



## ***NEWS RELEASE***

For immediate release: April 7, 2011

# **U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE USES FIRE TO IMPROVE HABITAT AT DETROIT RIVER INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**

*Grosse Ile, Michigan* – In spring 2011, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fire professionals plan to conduct prescribed burning in the coastal wetland habitats of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. The use of fire is a proven and well-tested management tool that improves the quality of habitat for fish and migratory bird populations. Improving habitat and the wildlife that depend on it, in turn, helps improve and sustain fishing, hunting, and outdoor recreation that is cultural in our area.

This spring's fire window (between April 1 and May 15) will concentrate on coastal habitats that contain invasive species. These prescribed fires will target *Phragmites australis*, a noxious, invasive, aquatic plant that has degraded the quality of coastal wetland ecosystems of the lower Detroit River and western Lake Erie over the last few decades. *Phragmites australis* can literally out-compete native aquatic plants. *Phragmites australis* grows to a height of over 10 feet and can literally shade out native aquatic plants that are more important to wildlife. Studies have shown that a dense layer of plant litter is an important factor in excluding native wetland plants. Furthermore, a dense layer of *Phragmites australis* can alter soil properties and even increase elevation, which ultimately alters the surface water hydrology and the functioning of wetland ecosystems. These changes likely degrade the value of these wetlands to the majority of fish and wildlife, and to the fishermen, hunters, and outdoor enthusiasts that depend on healthy wetlands.

Particular dates of the burn are dependent on when fire personnel are available and weather windows. The fire will occur during conditions when the smoke will be directed in a path that limits potential exposure. The Region 3 of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service annually treats approximately 70,000 acres of refuge lands with fire. Much planning and care are taken to craft a prescription for each controlled burn that is safe and achieves the desired ecological effect. Further, much communication and outreach will

be conducted with local cities, fire departments, townships, corporations, other government agencies, the U.S. Coast Guard and Border Patrol, interest groups, and concerned citizens. The Region 3 fire program employs 67 permanent and 48 seasonal personnel to conduct prescribed burns and assist with wildfire suppression and other natural disasters in the United States.

“I am pleased that U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is utilizing prescribed fire as a management tool to help restore and sustain healthy wetland habitats,” notes Congressman John Dingell. “Region 3 of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has an outstanding prescribed fire program that emphasizes safety and achievement of specific ecological results. We are so fortunate to have these professionals help us improve habitat for wildlife.”

The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge covers 48 miles of shoreline along the Detroit River and western Lake Erie (<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/detroitriver/>). The Refuge focuses on conserving, protecting and restoring habitat for 30 species of waterfowl, 117 kinds of fish, and 300 species of migratory birds. The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge is the first international refuge in North America. Unique habitats being managed within the Refuge include islands, coastal wetlands, marshes, shoals and riverfront lands.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is, working with others, to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

For more information, contact Refuge Manager John Hartig (734-692-7608) or Assistant Refuge Manager Steve Dushane (734-692-7604).