

# U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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

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### Implementation – Walking the Walk

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A year and change since the *Conserving the Future* Conference and finalizing the eponymous document, and it's plain to see that this expansive vision for the future of the National Wildlife Refuge System isn't sitting on a shelf, the graveyard of so many ambitious planning exercises. Indeed, the vision is in the hands of many imaginative and energized team members, and getting a thorough break-in. As readers will see in this progress report, there's been an abundance of activity as teams are preparing to release draft implementation plans for stakeholder input.

Making the drafts available to partners, states and other stakeholders is a crucial next step as this transparent process comes full circle. Importantly, it provides the Refuge System with an opportunity to reconnect with those that took the time and effort to communicate their views, desires and recommendations through the website, interviews and the numerous stakeholder meetings leading up to and during the conference.

The [National Wildlife Refuge Association](#) played a vital role as the Service's leading partner in stakeholder outreach and it's gratifying to see the seriousness Refuge System leadership has exhibited in promoting expeditious follow through. Indeed, with the notion of promoting partnerships a central theme throughout the document, there isn't a better way to foster trust than by promptly reconnecting with stakeholders to enlist their input.

And while the promise of clear and actionable implementation plans is encouraging, it's also noteworthy that throughout the country Service employees are already taking the vision to heart in their day-to-day activities.

For example, the vision emphasizes working "beyond the boundaries" and engaging new and diverse publics through urban refuges. Over the past year, the Refuge System has increasingly been recognized through the President's America's Great Outdoors initiative as a leader in these respective areas, with the establishment of the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area; the declaration of the Connecticut River Blueway around the Silvio Conte NFWR; creation of Price's Dairy NWR in Albuquerque; and promised establishment of the Hackmatack NWR, not far from Madison.

These and other lesser known, but equally compelling examples from around the country are guiding the implementation teams and serve as models that will be embraced by partners, states, refuge Friends and other stakeholders.

On a final note, the devastation brought by Hurricane Sandy, which has likely impacted no fewer than 100 refuges along the Eastern seaboard, adds even greater urgency to the need to complete the Climate Change Implementation Plan (see Scientific Excellence). As the preponderance of scientific evidence suggests, larger and more powerful storms are likely to become the 'new normal,' and refuges must anticipate the ecological and socio-economic ramifications as they relate to future wildlife, habitat and public engagement management decisions.

Importantly, partnerships will become an increasingly crucial strategy for addressing these challenges. Fortunately, the *Conserving the Future* stakeholder engagement process offers an abundance of opportunity to build and strengthen relationships that will be fundamental to a thriving future for our National Wildlife Refuge System.

### Introduction



Nisqually NWR (Photo: Cynthia Martinez, USFWS)

*Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation* is not just the Fish and Wildlife Service's vision for the Refuge System, but it is also a blueprint for the next decade. It encourages the Refuge System to look at how it has done business over the last 15 years and how it can adapt to an ever-challenging environment.

The Executive Implementation Council (EIC), chartered to make recommendations and decisions that lead the nine implementation teams, met in October 2012 and got a firsthand look at a major accomplishment for the Refuge System: the estuary restoration and tidal boardwalk at Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge in Olympia, WA. Refuge Manager Jean Takekawa explained the vital roles of community partnerships, sound science and funding in transforming land that had been diked for agriculture into one of the nation's largest estuary restoration projects, returning the life-affirming tidal ebb and flow of the Puget Sound.

Jean and her staff worked on the project for more than 12 years, often overcoming community skepticism as



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long-time visitors faced the loss of a favorite hiking trail. The level of success and ultimate community support was more than the refuge expected: visitation has nearly doubled and the area has come alive, teeming with migratory birds, native plants and other wildlife. Nisqually Refuge is just one of many examples throughout the Service that demonstrates the Refuge System's great success in working with partners to restore habitat for wildlife and build community support. How does the Refuge System ensure that the next generation of refuge managers has the vision and courage of someone like Jean? *Conserving the Future* is not only about changing and expanding the course of the Refuge System, but also about creating a working environment where innovation, sound science and out-of-the-box thinking will flourish.

### Leadership Development Council (LDC)

The LDC was tasked with developing a process to achieve recommendations 21, 22, 23, and 24 in *Conserving the Future*. The LDC has four subteams, each working to address one of the recommendations. The Recommendation 21 subteam, a cross-programmatic group, met in-person in late September to discuss organizational realignments and programmatic efficiencies. The subteam is fleshing out more focused topics, including accountability and administrative adaptive management for the Service. A draft report is expected to the EIC in November 2012.

Recommendation 22 subteam continues to focus on the Service's Diversity and Inclusion implementation plan, paying particular attention to the Refuge System. The subteam broke down into three cross-programmatic, multi-discipline teams to address: barriers and opportunities to recruiting and hiring people of diverse background, outreach, and communications. People are just now being named to the smaller subteams. The Recommendation 23 subteam is working on three projects: Career Pathways reports for Refuge System employees, temporary housing for employees on detail in Washington D.C. and a job sharing online bulletin board.

