

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation Progress Report

January 2013

Message from Jim Kurth Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System

The **Planning** implementation team received over 400 comments on its *Conserving the Future* draft document. The **Communications** and **Community Partnerships** implementation teams received hundreds more when their draft strategic plans were open for public discussion. The website, **AmericasWildlife.org**, is abuzz with observations and discourse.

There is much still to do.

Right now, go to **AmericasWildlife.org** to see the Draft Friends Mentoring Action Plan. Soon, the **Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative** implementation team will evaluate proposals from across the country to create an urban presence in areas near an existing National Wildlife Refuge or in urban environments that do not have the benefit of a nearby Refuge.

It's hard to keep up with the flow of ideas and innovation – and that's just fine with me.

Because such innovation was the goal when we authored *Conserving the Future*. We anticipated that it would set a tone for other programs within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and it has.

We said in *Conserving the Future* that the need to balance many competing priorities requires that we seek help from both traditional and emerging partners who want to ensure that future generations receive a legacy of healthy habitats, clean air and water, and robust wildlife populations. We are getting that help.

We said in *Conserving the Future* that today's conservation challenges require all of us to take steadfast action – as leaders, partners and role models – so we can inspire others to work with us. We are doing so.

We knew *Conserving the Future* implementation would take time. The only surprise is how fast we are moving forward.



Planning

The Planning implementation team continues to see change in leadership as they welcome Will Meeks, the new Refuge Chief in Region 6, as a co-chair. Meeks comes with a wealth of experience as a private lands biologist, wildlife biologist, and refuge manager. His experience with monitoring and research, biological planning, conservation design, and delivery will assist with implementing the new planning paradigm for the Refuge System.

The refuge-level planning document is where the proverbial rubber meets the road. It is the means by which inspiration and vision are transformed into on-the-ground action. Conservation plans not only guide all U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff toward a common goal, but they also provide an essential opportunity for the public and the Service's partners to get involved. The Service's commitment to conservation planning has never been stronger, and through ***Conserving the Future***, plans at all levels are about to become more strategic and effective.



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The Planning implementation team is prepared to help the Service improve the content of plans, the process by which they are developed, and the extent to which they are implemented. Refuges will always have an important sense of place and take care of the land within boundary signs. The team's goal with this document is to expand the vision to areas outside refuge boundaries - to look beyond those signs to a landscape more relevant to the wildlife we are entrusted to protect. With this approach, wildlife refuges will enjoy the clarity of purpose that comes with creating shared goals with others. In this way, planning will give refuges and all Service partners something bigger for which to aim—a conservation vision that sees both landscape-scale and site-specific plans as a requisite part of working with others to conserve wildlife well into the future.

***"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."
-- Rachel Carson***

Hunting, Fishing, and Outdoor Recreation

The Hunting, Fishing, and Outdoor Recreation implementation team had three jam-packed days of face-to-face meetings January 15-17 at Headquarters as members considered such issues as how to welcome and orient visitors; increase training for staff and volunteers; and a pilot program of outdoor skills centers. The team also outlined an ambitious strategy for Recommendation 17, which is to increase quality hunting and fishing opportunities on national wildlife refuges. The strategy will describe how far we have come from the time of the Refuge System's establishment and the North American model to the present vision for the National Wildlife Refuge System and the Improvement Act.

In addressing how to better welcome and orient visitors, the team intends to provide case studies, examples, and an opportunity analysis of how refuges can succeed in welcoming all visitors. The team has done its homework -- evaluating the current Refuge System Web pages – such as the online guides to [hunting](#), [fishing](#), and the [birding site](#) -- to determine how they might be improved. During the meeting, one sub-team proposed pilot outdoors skills centers as a means to teach the public the skills they need for successful adventures in the wild and ultimately to connect them to the Refuge System.

Another sub-team is developing a guide for State and NGO partners to work with refuges to educate and advance outdoor skills development and opportunities. This guide will promote opportunities for collaboration, building on existing "gateway" opportunities (such as [Becoming an Outdoors Woman](#), [Wheelin Sportsmen](#), [Jakes](#), [Greenwings](#), [Take a Kid Birding](#), etc.). These programs could help novices gain experience, increase competency, and connect to mentors in the community. The guide will seek to build a safe, skilled constituency invested in the local refuge and conservation.

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Community Partnerships

The Draft Strategic Plan for Volunteers, Friends Organizations, and Community Partners has been through numerous internal reviews and is now available for public comment. Shared stewardship is the conceptual linchpin behind the Community Partnership implementation team's draft strategic plan for **volunteer and partnership involvement**, open for comment through February 8. Seeking to strengthen the engagement of volunteers, Friends organizations, and community partnerships, the draft plan recommends rather specific steps, including:

- Over the next five years, adding 50 Friends organizations or formal community partnerships for staffed refuges that do not currently have such an organization. In the next decade, the Refuge System hopes to have a Friends organization for every staffed refuge. Today, 139-staffed refuges have no Friends organization working on their behalf.
- Working to hire full-time volunteer coordinators at refuges or refuge complexes that receive more than 200,000 annual visitors.
- Enhancing recruitment of volunteers, especially among diverse communities, and then improving the orientation that volunteers, Friends, and community partners receive so they better understand the local refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Providing not only more skills training for volunteers, but also more rewards and incentives that recognize just how important volunteers are.
- Strengthening Friends training not only through the Refuge System Friends Academy, but also through national conferences and regional workshops to encourage vibrant Friends organizations.
- Redesigning the Friends mentoring program.

