Fulfilling the Promise Progress Report

October 1, 2004

Message from the Chief

Whenever an organization as large and diverse as the National Wildlife Refuge System tries to create a long-term vision, it must wrestle with the rough work of crafting that vision in a way that it can be shared by all. Consider an introductory line from *Fulfilling the Promise*, "From one-ton bison to half-ounce warblers, the National Wildlife Refuge System contains a priceless gift—the heritage of a wild America...."

Invigorated by such responsibility, we, the Refuge System family, crafted *Fulfilling the Promise* into an incredibly durable vision document. Not only did *Promises* find the common ground amongst refuges, but it put our common needs into words and recommendations that have served us admirably.

Because *Promises* began over six years ago, some Refuge System employees are largely unfamiliar with it. A historical perspective is helpful here. In October of 1998, fresh on the heels of the Refuge Improvement Act being signed into law, the Refuge System held its first-ever national conference in Keystone, Colorado. During that conference, hundreds of Service employees, including managers from every refuge, and scores of conservation organizations, worked to outline a future for the Refuge System. Their needs and concerns were boiled down into 42 recommendations falling under the broad categories of: Wildlife and Habitat, People, and Leadership. These recommendations were put in context and assembled into the *Fulfilling the Promise* report published in July 1999.

To implement the recommendations, a Promises Implementation Team (PIT) was created. I chair the PIT, which includes the Regional Refuge Chiefs, Washington Office Division Chiefs, and an interdisciplinary group (i.e. refuge managers, biologists, public use specialists, etc.) from all regions. We meet twice a year to discuss progress and plan necessary steps to keep *Promises* recommendations moving forward. One of our primary tasks is chartering action teams to implement particular Promises recommendations. To date we've chartered 13 action teams, plus the Leadership Development Council. The LDC addresses recommendations pertaining to leadership and staffing. The LDC and the action teams have done the real legwork of implementing the Promise recommendations.
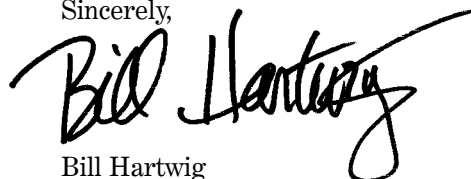
This report summarizes the remarkable work accomplished by each team and other people deeply involved in *Promises*. Without exception, the teams have done much more work than we can report here, but space prevents us from sharing all the details. Obviously, some recommendations have been fulfilled more than others. For instance, the recommendations for strengthening our work with partners and volunteers (P7 and P8) are mostly implemented now, as is the recommendation for creating a set of land management demonstration areas (WH18). Others, like habitat goals (WH1, 2 and 3) and baseline inventories (WH8) are at the final report stage. We now have detailed information on how to design and implement these programs. Still others have humbled us, such as external threats (WH6) and fee and concession management (P6). We found these issues more complex than imagined. Clearly, however, our overall progress has been tremendous, because most of the 42 recommendations are either implemented or their planning is well underway.

As I look at this report, I reflect on our advances with great pride. I hope you will take time to do the same. Despite the setbacks we encounter in the course of our work, we're holding steady to our long-term priorities. We are making a difference.

Some have questioned whether *Promises* will remain after the Conservation in Action Summit. Absolutely. More than anything, the Summit provided endorsement for programs already initiated under *Promises*. In that way, the Summit simply added momentum to implementing many *Promises* programs. I for one can't wait to see more of *Promises* come to fruition.

So please read about the wonderful things we have accomplished, and think about the hundreds of refuge people who have worked on *Promises*. We've made incredible progress. We owe ourselves a big "thank you" for a job well done.

Sincerely,

Bill Hartwig
Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System

The WH1-3 Habitat Goals process will integrate national, regional, and local conservation plans into tangible "conservation targets." These targets can then help direct habitat restoration and management, as well as acquisition in a place like South Carolina's ACE Basin.

Wildlife and Habitat

Wildlife, Habitat and Biodiversity Goals

WH 1: Develop integrated population goals and objectives (as appropriate) at the System, regional, ecosystem, and refuge levels.

WH 2: Establish national, regional, and ecosystem habitat priorities to direct the strategic growth and long-term management of the System.

WH 3: Define how the System and each unit can best contribute to maintaining biodiversity.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a clear picture of how each refuge fits into broader conservation efforts? Or to know that the next piece of land acquired for the Refuge System is clearly some of the most important wildlife habitat in the nation? That may soon be a reality, as the "Habitat Goals Process" continues to progress and address the first three *Promises* recommendations: population goals, habitat goals, and biodiversity goals for the Refuge System.

In the early stages of *Promises,* these three recommendations appeared closely related. Thus, a single action team, the Wildlife and Habitat Goals Team, was established. The team developed a process that steps down national, regional, and local conservation plans, and formulates them into tangible wildlife and habitat objectives. These objectives help managers determine how best to manage individual refuges so they contribute optimally to landscape-level conservation. They also help identify lands that should be high priority for refuge acquisition or other forms of protection. The process is very similar to that used by the Joint Venture offices to implement the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and other bird conservation programs.

