

National Wildlife Refuge System Workforce Plan

Southwest Region



FY 2007-2009

Overview

The Southwest Region is comprised of 45 refuges located in Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas and contains 2.86 million acres of habitat that attracts a variety of wildlife. These refuges are part of the larger National Wildlife Refuge System that is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Altogether there are 547 refuges with nearly 100 million acres.

Since 2001, funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System has increased from \$300 million to \$383 million in fiscal year 2006. However, the increase has been directed to specific priorities such as invasive species control, borderland security and maintenance needs at specific refuges. During this time the Refuge System's operational budget has not kept up with continued increases in permanent salaries, energy, and other operating costs.

These budget trends are projected to continue into the foreseeable future. To ensure that adequate operational capacity is maintained on its field stations, the Southwest Region is initiating a base budget model for its refuges this year, with full implementation slated for Fiscal Year 2009. This model dedicates 20% of a station's funding to operations with no more than 80% allocated to employee salary and benefits.

Therefore, to keep payroll costs from consuming operational capability, a Region-wide field staffing reduction of 12% is required over the next 3 years. This represents a total of 38 permanent field positions targeted for reduction, with an additional 15 positions identified for downward grade/salary adjustments.

It is our commitment to our workforce to match needed skill sets in any reassignment action that best fit the Refuge Program and the needs of employees and their families.

The projected loss of these permanent field positions is a significant reduction in the size and capacity of the Regional refuge workforce. Given the current workload on field stations that are already managed by a relatively lean workforce, this loss in staffing capacity will result in an overall decrease in habitat management and restoration projects, fewer acres managed to control invasive species, a reduction of public use opportunities, and a general decline of infrastructure at field stations.



The Refuge Program staff in the Southwest Regional Office will be similarly reduced. Where possible, staff and salaries will be moved to field stations to provide direct support of field operations, and additional staff reductions will allow the associated salary savings to support field positions and high priority projects such as recovery efforts for the highly endangered Attwater's prairie-chicken in Texas.

Background

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a field-based land management organization, responsible for the administration and management of 547 units of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge Program in the 4-state Southwest Region is comprised of 45 National Wildlife Refuges.

The Refuge Program field stations in the Southwest Region currently operate with a base annual budget of \$27.3 million. This budget covered the salaries of a permanent workforce of 329 field staff in Fiscal Year 2006, as well as the costs of management activities and routine expenses such as heating, lighting, fuel, supplies, and other basic operational needs.

This workforce of biologists, visitor services specialists, administrative officers, maintenance workers, and managers are the front line of conservation on National Wildlife Refuge System lands. These employees monitor and improve habitat, inventory wildlife, host visitor programs, provide environmental education, conduct law enforcement, collaborate with partners, and maintain boundaries, roads, trails, and buildings. Refuge staffs do a remarkable job of balancing the needs of wildlife while hosting nearly 5 million visitors each year.

Budget Pressures

The recognition in Fiscal Year 2004 that refuge operational and maintenance funding was not keeping pace with cost of living adjustments and inflation prompted a tighter hold on filling vacant positions in the Southwest Region. From 2004 through 2006, a total of 12 field and 5 Regional Office vacancies were left unfilled. Salary savings from those vacated positions were used to defray increased operational costs on refuges throughout the Region.

Absorbing these vacancies and losing the associated skill sets, however, increased workloads on the affected stations and offices, as the management goal was simply to accrue salary savings to meet fiscal year budget responsibilities. This form of position management based on opportunistic retirements and transfers has increased the challenge for managers to ensure that highest priority work is accomplished.

In spite of this position management strategy, the current salary and benefit costs of our permanent workforce totaled 86% of our field stations' base budgets, leaving only 14% for management capability, including fuel, electricity, and other operational costs. It is this management capability that continues to erode as more and more of the allocation is consumed in rising personnel costs and other inflationary pressures (Figure 1). In response, the Refuge Program in the Southwest Region is implementing a base budget funding model for field stations targeted to achieve a budget ratio of 80% salary to 20% management capability over the next 3 years (Table 1).

Implementing this model with a minimum 20% management capability for a station ensures that there will be adequate funding for essential wildlife, habitat, and visitor services programs and basic operations and maintenance. A minimum staff reduction of 38 field positions over the next 3 years will be required to obtain the needed funding to establish the 80:20 base funding model.