The LDC has drafted an employee resource guide: **Reaching Your Full Potential: an E-Guide for Employee Development**, expected to be online in the coming weeks. This e-guide will help employees find ideas, opportunities and training so they are equipped to accept the responsibilities of leadership at all levels in the Service. Employees and supervisors will find links and ideas in this vital resource for employees preparing their individual development plans (IDPs).

The E-Guide includes information and links to mentoring such as the Region 4 [Employees Empowering Employees for Excellence](#). The purpose of the E<sup>4</sup> Mentoring Program is to provide a structured professional environment in which an experienced employee empowers a less-experienced employee to develop the necessary skills to excel both professionally and personally within the Service.

The LDC also formed a new workforce assessment team to determine the skills and competencies that Service staff need to accomplish the *Conserving the Future* goals. The new subteam, comprised of a sweep of implementation team members, will address a variety of workforce-related needs to help the Service improve hiring practices and train employees to do the conservation work of tomorrow.



## Elevator Speech: Short Enough to Convey the Concept

“With more than 550 National Wildlife Refuges, you can discover a whole new universe while staying close to home. The National Wildlife Refuge System is dedicated to conserving animals and their homes, so you can see wildlife you can’t see most anywhere else. And because wildlife refuges are part of a national system dedicated to protecting wildlife now and in the future, you can be confident all is being done to ensure refuges will be available for you and your family today and for generations to come.”

## Communications

The team has been working with Spectrum Communications, a public relations firm in Washington, DC, to draft a plan, as required by Recommendation 14. The team began by identifying measurable goals, specific audiences and a few general messages to increase awareness of the Refuge System and its economic and environmental benefits to all Americans. The draft plan will be available for comment on [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org) in late November 2012.

The Communications implementation team also created subteams to evaluate current policy on visitor center exhibits; consider staff performance criteria to include communications standards; new media policy and a new media academy; and web-based locators for subject matter experts.

## Community Partnerships

The team has assembled a strategic plan for strengthening volunteer programs, Friends organizations and community partnerships. The plan responds to the requirements in the NWRS Volunteer Improvement Act of 2010 to prepare “a national strategy for the coordination and utilization of volunteers.” The strategy outlines four goals: 1) Increase volunteer management capability at field stations; 2) connect with and engage a wider cross-section of the American public; 3) Encourage and support active and vibrant Friends partnerships at as many Service field stations as possible; 4) encourage and support other community partnerships at as many field stations as possible. This plan will be made available for internal Service review in November 2012 prior to being posted on [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org).

The team also has a handbook subteam, which outlined a comprehensive reference for volunteer, Friends and community partnerships within the Refuge System. The outline was posted on [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org) for 45 days and feedback is currently being reviewed by the team.

The web-tools subteam saw success when the EIC approved funding for a web-based volunteer management application to the Web site, [Volunteer.gov](http://Volunteer.gov). Among other things, this application will allow field staff to more easily track and transfer volunteers and hours throughout the Service. Contract proposals are being solicited; the project should be underway in November 2012.

Two other subteams are working on staff training and Friends partnership mentoring. The Friends partnership mentoring subteam has a draft Friends Mentoring vision that outlines new methods to facilitate mentoring and seeks to



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increase benefits to cost, address priority needs and engage staff working with Friends at all levels. This vision will be ready for internal review in early November 2012.

## Interpretation & Environmental Education

The implementation team has drafted strategies for both Interpretation and Environmental Education. The draft plans cover: the current status of Refuge System interpretation and

environmental education program capabilities at field stations; identify training and professional development programs available; identify self-assessment tools and standards to measure quality

and success; and the delivery modes through the Ambassadors program, citizen science and mobile platforms. The strategies also recommend updated sign and small outdoor facility guidelines to deliver interpretative and education-related information to most visitors. Once the draft plans have been reviewed internally, they will be posted on [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org) in January 2013.

## Ambassador Program

Contact with the public occurs almost anywhere and at any time on a national wildlife refuge. Whether our staff is on or off duty, in uniform or not, they represent their local field station, the Refuge System, and the Department of the Interior. In short, we put “service” into the Service. The main goal of the Ambassadors Program is to help build a constituency that supports the National Wildlife Refuge System – to do so, we first need to increase awareness and develop our staff, volunteers and partners to communicate enthusiastically, clearly and effectively with our visitors and surrounding communities. Components of the program include: training in customer service, interpretation, hospitality, and outreach relations for staff, volunteers, Friends and partners.



