Rooted in Purpose

29 RECOMMENDATIONS | Four themes for the National Wildlife Refuge System

THEME 01 / 10 ACTIONS

Mission Alignment, Habitat Stewardship and Long-Range Planning

1. 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.
2. Support existing strike teams and pursue opportunities to expand their capacity.
3. Use predator control where appropriate to protect sensitive species and support ecosystem balance.
4. 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.
5. Revoke the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program Policy and redirect all discretionary program funding to activities that directly support the conservation mission.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. Elevate compatibility determination declinations to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director.
9. 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.
10. 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.

THEME 02 / 9 ACTIONS

Organizational Structure, Leadership Roles, Systemwide Operations and Public Access

11. 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.
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. Clarify refuge managers' responsibilities and provide consistent Servicewide guidance to support timely, practical decisions.
15. Improve access to staff expertise, assets, equipment and guidance regardless of regional boundaries, with better coordination between headquarters and field implementation.
16. Increase refuge law enforcement staffing to provide a more consistent field presence, protect refuge resources and improve public safety.
17. 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.
18. To ensure consistency, accountability, and maximized mission delivery, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program must be housed within the same program nationwide with clear and well-defined lines of authority.
19. 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.

THEME 03 / 5 ACTIONS

Maintenance and Infrastructure

20. Create core centers that position maintenance professionals and heavy equipment to serve multiple refuges.
21. Use shared crews to complete annual and deferred maintenance more efficiently.
22. Improve Maintenance Professional workforce practices to ensure consistent classification, clear advancement pathways supported by a registered apprenticeship program, and meaningful inclusion of heavy equipment coordinators in maintenance planning.
23. 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.
24. 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.

THEME 04 / 5 ACTIONS

Partnerships, Engagement and Improving Administrative Systems

25. Review and revise policies that impose unnecessary requirements on field employees, ensuring safeguards support safe and effective refuge operations.
26. 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 (SI) to improve efficiency.
27. Give refuge managers greater ability to strengthen existing relationships and develop new partnerships that expand conservation capacity.
28. 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.
29. 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.