Operating Efficiencies and Cost Reduction

In addition to reducing the number of permanent positions, operating costs were reduced in several ways, for example:

- Travel expenses were decreased to include only critical training and coordination needs.

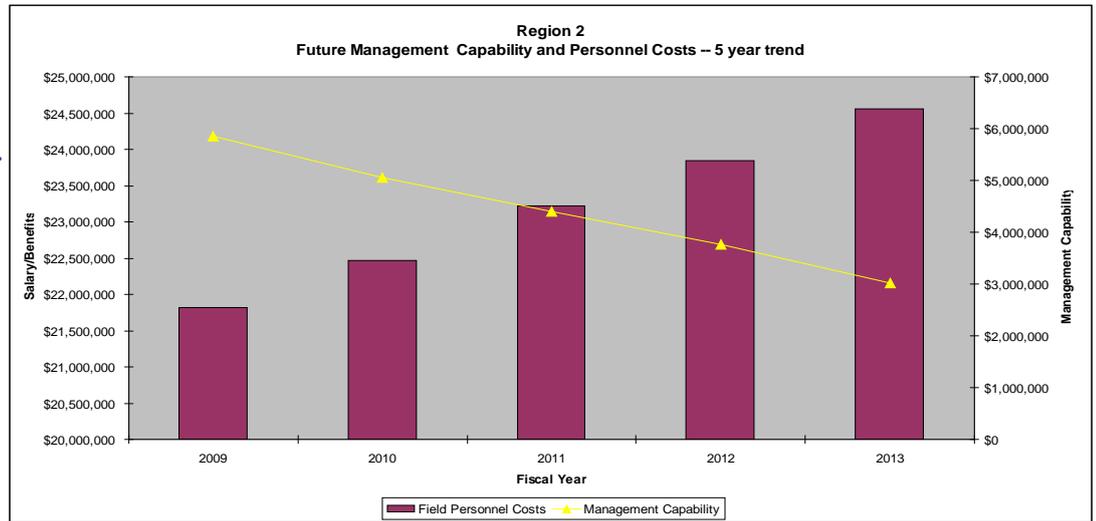


Figure 1. Future Management Capability and Personnel Costs - 5 year Trend

Table 1. Salary to Management Capability

	Existing Status at 86:14 Ratio	Base Budget at 80:20 Ratio
Permanent Salary	\$24,198,000	\$21,876,480
Management Capability	\$3,147,600	\$5,469,120
Total Base	\$27,345,600	\$27,345,600

- Funding sources were leveraged to increase gains and produce better results such as the new Refuge Office/Fire Cache facilities constructed at Balcones Canyonlands NWR and at the Texas Mid-Coast Refuges Complex. Both buildings will allow us to eliminate leased costs for office space.
- The Regional Heavy Equipment Coordinator worked with Refuge Managers and Refuge Supervisors to coordinate purchases of heavy equipment to negotiate better prices from vendors and share resources across field stations where possible.
- The Maintenance Action Team, composed of maintenance staff from across the Region, was active and helped complete several facility projects that resulted in about \$300,000 in efficiencies.

In spite of these and other cost containment measures, the largest part of field base budget expenses – permanent personnel salary and benefits – continues to consume a hefty portion of the funding.

Pressures of Inflation

The Refuge Program is experiencing salary costs increases of approximately 2-3% annually and as well as steady, if not steep, rises in energy and other costs to field station operations. When these costs are not covered in a given budget year, it results in less overall accomplishments for the program due to the required reductions in staff and/or operations. The impact of managing the Refuge Program under this regime has catalyzed the workforce planning and establishment of the base budget funding model. This focused deployment of staff and funds on field stations will ensure that the highest priorities are effectively addressed, while any subsequent reduction in workload capacity affects primarily lower conservation priorities.

In addition, each subsequent year beyond Fiscal Year 2009 may require annual reductions of 5-7 positions just to cover cost of living increases. This continual permanent reduction of the field workforce will not allow all refuges to maintain the quality of mission critical activities currently being provided.

The reduction of an additional 38 field positions over the next 3 years will be achieved by continuing a proactive approach to position management. On an annual basis, 12 to 14 positions are expected to be eliminated, and staff may be relocated from a Tier 2 to a Tier 1 Field Station to ensure that the appropriate skill sets and expertise are maintained. Also over the next 3 years an additional 15 field positions will be impacted by grade reductions, redefining positions, and sharing of staffing resources.

