ROOTED IN PURPOSE
2026

Honoring Our Heritage, Shaping Our Future
A Review of the National Wildlife Refuge System



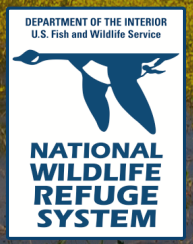




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Access the full report: https://www.fws.gov/initiative/rooted-in-purpose



FROM THE DIRECTOR

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages the National Wildlife Refuge System for the American people to conserve America's wildlife and habitat for generations to come. This system is an incredible resource that contributes directly to our American quality of life. Each of these 573 refuges has defined establishing purposes. Our responsibility is to honor those purposes through sound management, effective use of resources and to provide places for Americans to experience the outdoors.

I directed this review to determine where our organization, policies and spending support that responsibility and where changes are needed. The findings call for stronger field operations, fewer layers of bureaucracy and decision making focused on local refuge needs, backed by clear expectations and accountability.

Rooted in Purpose presents 29 recommendations to put resources closer to the work, protect active habitat management tools, improve infrastructure and strengthen partnerships with states, tribes, private landowners, hunting and conservation groups and local communities. Importantly, it also identifies changes to support hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation and builds on our recent efforts to open all refuge lands to hunting and fishing where those uses are compatible with the refuge purpose.

Our task now is to turn these recommendations into results. Success will be measured by what we accomplish on refuge lands for wildlife and the American people.

Brian Nesvik
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

A Review Grounded in Field Experience

Rooted in Purpose examines how the National Wildlife Refuge System uses its people, funding and policies to conserve wildlife and fulfill the purposes for which each refuge was established. It identifies practical changes to strengthen field operations and support hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation.

Conducted under Director's Order 230, the review ran from Dec. 16, 2025, through May 15, 2026. It brought reviewers directly to refuges to hear from the people managing habitat, maintaining infrastructure and serving the public. It combined surveys, site visits and direct outreach to employees, retirees, states, tribes, private landowners and hunting and conservation partners.

Those firsthand experiences shaped 29 recommendations to strengthen field operations, reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and keep practical habitat management tools available, including prescribed fire, grazing, agriculture, active forest management, invasive species control and appropriate predator management.





THE FOUNDATION

Mission and habitat: Align management with refuge purposes, establishing purposes and practical tools that deliver results for wildlife.

Organization and public access: Strengthen field level input on site-specific decisions, reduce duplication and pursue hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation.

Maintenance and infrastructure: Prioritize essential assets and put skilled crews, equipment and maintenance funds to work on essential refuge needs.

Partnerships and administrative support: Strengthen and use partnerships to expand conservation capacity and simplify processes that impede fieldwork.

REVIEW AT A GLANCE

- 41 refuge visits, including 3 urban refuge visits
- 4 regional office visits
- 2 internal surveys with more than 1,000 total responses
- 1 external survey to tribes and tribal organizations, non-governmental organizations and state organizations with more than 2,000 responses
- Direct correspondence with current and retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees, all 8 regional directors and conservation organizations
- Employee and partnership participation through webinars, leadership sessions, conferences, Q&As and virtual refuge visits

Strengthen Hunting and Fishing Access

National wildlife refuges conserve wildlife while providing opportunities for Americans to hunt, fish and enjoy other wildlife-dependent recreation. The Service will continue looking for new opportunities to expand access consistent with refuge purposes and the conservation mission.

The review recommends strengthening hunting and fishing coordination, and increasing refuge law enforcement staffing to protect wildlife, safeguard visitors and support responsible public use.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Coordinate and improve access.** Designate field-based, collateral-duty regional hunting and fishing coordinators, and a national sportsman's access coordinator, integrated into regional and national leadership teams, to strengthen consistent access decisions, support high-quality hunting and fishing opportunities and identify opportunities for expansion.
- **Strengthen protection on the ground.** Increase refuge law enforcement staffing to provide a more consistent field presence, protect refuge resources and improve public safety.





Keep Practical Habitat Management Tools Available

Wildlife habitat often requires active management. Refuge employees need practical tools to maintain wetlands, grasslands and forests, and address conditions that threaten wildlife.