Volunteers and Refuge Friends are vital in helping the Fish and Wildlife Service achieve wildlife conservation and public outreach goals on our national wildlife refuges. -- USFWS

The Community Partnerships implementation team is also developing a **Friends Mentoring Action Plan**. A draft of this plan is now available for public comment on the AmericasWildlife.org website. This draft action plan is one of several programs to support the larger Fish & Wildlife Service goal of facilitating partnerships with Friends organizations and public participation in the conservation of resources. The plan reengineers the former national Friends mentoring program, developed 15 years ago, to provide Friends partnerships with critical developmental support. This proposal suggests an expanded mentoring approach to address today's priority needs of Friends partnerships, increase the cost-benefit of mentoring, and engage all levels of the Service in mentoring.



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Communications

The first draft of the communication's strategic plan was available for comment through January 16, and is now back in the hands on the Communications implementation team. The Communications implementation team put forward a five-year **strategic plan** that seeks first to reach key audiences where they live; then increases online and in-person visits to wildlife refuges; and ultimately builds the next generation of Refuge System supporters. The plan details a host of tools and approaches – from marketing partnerships that engage non-traditional partners, to traveling *Refuge Live!* activity centers and a Champions Academy for high school students.

The draft plan was developed only after stakeholder interviews, some with individuals who work for the Service and others who knew about wildlife refuges but never worked on one. The team also worked with a consultant who conducted four small focus groups in two major cities in which participants gave their reactions to the messages and images included in the plan. The plan seeks not only to increase awareness about the Refuge System, but also to increase the number of people who volunteer for the Service or join a Friends organization and to strengthen brand recognition.

Based on scores of comments, the team is creating a year-by-year implementation timeline, looking once again at messages and a more directed audience focus, and contemplating the advantages of a top-down versus a field-station-up approach to communications. The team recognizes that its plan is not only ambitious, but also may go beyond the Service's ability to implement every tool. A revised plan will be presented for yet more public and staff comment in late winter or early spring.

***"Regardless of the changes in technology, the market for well-crafted messages will always have an audience."
-- Steve Burnett***

Leadership Development Council (LDC)

A spotlight on one sub-team of the LDC is the workforce sub-team. This sub-team is looking to address a range of workforce-related needs, all designed to ensure the Service hires and trains the best people to accomplish the conservation work of tomorrow. To this end, the sub-team is identifying gaps in skills, training, and attitude between the current workforce and the perceived needs of the workforce of tomorrow. Using results from a recent survey by the Planning implementation team, three key themes emerged regarding the additional knowledge, skills, and abilities needed in the workforce: landscape level ecological/conservation experience; technical skills; and emotional intelligence (Sexton *et al.*, 2012). The other implementation teams will serve as "focus groups" to solicit feedback on the skills and competencies of the present and future workforce. The results of these

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“focus groups” will be used to improve the recruitment practices, education standards, and continuing education requirements of Service employees.

One of the first products from *Conserving the Future* is available on *InsideFWS* for online use: an e-guide titled, “**Reaching Your Full Potential**,” which helps Service employees find ideas, opportunities, and training so they are equipped to climb the leadership ladder. Created by the LDC, the e-guide not only has ideas for employees – such as information and links to mentoring programs and a call for participation in Communities of Practice – but also offers a summary of leadership and employee development sources. Supervisors have a checklist of steps they can take to empower their employees and mentor a new generation of decision makers. The e-guide offers a list of books about leadership along with a way to add your favorites to the list. Here’s one reference that you don’t easily find in a single place: a list of resources that help you assess yourself, tips on how to find a mentor, and an exhaustive source of training courses at the National Conservation Training Center. No online guide is ever done. That’s true for the e-guide, which can still be altered and expanded with your ideas.

***Become the kind of leader that people would follow voluntarily;
even if you had no title or position.
-- Brian Tracy***

Scientific Excellence

The Scientific Excellence implementation team, which is responsible for four recommendations, has made significant progress on Recommendation 7 (Inventory and Monitoring, I&M) and Recommendation 9 (Deliberate Research Agenda).

Recommendation 7 has three key elements: 1) A centralized data information system, 2) guidance on I&M protocols, and 3) a 7-Year Inventory and Monitoring Plan. The centralized data information system (ServCat) has more than 15,000 documents. The Survey Protocol Handbook (SPH) is an accompanying document to the I&M Policy that details how protocols used in station surveys are to be developed, reviewed, and stored as permanent electronic records. The 7-Year Plan steps down from the I&M strategic plan, replaces the blueprint, and will inform I&M national and regional annual work plans.