The total expected reductions on Field Stations for FY 2007-2009 are identified by position types as follows:

Refuge Manager	6
Biologist	7
Maintenance	12
Outdoor Recreation Planner	3
Administrative	10
TOTAL	38

Position Management in the Field, FY 2004 - 2009

Position management was initiated prior to the implementation of a formal workforce planning process. In order to maintain the previous level of support for field operations, positions were reduced as vacancies became available and the salary savings were used to offset increased costs of refuge operations.

Reductions in the Regional Office since FY 2004 are identified by position type as follows:

Biologist	2
Outdoor Recreation Planner	1
Office Assistant	2
TOTAL	5

Reductions at Field Stations since FY 2004 are identified by position types as follows:

Refuge Manager	5
Biologist	3
Maintenance	1
Outdoor Recreation Planner	2
Law Enforcement	1
TOTAL	12

Complexing in the Southwest Region

Creating additional “complexes” of a group of field stations is proposed as an approach to enhance operational efficiency and to facilitate the shifting and sharing of positions, supervision, equipment, and other resources. The Southwest Region currently has four refuge complexes, all located on the Texas Gulf Coast. In a complex, several refuge units are combined under one headquarters office and complex manager, providing shared resource and management capability across a larger landscape. Factors that are evaluated in developing a complex include the potential for attaining greater efficiencies in administrative functions and in the utilization of material and equipment, reduction in asset duplication, ensuring a manageable degree of span-of-control for managers, and alignment of related management and public use priorities.

As a result of this workforce planning effort, the Southwest Region will form two new refuge complexes. In Arizona, Kofa and Imperial NWRs will be complexed, with the new Kofa NWR office in Yuma serving as the administrative headquarters for the complex. The office, shop, visitor center and associated facilities at Imperial NWR will provide primary support for refuge complex field activities such as habitat and wildlife management and priority public use programs. This will allow a reduction in overall building construction and maintenance, and allow for greater opportunities to work with our State and Federal natural resource partners in southern Arizona.

National Wildlife Refuge System Workforce Plan FY 2007-2009

Position Losses: Actual and Planned, FY 2004 - FY 2009

<p>ARIZONA 12 Positions 16% Reduction</p>  <p>2 Managers/Refuge Ops Specialist 5 Biologists 2 Maintenance Staff 3 Administrative Staff</p>	<p>NEW MEXICO 10 Positions 20% Reduction</p>  <p>1 Manager 1 Biologist 1 Outdoor Recreation Planner 4 Maintenance Staff 3 Administrative Staff</p>
<p>OKLAHOMA 13 Positions 18% Reduction</p>  <p>3 Managers/Refuge Ops Specialist 3 Outdoor Recreation Planners 5 Maintenance Staff 2 Administrative Staff</p>	<p>TEXAS 15 Positions 11% Reduction</p>  <p>5 Managers/Refuge Ops Specialist 3 Biologists 2 Outdoor Recreation Planners 2 Maintenance Staff 3 Administrative Staff</p>

The second new complex will be in northern New Mexico and will consist of combining Las Vegas and Maxwell NWRs. The administrative function of the two refuges will be located at the Las Vegas NWR. Existing maintenance facilities at Maxwell NWR will continue to support the refuge management program and infrastructure. These two new refuge complexes will result in increased efficiencies in delivering our mission as well as effectively using available funding to ensure long-term operational capability.

Refuge Tiering

To facilitate workforce planning, Refuge Field Stations in the Southwest Region were categorized into one of three groups or “Tiers” (Table 2). Each Tier was defined based on a number of characteristics including current staffing, variability in size, location, habitat resources, degree of complexity, and actual performance, as measured by the Refuge Annual Performance Plan (RAPP). Although the RAPP is relatively new to the Refuge System, the information reported in the system was used in the workforce planning process to ensure proper ranking and recognition of those highly productive habitat management and visitor services programs that contribute significantly to the Refuge System’s Strategic Goals and the Department of the Interior’s Operational Plan.

For example, Tier 1 or “Focus Refuges” make up 48% of the refuge field stations in the Southwest Region, but contribute over 75% of the performance accomplishments in many key performance measures. Tier 1 stations have over 81% of the total acreage in this Region, nearly 60% of all refuge visitation, contribute 91% of wetland acres restored, and provide 79% and 74%, respectively, of the Regional total acres of wetland and open water habitat management.

