

LANDMARK LAW CHARTS BRIGHT COURSE FOR MANAGEMENT OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

President Clinton today signed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, for the first time formally establishing fish, wildlife, and plant conservation as the mission of the world's largest network of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife. The new law also gives priority to certain wildlife-dependent recreational uses of national wildlife refuges.

The only system of federal lands devoted specifically to wildlife, the National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of diverse and strategically located habitats. More than 500 national wildlife refuges across the United States teem with millions of migratory birds, serve as havens for hundreds of endangered species, and host an enormous variety of other plants and animals.

For nearly a century, the 92-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System has been managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under a variety of laws without an "organic act," or comprehensive legislation spelling out how it ought to be managed and used by the public. The legislation signed by President Clinton resolves these key issues, which had grown more complex as the Refuge System expanded and visitation increased to nearly 30 million people a year.

"This legislation marks a milestone in the National Wildlife Refuge System's history by making wildlife conservation its overarching mission and ensuring sportsmen, birdwatchers, and other wildlife enthusiasts ample opportunities to enjoy this magnificent collection of wild lands," said Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt.

"This is truly historic conservation legislation," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now has a clear, unifying law to help ensure a vibrant National Wildlife Refuge System. Managing this system of federal lands for conservation will help ensure healthy and abundant populations of wildlife for future generations of Americans to enjoy."

The new law is a product of extensive negotiations over the last several months among Secretary Babbitt, Congressional sponsors Don Young (R-AK) and John Dingell (D-MI), and leaders of key sportsmen's and environmental organizations. All joined forces to develop legislation to address varying concerns and interests on management and public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which had been the only major federal land management agency to lack an organic act.

Other Congressmen who were instrumental in building overwhelming bipartisan support for the bill were George Miller (D-CA), John Tanner (D-TN), Jim Saxton (R-NJ), and Neil Abercrombie (D-HI); and Senators John Chafee (R-RI), Dirk Kempthorne (R-ID), Bob Graham (D-FL), and Max Baucus (D-MT). Representatives of sportsmen's and environmental groups who were key players in the legislation's development were Dan Beard, Senior Vice President of the National Audubon Society; Rollin Sparrowe, President of the Wildlife Management Institute; Bill Horn, Legislative Director for the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America; and Max Peterson, Executive Vice President of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

President Teddy Roosevelt established 3-acre Pelican Island in Florida as the first national wildlife refuge in 1903 by executive order because of concern over the widespread killing of birds for feathers used for hats and other fashions of the day. Roosevelt went on to establish 51 more bird refuges during his presidency, as well as refuges for big game like buffalo and elk.

Plummeting migratory bird populations in the 1920s and 30s led to laws to protect these species and their wetlands habitat, including authority to establish national wildlife refuges in key areas. As a result, hundreds of national wildlife refuges were strategically established along the four major migration pathways, or "flyways" that run north to south in the continental U.S. These laws also called for protection of prime waterfowl breeding grounds in the Upper Midwest prairie region, leading to management of thousands of small ponds or "potholes" called waterfowl

production areas. These are managed in units called wetland management districts, which are also part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

In the 1960s and 70s, the Endangered Species Act and other laws called for the protection of plants and animals threatened with extinction. The National Wildlife Refuge System became host to some of the nation's most endangered species, with more than 200 finding safe haven on national wildlife refuges. In 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act added 54 million acres to the Refuge System in that state.

In 1962, the Refuge Recreation Act authorized recreational uses of national wildlife refuges when such uses do not interfere with the primary purpose of a refuge. In 1966, a "compatibility standard" for allowing public uses on refuges was established with passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, which the law signed today amends. The 1966 law also officially united this growing network of wildlife habitat areas together into one land management system.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 defines clearly a unifying mission for the Refuge System, calls for enhanced consideration of certain wildlife-dependent public uses when compatible, and outlines a specific process by which compatibility determinations should be made. The act comes on the cusp of the 100th anniversary for the Refuge System, just in time to guide its management and public uses into the next century.

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Key Provisions of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act

Defines the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which is, "to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."

Requires the Secretary of the Interior to ensure the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the National Wildlife Refuge System are maintained.

Defines compatible wildlife-dependent recreation as "legitimate and appropriate general public use of the [National Wildlife Refuge] System."

It establishes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation as "priority public uses" where compatible with the mission and purpose of individual national wildlife refuges.

Retains refuge managers' authority to use sound professional judgment in determining compatible public uses on national wildlife refuges and whether or not they will be allowed. It establishes a formal process for determining "compatible use."

Requires public involvement in decisions to allow new uses of national wildlife refuges and renew existing ones, as well as in the development of "comprehensive conservation plans" for national wildlife refuges. In addition, refuges that do not already have such plans are required to develop them.

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