

# U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## *Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation* Progress Report

April 2013



*Conserving the Future* is coming to life. Implementation teams have draft plans, products and strategies that have been circulated throughout the refuge system. Interpretation now has a whole new strategy to strengthen this skill in the Service; the leadership development council created an **e-guide for employee development** that's become an asset for employees; and the Urban team provided seed money for five on-the-ground Presence Partnership projects. Continue reading to find out the progress on all nine *Conserving the Future* implementation teams.

### Community Partnerships

*Need help with volunteer management? Tired of tracking volunteer hours with no consistency?*

Help is on the way. A new web application is in early development to improve the field's ability to manage volunteer programs effectively and efficiently. For recruitment, DOI agencies are mandated to use the website **Volunteer.gov**, but the site has very limited capabilities to assist with other volunteer management functions. Beyond volunteer.gov, field stations devise their own individual and highly varied procedures for the selection of volunteers, orientation and training, scheduling, tracking hours, records management, and recognition. This leads to redundancy, non-transferability of hours and training records, and a generally inefficient and time consuming system. This project will allow the Refuge System to build a custom application that can work seamlessly with

### Community Partnerships

**Recommendation 11:** *Develop and nurture active and vibrant friends groups or community partnerships for every staffed refuge or refuge complex.*

**Recommendation 12:** *Develop a national strategy for recruiting, coordinating and supporting more self-sustaining volunteer corps, while creating new opportunities for community involvement in implementing refuge priorities.*



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the mandated capabilities of volunteer.gov, but expand to accommodate our larger and more complex volunteer program. The team anticipates this new application will be functional in the fall of 2013.

A draft national Friends mentoring action plan now complete recommends tripling the number of annual mentor visits to 30 per year – up from the current six to 12 – and more fully engaging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s regions in the process. The goal is to launch a revamped program by the end of this year. This would be the first major realignment of the Friends Mentoring Program since it was developed 15 years ago. To expand the program without creating new positions, the draft plan would share responsibilities among the Refuge System Headquarters, regions and the field. The plan also would increase the use of technology for cost-effective mentoring that would expand the benefits of face-to-face mentoring. That would include greater use of the new **Refuge Friends Connect** website, a joint project of the Refuge System and the National Wildlife Refuge Association that could serve as an informal mentoring venue. The plan was available for public comment in February and is currently being revised by the sub-team.

### Interpretation & Environmental Education

**Recommendation 19:** *Develop an interpretation strategy that builds upon current Service standards and guidelines, taking advantage of multiple modes of delivering messages, reaching diverse audiences, and measures the effectiveness of our programs in partnership with key government agencies, the National Association for Interpretation and other professional organizations.*

**Recommendation 20:** *Develop an environmental education strategy that inventories existing efforts, identifies priorities for investment of staff and funds, and outlines basic standards for all refuges.*

### Interpretation & Environmental Education

Interpretation is about to be strengthened for the Service. The Interpretation and Environmental Education implementation team has completed a draft Strategic Plan for Interpretation for the Refuge System. The strategic plan has one goal: to strengthen, formalize and institutionalize interpretation within the Refuge System. This plan makes recommendations on how employees, volunteers and partners can enhance interpretation communication, planning, delivery, and evaluation at national wildlife refuges, wetland management districts, and other field stations of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A proposed Refuge Ambassador Program to train all employees in excellent customer service

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may be one of the most far-reaching elements of the draft strategy, but it is hardly the only all-encompassing element.

The Refuge System Ambassador Program, one of the most highly anticipated, cross-coordinated efforts by the implementation teams, focuses on community engagement and customer service as a priority for every employee. The program is designed as an ongoing, comprehensive training program, providing regular learning opportunities through multiple delivery methods. As the program grows, the link between refuges and communities will strengthen, and public support will increase. The goal of the program is to teach excellent internal and external customer service skills and enhance teamwork among Refuge System staff, Friends, volunteers and key partners.

