

## **Heavy-Duty Cooperation on Equipment Safety**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees who operate heavy equipment such as bulldozers, excavators and backhoes are the behind-the-scenes folks whom visitors to national wildlife refuges and other public spaces often take for granted.

In fact, their earth-moving work is fundamental to building and maintaining observation platforms, kiosks, fishing piers, trails and tour route roads. These operators also help on a range of habitat restoration projects that benefit wildlife on refuges.

Maneuvering those gigantic rigs properly is critical to operator and visitor safety.

Early in 2015, the National Park Service (NPS) paid a high compliment to national coordinator John Blich and the regional coordinators who run the Service's heavy equipment training program. The NPS asked four Service specialists to teach NPS instructors how to train NPS field employees in the safe operation of heavy equipment.

The train-the-trainer instruction took place at Lake Mead National Recreation Area, an NPS site east of Las Vegas. It happened because Sarah Polzin, training manager with the NPS Office of Learning and Development, adopted the Service training for NPS use. After hearing about what she considered to be the excellent Service training, she thought, "Why start again from the very beginning when they're doing basically the same thing?"

Blich, Midwest Region heavy equipment coordinator Dale Pittman, Mountain-Prairie Region coordinator Wade Briggs and Service safety instructor Michael McAllister of Kodiak, AK, worked with Polzin to train the NPS trainers at Lake Mead.

The instruction helps prepare heavy equipment operators for encounters with visitors. "We talk about how to interact with people who may want to stop them while working and ask questions," says Blich. "Many times visitors will walk up out of nowhere – even in closed areas – because they are curious. We teach the operators to always keep an eye out for this scenario. Safety to the public is a top priority that is taught in both the train-the-trainer course to the instructors and from instructor to employee."

### **CAPTION:**

Maintenance specialist Clint DeMenge uses a backhoe to load soil at Rydell National Wildlife Refuge in northern Minnesota. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is helping the National Park Service in training matters related to the safe operation of heavy equipment. (photo by Chuck Shire/USFWS)