

The Conversation Yet To Be Had

By Cynthia Martinez

Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System

I became Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System on May 11. Just four years and three months earlier, I was the manager of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex, overseeing the four national wildlife refuges in Southern Nevada. Those four -- Desert, Ash Meadows, Pahrnagat and Moapa Valley -- called me and are the reason that I am devoted to the National Wildlife Refuge System.

There are many “firsts” associated with my selection -- first woman, first Hispanic, first to have worked in Ecological Services. Heck, we could also say that I am the first from New Mexico, where we love our green chili! At the end of the day, it matters to a lot of people. It matters to my family, who is prouder than anyone might expect. As much as my family means to me -- and they mean the world -- it matters to a lot of people on the ground working on national wildlife refuges....and that matters to me.

On the topic of my appointment, Lynn Greenwalt, former Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, wrote, “A truly big-time ‘first’ for everyone and an event too long in coming. I do have to say, though, that I am delighted that it waited for you to come along and are the one to have broken the gender barrier for the Refuge System. (My wife) Judy is even more ecstatic, since she is a graduate of the era when women just did not stand a chance. As she has pointed out more than once, ‘I could not possibly become a refuge manager, so I married one.’ It was that difficult, once upon a time.”

My first act as Chief was to attend the Ambassadors Program team meeting at the National Conservation Training Center. There, we set the stage to develop the training that will offer folks the tools to engage our surrounding communities. As much as connecting to urban communities is a priority, we should not forget those rural communities within which we work and live.

The first national wildlife refuge I visited after being named Chief was J. Clark Salyer in North Dakota, a fitting choice, as it is the namesake of the first Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

At the end of the day, I’m grateful for your emails and good wishes. And rest assured that we have our vision set forth in [*Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation*](#). As much as I look forward to seeing the majestic places that we are entrusted with managing, I most look forward to the conversations yet to be had with each of you who embrace the challenge of wildlife conservation.

Thank you for all that you do for wild places and wild creatures. I look forward to our next conversation.