## ***From the Blog:***

*Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the audience and the resource. Already there are examples of strong interpretive programs and visitor centers throughout the Refuge System, such as the Visitor Center at Assabet NWR. This ultra-green visitor center services the entire Eastern Massachusetts refuge complex and provides interpretive messages on all eight refuges. The center leaves visitors with a sense of empowerment: no matter who they are or where they live, they can make some kind of positive change. The panels and signs create local connections, providing messages on unique habitats and species the refuges manage for as well as local history and life cycles of the land. One of the most important messages, according to visitor services manager Susan Russo, is "People are a part of it; it's not just the Refuge system doing their work, but we need the public's support."*

## **Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative**

**Recommendation 13:** *Create an urban refuge initiative that defines excellence in our existing urban refuges, establishes the framework for creating new urban refuge partnerships and implements a refuge presence in 10 demographically and geographically varied cities across America by 2015.*

The Urban implementation team set Recommendation 13 into motion by evaluating proposals from across the refuge system to create an urban presence in 10 geographically and diverse areas. These proposals will establish a new or additional Service presence in urban areas where awareness of the Service is minimal to lacking. This presence can take various approaches, ranging from creating a partnership with key organizations in a city without a National Wildlife Refuge, to developing outreach or education programs between a Refuge and partners that literally meet the community where they are. Five of these will



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### Urban Refuge Training

A three-day Urban Refuge Training will be held at the National Conservation Training Center September 23-25, 2013. This course is designed for Service staff, friends, and partners who are working in urban areas, and who can most benefit from the information and innovative ideas that have been generated by the Urban Refuge Initiative over the past two years. The objective of this training is to teach new skills to Service managers and staff who are working in or near urban areas, to build stronger programs and partnerships, and ultimately help increase fish and wildlife conservation awareness and appreciation in urban areas. The training will share real-world examples of the standards of excellence, model new ways for the Service to develop outreach partnerships in urban centers, and share strategies for meaningful engagement with diverse communities, including overcoming barriers.

receive seed funding to match partners, and seven will receive designation as a land-based partnership. More to come on these exciting ventures!

How do we know we are working effectively in urban communities? To help answer this difficult question, "standards of excellence" have been drafted, and are applicable to both land-based FWS refuges and partnership-based work of the FWS in urban areas. While these standards are applicable to any National Wildlife Refuge, they strive to help guide the FWS in achieving our overall goals to engage the American public and youth in urban areas in conservation of natural resources, and to raise awareness among urban populations of the great work of the FWS. These standards provide a framework for collaboration between the FWS and urban communities. The team plans to share the standards for comment on [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org) in the spring of 2013.

### Planning

**Recommendation 1:** *Incorporate the lessons learned from our first round of CCPs and HMPs into the next generation of conservation plans, and ensure these new plans view refuges in a landscape context and describe actions to project conservation benefits beyond refuge boundaries.*

Over 400 comments were received on a report outlining recommendations for the future process, content, and implementation of Refuge System planning, based on new models of conservation planning and lessons learned from the last 15 years. Landscape conservation designs (LCD) will play an important role in placing our future refuge planning in a landscape context. A landscape level pre-planning framework in development will be

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important to assist planners and managers in identifying the most meaningful scale in which to plan, taking into consideration LCCs, existing partnerships, and clusters of Refuges on the landscape. LCDs assess current and future conditions, and use conservation features (i.e. surrogate species) to reach biological objectives. Eventually, planners will use LCDs to inform landscape planning for the Refuge System and implement conservation strategies for land protection, land management and restoration.

The Planning team has also identified the need for new and revised planning policies to fully integrate strategic habitat conservation and implement the recommendations from the draft report into future refuge planning. The final report will outline proposed changes and the path forward to finalizing necessary policy updates. The final report of recommendations should be available by the end of June, 2013.

## Hunting, Fishing and Outdoor Recreation

**Recommendation 17:** *The Service will work closely with state fish and wildlife agencies to conduct a review of its current hunting and fishing opportunities, especially opportunities currently offered for youth and people with disabilities. Based on this review, the Service and states will work cooperatively to prepare a strategy for increasing quality hunting and fishing opportunities on national wildlife refuges.*

**Recommendation 18:** *Support and enhance appropriate recreation opportunities on national wildlife refuges by partnering with state fish and wildlife agencies, other governmental bodies, conservation organizations and businesses; and by updating relevant policies and infrastructure.*

States and traditional user groups are crucial to accomplishing strategies for recommendation 17. As such, a draft strategy to increase quality hunting and fishing opportunities on national wildlife refuges has been drafted by the implementation team and is now being circulated for internal review. The strategy focuses on hunting and fishing opportunities, with particular attention to opportunities for youth and people with disabilities. Elements of the strategy include:

