

**Series:** Refuge Management  
**Part 602** National Wildlife Refuge System Planning  
**Chapter 5:** Strategic Growth  
**New**

**5.1 What is the purpose of this chapter?** This chapter provides policy for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to implement a strategic approach to the growth of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Administration Act) as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee), directs the Secretary of the Interior to “plan and direct the continued growth of the System in a manner that is best designed to accomplish the mission of the System...” *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation* (2011), the Refuge System’s guiding vision document, calls for the Service to “ensure future land protection efforts are based on explicit priorities, rigorous biological planning, and conservation design that support achieving measureable conservation and population objectives that are developed in cooperation with State fish and wildlife agencies.”

**5.2 What are the objectives of this chapter?** Our objectives are to:

**A.** Ensure that the Refuge System continues to support the Service’s mission of conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

**B.** Further the development of a comprehensive, logically dispersed, and efficient network of lands and waters to achieve our mission through strategic implementation of conservation design.

**C.** Ensure interaction, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration with the State fish and wildlife agencies through timely and meaningful opportunities to participate in the development of project proposals and their implementation.

**D.** Ensure that existing refuges, new refuges, and refuge expansions support viable and persistent populations of priority conservation features and achieve measureable conservation targets, such as ensuring population objectives are developed in cooperation with partners at various landscape levels (e.g., national, Regional, and local).

**E.** Integrate the best available science from biological planning and conservation design into the process of identifying and prioritizing lands and waters for inclusion in the Refuge System.

**F.** Ensure the future growth of the Refuge System is based on a species-based, landscape-scale conservation design that enhances ecological resilience and provides opportunities for fish, wildlife, and plants to adapt to a changing world and climate.

**G.** Ensure we adequately collaborate with other local, State, and Federal government agencies, tribal governments, conservation organizations, and private landowners to identify new lands for the Refuge System.

**5.3 What is the scope of this chapter?** This chapter applies to the prioritization of acquisitions within existing refuge boundaries, expanding existing refuges, and establishing new refuges. We will prioritize funding for acquisitions within existing refuges on the same basis as expanded refuge boundaries and new refuges. Our use of the term “refuges” includes national wildlife refuges, wildlife ranges, wildlife management areas, conservation areas, waterfowl production areas, and other areas managed by the Refuge System.

**5.4 What is our authority for this policy?** The authority for this policy is the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Administration Act) as amended by the National

Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee).

## 5.5 What is the overall policy?

**A.** The Administration Act requires that we plan continued growth of the Refuge System in a manner that will best accomplish our mission. To accomplish this goal, it becomes increasingly important for the Refuge System to add lands in a strategic and effective fashion as we face:

- (1) Unparalleled challenges related to climate change and non-climate change stressors,
- (2) Pressures from new development and increased land prices across the Nation, and
- (3) More opportunities to collaborate with others for land conservation.

**B.** We focus on priority conservation features to ensure that our limited resources concentrate on the land protection efforts that make the greatest contribution to the conservation of species in a strategic, cost-effective, and transparent manner.

**C.** We must ensure that the growth of the Refuge System reflects our transition toward managing for functional landscapes, enhancing our scientific rigor, improving our effectiveness, and involving our partners and the American people.

## 5.6 What terms do you need to know to understand this chapter?

**A. Biological Planning.** A component of the Strategic Habitat Conservation framework (see section 5.6H below), biological planning is the process of identifying priority conservation features and measurable targets such as population objectives, assessing the current status of populations (increasing, decreasing, static), identifying threats and limiting factors, and building models to describe the relationship of populations to habitat and other limiting factors.

**B. Birds of Conservation Concern.** A list we developed from the most current conservation assessments from three bird conservation plans: *Partners in Flight*, *The United States Shorebird Conservation Plan*, and the *North American Waterbird Conservation Plan*. We developed rules to narrow these lists by focusing on species, subspecies, or populations that have declining trends, small population sizes, and are facing severe threats at some point in their annual cycle (see U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2008, *Birds of Conservation Concern 2008*).

