

Volunteer Program Guidelines and Policies

The following apply to the work done on any Refuge within the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex (Ridgefield, Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, and Pierce) as well as any off-site work done in representation of one or all of these sites.

These guidelines and policies are presented here to ensure that volunteers, partners, and staff know their rights and responsibilities, and that everyone is ensured to a volunteer experience in a safe and rewarding atmosphere.

These policies are to be read and signed off by volunteers as well as staff and partners that work with volunteers. (Updated 4/2017)

Goals of the Volunteer Program:

To support and enhance the operations and maintenance of Refuges within the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex, including Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, Pierce and Ridgefield Refuges.

Objectives:

- To provide assistance to staff in the performance of various habitat and visitor programs
- To promote the objectives and programs of these Refuges to the public, students, environmental groups, other organizations, and local government agencies
- To offer opportunities to the public to participate in and become acquainted with wildlife and habitat management practices and public use programs
- To support Refuge programs with projects developed and maintained by volunteers
- To assist individuals and students in career exploration and development, work experience, skill maintenance and development, school credit achievement, and completion of youth projects

Requirements for Membership

The volunteer program will accept any individual who wishes to give personal service to the Refuge without receiving compensation for those services, regardless of race, color, creed, age, sect, national origin, religion, political affiliation, citizenship, or other non-merit factor.

The volunteer program will strive to promote the participation of disabled individuals, with either physical or mental limiting conditions, by offering assignments that will complement their abilities and encourage them to complete their selected work tasks, when available.

Medical conditions that limit the performance of, or participation in, a project must be reported on the Volunteer Services Agreement.

Age

Age is not a limiting factor for membership in the volunteer program but may limit the degree of participation in certain tasks that present safety issues. (Ask staff for details.) All minor volunteers (under 18 years of age) must have a Volunteer Services Agreement and Position Description signed by a legal guardian before the minor is accepted for membership.

Volunteer Service Agreement & Position Description

These forms are agreements signed by the volunteer and the Refuge to ensure that volunteers are covered in the event of an injury while doing the tasks outlined. Both forms must be updated and signed by the volunteer (or parent/guardian of the volunteer) and a Refuge staff member on an annual basis to continue the volunteer position.

****Volunteers working outside of their Position Description are not covered by the refuge in case of injuries or damage to property.****

Contact information from these forms is included in our volunteer database and aids in tracking volunteer hours, types of work performed and the specific skills and interests of each volunteer. These forms also let us know whether the volunteer gives permission to be photographed, has a disability or illness we need to know about, and who to contact in case of an emergency. This information is kept secure and not shared with any organization outside of the US Fish & Wildlife Service. Volunteers can opt out of any email and mailing list at any time.

Orientation

Volunteers working on long-term projects are required to participate in annual training as is appropriate and as staff and resources allow. On-the-job orientation will be the responsibility of the staff supervisor managing the specific work assignment. Additional training on selected topics will be periodically offered to volunteers throughout the year.

Recognition and Appreciation

In recognition of the high value of the volunteers' staff will strive to offer ways to appreciate the accomplishments and contributions of individuals participating in the volunteer program. This may include special tours, awards and appreciation events both on and off-site. The nature of these events varies from year to year as staff and resources fluctuate and the interests of the volunteers change. Volunteers are always encouraged to share with staff new ideas for an appreciation program. Staff will act on these according to current resources and policy guidelines.

Grievances

If a volunteer has a complaint about matters concerning the volunteer's work assignment, working conditions, relationships, or any other job-related matter subject to the control of management, the volunteer may submit a grievance. This can be either verbally or in writing to the Refuge Complex Volunteer Coordinator, Refuge Management, or any staff member they are comfortable sharing this information with.

The volunteer is encourage to first communicate and work out these issues in a healthy and productive way with their supervisor, but are always invited to talk to any staff member that is not involved in the grievance in order to figure out the appropriate course of action. Volunteers have the right to request that these conversations stay private and anonymous; however open communication is always encouraged in order to keep healthy relationships between all parties.

