



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Washington, D.C. 20240



Mr. Scott Kovarovics
Executive Director, Izaak Walton League of America
Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council Chair
707 Conservation Lane
Gaithersburg, MD 20878

JUL 17 2018

Dear Chairman Kovarovics:

Thank you for your letter of May 3, 2018, to the Department of the Interior Secretary Zinke, concerning Secretarial Order (S.O.) 3347. The Secretary has requested that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) respond to your letter, and we apologize for the delay.

The Department of the Interior (Department) and all of its bureaus are committed to working with tribal, state and local government, industry, and non-profit partners to promote and expand public access to recreational angling and boating. The opportunity to participate in one of America's great national past times also depends on managing and sustaining America's fisheries. For over 140 years, the Service has worked closely and collaboratively with many partners to conserve the nation's aquatic resources, maintain healthy fish populations, restore their habitats, prevent and control invasive species, and engage the public in outdoor recreation.

The Service appreciates the specific Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council (Council) recommendations regarding S.O. 3347 on boating access, modernizing the National Fish Hatchery System (NFHS), and increasing recreational fishing participation. We appreciate the opportunity to further elaborate on the work we are doing with the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (RBFF) to advance the 60 million anglers in 60 months campaign and the steps its Hunt and Fish Chiefs have embarked upon to implement S.O. 3347 and 3356.

1. **Boating Access** – The Department wholeheartedly agrees that boating access is a key element of a broader effort to expand access to outdoor recreation. In addition to the Service's ongoing work with RBFF to promote angling and boating, substantial funding is provided each year to States, the District of Columbia, and insular areas through the Service's Boating Access and Boating Infrastructure Grant programs for a broad range of access facilities and associated amenities that benefit recreational boaters.
2. **NFHS Modernization** – The Service assesses the condition of well over 4000 assets within the NFHS at least once every five years, and uses the assessment results to determine Deferred Maintenance (DM) needs. Beginning in fiscal year 2019, the Service will allocate NFHS DM funding to highest priority (mission critical) assets that are in the worst condition, on a nationwide basis. These facilities propagate millions of fish each year in support of increased access to recreational fishing opportunities. As a result of this change, the Service will not only utilize the DM funds appropriated by Congress each year more efficiently and effectively to address our \$185 million backlog of NFHS deferred maintenance needs but it

will also allow the Service to continue to utilize operational funds for fish propagation, essential to recreational and conservation goals.

3. **Increasing Recreational Fishing Participation** – The Service works closely with the RBFF Board to advance its goal of increasing the number of anglers in the nation to 60 million in 60 months. As part of this ongoing effort, the RBFF cooperative agreement to implement the Council's National Outreach and Communication Plan, for approximately \$12 million per year for the next five years, was renewed in April of 2018. Additionally, the Service is hosting an angler recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) workshop this summer at the National Conservation Training Center for the states and federal R3 practitioners who are working collaboratively to develop and implement R3 plans. A number of Service staff will participate in this workshop and staff in regional and headquarter offices are working on a Service-wide approach to support R3, both internally and externally. Finally, Service staff will be attending and participating in a strategic planning meeting of the entire RBFF Board in June, as part of an ongoing effort to improve and refine the work that RBFF, the Service, and its other partners undertake to advance our shared mission.
4. **Work of the Hunt and Fish Chiefs** – As you requested, the Service will arrange for a follow-up briefing for the Council at its next conference call to present the ongoing work of the Service's Hunt and Fish Chiefs. These eight professionals are assigned to increase public access and quality hunting and fishing experiences on lands managed by the Service. Though on the job for only a few months, the Chiefs have already contacted all states and are out in the field visiting national wildlife refuges and hatcheries, talking with managers, and working directly with state fish and game agencies and tribes to develop recommendations on how the Service can enhance hunting and fishing access on these public lands. In addition to the field work, staff in the Service's Regional office in Denver, are pulling together updated maps of all Service lands to inform the assessment and identification of lands that could be opened to the public for recreational activities.

In response to the Council's previous work to sustain and expand access to recreational fishing and boating and your additional recommendations:

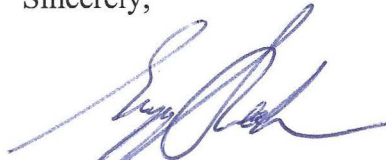
1. **Improve Coordination and Communications on Federal Permitting Affecting Boating Infrastructure and Water Access** – At the Council's 2015, Winter Meeting, the Boating Issues Committee initiated a session entitled *Proposed Pilot Project: Boating Access Infrastructure Permit Process Coordination*. This session, and subsequent discussions with stakeholder organizations, led to the development of specific recommendations for improving interagency coordination and communication, which were provided to the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation and other federal permitting agencies. The Service and the Department remain committed to working with the Council, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Marine Fisheries Service to further improve and streamline the federal permitting process affecting boating infrastructure and public access to water resources.
2. **Resume joint Service/Council Review of Boating Infrastructure Grant (BIG) Grant Applications** – The Service plans to engage the Council's BIG Tier 2 Ranking

Subcommittee in the program's next Tier 2 application review process. The Subcommittee would receive the applications by early October in order to provide ample time for a thorough review. We concur that the Council Subcommittee's involvement with the review of BIG grant applications greatly benefits and enhances the ranking process. Industry and state agency knowledge and expertise are critical for recommending the very best applications for funding. In addition, there is the added benefit of Council members providing third-party validation of the review process as being fair and impartial. All of which benefit transient recreational boaters.

3. **Approve a Waiver from Departmental Review for Clean Vessel Act and BIG Grant Programs** – The Service will engage with the appropriate officials at the Department relative to this request. The Service understands and supports the Department's desire to ensure that discretionary grants align with the Secretary's priorities as well as the Council's viewpoint that represent industry and state agency perspectives relative to the Clean Vessel Act and Boating Infrastructure Grant programs. While the ultimate decision on who receives the grants is discretionary, the grant programs themselves are narrow in scope based on Congressional intent, law and rule similar to the traditional Sport Fish Restoration grant program, which has received a waiver.
4. **Ensure the Fisheries Program Strategic Plan Appropriately Addresses the Program's Role in Supporting and Promoting Recreational Fishing** – In response to the recommendations and input of the Council and other partners, recreational fishing is already a centerpiece of the Service's Fish and Aquatic Conservation (FAC) Program Strategic Plan (Plan). In response to a series of new Secretarial Orders in the last 18 months, FAC has substantially stepped up work with partners to promote angling and boating. In addition, FAC is currently working with our state and tribal partners at a local and regional level to ensure their input is considered in the development of annual work plans developed for 71 National Fish Hatcheries, 65 Fish and Wildlife Conservation Offices, 9 Fish Health Centers, and 7 Fish Technology Centers. The Service has also overhauled the process used to allocate DM funding to the field to ensure that these resources are dedicated to the highest priority NFHS assets in most need of these funds, nationwide. Although FAC would like to undertake a more aggressive program to modernize aging NFHS facilities, this would require additional funds and a more in-depth assessment of our long-term needs.

The Service appreciates your concerns regarding Secretarial Order 3347. If you have further questions, please contact Mr. Gregory Sheehan, Principal Deputy Director, at (202) 208-4545.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gregory Sheehan', is written over a horizontal line.

PRINCIPAL DEPUTY DIRECTOR