



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Washington D.C. 20240



In Reply Refer To:
FWS/NWRS/DTS 079870

Mr. Collin O'Mara
Mr. John Devney
Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council
c/o Mr. Douglas Hobbs
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
5275 Leesburg Pike, MS:OC
Falls Church, Virginia 22041

Dear Mr. O'Mara and Mr. Devney:

Thank you for your letter dated September 19, 2023, which recommends that funding through the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) be used for infrastructure improvements that would benefit waterfowl habitat on national wildlife refuges (NWRs).

Since passage of the Great American Outdoors Act in August 2020, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has followed an investment strategy that prioritizes completing deferred maintenance retirement projects located at NWRs with especially high visitation and high deferred maintenance backlogs. There are many cases where these projects improve infrastructure that supports waterfowl habitat. The Service has taken advantage of such opportunities wherever possible while adhering to the intent of the GAOA.

The Service has funded the following projects on these critical NWRs, where waterfowl management is a central component of the refuges' individual missions. These projects demonstrate our commitment to repairing access and wetland-related infrastructure.

- Camas NWR, Hamer, Idaho: In fiscal year 2021, the Service funded a large project to modernize the wells and water delivery system that supply the refuge's impoundments. The existing water management infrastructure requires modernization due to deferred maintenance and the effects of drought and aquifer depletion. Additional work will relocate the Camas Creek diversion structure to benefit the wetland areas and impoundments on the refuge. The project will increase waterbird and migratory waterfowl production, stopover time on station, and overall hunting opportunities. This project is in construction now and will be completed this fall.
- Dale Bumpers White River NWR, St. Charles, Arkansas: In fiscal year 2021, the Service funded a large portfolio of projects at the refuge to improve public access and recreational opportunities, as well as internal water management capabilities. This project rehabilitated over 40 miles of roadways and parking lots for access to campgrounds and boat launches. Several popular boat launches were repaired or replaced. Additionally, the rehabilitation of two levees and replacement of integrated water control structures are currently in construction. These projects will provide better management controls of water levels and flooding impacts within the refuge. The majority of this work has already been completed with the remainder scheduled for completion this summer.
- San Luis NWR, Los Banos, California: Beginning in fiscal year 2021, the Service has worked to repair and modernize water control structures, canals, and outdoor recreation assets at this refuge. The rehabilitation of the water management infrastructure will improve waterfowl habitat and

sustainable recreational opportunities. The project also replaced the hunt blind system that supports waterfowl hunting on the refuge. Work to address these concerns is ongoing.

- Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Brigham City, Utah: This project, funded in fiscal year 2023, is a comprehensive infrastructure rehabilitation package. It will implement portions of the refuge's 2020 Habitat Management Plan aimed at improving water management capacity. This will in turn promote the establishment of native wet meadow and playa plant communities used by migrating and nesting waterfowl and shorebirds. The project will modernize water management infrastructure, leading to improved recreational opportunities. Key components of this project are currently in the design phase.
- San Luis Valley National Wildlife Complex, Alamosa, Colorado: When funded in fiscal year 2024, the Service will begin work on an overall water management infrastructure modernization project on the three high-valley refuges in this complex (Alamosa, NWR, Baca NWR, and Monte Vista NWR). The project will replace high-capacity wells to produce sufficient water to halt or reverse migratory bird habitat loss. Additionally, consistent with the refuge's Habitat Management Plan, the project will remove or alter over 40 miles of levees and dikes, which will improve migratory bird habitat.
- The Service has completed smaller projects to rehabilitate water control structures and levees at numerous other refuges around the country, using GAOA-provided Maintenance Professional salary funds. Examples include projects at Kootenai NWR in Idaho, Cold Springs NWR in Washington, and Wheeler NWR in Alabama. These smaller deferred maintenance projects will be continued throughout the life of the GAOA salary funding.

Thank you for your interest in this issue and for offering your recommendations. The Service agrees that improving impoundment and water delivery assets on refuges is good for conservation and recreational access. And we understand that these benefits are important to the birdwatching, hunting, and conservation communities. The efforts of the Hunting Wildlife Conservation Council's member organizations to inform decision-makers involved in GAOA are extremely important and are appreciated. If you have questions or need more information regarding this matter please contact Cynthia Martinez, Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System, at Cynthia_Martinez@fws.gov.

Sincerely,

Martha Williams
Director