While every refuge contributes to fulfilling the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, categorizing stations into tiers helps focus the allocation of limited resources. We will work to ensure that these Focus refuges maintain core staffing and full operational capacity at the 80% salary to 20% management capability ratio. Under this model, further staffing reductions may occur at the Tier 2 refuges to ensure that a suite of refuges in the Region are maintained at full operational capacity (the alternative to cut funding equally across all field stations was not pursued because this reduction methodology option would not guarantee the ability to accomplish any management priorities at any given refuge). However, the ultimate goal of the Southwest Region’s workforce plan is to move all refuges toward Tier 1 status/capability as funding and opportunities become available.



Focus Refuges - Tier 1

Tier 1 field stations, the Focus Refuges, are highly complex units of the Refuge System that have extensive habitat management and visitor services activities making significant contributions to achieving the five goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (601 FW 1) and the 12 strategic outcome goals identified in the Strategic Plan for the National Wildlife Refuge System (FY 2006 - 2010). These stations typically have large landholdings, have diverse habitats, host a variety of high priority fish and wildlife species, and offer extensive visitor service programs including environmental education. Tier 1 stations often have a full-range of expert staff in a variety of management disciplines. These stations are expected to provide additional administrative and management support to Tier 2 and 3 field stations.

Targeted Reduction Refuges - Tier 2

Tier 2 field stations are staffed units of the Refuge System that make important contributions to the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System and many if not all of the goals of the Strategic Plan. These units typically offer some level of visitor service programs such as wildlife interpretation and special public use events. Tier 2 stations usually have staff that covers the basic areas of refuge management and maintenance. These field stations may ultimately become Tier 1 stations when fully acquired or developed, and may have highly complex and sometimes controversial management challenges.

Unstaffed Satellite Refuges - Tier 3

Tier 3 field stations are unstaffed units (or will be come unstaffed with planned reductions) of the Refuge System that are not of a size that requires extensive habitat management to achieve wildlife objectives. While these field stations may contain important

habitat for threatened or endangered species or other significant wildlife populations, daily oversight or management is not required or can be reduced to a lower maintenance level. These stations may be opened to public-use activities, but do so on a self-directed or infrequent basis. These field stations are typically managed by staff from nearby Tier 1 or Tier 2 field stations. As a Tier 3 station grows in size, it is possible that it will become a Tier 2 or Tier 1 station.

Operational Reductions from Lost Staff

In spite of innovations and efficiencies that Field and Regional Office staffs have been able to achieve, the loss of significant number of personnel from the field workforce will have a considerable impact in providing for wildlife and habitat.

The loss of Refuge Managers affects a refuge's ability to coordinate with partners, state and local governments, and non-profit organizations. It causes a reduction in oversight capabilities for supervisory, legal and administrative requirements, and operations and maintenance of refuge facilities; and it seriously hampers our ability to achieve mission critical activities as called for in the establishing legislation for each national wildlife refuge.



The loss of Biologists and Biological Science Technicians affects our ability to make decisions using the best biological information available. Sound science is required to plan and implement management actions and evaluate effectiveness of these actions. It diminishes the ability to: conduct baseline inventory and monitoring activities that are fundamental to understanding the effects of management and other actions on complex ecosystems; interact and coordinate with university and other natural resource professionals on issues of mutual concern; promote and implement recovery actions for

threatened and endangered species dependent on refuge habitats; effectively incorporate the latest research results to improve and evaluate management practices; deal with the ever growing threat of invasive species on native flora and fauna; and effectively monitor habitat change and adjust management strategies to prevent habitat degradation or loss.

The loss of Visitor Services professionals affects a refuge's ability to provide compatible wildlife dependent recreation including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education and interpretation that the American public now expects.

The loss of Maintenance Professionals affects the refuge's ability to provide the on-the-ground work that directly benefits all aspects of a national wildlife refuge. Reduced maintenance capability means shortened life of vehicles, equipment, facilities, and other infrastructure. Delays or loss of corrective maintenance diminish our capability to manage habitat and provide adequate public use infrastructure and ultimately results in higher costs from an increased maintenance backlog, more frequent equipment breakdowns, and shortened life of service.

The loss of Administrative professionals seriously affects a refuge's ability to accomplish its mission. Administrative staff is often the key communication link with the visiting public and provide support for everything from payroll administration, purchasing, accounting of funds, property management, and supporting responses for critical data calls. Diminished administrative support places increased responsibilities on Refuge Managers and seriously compromises their ability to maintain accountability and oversight of trust responsibilities.



