

Blue Goose Alliance Bulletin

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Getting the Message to Friends Group Members

Recently, Don Redfearn met with the Board of Directors of the Friends of Bosque del Apache NWR to discuss the Refuge System and the proposal to create a new National Wildlife Refuge Service. The Board requested a brief article on this subject for their newsletter. While developing this article, the Alliance felt that it should be provided to other Friends Groups who might wish to share it with their members through their own newsletters. The article is included below. With appropriate introductory material, the article is also suitable for newsletters of other organizations such as National Wildlife Federation affiliates, Sierra Club chapters, Isaac Walton League chapters, and others.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM AT CENTER OF CONTROVERSY

The National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) will soon celebrate its 100th Anniversary. President Theodore Roosevelt established the first refuge, tiny Pelican Island Refuge, on March 14, 1903, in the Indian River of Florida. From that humble beginning, the System has evolved to more than 520 units, encompassing more than 93 million acres, an area about the size of Montana. The Refuge System is the only land resource system in the U.S. dedicated to the management and protection of wildlife and their habitat.

Originally, Wildlife Refuges were positioned in the Bureau of Biological Survey as part of the Department of Agriculture. In 1939, the Biological Survey was moved to the Department of the Interior and, with the Bureau of Fisheries, became the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Over time, the NWRS became only one of numerous attention-demanding programs administered by the FWS. The result has been organizational problems, which have been recognized for more than four decades. At least 30 major studies and reviews of the Refuge System have occurred in that time. Of those dealing with organizational needs and problems, most noted were the Leopold Committee Report in 1968, a Task Force commissioned by the Department of the Interior in 1978, and a report commissioned by Defenders of Wildlife in 1992.

Each of these studies found organizational structuring as a major flaw in the management of the Refuge System. The report of the 1978 Task Force stated unequivocally, "[The] current lack of recognition is intolerable. The World's foremost collection of wildlife habitats and wildlands deserves higher public visibility."

The National Audubon Society issued a report in October 1999, that described the Refuge System as being, "America's Hidden Lands." Their report describes the same kinds of administrative problems found in the earlier studies. Audubon's recommended solution of these entrenched problems is the formation of a separate Bureau, the NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SERVICE. Perhaps because of this report, the issue has recently intensified into a cloud of controversy surrounding this system of wild lands which is so vital to our Nation's wildlife and which provides such enjoyment to all people.

The FWS solution to the organizational needs of the Refuge System is to re-title an existing Assistant Director's position as "Chief of Refuges". This is a staff position. It has no line authority whatsoever. The "Refuge Chief" can only offer recommendations to the Director.

Advocates of a separate Bureau for the NWRS make the following points:

(1) Although the FWS has a major land management responsibility, it has a broader mission which includes many other wildlife-related functions. Therefore, the Refuge System does not have the stature or the public recognition and support of the other major land management bureaus.

(2) Because of its location within the FWS, strong authority and focused leadership does not exist for the Refuge System.

(3) There is a barrier to obtaining adequate funding at the field station level. Funds are allocated by Congress to the FWS, and indirectly to Refuges. The Director and Regional Directors of FWS have discretionary authority to shift funds otherwise intended for Refuges. As a point of interest, the 2001 budget requested by the FWS includes an overall agency increase of \$250 million but the Refuge System operations and maintenance accounts will receive only about \$20 million, or about 8%, of that increase. Yet the Refuge System accounts for half the number of FWS employees and normally half the FWS annual budget. The Refuge System suffers a \$1.2 billion backlog of funds needed for bringing operations and maintenance up to reasonable standards, and that backlog increases each year!!

(4) Only a single mission bureau can offer efficient management. Focused and experienced leadership from a Central Office, through the Regional Offices, to the Refuge Station level, is essential to promoting the purposes and values of the Refuge System for the American people. The management integrity of the Refuge System is weakened by a failure to recognize that a one-mission organization invariably functions most efficiently and effectively.

As members of the (Name of Friends Group) , it behooves you to be aware of the controversy that surrounds the NWRS, because what affects the Refuge System will affect (Name of local refuge) . There will be more on this issue in subsequent issues of (Name of Group Newsletter) .