

Refuge Roads Program Trails Project Procedures, Selection Criteria and Priorities

The passage of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFTEA-LU) authorized the expenditure of up to 5% of the available Refuge Roads Program funds for the maintenance and improvement of existing recreational trails.

Funds that are made available are subject to the standard FHWA rules. Obligation and contract authority expire each fiscal year on September 30. During August redistribution, obligation authority that will not be used by FWS must be returned to FHWA.

Projects funded under the Refuge Roads Program are subject to legal limitations. The trails must:

- 1) Provide access to or within a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System and,
- 2) Title and maintenance responsibility are vested in the United States Government

Similar to the Refuge Roads Program the funding of projects is constrained by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) guidance document for refuge trails. That document provides general guidance as to what must be done, what can be done and what cannot be done with the funds. As the trails funding comes from the Refuge Roads Program, construction of new trails is not an eligible activity.

It is estimated that approximately \$1.1 to \$1.2 million could be made available for trails related funding each FY from 2005 through 2009. The exact funding will vary from year-to-year due to fluctuations in obligation limitation imposed on the FHWA by Congress.

Unlike the roads, bridges and parking lot portion of the Refuge Roads Program, the trails funding will not be allocated by formula to the Regions. For the cycle of funding eligible for trails funding under SAFETEA-LU, projects will be funded individually from the Washington Office using guidelines and criteria described below.

The reasons for this are

- 1) There is not enough money to allocate to each region to have a significant impact on a regional trail backlog.
- 2) There are no reliable measures commensurate to the ones being used to allocate the roads portion of the RRP: road miles, parking lot square footage, public use and road condition

As the trails program matures, and if the RRP gets significant increases in the next reauthorization of the Surface Transportation Act in 2009, this may change.

A significant majority of the trails money will be directed to projects on the ground, however some program support funds will be held back in the WO. These supports are described below.

The selection of projects for individual funding will take into consideration

- 1) documented safety issues and/or documented resource impacts,
- 2) partnerships (byways, enhancements or trails) involved with the trail,
- 3) designation status of the trail (is it a national, state or regionally designated trail),
- 4) current use of trails at the field station (percent of visitors using trails),
- 5) annual refuge visitation level
- 6) completeness and clarity of the project proposal
- 7) inclusion of the project in the existing five-year regional deferred maintenance plan
- 8) the current condition rating of the trail asset(s) based on the FCI.

A complete matrix of the Trail Project Grading Criteria is included as an appendix to the FHWA Guidance.

Regions will be asked to submit a list of projects in the Maximo database that they would like to have considered for funding. If the regions desire, they may submit a single page project summary to supplement the information in the database. In case of conflicting data in the database and the project summary page, only the information in the database will be used for the evaluation.

A full five year plan of trails projects will be selected for this cycle of Refuge Roads Program Trails funding. Each subsequent FY the regions will be asked to submit projects for selection to keep a full five year program of RRP Trails projects.

Funds for selected projects will be added to the regions' RRP program to be managed as part of the regional RRP. It is anticipated most projects will be done by the Service and not by the FLHD because of their relatively small size,

Any funding not allocated to trails projects in a given fiscal year will be returned to the general refuge roads funding and allocated back to the regions as part of the following year's refuge roads allocation.

The funding for the Trails, Byways, Transportation Enhancements and Alternative Transportation Coordinator's position will be paid from the general amount held back for the overall WO support for the RRP.

In the initial years of the program, funding will be set aside to accomplish a national inventory of recreation trails using the interagency trail data standards. The inventory will include condition assessments and GPS data collection. Information gathered during the inventory and condition assessment will be used in the interagency trails white papers being developed for the 2009 transportation bill reauthorization. The initial cycle is anticipated to cost \$1million from FY 06 and 07 WO RRP general administrative funds.

The FWS participates in several national level trails councils and programs. Funds will be used to support these efforts commensurate with number of trails and mileage as compared to the other Federal Land Management Agency partners' trail assets and responsibilities. Approximately 10% or up to \$120,000 of the total funds eligible for trails in the RRP will be used to support training, conference attendance, and partnership

activities. If these funds are not obligated by the end of any fiscal year, they will be used to fund trail projects or returned to the general refuge roads funding and allocated to the regions.

Funds will be set aside to support regional and field staff to attend trail related training and conferences. Eligible training would include the Trails Management Course held twice annually, the Universal Trails Accessibility Process trainings. Eligible conferences would include the National Trails Symposium, or TrailsLink, the Rails to Trails/Greenways conference and others found on the National Trails Training Partnership website.

Funding will also be set aside to support American Trails for the administration of the National Recreational Trails Program, National Trails Training Partnership and the biennial National Trails Symposium, Partnership for the National Trails System, the Public Health and Recreation MOU group, and the American Hiking Society to support National Trails Day. These are entities that currently have ongoing agreements with other agencies involved in trails management and administration.