### In the Spotlight:

#### Community Partnerships Team

*We Get By With a Little Help From Our Friends*

Actually, it’s more than just a little help. In fact, in 2011 alone, almost 42,000 volunteers contributed over 1.5 million hours of time to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

That’s why it was crucial to have two recommendations in the *Conserving the Future* vision focused on volunteers, Friends, and community partners of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The two recommendations focus on how we can improve and expand our existing base of volunteers, Friends, and community partnerships...read more at [www.AmericasWildlife.org](http://www.AmericasWildlife.org)

## Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative

During the spring and summer, this implementation team has worked extensively with partners and staff to develop key deliverables. Interviews with staff and conservation partners helped develop Standards of Excellence, which describe objective measures for a Service effort in urban refuges (both land based and partner driven), potential barriers and strategies to overcome, and metrics for evaluating current conditions and measuring progress. These standards will help the Refuge System evaluate success and identify ways to increase our capacity to reach urban audiences as the Urban Initiative is

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implemented. The standards have been submitted for internal review to the EIC and regional refuge visitor services chiefs.

An urban audience analysis at various geographic scales and in several phases will provide the Refuge System with key information on both the national and community levels. Based on conversations with several social science researchers, the implementation team plans to conduct a national review of demographic and economic trends, a literature review on human dimensions, and follow-up of localized research within identified piloted areas, as well as focus groups to gain insight for both urban refuges and the presence partnerships subteam.

## 8 Draft Standards of Excellence

- 1) Urban refuges engage urban communities in wildlife conservation and how this relates to people and their well-being. We do this by conducting both traditional and innovative wildlife management actions on the refuge, and by providing visitors and partners with opportunities to learn about, support and engage in wildlife conservation both on established refuges and on new urban partnership refuges.
- 2) Urban refuges (land-based and presence) develop both formal and informal partnerships with a diversity of community organizations in order to gain support and build a sustainable conservation community. These mutually beneficial partnerships are sustained and nurtured, and over time become an integral part of both the refuge system and the urban community.
- 3) Urban National Wildlife Refuges or partnership presences have sustainable resources to make long term commitments to achieve the mission of the Service, NWRS and the local refuge or refuge presence.
- 4) Urban NWRs are accessible to residents of local communities regardless of transportation, physical, or financial abilities.
- 5) Connecting Urban People with Nature—Stepping Stones of Engagement
- 6) Ensure Safety of Visitors and That Visitors Feel Safe
- 7) Be a model of sustainability in all aspects of refuge management and community involvement in order to inspire environmental, social, and economic responsibility within our urban communities.
- 8) Both urban national wildlife refuges and urban national wildlife partnership/presence refuges depend on partners and the community to provide support and expertise in achieving the mission of the Service. In turn, the FWS and the NWRS also lend support, assistance, and technical expertise to our partners and our community in realizing programs that meet our shared vision for healthy environments, healthy people, and healthy economies.

## Planning

One deliverable for the Planning implementation team is a report outlining recommendations for the future process, content and implementation of Refuge System planning, based on new models of conservation planning and lessons learned from the last 15 years. Prior to drafting the report, the team worked closely with human dimension experts to develop a survey for



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those involved in planning for the Refuge System. The survey was distributed throughout the Refuge System in late July; 452 individuals responded. Survey experts from the Natural Resources Program Center are doing quantitative and qualitative analyses.

In conjunction with the survey results, the team is building a landscape level pre-planning framework to assist planners and managers in identifying the most meaningful scale in which to plan, taking into consideration Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs), existing partnerships, and clusters of refuges on the landscape. Once the scale is determined, a landscape blueprint will be developed in consultation with partners. The team will complete a draft report in November 2012.

### Hunting, Fishing, & Outdoor Recreation

The Hunting, Fishing and Outdoor Recreation implementation team, tasked with Recommendation 17 and 18, has broken down into five subteams. The data collection subteam, in conjunction with RAPP (Refuge Annual Performance Plan), asked all field stations for more detailed information about hunting, fishing and outdoor recreational activities on refuges and wetland management districts. The response was outstanding, and results are being compared with the *Federal Register* as well as vetted through several visitor services staff not involved in the original data call.

According to preliminary results, more than 360 refuges and wildlife management districts (WMDs) are open to hunting and more than 300 open to fishing. Almost 200 refuges/WMDs had public boating access facilities, including boat ramps, canoe launches, parking areas and docks. For the recreational opportunities not included in RAPP, preliminary findings indicate biking was by far the most popular. More than 250 refuges/WMDs reported activities outside the Big Six, including berry picking, picnicking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.

The team is also focusing on outdoor skills. Members have developed products addressing four subject areas: 1) development of a guide for NGO partners, 2) development of Refuge System staff training and information regarding outdoor skills programs offered by other organizations, 3) development of internal guidance on creating, maintaining and staffing outdoor skills centers and 4) pilot program to showcase centers of excellence where refuges are already making outstanding strides, working with states and others to provide outdoor skills training on wildlife refuges.