- history and current status of programs
- increased emphasis on welcoming and orienting hunters and anglers and other visitors
- development of outdoor skills, special events, and case studies of successful projects;
- emphasis on ADA accessibility
- institutionalizing a relationship with the states



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- looking for opportunities to partner with State mentoring programs on refuges
- providing new policy guidance on fish stocking to protect historical programs when compatible, and offer potential new fishing opportunities on refuges
- working jointly with States on important wildlife disease issues
- training for refuge managers on implementation of hunting and fishing programs
- partnering on outreach and recruitment efforts developing a monitoring and evaluation process to track success and redirect efforts as appropriate.

The team plans to have the strategy available for review on [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org) in the summer of 2013.

### From the Blog

*You can hunt on a refuge?*

*That's the response NWTF Director of Education Christine Rolka heard from some of her colleagues after returning from a course at NCTC. The training showcased ways to collaborate on the shared goals in Conserving the Future including increasing opportunities to hunt, fish and recreate on refuges. The National Wild Turkey Federation is now partnering with national wildlife refuges from across the country to educate their local chapters about the vast hunting opportunities on refuges.*

### Scientific Excellence

**Recommendation 6:** *Provide each refuge with access to resources to fully implement the principles of adaptive management.*

**Recommendation 7:** *Institutionalize a purpose-driven, nationally coordinated effort to inventory and monitor wildlife and habitats to obtain data that inform planning and management decisions; and develop a state-of-the-art data management system that can be integrated with the broader scientific community and key partners.*

A new group of experts in the Service have reconvened to begin work on Recommendation 6 with the goal of producing an Adaptive Management Handbook to provide synthesis on the use of adaptive management, relevant definitions, and guidance on implementing. The goals are improving understanding of what adaptive management is and how it can be accomplished on refuges, in order to advance our conservation and management efforts. The Handbook will discuss adaptive management in the context of where structured decision

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making has worked, versus smaller issues where structured decision making can become overkill and inefficient. This discussion will be useful for helping steer refuges to the best science tool for the management problem at hand. The Handbook will be informative, simple, and concise, and a draft available in November 2013. It will demonstrate a variety of adaptive management applications by presenting examples describing the use of adaptive management.

The regional I&M coordinators and leadership in Fort Collins have leveraged the Service's national effort to support inventorying and monitoring of wildlife and habitats within the Refuge System. The effort fits well with Recommendation 7 of *Conserving the Future*. The Inventory and Monitoring Coordination Team has identified 19 strategic goals that provide direction for the Service's I&M Initiative. The resulting *Inventory and Monitoring 7-Year Plan: 2013-2020* outlines how the Refuge System will implement a nationally coordinated effort to support rigorous inventories and monitoring at the refuge, landscape, regional and national scales. The Plan prioritized operational goals based on immediate foundational needs that support monitoring at multiple scales as outlined in Recommendation 7.

## Strategic Growth

**Recommendation 3:** *Undertake a rapid top-to-bottom assessment of the status of all Refuge System land protection projects and complete a report that will inform development of a plan for the strategic, future growth of the Refuge System.*

**Recommendation 4:** *Ensure future land protection efforts are based on explicit priorities, rigorous biological planning and conservation design that support achieving quantifiable conservation and population objectives that are developed in cooperation with state fish and wildlife agencies.*

**Recommendation 5:** *Use all of the Service's conservation tools, especially Partners for Fish and Wildlife, to work nationwide to project conservation benefits beyond refuge boundaries, leveraging resources through partnerships with other governmental agencies, conservation groups and private landowners and achieving mutually shared and scientifically sound restoration and protection goals around refuges.*

The Strategic Growth implementation team has put forth final recommendations for Recommendation 5. Once accepted by the Executive Implementation Council, their work will be institutionalized into the Refuge System and we will no longer be convening the Strategic Growth implementation team. The team finalized its assessment of Refuge System land



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acquisition and plans to post this report online in coming weeks. The report concludes that land acquisition efforts have created a Refuge System that provides undeniable value to migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, the conservation of wetlands, and Alaskan and marine ecosystems. However, the report also cautions that our current trajectory for adding lands to the Refuge System is unsustainable and may not reflect the highest priority acquisitions that contribute to landscape conservation. Looking forward, we should employ methods that result in achievable land protection goals that are directed at priority conservation targets, with positive impacts within and outside refuge boundaries.