**C. Conservation Design.** A component of the Strategic Habitat Conservation framework (see section 5.6H below), conservation design is the application of scientific information, expert opinion, and spatial data that helps us to establish estimates of where and how to achieve our mission through landscape sustainability. It is the integration of multiple objectives and the determination of how to efficiently apportion objectives across the landscape and among Refuge System Units.

**D. Landscape Conservation Cooperative (LCC).** Landscape Conservation Cooperatives are public-private partnerships that define shared conservation goals and provide the expertise needed to support conservation planning at landscape-scales. LCCs generate the tools, methods, and data that managers need to design and deliver conservation using the Strategic Habitat Conservation approach.

**E. Population Objectives.** Population objectives describe the desired outcomes. We express objectives as abundance, trend, change of distribution, vital rates, or by using other measurable indices of population status based on the best biological information. We use these objectives, which are dependent on the scale of the population measured, to assess how well we're performing our management actions.

**F. Priority Conservation Features.** Priority conservation features are those species requiring focused resource commitments due to legal status, management need, vulnerability, and geographic areas of importance.

**G. Project Proposal.** A project proposal is a document recommending the creation of a new refuge or the expansion of the boundary of an existing refuge as described in Section 5.9 and as identified within a conservation design.

**H. Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC).** SHC is an adaptive management framework the Service adopted for making management decisions about where and how to deliver conservation efficiently to achieve specific biological outcomes. SHC requires us to set goals, make strategic decisions about our actions, and constantly reassess and improve our approaches—all critical steps in dealing with a range of landscape-scale resource issues.

**I. Surrogate Species.** Representing other species or aspects of the environment, surrogate species are used to define measurable targets and guide conservation design. Surrogates represent multiple species and habitats within a defined landscape, geographic area, or specific national wildlife refuge.

**5.7 Who in the Service is responsible for the Refuge System’s strategic growth policy?**

<b>Table 5-1: Responsibilities for the Refuge System’s strategic growth policy</b>	
<b>These employees.....</b>	<b>Are responsible for....</b>
<b>A. The Director</b>	<p>(1) Reviewing and approving national policy for the Refuge System;</p> <p>(2) Reviewing proposals for refuge expansions and new refuges for consistency with national policy and priorities. Ensuring each proposal or plan embraces the principles of SHC (see section 5.9);</p> <p>(3) Providing final approval for refuge expansions and new refuge proposals; and</p> <p>(4) Coordinating with the State fish and wildlife agencies in a timely and effective manner on the acquisition and management of refuges.</p>
<b>B. Chief – National Wildlife Refuge System</b>	<p>(1) Developing national policy for implementing the strategic growth of the Refuge System;</p> <p>(2) Developing additional policy and guidance on process and procedures;</p> <p>(3) Providing staff support and resources to the Director for the implementation of this chapter;</p> <p>(4) Working with Regional Directors and staff to ensure that existing refuges and proposals for refuge expansions and new refuges are consistent with priority conservation features;</p> <p>(5) Ensuring that the strategic growth of the Refuge System contributes to the plans, goals, and objectives of other Service programs; and</p> <p>(6) Coordinating with other Service programs and State fish and</p>

<b>Table 5-1: Responsibilities for the Refuge System's strategic growth policy</b>	
<b>These employees.....</b>	<b>Are responsible for....</b>
	wildlife agencies on plans for Refuge System growth and acquisitions.
<b>C. Regional Directors</b>	<p>(1) Ensuring that existing refuges and proposals for refuge expansions and new refuges are consistent with the guidelines in this chapter;</p> <p>(2) Ensuring that strategic growth of the Refuge System contributes to the plans, goals, and objectives of other Service programs; and</p> <p>(3) Coordinating with other Service programs and State fish and wildlife agencies in the Region on plans for Refuge System growth and acquisitions.</p>
<b>D. Regional Refuge Chiefs</b>	<p>(1) Ensuring that existing refuges and proposals for refuge expansions and new refuges are consistent with the guidelines and processes in this chapter;</p> <p>(2) Ensuring that resources are available to identify and prioritize refuge expansions and new refuge proposals as they relate to the strategic growth of Refuge System; and</p> <p>(3) Preparing and submitting proposals for modifying existing refuges, expanding refuges, and establishing new refuges to the Director through their respective Regional Directors.</p>

**5.8 What are the priority conservation features for the strategic growth of the Refuge System?** The growth of the Refuge System must focus on acquiring interests in lands and waters for the following priority conservation features:

**A. Recovery of threatened and endangered species.** We may acquire interests in lands and waters where land acquisition is prescribed in threatened or endangered species recovery plans.

