



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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PRESIDENT ISSUES LANDMARK EXECUTIVE ORDER ON THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

President Clinton today issued the first Executive Order in the history of the nearly century-old National Wildlife Refuge System that clearly defines the mission, purpose, and priority public uses of the system.

Since it was established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 at Pelican Island in Florida, the refuge system has grown to 508 refuges in all 50 states, encompassing 92.3 million acres of land. Thirteen new refuges have been added so far during the Clinton Administration.

As defined by the Executive Order, the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is "to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation and management of the fish, wildlife, and plants of the United States for the benefit of present and future generations."

The Order also addresses four principles to guide management of the system: habitat conservation, public use, partnerships, and public involvement. It recognizes compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation as priority general public uses and directs the Secretary of the Interior to take a number of actions including expanding opportunities for these priority uses, particularly for families, and providing these uses on a more timely basis when new lands are added to the system.

Finally, and most importantly, it recognizes a stewardship and trusteeship on the part of the Secretary of the Interior to ensure that the biological integrity and environmental health of the refuge system are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations.

In announcing the Executive Order, "Management and General Public Use of the National Wildlife Refuge System," President Clinton praised the visionary and non-partisan actions that created and have nurtured the refuge system throughout its history:

"Presidents and Members of Congress, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, all have had several things in common: a love of the outdoors, a respect for the natural world, and a commitment to conservation.

"The history of the National Wildlife Refuge System is a story of untiring effort and timeless contributions from legions of dedicated individuals and of government serving its people. Collectively, these efforts have culminated in what is unquestionably the largest and most outstanding wildlife conservation program in the world."

Throughout its history, the system has been plagued by misconceptions about its purpose, mission, and appropriate public uses. In commenting on the Order, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt said, "From this day forward, there can be no doubt that the core mission and first obligation of the National Wildlife Refuge System is the conservation of wildlife habitat."

"There should also be no doubt that wildlife-dependent recreational activities, when compatible with the purposes for which a refuge was established, should be recognized as priority general public uses within the refuge system. In particular, compatible hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation are especially recognized in this Executive Order," he said.

Babbitt said the Executive Order is, ". . . a clear statement of the Administration's commitment to a strong and vibrant National Wildlife Refuge System as it approaches the 21st Century and its own centennial. Our commitment is also reflected in the \$10 million increase requested in the President's budget for fiscal year 1997. This increase and the Executive Order are the beginning of a refuge system renaissance," he said.

In addition to articulating the mission, priority uses, and guiding principles for the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Executive Order also directs the Secretary of the Interior to:

- o expand opportunities for priority wildlife-dependent recreational activities, particularly for families, when they are compatible and consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife management, and are otherwise in the public interest;
- o ensure that the biological integrity and environmental health of the system are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans;
- o identify, prior to acquisition, existing compatible wildlife-dependent uses of new refuge lands that shall be permitted to continue on an interim basis pending completion of comprehensive refuge planning;

- o ensure effective cooperation and collaboration with state fish and wildlife agencies and other affected interests during the acquisition and management of national wildlife refuges; and
- o plan and direct the continued management and growth of the system so that it contributes to ecosystem conservation and increases support and participation from conservation partners and the public.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's most outstanding network of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife. Its lands of incredible beauty and diversity stretch from the icy north coast of Alaska to the balmy Florida Keys and to tropical islands in the Caribbean and Central Pacific. It is home to diverse wildlife, including some of the most endangered species such as the whooping crane.

"The refuge system offers a richness of wild places unmatched in the world, providing a heritage that Americans of all ages should treasure and perpetuate," Secretary Babbitt said.

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

March 25, 1996

EXECUTIVE ORDER

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MANAGEMENT AND GENERAL PUBLIC USE OF
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, and in furtherance of the purposes of the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742a), the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (16 U.S.C. 661), the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (16 U.S.C. 668dd), the Refuge Recreation Act (16 U.S.C. 460k), the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531), the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act (16 U.S.C. 3901), the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 4401), the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. 4321), and other pertinent statutes, and in order to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitat, it is ordered as follows:

Section 1. The Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System ("Refuge System") is to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, and plant resources of the United States for the benefit of present and future generations.