A fish stocking subteam is using survey results to prepare an internal report that summarizes potential fish stocking practices and policy issues. Any formal recommendations would be shared with states and other partners. A welcome and orient subteam has developed a list of recommendations addressing five subject areas: social media, signage, web sites, training and visitor services manuals, all of which relate to welcoming and orienting hunters, anglers and other outdoor recreationists to the Refuge System. The recommendations are being reviewed internally.

A subteam is analyzing and reviewing the appropriate use policy, associated Director's guidance and the Appropriateness finding form to consider revision of policy and guidance. In addition, the subteam plans to offer suggestions for staff training that will facilitate understanding of the policy, enable consistency of its application and possibly engage a broader conservation

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constituency while still holding true to the values and principles upon which the Refuge System was founded.

## Scientific Excellence

Of all the implementation teams, the Scientific Excellence implementation team is responsible for six, the most recommendations. This progress report focuses on Recommendation 2 and development of a climate change implementation plan for the Refuge System.

The Refuge System Climate Change Implementation Plan (CCIP) will step down goals outlined in “[Rising to the Urgent Challenge: Strategic Plan for Responding to Accelerating Climate Change](#),” the Service’s strategic plan, and will build upon the NWRS 2008 draft plan. The CCIP will also incorporate key concepts from the “[National Fish, Wildlife, and Plants Climate Adaptation Strategy](#)” (expected to be published in November 2012). A revision of “A Primer on Climate Change and the NWRS”) will provide general information on climate change science tools and directions for incorporating climate change considerations into Refuge System planning documents. Internal review of the Primer was completed in late September 2012; and the team is on track to complete the document for external review by December 2012.

The Refuge System Climate Change Mitigation Plan will facilitate the continued greening of the NWRS infrastructure to meet the Service’s 2020 carbon neutral goal. This will reduce the Refuge System’s contribution to global climate change and demonstrate leadership in addressing climate change impacts. The Climate Change Engagement Strategy will help ensure new and existing climate change resources are known and used Service-wide, and will continue to facilitate communities of practice including the use of [sustainable practices](#) in building construction, maintenance and management. A communications strategy will ensure staff is aware of climate change resources and how to incorporate these resources into their work.

### In the Spotlight:

#### Scientific Excellence



The Scientific Excellence Implementation Team has been taking steps toward their recommendations in *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation*. “*We are committed to a culture of scientific excellence, adhering to the highest standards of integrity and transparency, and are viewed as valued contributors to the broader scientific community.*”

We are working to develop a simple and concise Adaptive Management Handbook that will demonstrate adaptive management applications, with examples of where it has worked and where it has not in order to learn from previous experiences and improve implementing in the future.

Our team has been working on developing state-of-the-art data management and sharing systems to serve many purposes, including storing adaptive management projects, inventory and monitoring information, and refuge research needs. These systems will allow us to be more efficient with our resources and share with partners more effectively...read more at [www.AmericasWildlife.org](http://www.AmericasWildlife.org)

“Our level of scientific accountability must be higher in these times of increased expectations. All employees, not just biologists, must be well-versed in science.”  
**Gabriela Chavarria, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Science Advisor**



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## Strategic Growth

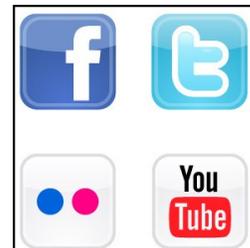
The implementation team is tasked with completing a rapid assessment of land acquisition and creating a draft strategic growth policy for the Refuge System. The rapid assessment has been completed, using data from the realty database, Land Records System and the [Annual Report](#) of Lands Under Control of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The report provides a comprehensive historical summary of Refuge System acquisition, and was presented to the EIC in October. It is being reviewed internally.

The team has completed a draft strategic growth policy that identifies priority conservation objectives for the Refuge System. This interim guidance also lays out the science-based criteria, feasibility factors and Director's decisions, which are all in the best interest of the Service. The draft policy was sent to regional refuge chiefs in late October 2012 and final changes are being incorporated. Once the policy is distributed to the Service Directorate, it will also be made available to States.

## Conclusion

Implementation of the 24 recommendations in *Conserving the Future* is continuous and sometimes overwhelming. To find out more information about a team's status, latest products and progress report, go to [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org). Once online, you are invited to join the social network and provide comments on draft implementation team products. Be sure to check the blog at [AmericasWildlife.org](http://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, accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr are being maintained. You can access all of them from the home page at [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org). Just click on the social media icons in the upper right hand corner. You can also follow the social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter for the National Wildlife Refuge System for a double dose of great wildlife and vision related updates.

[www.AmericasWildlife.org](http://www.AmericasWildlife.org)



*Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.*  
- Henry Ford