The Recommendation 9 sub-team has developed a centralized database of research needs that will position the Refuge System to communicate internally and externally a purposefully driven research agenda to reduce uncertainty in planning and management decisions. The dynamic clearinghouse would have a “rack-and-stack” approach to facilitate sorting of information to address a variety of funding opportunities. The business model for populating the database will encourage cross-programmatic coordination and engagement with the academic community. Utilization of the database



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maximizes the likelihood of relevant and management driven research being conducted on refuges to inform conservation delivery decisions. The database is in draft form and still has to undergo formal approval.

Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative

The Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative Implementation Team proposes to establish a new Service presence, where we do not currently have an Urban Refuge or additional Service presence in urban areas where awareness of the Service is minimal. This effort will engage communities to nurture an appreciation of wildlife conservation and foster a better understanding of the role of the Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System in conserving natural resources. This will be accomplished through innovative partnerships, new communication strategies, and outreach to urban audiences.

The team continues to revise the urban **standards of excellence**. Over 40 interviews with FWS staff, partners, and other urban engagement experts were conducted with questions based on the Trust for Public Lands Excellence in City Parks. After a final review by the Urban implementation team, the standards will be distributed to Refuge Chiefs and partners for comment in late February. The urban standards of excellence will be available on AmericasWildlife.org following the internal review.

Planning is in full swing for the urban summit, which will highlight the Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative's implementation tasks. Two sub-teams have been formed to help plan the summit, which is planned for September 23-25, 2013 at the National Conservation Training Center. The AmericasWildlife.org website will play an important role in the build-up to the urban summit, which will be streamed live on the Web.

Interpretation and Environmental Education

The Interpretation and Environmental Education implementation team will hold its second face-to-face meeting at Desert National Wildlife Refuge, NV, February 5-7. The discussion will primarily focus on the team's two strategies for interpretation and environmental education. Other items up for discussion include the Ambassador program and the Land Ethics program, both new initiatives.

The team will soon release for public comment draft strategic plans for interpretation and environmental education for the Refuge System on AmericasWildlife.org. One highlight of the interpretation plan focuses on distance-learning training to be developed, in coordination with NCTC, on the use of the Visitor Services Handbook, emphasizing interpretive analysis using a specific assessment tool. Headquarters and NCTC will also review the refuge-based training curriculum and include (where appropriate) training modules on interpretation.

The team is ready to launch environmental education to a whole new level with its plan,

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"Sowing Seeds of Wonder," preparing for an abundant harvest within the field of environmental education. By the end of the year, a core competency training matrix will be developed to include professional development guidelines for employees at all levels, Friends members, and Service volunteers. Available training will be evaluated and environmental mentorship/detail opportunities will be developed and implemented. In addition, the Visitor Services Career Pathway's Handbook will be updated to reflect current needs, priorities, and initiatives as they relate to environmental education.

"Let Nature be your teacher." -- William Wordsworth

Strategic Growth

Recommendation 3 requires the Strategic Growth implementation team to "undertake a rapid top-to-bottom assessment of the status of all Refuge System land protection projects and complete a report that will inform development of a plan for the strategic, future growth of the Refuge System."

The Rapid Assessment Report concludes that land acquisition efforts have created a Refuge System that provides undeniable value to migratory birds, threatened and endangered species and the conservation of wetlands, Alaskan and marine ecosystems. However, the report also cautions that the current trajectory for adding lands to the Refuge System is unsustainable and may not reflect the highest priority acquisitions that contribute to landscape conservation. Thus, the report recommends that the Service should employ methods that result in achievable land protection goals directed at priority conservation targets, with positive impacts within and outside refuge boundaries.

The team completed a strategic growth policy for the Refuge System with a framework for implementing *Conserving the Future* Recommendation #4. Recommendation 4 required the team to "ensure future land protection efforts are based on explicit priorities, rigorous biological planning and conservation design that support achieving quantifiable conservation and population objectives that are developed in cooperation with state fish and wildlife agencies."

The draft policy embraces the tenets of Strategic Habitat Conservation by mandating rigorous biological planning and conservation design, requiring mandating project proposals to identify priority conservation objectives and surrogate species, contribute to achieving stated population objectives, identify priority conservation areas, and identify vulnerability and resiliency.



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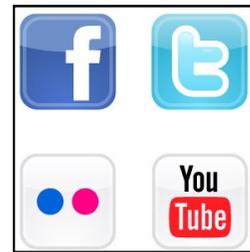
Conclusion

Implementing the 24 recommendations in *Conserving the Future* is a continuous process. Information about a team's status, latest products, and progress reports is available online at AmericasWildlife.org. You are invited to join the online social network and provide comments on draft implementation team products. Be sure to check the blog at AmericasWildlife.org for stories about the progress of the implementation teams.

Refuge Update and *Friends Forward* continue to have regular features and cover stories on the status of implementation and narratives from the field about *Conserving the Future* on the ground. If social media is your information gateway, join us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), [Flickr](#), and even [Pinterest](#)! You can access all of them from the home page at AmericasWildlife.org. Just click on the social media icons in the upper right hand corner.

You can also follow the Refuge System's social media accounts on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to get the latest information about wildlife and refuge activities.

www.AmericasWildlife.org



"Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success."

— Henry Ford