The review recommends keeping those tools available and updating guidance to support their appropriate use, consistent with refuge purposes. Effective habitat management also supports the wildlife populations that sustain hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Use grazing, agriculture and forest management appropriately.** Update habitat management and public-use policies to reflect operational capacity and partnership opportunities, prioritizing grazing and complementary agriculture and active forest management where appropriate.
- **Strengthen invasive species control.** Support existing strike teams and pursue opportunities to expand their capacity.
- **Apply targeted predator management.** Use predator control where appropriate to protect sensitive species and support ecosystem balance.

Strengthen State and Local Partnerships

Effective conservation requires cooperation with states, tribes, private landowners and local communities. Their knowledge and resources help refuge managers accomplish habitat work and address conservation needs across property boundaries.

The review recommends empowering refuge managers to build practical partnerships and establish a consistent point of coordination in every state. These relationships should respect state wildlife management expertise and authority, alongside government-to-government engagement with tribes.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Empower local partnerships.** Give refuge managers greater ability to strengthen existing relationships and develop new partnerships that expand conservation capacity.
- **Strengthen state coordination.** Designate a collateral-duty partnership coordinator in each of the 50 states to ensure state partners have a meaningful voice in decisions and wildlife management efforts, and strengthen coordination with states and tribes to align hunting and fishing regulations where appropriate and consistent with applicable law.





PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Enhance Accountability and Timely Decisions

Refuge planning should guide practical management, and permit and easement applications should receive timely decisions. Outdated plans and unresolved reviews create uncertainty for managers, landowners and partners.

The review recommends streamlining planning, preserving management knowledge and establishing clear deadlines for elevating unresolved compatibility determinations.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Bring conservation plans up to date.** Establish a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) Support and Compliance Initiative that includes a community of practice, integration of Super Intelligence (SI), a cross-regional action team to provide surge capacity, streamlined review pathways for refuges with existing plans, and clear accountability measures to ensure every refuge achieves 100% compliance within an 18-month timeframe.
- **Preserve field knowledge.** Reinstate annual narrative reports for national wildlife refuges to complement the Refuge Annual Performance Plan system, preserve institutional knowledge, provide critical management context, and strengthen long term continuity and accountability across the Refuge System.
- **Ensure leadership review.** Elevate compatibility determination declinations to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director.
- **Prevent indefinite delays.** Require prompt action on compatibility determinations associated with permit or easement applications. If a determination remains unresolved 180 days after receipt of a complete permit application or 270 days after receipt of a complete easement application, elevate the matter to the Director for decision.

Focus Programs and Spending on Refuge Purposes

Refuge programs and spending should directly support the purposes for which these lands were established. Employees also need a clear understanding of those purposes and the contributions of hunters and anglers to wildlife conservation.

The review recommends redirecting discretionary urban program funding to core conservation work and expanding practical training that connects employees with the Refuge System's mission and the people it serves.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Refocus conservation spending.** Revoke the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program Policy and redirect all discretionary program funding to activities that directly support the conservation mission.
- **Strengthen employees' understanding of the mission.** Expand training opportunities such as Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow, hunting and shooting sports recruitment, retention and reactivation training, and related programs that reinforce refuge purposes and the role of hunting and fishing in conservation.
- **Update habitat management policies.** Review and update Service Manual Chapters 620 FW 2, 601 FW 3, 603 FW 1, and 603 FW 2 as necessary to reflect current operational capacity and partnership opportunities, prioritizing the strategic use of grazing as a core habitat management tool. Expand the complementary use of agriculture and active forest management where appropriate to support and enhance refuge habitat objectives.





Build the Maintenance Workforce

Maintaining refuge infrastructure is essential to managing wildlife habitat and keeping public access safe. Maintenance professionals bring the practical skills needed to manage water systems, maintain roads and keep equipment working.

The review recommends expanding use of crews and equipment across refuges, developing skilled trades employees and bringing field expertise into maintenance planning.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Expand Maintenance Action Teams.** Use shared crews to complete annual and deferred maintenance more efficiently.
- **Share personnel and equipment.** Create core centers that position maintenance professionals and heavy equipment to serve multiple refuges.
- **Develop skilled employees.** Improve classification consistency and establish clear advancement pathways supported by a registered apprenticeship program.