**B. Implementing the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.** We may acquire interests in lands and waters that will contribute toward achieving the waterfowl population objectives that the *North American Waterfowl Management Plan* and associated Joint Venture step-down management plans have identified.

**C. Conserving migratory birds of conservation concern.** We may acquire interests in lands and waters to conserve groups of migratory birds that are of conservation concern if any of the following plans identify the acquisition as contributing toward achieving population objectives:

- (1) *The Partners in Flight North American Landbird Conservation Plan*,
- (2) *The United States Shorebird Conservation Plan*,
- (3) *The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan*, and
- (4) Associated step-down management plans.

**5.9 What science-based criteria must a project proposal meet for the Director to consider an addition to the Refuge System?** The biological planning and conservation design components of the SHC framework serve as science-based criteria that the Director uses to

evaluate project proposals the Regions develop. For the Director to consider a project proposal, it must:

**A. Identify priority conservation features or the surrogate species that represent them.**

**B. Explain how a project or combination of projects contributes to achieving stated population objectives.** Population objectives must be identified:

(1) In national, Regional, State, Landscape Conservation Cooperative (LCC), or species-specific conservation, management, or recovery plans; or

(2) By a team of experts through a cooperative decisionmaking processes.

**C. Identify priority conservation areas.** Using the best available science, the project proposal must identify priority conservation areas that support priority conservation features and contribute toward achieving measurable targets, such as stated population objectives. The project proposal must consider lands and waters identified in national, Regional, State, or species-specific conservation, management, or recovery plans, or a LCC-sponsored or developed landscape conservation design. The project proposal must incorporate elements of conservation design to ensure projects are arranged in a geographically efficient manner to safeguard ecological processes across the landscape and to complement the resiliency of other conservation areas.

**D. Identify vulnerability and resiliency.** The project proposal must discuss vulnerability to climate change and other non-climate stressors (e.g., habitat fragmentation, invasive species, etc.) and describe how the Refuge System will mitigate stressors to ensure the project's resiliency.

**5.10 How does the Director receive project proposals, and what might be the outcomes of his/her review?** The Region may submit a project proposal to the Director for his/her consideration after ensuring that the proposal adequately describes how the project will meet the science-based criteria. The Director may make any of the following decisions about the project:

**A. Approved.** The project proposal meets all the criteria and is considered a Refuge System priority. The Region may begin detailed planning.

**B. Merited, but not approved.** The project proposal is of merit based on its strong biological planning and conservation design. However, due to other factors, it is not currently a priority for funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund or the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund. The Refuge System at Headquarters will provide the rationale behind the decision to the Region and an explanation of when or how it may be approved in the future.

**C. Needs Additional Work.** The project proposal did not meet all the required criteria, but the Region may address the deficiencies through additional processes or related content work. The Refuge System at Headquarters will provide the rationale to the Region, and the Region may resubmit a revised proposal for the Director's consideration.

**D. Unmerited.** The project proposal does not meet all of the criteria, or it is not in the best interest of the Refuge System, or both. The Refuge System at Headquarters will provide the rationale behind this decision to the Region.

**5.11 How does the Service coordinate with the States in strategic growth of the Refuge System?** Both the Service and State fish and wildlife agencies have authorities and responsibilities for management of fish and wildlife on refuges as described in 43 CFR part 24. Consistent with the Administration Act, the Director must interact, coordinate, cooperate, and collaborate with the State fish and wildlife agencies in a timely and effective manner on the acquisition and management of refuges. We charge refuge managers, as the designated

representatives of the Director at the local level, with carrying out these requirements. We also provide State fish and wildlife agencies opportunities to discuss and, if necessary, elevate decisions within the hierarchy of the Service.