinning followed by prescribed fire to restore pine stands to more historic levels, reducing existing densities of 400-600 trees per acre down to 40-60 trees per acre.

Aldo Leopold, the visionary 20th century conservationist, remains a prophet to the entire conservation community.

Leopold called for a land ethic rooted in the American tradition of people working together to accomplish tasks that neither they nor the government could accomplish alone. It would involve the combined efforts of all citizens, each applying a caring hand to the landscape -- in backyards, in worksites, on farms and ranches, and in local communities.

In this new land ethic, landowners and people in communities across the nation would be citizen-conservationists.

Many of you were at Pelican Island with me last March as we celebrated the official centennial of the refuge system's creation. Only a handful of you were able to accompany me on the refuge that morning. What I saw was an inspiring testament to the power and influence of refuge friends and community groups.

As I walked along the refuge paths, I saw dozens of local school children hard at work replanting the refuge with native vegetation.

I can think of no stronger way of showing their concern for the refuge than their active participation in restoring this land to its original splendor.

Although these students were clearly learning the lessons that hard work teaches all of us, they were also learning lessons about what it is that makes their community a great place to live – and what it takes to keep it a special place. Children like these will be the conservation leaders of the future.

As I traveled across the nation during the refuge centennial year, I was continually reminded of the role of citizen stewards in creating and maintaining the National Wildlife Refuge system. I was also reminded of how important these cooperative efforts are to lands off the refuges themselves.

In many ways, this citizen stewardship ethic has helped grow and nurture the National Wildlife Refuge System. While the refuge system is administered by the federal government, it is still public land and its success can be credited to a strong spirit of community and collaboration.

We hold stewardship responsibilities for refuge lands and resources as our primary mission, but we also need to be good neighbors. Being good neighbors means building partnerships and relationships that will result in improvements to the refuge system and surrounding areas.

This administration is a strong supporter of Challenge Cost Share grants under what we call the Cooperative Conservation Initiative. It is a broad scale effort to forge partnerships with private groups and citizens, in effect to help realize Leopold's vision of a nation of citizen stewards.

Over the past 3 years, the Department of Interior has provided more than \$1.3 billion in grants to states, tribes, local governments and private landowners through programs that preserve open space, restore habitat for wildlife, and protect endangered species.

Today, I am pleased to announce that we are providing \$21 million in new grants that will also include funding for on-the-ground conservation work with our partners on refuges.

Under the Challenge Cost Share program, these new grants will help complete 375 conservation projects in conjunction with states, local communities, businesses, landowners, and other partners.

The projects involve more than 700 partners in 43 states, and with partners required to match at least the federal grants, the overall funding for these projects totals more than \$52 million.

The goal of the grants and the Cooperative Conservation Initiative is to empower federal land managers, including those on our National Wildlife refuges, to form partnerships within local communities to better care for the land and its wildlife.

By promoting such partnerships, we not only leverage federal conservation dollars with private funds but also tap into the ingenuity and local knowledge of the people who live and work on the land.

Many of our partners in this effort are here today and are recipients of Challenge Cost Share Program grants this year.

Partners include The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, Friends of the Bosque del Apache, Friends of Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, the National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Student Conservation Association, Trout Unlimited, and the Wildlife Society.

These partnerships are achieving substantial conservation benefits.

With our partners, we have restored millions of acres of habitat; removed invasive exotic species; replanted native grasses; improved riparian habitat along thousands of miles of streams; conserved limited water resources; and developed conservation plans for endangered species and their habitat.

Much of this is taking place on National Wildlife Refuge land.

- On Alaska's Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, partners such as the Nature Conservancy and Kenai Peninsula Borough are helping us restore portions of Silver Salmon creek.

We are hoping to open up access to ten miles of stream habitat by removing barriers to allow fish passage for Coho and Chinook salmon.

- In the Desert Southwest, we are conducting major wetland and riparian restoration work at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, along with help from New Mexico State University and Friends of the Bosque del Apache.

This project is intended to demonstrate adaptive management techniques in converting exotic salt cedar infestations back to the native vegetation along central New Mexico's Rio Grande.

- At our largest urban refuge complex – the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, a local dairy is helping the refuge improve habitat for bats, swifts, and swallows.

Here, a single historic silo, standing in a field that is surrounded by suburbs, is being converted into a structure that will provide ideal habitat for the birds and bats.

- In nearby Virginia, at Chincoteague National Wildlife refuge, we're getting help from a variety of partners to conduct barrier island enhancement efforts for the benefit of federally threatened piping plovers.

The greatest challenge to plover recovery is predator depredation. This project aims to increase protective efforts and develop safer nesting conditions.

The list goes on, and refuges play a prominent role in a large number of these new grant projects. Across the country, refuges have embodied my own pledge that we would employ communication, consultation and cooperation – all in the service of conservation.

Obviously, the Refuge System does more than conserve this nation's most beautiful and important pockets of nature. The results are tangible, on the ground and in local business. But also, it is evident today in this room – and in the communities on which the future of conservation will always depend.

The system has cultivated a network of 250 nonprofit Friends groups that bring energy, expertise and muscle to refuges across the country. More than 40,000 volunteers give their time to the Fish and Wildlife Service. Almost all of the 1.5 million hours they donated last year were given to and for refuges.

More than 1,400 partners – ranging from corporations, local governments and nonprofit organizations – donated about 10 million dollars to the Federal Challenge Cost Share Program. In fact, they donated five dollars for every three dollars the federal government spent for refuge habitat restoration and education.

With so much expertise and support, I am very optimistic about the future of our National Wildlife Refuge System. Because, as important as the number of refuges and the acres they encompass, so too is the number of hearts, minds, and hands that we enlist to the cause of conservation.

Although it may be impossible for a land surveyor to measure, true growth of the refuge system – and conservation for that matter – lies in the ethics that we pass on.

Chief Seattle: "If all the beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of spirit."

We must continue to nurture the refuge system with Leopold's vision still in mind. A hundred years has passed since Roosevelt planted that first seed in what has become a lush garden: it is up to all of us now to tend to the garden and keep it healthy and vibrant for the future generations of citizen stewards.