Prioritize Essential Infrastructure

Maintenance spending should support refuge purposes and address the facilities most important to conservation and public access. Accurate inspections and cost estimates are essential to setting priorities and using funds responsibly.

The review recommends strengthening condition assessments and directing maintenance resources toward essential work, including demolition of unneeded facilities and projects completed by Maintenance Action Teams.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Complete critical inspections.** To improve the accuracy of deferred maintenance assessments and the deferred maintenance backlog estimate, increase the inspection rate of mission critical assets from 75.3% to 100% and define a continuous learning curriculum in construction cost estimating for Facility Management Coordinators.
- **Focus project priorities.** Refine the Nationally Significant Project List criteria, along with the annual call memo for five-year deferred maintenance plans, to ensure that priority is given to demolition projects, Maintenance Action Team efforts, and other work that aligns with refuge purposes and advances the Service mission.



Put Resources Where the Work Happens

Conservation depends on boots on the ground: employees managing habitat, maintaining water systems and roads, supporting hunting and fishing, and protecting wildlife and visitors. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's organizational structure should put resources behind that work.

Rooted in Purpose examines organizational concerns dating back to the early 2010s. The Service's 2011 review called for examining headquarters, regional and refuge structures, and staffing data beginning in 2013 document a long-term decline in field capacity. The new review recommends reducing unnecessary headquarters and regional management layers and reallocating positions to refuge operations.

The goal is practical: put people with the right skills where they can deliver results and serve the public.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Put more boots on the ground.** Reduce headquarters and regional office staffing and reallocate positions to refuge operations, prioritizing the people needed to manage habitat, maintain facilities, support public access and protect resources.
- **Value practical experience.** Prioritize generalist refuge positions and give greater weight to demonstrated merit, practical skills and readiness for greater responsibility when selecting refuge specialists, managers and project leaders.
- **Support consistent field decisions.** Clarify refuge managers' responsibilities and provide consistent Servicewide guidance to support timely, practical decisions.



Share Resources and Eliminate Duplication

The Refuge System should operate as a coordinated part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Regional and program boundaries should not prevent refuge managers from accessing the people, equipment and expertise needed to accomplish conservation work.

The review recommends removing organizational barriers, clarifying responsibilities and eliminating duplicative support structures so resources strengthen field operations.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Share resources across regions.** Improve access to staff expertise, assets, equipment and guidance regardless of regional boundaries, with better coordination between headquarters and field implementation.
- **Eliminate duplication.** Keep the Refuge System fully integrated within the Service, phase out support structures that duplicate existing Service functions and redirect those resources to the field.
- **Clarify program accountability.** Place the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program within the same organizational program nationwide, with clear and consistent lines of authority.





Remove Barriers to Fieldwork

Administrative systems should help refuge employees accomplish conservation work efficiently. Duplicative reporting, contracting delays and unnecessary requirements consume time and resources needed for habitat management and refuge operations.

The review recommends strengthening practical administrative support, improving procurement processes and removing requirements that impose costs without measurable benefits.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Strengthen operational support.** Direct regional leadership to provide sufficient administrative support and develop a position description that meets daily refuge needs. Employ the use of technology and Super Intelligence to improve efficiency.
- **Improve contracting.** Strengthen coordination between contracting and field staff, reduce barriers for qualified local businesses competing for federal work, and engage lawmakers on statutory spending limits that constrain operations.
- **Remove unnecessary barriers to fieldwork.** Review and revise policies that impose unnecessary requirements on field employees, ensuring safeguards support safe and effective refuge operations.

Bolster and Improve Remote Refuge Operations

Managing remote refuges requires reliable transportation and practical planning. In Alaska and on distant islands, aircraft and vessels enable habitat management, biological surveys, maintenance and law enforcement where roads cannot reach.