Implementing the Workforce Plan

The reduction of approximately 12-14 positions per year over the next 3 years will be accomplished without the use of reduction in force (RIF) authority or voluntary separation incentive payments (VSIP) or "buy-out" authority. Voluntary early retirement authority (VERA) may be implemented to facilitate workforce reductions of normally higher graded positions. An annual rate of attrition of approximately 5% of the workforce through retirements, resignations, and transfers will help facilitate needed management flexibility to reach downsizing targets. There are some indications that retirements may even be increasing. While these created vacancies will not all be in the targeted positions or at the desired field stations, they should create enough flexibility in workforce management to enable the Region to reach its targets by the end of Fiscal Year 2009.

Some examples of where managers have used position vacancies to realign staff to accomplish higher priority work illustrate this approach to workforce management and planning. In addition, creative use of partnerships and student career employment program hiring authorities are workforce management tools that help managers meet planning targets.

- At Bosque del Apache NWR, the loss of an administrative position and a Facilities Manager will be combined into one position to serve both roles and oversee the station's Service Assets and Maintenance Management System.
- The Refuge Manager at Little River NWR was moved to Caddo Lake NWR to support establishment of that refuge and is now responsible for the newly created Neches River NWR as well. All administrative support is being provided from the Little River NWR.

Table 2. Southwest Region - Refuge Tiers

	Focus Refuges - Tier 1	Targeted Reduction Refuges - Tier 2	Unstaffed Satellite Refuges - Tier 3
Arizona	Buenos Aires NWR Cabeza Prieta NWR Kofa / Imperial NWRs Bill Williams River NWR	San Bernardino NWR Havasu NWR Cibola NWR	Leslie Canyon NWR
New Mexico	Bosque del Apache NWR	Las Vegas / Maxwell NWRs Sevilleta NWR Bitter Lake NWR San Andres NWR	Grulla NWR
Oklahoma	Salt Plains NWR Ozark Plateau NWR Wichita Mountains WR	Sequoyah NWR Deep Fork NWR Little River NWR Tishomingo NWR Washita NWR	Optima NWR
Texas	South Texas Refuges Complex Laguna Atascosa NWR Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR Santa Ana NWR Aransas/Matagorda Island NWR Complex Aransas NWR Matagorda Island Texas Mid-Coast Refuges Complex Brazoria NWR San Bernard NWR Big Boggy NWR Texas Chenier Plain NWR Complex Anahuac NWR McFaddin NWR Texas Point NWR Moody NWR Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR Balcones Canyonlands NWR	Trinity River NWR Hagerman NWR Muleshoe NWR Caddo Lake NWR Buffalo Lake NWR	Little Sandy NWR Neches River NWR

- The vacant Aransas NWR Refuge Manager duties were realigned within the Aransas NWR Complex office and the position was used to fill a critical maintenance position to support Complex needs.
- A permanent full-time Law Enforcement Officer is being shared between the Tishomingo and Hagerman NWRs to meet resource protection needs at both stations.
- At Cibola NWR, the vacant Biologist and Refuge Operations Specialist positions have not been filled. The Refuge Manager is using the Student Conservation Association program and a Biological Science Technician to accomplish limited biological work at the refuge.



Position Management and Savings in the Regional Office

At the same time that the Southwest Region field program is reducing positions to increase operational funds, so too will the Regional Office. The Regional Office NWRS program will be reduced by a minimum of 10 percent (4.2 FTEs) over the next 2 years, with those funds going directly to support priority field work at refuges. Since 2004, five resource management funded Regional Office positions were eliminated. An additional five refuge positions in non-resource management funded positions (Realty and Fire) have also been eliminated.

Other cost-saving measures are being considered. The Regional Office has completed a space management plan that will consolidate programs and functions and ultimately reduce leased costs for space. The Migratory Bird Program was realigned within the Refuge Program and the Division of Federal Assistance and State Programs was realigned under the Deputy Regional Director. This resulted in elimination of one GS-15 in the Regional Office.