Sec. 2. Guiding Principles. To help ensure a bright future for its treasured national heritage, I hereby affirm the following four guiding principles for the management and general public use of the Refuge System:

- (a) Public Use. The Refuge System provides important opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.
- (b) Habitat. Fish and wildlife will not prosper without high-quality habitat, and without fish and wildlife, traditional uses of refuges cannot be sustained. The Refuge System will continue to conserve and enhance the quality and diversity of fish and wildlife habitat within refuges.

- (c) Partnerships. America's sportsmen and -women were the first partners who insisted on protecting valuable wildlife habitat within wildlife refuges. Conservation partnerships with other Federal agencies, State agencies, Tribes, organizations, industry, and the general public can make significant contributions to the growth and management of the Refuge System.
- (d) Public Involvement. The public should be given a full and open opportunity to participate in decisions regarding acquisition and management of our National Wildlife Refuges.

Sec. 3. Directives to the Secretary of the Interior. To the extent consistent with existing laws and interagency agreements, the Secretary of the Interior, in carrying out his trustee and stewardship responsibilities for the Refuge System, is directed to:

- (a) recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation as priority general public uses of the Refuge System through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife;
- (b) provide expanded opportunities for these priority public uses within the Refuge System when they are compatible and consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife management, and are otherwise in the public interest;
- (c) ensure that such priority public uses receive enhanced attention in planning and management within the Refuge System;
- (d) provide increased opportunities for families to experience wildlife-dependent recreation, particularly opportunities for parents and their children to safely engage in traditional outdoor activities, such as fishing and hunting;
- (e) ensure that the biological integrity and environmental health of the Refuge System is maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans;
- (f) continue, consistent with existing laws and interagency agreements, authorized or permitted uses of units of the Refuge System by other Federal agencies, including those necessary to facilitate military preparedness;

- (g) plan and direct the continued growth of the Refuge System in a manner that is best designed to accomplish the mission of the Refuge System, to contribute to the conservation of the ecosystems of the United States, and to increase support for the Refuge System and participation from conservation partners and the public;
- (h) ensure timely and effective cooperation and collaboration with Federal agencies and State fish and wildlife agencies during the course of acquiring and managing National Wildlife Refuges;
- (i) ensure appropriate public involvement opportunities will be provided in conjunction with refuge planning and management activities; and
- (j) identify, prior to acquisition, existing compatible wildlife-dependent uses of new refuge lands that shall be permitted to continue on an interim basis pending completion of comprehensive planning.

Sec. 4. Judicial Review. This order does not create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or equity by a party against the United States, its agencies, its officers, or any person.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

THE WHITE HOUSE,
March 25, 1996.

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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

March 25, 1996

Warm greetings to everyone gathered in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for the sixty-first North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference.

America has been blessed with the largest and most varied conservation system in the world. Born of President Theodore Roosevelt's vision nearly a century ago, the system has grown to include more than 500 refuges, in every state, covering more than 92 million acres of land.

While a vast majority of refuges were established administratively under authority of our great conservation laws, over 30 have been established directly by acts of Congress. Farsighted conservationists like Silvio Conte, Edwin Forsythe, and John Dingell have nurtured the development of the system, and under the leadership of Congressman Dingell, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, which directed that the diverse refuges across our country should be managed as a unified "National Wildlife Refuge System."

Although we owe much to the vision and leadership of conservationists who have served in the White House and in Congress, our refuge system has grown and flourished because of the dedicated support of the millions of Americans who use and enjoy it each year. Sportsmen and women who fish and hunt; individuals who observe or photograph the variety of wildlife on our public lands; families on camping trips who delight in the beauty and new knowledge they absorb from spending time in wild places -- all these help to maintain, protect, and develop America's National Wildlife Refuge System.

This great national treasure reminds us not only of our blessings as a nation, but also of our responsibilities. To keep faith with all those whose dedicated efforts through the years have preserved America's wild places, I am signing today an executive order that provides direction on the management and use of our National Wildlife Refuge System. It reflects my Administration's conviction that sound fish and wildlife conservation and management are essential to sustaining public use of our refuges, and it will guide the actions and goals of the Department of the Interior for years to come. It is a solemn pledge to all Americans that these special lands -- from the tropical mangroves of Florida's Key Deer National Wildlife Refuge to the majestic peaks of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska -- will be preserved and wisely managed for generations to come.

Bill Clinton