

Blue Goose Alliance Bulletin

#42 - December 21, 2004

National Wildlife Refuges Face Emerging Threat of Co-Management

On December 15th, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) signed an agreement that requires transferring supervision of approximately half of the staff positions and budget for the National Bison Range Complex in Montana from the Refuge Manager to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). Despite strong opposition to the agreement by conservation groups, concerns raised by Montana's delegation, and a groundswell of vocal opposition from refuge managers across the country, FWS failed to demand revisions to the agreement needed to make it workable and beneficial to the refuge and its wildlife.

As currently drafted, the annual funding agreement (AFA) diminishes the capability of FWS refuge management to administer the refuge, exposes refuge volunteers to unnecessary liability, and results in additional operating costs of up to \$500,000. In its totality, the agreement creates a management quagmire, characterized by Refuge Managers across the country as impossible to implement. Additionally, future unmanageable costs will result in fewer resources to ensure the refuge complex and the Refuge System meet their vital wildlife conservation purposes.

"By approving this agreement, the Fish and Wildlife Service ignored the serious concerns of the public, national conservation organizations and even its own professional refuge managers," said Bill Reffalt, President of the Blue Goose Alliance. Reffalt added, "The Fish and Wildlife Subcommittees in Congress now must initiate actions to correct the serious deficiencies in the current agreement. Congressional action is essential to assure interested Americans they can have confidence that their National Bison Range Complex will continue its efficient and effective wildlife, habitat and public use programs to benefit its wildlife and Americans in general. The Congress needs to investigate the costs associated with this unsatisfactory agreement, and direct they be brought under control. And, finally, the Fish and Wildlife Subcommittees must set basic standards for potential agreements with other qualifying tribes in the future."

The AFA now goes to Capitol Hill, where Congress must evaluate it and respond with modifications where appropriate. If Congress doesn't act, the agreement goes into effect immediately following a 90 day period that began on the signing date. The Bison Range agreement is the second AFA for a national wildlife refuge and is widely believed to have exceeded the limits, under current law and long precedent, of what activities can be transferred to any other entity. Despite this, the FWS has no policy for developing such agreements on national wildlife refuges. The Blue Goose Alliance believes the policy should have preceded any AFA, but the need for such policy is now urgent, and obviously requires congressional guidance.

The Alliance strongly urges all people interested in the welfare of the National Wildlife Refuge System to write the following congressional representatives and ask them to hold hearings and make needed modifications to the Bison Range AFA. In the House of Representatives, write to:

Honorable Wayne T. Gilchrest, Chair
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

H2-188, Ford House Office Bldg.
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

and

Honorable Frank Pallone, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
H2-186, Ford House Office Bldg.
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

In the Senate, write to:

Honorable Michael D. Crapo, Chair
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, and Water
SD-410
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6175

and

Honorable Bob Graham, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, and Water
SD-456
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6175

In addition, it is highly recommended that a copy of the letters be sent to the following because of the changing memberships as a new Congress begins:

In the House copy:

Majority Staff Director
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
Room 188, Ford House Office Bldg.
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

and

Minority Staff Director
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
Room 186, Ford House Office Bldg.
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

In the Senate:

Majority Staff Director
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water
Room SD-410

U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6175

and

Minority Professional Staff
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water
Room SD-456
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6175

This issue has been the subject of two earlier Bulletins, #39 and #41. These can be found at <http://www.bluegoosealliance.org/Bulletin39.html> and <http://www.bluegoosealliance.org/Bulletin41.html>, respectively.

The Blue Goose Alliance is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit conservation organization. In addition to its primary mission, the Alliance works on matters of major importance related to the National Wildlife Refuge System and its personnel.