Suggested Grievance Procedures:

- Talk to your volunteer supervisor
- Talk to another trusted employee
- Submit a written statement to a staff person

Termination of Service

If at some time the volunteer decides to resign from the volunteer program they are asked to notify their supervisor or the volunteer coordinator and turn in any uniforms and equipment checked out to them. The Refuge office would appreciate receiving the reason for leaving in order to continue to improve programs and a forwarding address if it is different than what is on file. Volunteers are welcome and encouraged to stay on any contact lists to be kept aware of news and notices of events and activities but can ask to be deleted from these.

****USFWS staff and partners strive for open communication and cooperation and will go to the lengths needed to mediate any issues that interfere with a positive and productive working environment. Supervisors of volunteers reserve the right to ask any volunteer to switch volunteer positions or schedules if there are any conflicts between staff, partners or volunteers, or to request that the Staff Volunteer Coordinator terminate a volunteer's service agreement altogether.****

Termination Procedures:

1. Conversation with volunteer supervisor
2. Potential reassignment to another job
3. Conversation with management
4. Decision to separate (temp or permanent)
5. Formal letter

General Volunteer Guidelines

Volunteer Uniforms

- Volunteers performing certain tasks are required to wear a uniform that bears the USFWS Volunteer Emblem to identify themselves to the public and staff while on duty. These uniform components are a symbol of the USFWS and identify the volunteers as Service representatives. Volunteers are required to act in a manner that aligns with Service and Refuge values while on duty and in uniform.
- Uniforms are to be worn **ONLY** when the volunteer is on official duty.
- Uniform components are provided by the Refuge and may be any combination of vest, shirt, hat and nametag, depending on the job and availability. Other job specific components will be issued as needed.
- The volunteer is required to wear the volunteer uniform while working on the Refuge if the supervisor deems it is appropriate to the task.
- For short term or episodic volunteers, vests can be checked out at the beginning of each shift. For regular and long term volunteers components can be assigned during the length of their volunteer term to take home for convenience and washing. Some components are not appropriate for shared use (hats, t-shirts, etc).
- If the volunteer leaves the volunteer program and their uniform is in useable condition they should return the uniform to the Refuge.
- Active volunteers may request replacement for worn uniform components.

Expenses

Volunteers are not to incur out-of-pocket costs due to their volunteer duties (outside of personal travel to the site and personal needs like food etc.) If there is a need for project supplies volunteers must approach a staff member about purchasing these items. Volunteers cannot be reimbursed for items purchased by their own means.

Tax Deductions

Some expenses such as purchases made for the Refuges and not reimbursed (by volunteer choice) and mileage driving to and from the Refuges or work assignment sites may be tax deductible. It is the responsibility of the volunteer to be knowledgeable about the IRS rules on these charitable contributions and how to document them for tax purposes.

Worker's Compensation

All volunteers are covered by medical insurance for any accident occurring while performing their approved work assignments. An "approved" work assignment means that the volunteer has a current Volunteer Services Agreement on file with an attached Position Description of the work, assigned and approved by both volunteer and the associated Refuge Staff Volunteer Supervisor. The injured party must inform their supervisor immediately upon being injured and fill out appropriate paperwork.

**Injuries resulting in work not outlined on a Position Description are not covered.

Tort Claims

The Federal government is its own insurer. Any personally owned equipment damaged during an approved work assignment, not due to personal neglect, is covered for replacement. Damage to other people's equipment, but not another volunteer, is also covered by this insurance. However, the volunteer may still be held responsible by an individual lawsuit.

Absences

Each work assignment accepted by a volunteer requires a commitment by the volunteer that he or she will report on the day and time assigned for the length of the project. Volunteers are important members of the team and are depended on to fulfill their commitments. In case of illness or emergency, the volunteer should call their project supervisor before their expected work time to notify them of the intended absence. This gives staff the opportunity to find someone to fill in.

