

Proposal to Expand Refuge Lands in Southern Maryland

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to expand the Patuxent Research Refuge (Refuge), located in Laurel, Maryland, and/or create a new refuge to include and ultimately conserve currently unprotected, high priority fish and wildlife habitats across southern Maryland.

In collaboration with landowners, outdoor enthusiasts, conservation partners, and local communities, the Service proposes to identify new Refuge boundaries within which the Service would have the authority to purchase land or interests in land (conservation easements) in the Maryland counties of Calvert, Charles, St. Mary's, Prince George's, and Anne Arundel. Extensive research and data collection and analysis over the past 15 years have shown that currently unprotected habitats in these counties support significant populations of fish and wildlife that have been identified by the Service for protection by the National Wildlife Refuge System, primarily threatened and endangered species, waterfowl, and migratory birds of conservation concern. These species face the threat of habitat loss from land use changes, climate change, competition from invasive species and other external population stressors. Following are answers to frequently asked questions regarding management of the Refuge System, and in particular, the policies related to land acquisition and public uses on refuge lands.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are national wildlife refuges?

The National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is managed by the Service on behalf of the American people and is the largest assemblage of lands and waters devoted to fish and wildlife conservation in the world. It consists of 568 refuges across all 50 states and 5 U.S. territories, encompassing 95 million land acres, 760 million acres of submerged lands and waters, 38 wetland management districts, and 5 marine national monuments. Of the total number of refuges, 63 contain and protect designated wilderness areas.

Why is Southern Maryland so important for fish and wildlife?

Patuxent Research Refuge was established in 1936 and has since fulfilled an important research component for the Service, including establishing and coordinating the national Breeding Bird Surveys and compiling waterfowl harvest data among other important research initiatives. Maryland's natural resource agencies, The Nature Conservancy, and other conservation entities also collect and publish data on topics such as green infrastructure, climate resiliency, and locations of cultural importance. Looking at these data, Service biologists, working with partners from across the conservation spectrum, have recognized that Southern Maryland contains tens of thousands of acres of unprotected habitats that support the Service's priority conservation targets, and that the loss of these habitats would have severe consequences for those species that depend on them.

What is the process for establishing new refuge boundaries and will there be opportunities for public input?

The Service is following its internal policy and guidance from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Service policy requires preparation of a Land Protection Plan to inform landowners and interested stakeholders about the details of the proposal. This document will be combined with an Environmental Assessment (EA) as required by NEPA. The combined document will be developed in draft and will be made available for a public comment period of at least 45 days. The draft document will describe the purpose and need for action, a description of the affected environment, alternatives including the Service's proposed action and a "status quo" alternative, the predicted environmental consequences of each alternative, and a description of consultation and coordination efforts. Public input will be incorporated into the final document. The Director of the Service has the authority to approve or disapprove the proposal.

How will the refuge be created?

Once a new refuge boundary is approved by its Director, the Service and its partners will work with willing landowners to protect land within the boundary area by either purchasing land at fair market value or purchasing development rights through conservation easements. Creating a new refuge boundary will also allow the Service to accept donations of land or interests in land. The Service is seeking authority to protect up to 30,000 acres for the refuge over a 30-year planning horizon.

My land is within the proposed refuge boundary. What does that mean?

The rights of a private landowner are not affected by the designation of a refuge boundary or the establishment of the refuge. The Service will work with willing sellers to acquire lands as opportunities and funding allow. Landowners have no obligation to sell their land or otherwise participate in the proposed refuge at any time. There is no additional regulatory burden for landowners within the refuge boundary.

What if the Service wants to buy my land, and I do not want to sell?

You don't have to sell your land as part of this proposal. You would be unaffected by the establishment of the refuge.

What is the timeline for completing the refuge?

This is a long-term effort that may take decades to complete. The number of willing sellers and availability of funding will determine the timeline for completing the purchase of up to 30,000 acres for the refuge.

What types of activities will be allowed on the refuge?

The Service supports wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation. All of these visitor activities and more are offered at the existing Patuxent Research Refuge, which also houses the National Wildlife Visitor Center.

What are the potential impacts to local economies if lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System?

The Federal Government does not pay state or local taxes. However, the Service annually reimburses localities to compensate for the lost revenue of real estate tax, based on a formula that is the greater of: 75 cents per acre; three-fourths of one percent of the fair market value; or 25 percent of the net receipts collected from operation and management of the refuge. Payments to localities are subject to annual appropriations by Congress. In Fiscal Year 2022, Congress appropriated \$13,228,000 for Refuge Revenue Sharing, which allowed the Service to pay localities 21.7% of what would constitute full payment under the formulas described above. Congress may appropriate additional funds to compensate local governments. Other economic benefits typically associated with refuge lands include increased tourism, improved property values adjacent to the refuge, preservation of ecosystem services, and enhanced consideration for federal, state and other grant programs to name a few.

<https://www.fws.gov/program/land-acquisition-and-realty/revenue-sharing>

Where does the Service obtain funding to purchase land?

The Service receives funding for land acquisition from two major sources: the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. These funding sources are not derived from traditional tax revenues but are collected from the sale of Federal Duck Stamps, entrance fees from certain national wildlife refuges, import duties on arms and ammunition (Migratory Bird Conservation Fund), and from the sale of offshore oil leases (Land and Water Conservation Fund). Funding from these sources supports conservation of land across the nation.

What are the next steps?

Following public scoping this winter, we expect to publish a draft Environmental Assessment and Land Protection Plan in the Spring or Summer of 2023, complete with maps showing where the Service would like to create the proposed refuge. The Service will provide an opportunity for the public to review and comment on the proposal. Once the public review and comment period ends, the Service will evaluate the comments and make any changes needed before developing a final plan, which will be submitted to the Service Director for approval.

Proposed Schedule for Establishing the Expanded Patuxent Research Refuge Boundary

Host Public Open Houses

Spring 2023

Develop Draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment

Winter/Spring 2022-23

Conduct Public Review and Comment on Proposal

Summer 2023

Evaluate the Comments and Develop Final Plan for Approval

Summer/Fall 2023

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