The draft strategic growth policy, a major team product, has gone through Directorate review and Refuge System Headquarters staff is now sifting through the comments from the Service Directorate. The draft policy directs the Service to focus on acquiring interests that aid in the recovery of threatened and endangered species, implement the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, or conserve migratory birds in decline. Once approved, this would be the first strategic growth policy in Refuge System history.

### Leadership Development Council (LDC)

**Recommendation 21:** *Assemble an evaluation team consisting of Service and Refuge System leaders to report to the Service Directorate on opportunities for organizational realignments or programmatic efficiencies.*

**Recommendation 22:** *Within the next 10 years, make our workforce match the diversity in the civilian labor workforce. Recruit and retain a workforce that reflects the ethnic, age, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and language diversity of contemporary America.*

**Recommendation 23:** *Revisit Fulfilling the Promise and seek innovative ways to address the recommendations therein to reinvigorate our commitment to leadership development.*

**Recommendation 24:** *Develop and mentor Refuge System employees so they are fully equipped to accept the responsibilities of leadership at all levels in the Service.*

Recommendation 21 has a group of leaders working on opportunities for organizational realignments and programmatic efficiencies. They have analyzed past reorganization and efficiency efforts, within and outside the agency, in order to gather key lessons learned. Additionally, they compiled a list of existing inefficiencies within the Service, based on team input and informal surveys. The goal of their recommendations is to help the agency realize greater administrative efficiencies. The team expects to have a report available for review in the summer of 2013.





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The LDC Workforce Assessment team was formed to address a variety of workforce-related needs, all designed to ensure that our employees have the education and skills to do the landscape-scale, partner-based conservation work of tomorrow. The fundamental goal of this team is to ensure a workforce well prepared to do the ambitious work laid out in *Conserving the Future* and other guiding FWS documents. The team includes representation from each of the Implementation teams with an interest in workforce issues and a variety of programs and regions. In January-February 2013, the team interviewed all the *Conserving the Future* implementation teams. The teams identified needed hiring reforms, trainings, and missing or deficient workforce skills—skills needed if the Vision is going to be fully implemented. The interviews have been separated into a discussion about *Technical Competencies* (specific knowledge/skills needed for particular jobs) and *General Competencies* (emotional intelligence and the various OPM leadership competencies) and the team continues to analyze the results for the focus groups.

### Communications

**Recommendation 14:** *Create a strategic communications plan that educates the public about our mission and accomplishments, and creates a positive, professional 'brand' for the System.*

**Recommendation 15:** *Develop integrated mechanisms for using web-based and other emerging technologies to store and share data, communicate within the System, and inspire and educate visitors and the public.*

The Communications implementation team continues to refine their strategic communications plan. To meet the vision outlined in *Conserving the Future*, the communication strategy will broaden its focus, reaching and engaging non-traditional audiences – such as urban residents and young adults – while maintaining strong relationships with current visitors and Friends organizations. The purpose of this plan is to guide communications that reach key audiences over the course of the next five years, driving awareness of the Refuge System, increasing online and in-person visitation, and ultimately, building the next generation of refuge supporters.

The key elements of this plan were developed based on the results of several research activities including stakeholder interviews, reviewing existing materials, social media listening and focus groups with targeted messaging and images. Over the next five years the Refuge System's communications strategy, working in concert with the strategies of the Community Partnerships and other *Conserving the Future* implementation teams, will work toward a 25 percent increase across the following: in-person visitation, virtual visitation, number of



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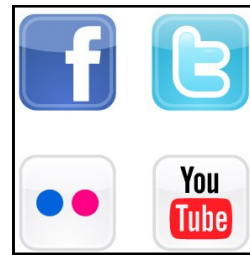
volunteers, and membership in Friends and community organizations. The team plans to have a revised version available for public comment on [AmericasWildlife.org](http://AmericasWildlife.org) in the spring of 2013.

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Any other questions, comments, or feedback, please e-mail [conservingthefuture@fws.gov](mailto:conservingthefuture@fws.gov).

[www.AmericasWildlife.org](http://www.AmericasWildlife.org)



***"Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success."***

**— Henry Ford**