Support of Innovation

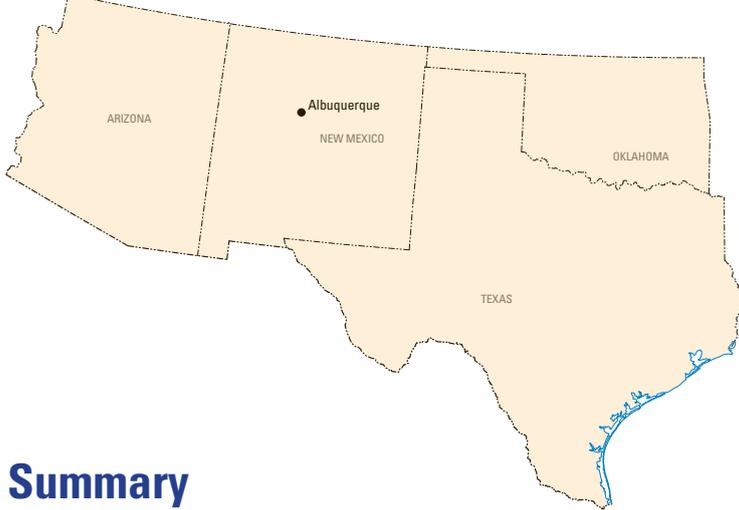
A Visitor Services position is being moved from the Regional Office to the Wichita Mountains Refuge. The position will maintain some Regional roles and responsibilities and support mission critical needs at the refuge.

Consideration is being given to moving the Regional Law Enforcement Chief to Sevilleta NWR to serve as the Zone Officer for New Mexico in addition to maintaining the role of the Regional Law Enforcement Chief.

The Region utilized the Maintenance Action Team (MAT) to complete maintenance and construction projects on refuges and hatcheries that otherwise would have been cost prohibitive. The MAT is comprised of Service personnel who are skilled in varying fields and are willing to travel to locations within the Region to accomplish priority work projects across programmatic lines in order to more efficiently meet the Fish and Wildlife Service mission. The intent of the program is to provide cross training opportunities using the talents and expertise of our employees to further the development and skill base of others. The overall benefit is developing a highly skilled and motivated workforce while accomplishing mission-critical work at the same time. Team members also have the opportunity to visit a vast array of landscapes throughout the southwest and develop a broader knowledge of the overall mission of the Service. Projects the MAT has undertaken include constructing a residence at Salt Plains NWR, building water control structures at Sevilleta NWR, constructing storage buildings at several refuges, and erecting security fences at Buenos Aires NWR.

The Region has implemented a Special Operations Response Team (SORT) from within our law enforcement professionals. The SORT has assisted refuges and sister agencies (BLM, USFS) with critical law enforcement needs. Some examples include supporting hurricane recovery efforts during and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, drug interdiction and illegal immigrant activities along border refuges, and supporting resource protection needs during high visitation times such as those along the Colorado River NWRs.

Southwest Regional Office



Summary

The long-term forecast for the National Wildlife Refuge System, combined with the rising cost to conduct business, have served as the catalyst for the Southwest Region Refuge Program to refocus its workforce and align staff and resources to maximize effectiveness in meeting our conservation mission. Ever increasing costs of maintaining a highly talented and effective workforce have begun to erode the operational capability of our refuge field stations, reducing the overall ability of field staff to meet basic management and operational needs. Rather than keep reducing staff and operational costs across all stations, the Southwest Region is implementing a strategic staffing and operational model that will maintain as many of our field stations at full operational capacity as possible under the available resources. This model requires the shifting of staff and funds from targeted field stations (Tier 2) to focus refuges (Tier 1), which will result in these stations having their capacity for management and public use proportionately reduced. The model establishes a base budget allocation for field stations where 80% is the budget cap for personnel costs, while 20% of the allocation is the minimum set for maintaining operational capability.



The Southwest Region will reduce the field workforce by 38 positions over the next 3 years as it implements the new staffing model. It is our goal to ensure the effectiveness of our field operations to the extent feasible while this reallocation of staff and resources are underway.

The Refuge Program staff in the Southwest Regional Office will be similarly reduced and where possible, positions and salaries will be moved to field stations to provide direct support of field operations. Additional staff reductions will allow the associated salary savings to support field positions and high priority projects.

We are committed to our workforce to match needed skill sets in any reassignment action that best fit the Refuge Program and the needs of employees and their families. This restructuring effort has its challenges. Although, the dedicated staff of the National Wildlife Refuge System will continue their tremendous efforts to conserve and protect refuge lands and trust resources.



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