Expectations, Rights and Responsibilities of all Volunteers

All volunteers, no matter their position, are expected to:

- Take pride in their appearance and keep any assigned uniform neat and clean.
- Participate fully in training opportunities.
- Follow policies and procedures outlined by their project supervisor.
- Consult with their supervisor if unclear on the proper policy or action to take.
- Put the safety of themselves and others first at all times and notifying staff if anyone is in danger due to the work assignment or environment.
- Work as a team member and give constructive feedback to help improve the effectiveness of the volunteer program.
- Always be courteous when in contact with the public, staff, and other volunteers.
- Remain cheerful and patient even when the public seems demanding or frustrating.
- Recognize that all visitors are entitled to help and services without discrimination as to race, color, creed, or disability.
- Communicate their needs to their supervisor to ensure that volunteer work remains rewarding.

Volunteers have the right to:

- Receive orientation and training on specific work requirements.
- Be employed under the same established Service personnel practices as employees (hiring, work conditions, confidentiality).
- Be treated as co-workers by other staff members.
- Receive project descriptions for work projects, information needed to carry out projects effectively, and have a role in decision-making within a project as appropriate.

- Reasonable freedom in completing projects in accordance with the level of responsibility accepted.
- Receive regular, clear responses to the effectiveness of their work and a written record of their job performance if desired.
- Be recognized for their contributions to the Refuge and Service.
- Ask to be reassigned to a different duty or schedule, request accommodations when needed and appropriate, and to give constructive feedback about the program and volunteer job

Volunteers have the responsibility to:

- Wear the volunteer uniform so visitors can easily identify them.
- Be a good example to the public by clearly following all rules and regulations while on the Refuge during volunteer AND personal time.
- Keep confidential any gate or lock codes issued for volunteer duties and do not go into restricted areas outside of predetermined volunteer shifts.
- Be the first to give a greeting to a visitor and/or be open and approachable for questions.
- Be good listeners and offer empathy and understanding to visitors, especially when those visitors are unfamiliar with or do not understand Refuge goals, programs and regulations.
- Answer questions or inquiries by using information given by staff, in Refuge/Service materials and websites, the volunteer manual, or other approved materials available for your use.
- Do not guess or lie - if you don't know the answer to an inquiry direct the person to the appropriate resource or staff member or suggest they call the office.
- Be sensitive to the value systems of other people even if they are different than your own.
- Not argue with the visitor; refer them to Refuge staff or have them call the office if conflicts arise.
- Direct complaints to Refuge staff or the office.

- Keep themselves safe by leaving the area and contacting authorities if they feel uncomfortable with a situation.
- Be seen as an educator and interpreter of the Refuge and NOT as a rule of law enforcer*
- Be casual, relaxed, and have fun!

***Approach visitors to EDUCATE not to enforce.**

A volunteer's job is to greet and educate the public about the refuge and its importance and create a welcoming and rewarding atmosphere for everyone. Volunteers are NOT responsible to ensure that rules are followed. When approaching visitors volunteers must always have this education-theme in mind. No one is to go out of their way to chase down a visitor who is violating the rules. This creates anxiety and a negative atmosphere that can lead to a very uncomfortable or even dangerous situation. Instead make sure you greet all visitors in a friendly way and start a conversation before *educating* them about the rules on the refuge and why. It is then up to them if they choose to adhere to the regulation or to risk getting a ticket from law enforcement.

Remember, you have the ability to create conservationists and Refuge supporters out of any visitor OR chase them away and give them a negative experience that will not lead to their continued support or connection to nature.

Policy: Conflict of Interest

Employees and volunteers are not to have a direct or indirect financial interest that conflicts substantially with their government duties and responsibilities, and engage in, directly or indirectly, a financial transaction as a result of or primarily relying on information obtained through their government employment or volunteer work.

What this means for Photographers:

At the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex we encourage wildlife dependent recreation including photography. We appreciate all the publicity and beauty that these photographs communicate to the public.

However, those volunteers, partners and staff taking pictures under the following circumstances have a clear conflict of interest if they are interested in using those for financial gain:

- Photos taken with government property.

- Photos taken as part of official duties.
- Photos taken during duty hours.
- Photos taken in areas NOT accessible to the public.

Photography while volunteering or in closed areas are public domain.

Other Ethics

- No campaigning while volunteering
- No political buttons on volunteer uniforms
- Do not represent the Refuge System or US Fish and Wildlife Service in an official capacity while on personal time
- No selling things on-site