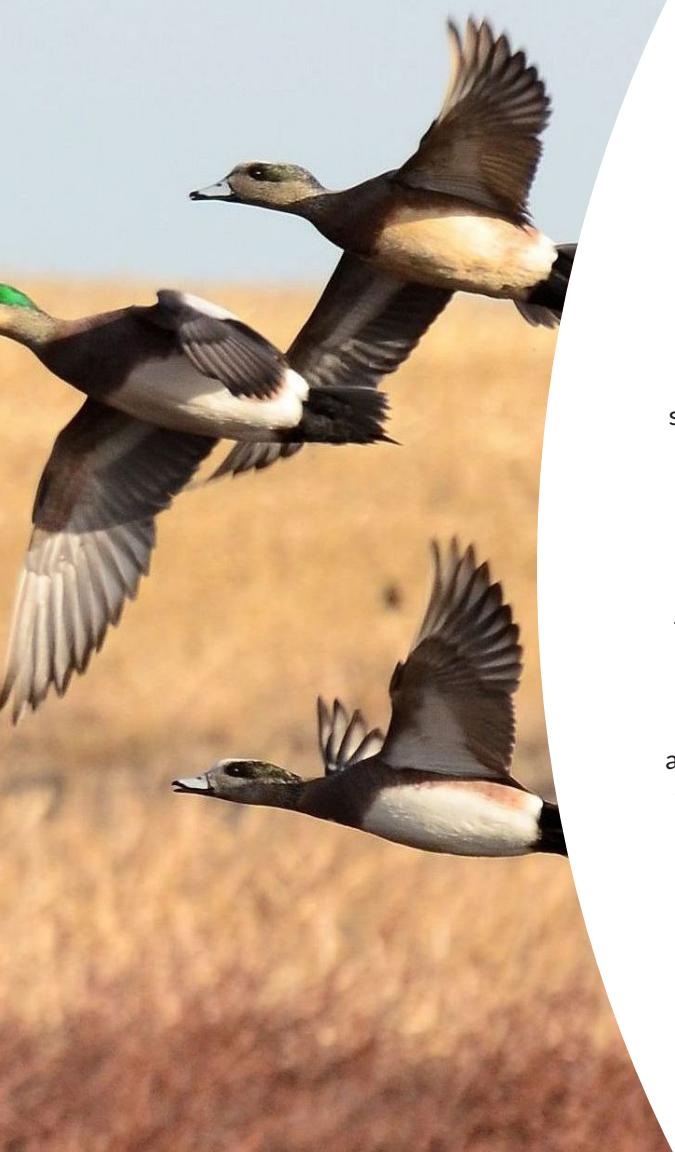
The review recommends addressing aviation staffing and contracting barriers in Alaska and examining funding flexibility for remote Pacific operations. Management must also reflect refuge purposes and local knowledge. Under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, the Service must provide priority for rural Alaska residents' customary and traditional subsistence uses of fish and wildlife on federal public lands, consistent with conservation requirements.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Improve access to remote Pacific refuges.** To ensure access to the most remote parts of the refuge system, capacity to reach geographically isolated conservation areas must be strengthened. Increase recruitment of qualified pilots in Alaska and improve the processes for hiring pilots and procuring contracted aviation services. Examine the feasibility of establishing a Pacific Monuments receipts account to provide greater flexibility for multiyear planning and consistent access to remote Pacific refuges.







CARRYING THE REVIEW FORWARD

Deliver Results on the Ground

Rooted in Purpose calls for action to refocus the Refuge System on its mission,strengthen field operations and use resources effectively. Its recommendations provide a path to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, support active habitat management, and improve hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation.

Implementation requires clear responsibilities, practical schedules and accountability for results. Each action should identify the resources and approvals needed, with progress measured by improvements in refuge operations and conservation delivery.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service thanks the employees and retirees, state agencies, tribes, private landowners, agricultural groups, conservation organizations, hunting and fishing groups, refuge friends groups and local communities which contributed to this review. Their firsthand knowledge and candid feedback helped shape recommendations grounded in the needs of wildlife and the people who manage, use and support America's refuges.

Success will be measured on refuge lands: better habitat management, reliable infrastructure, effective public access and managers equipped to fulfill each refuge's establishing purposes.



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Thank you to our partners.

Scan QR code for the full report.