However, the Habitat Goals process is slightly different because it utilizes both coarse and fine filters to address the conservation of not only individual species, but also biotic communities. Each region has already designated a Habitat Goals contact person; Region 2 has even hired a fulltime Habitat Goals Coordinator. Because the Habitat Goals Process aims to align conservation actions at all scales (from refuge and ecosystem, to regional and national) it is expected to work closely with the Service's Migratory Birds and Ecological Services Programs.

Togiak Refuge, AK, has the second largest contiguous Wilderness Area in the National Wildlife Refuge System, with 2.3 million acres set aside in the Togiak Wilderness.

Water is of utmost importance to many refuges, whether it's for managed wetlands, like those of Bear River NWR, UT, (above) or the groundwater needed by endangered Ozark cavefish at Logan Cave NWR, AR.

Wilderness

WH 4: Develop national policies and a national management plan which address wilderness values on refuges.

With more than 20 million acres under some type of wilderness designation, wilderness management is tremendously important to the Refuge System. This team drafted new policy, to be finalized in 2004-2005, that will clarify several wilderness management issues. In particular, the new policy will make clear that Wilderness Study Areas and proposed wilderness areas should be managed to preserve their wilderness character, and emphasize training staff to better understand wilderness issues. This team also insured that several other recently revised policies, such as Comprehensive Conservation Planning and Compatibility, recognize wilderness as an additional purpose for refuge lands. The team is beginning to draft a policy on Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Water Resources

WH 5: Conduct a comprehensive assessment of existing water rights and needs for water quantity and timing.

Adequate supplies of surface and sub-surface water are necessary to nourish abundant and healthy wildlife on refuges, so it's not surprising water is often described as the "life blood" of refuges.

Although no formal team has been assembled to address this recommendation, a variety of water resource staff from across the Fish and Wildlife Service have worked on this element of *Promises*. They began by reviewing mapping and water measuring protocols from the Western regions (R1, R2, and R6) to standardize methods whenever possible. The group also conducted a weeklong workshop at NCTC in May 2004, where 43 of the Service's water resource staff gathered to discuss issues such as water rights, water quality, instream flow, navigability, FERC relicensing, and Clean Water Act.

The group is also working with NCTC to develop a water resources training course that will address the needs of Refuge System staff, among other programs. In the very near future, Refuge System staff should also anticipate a System-wide assessment of individual refuge water needs, which was identified as a high priority at the Conservation in Action Summit.

External Threats

WH 6: Identify and recommend solutions for external threats to refuge habitats, such as air and water quality and cumulative impacts from watershed development.

Because refuge habitats can be threatened by such external factors as contaminated air and water, surrounding land-use patterns, or invasive species, there is a great need to track and mitigate such threats. Therefore, the WH6 team developed a Threats and Conflicts database, which went out to all refuges as a data call in 2002. Through the database, the Refuge System identified more than 2,376 threats nationwide. Unfortunately, problems with categorizing the endless variety of threats refuges face led to processing errors in the database. Ultimately, these problems prevented all regions from reporting threats and conflicts equally and uniformly. The team still hopes the database can be

A fifteen year effort to eradicate the grass Cenchrus echinatus (top, right) from Palmyra Atoll NWR, HI, relied mostly on the prudent use of glyphosate (top, left). The island has been free of Cenchrus grass now for two years, resulting in excellent regeneration of native bunchgrasses (center).

restructured and eventually used as intended; meanwhile refuge staff and supporters must remain vigilant and proactive in addressing threats and conflicts.

Invasive Species

WH 7: Review and revise existing policies to strengthen support and action for problem and invasive species management.

In the United States alone, scientists estimate that about 7,000 invasive species of plants, mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, fish, arthropods, and mollusks are established. The Refuge System has certainly felt the impact of these invasives, as they regularly displace or reduce native plant and animal populations. To address this broad and complex issue, the WH7 team prepared a National Invasive Species Management Strategy released in May, 2004. The document reviews the current status of invasive species management in the Refuge System, identifies deficiencies, and provides tools, processes and strategies to combat invasives. This report is complimented by a technical report issued this past May by USGS, titled: *The Invasive Species Survey: A Report on the Invasion of the National Wildlife Refuge System.* These reports together give both a status review and management strategy for combating invasives.

The team is also revising existing policies on Invasive Species and Pest Species Management. The revised policies should consolidate an assortment of outdated policies and incorporate language that's consistent with new policies on habitat management, biological integrity, wilderness stewardship, refuge planning, and compatibility. The team has insured that each region establish a regional invasive species contact person, who is responsible for helping field stations develop invasive management strategies.

Baseline Inventory and Monitoring

WH8: Develop refuge inventory and monitoring plans to ensure that refuges use standard protocols to develop baseline and trends data for selected species groups and habitats.

While Refuge System policy requires inventories of plants, fish, wildlife, and habitats, as well as monitoring of critical parameters and trends of selected species, current approaches to inventory and monitoring are very inconsistent. The very first step in correcting this problem is to ensure all refuges have similar sets of baseline data on the biotic

and abiotic resources of each refuge. Such baseline information is fundamental to long-term planning and daily management of both individual refuges and the System as a whole.

To address this need, the WH8 team reviewed minimum inventory standards used by other agencies (e.g. National Park Service, British Columbia Ministry of the Environment, Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service) and then identified all possible data layers that could be considered minimum standards for refuges. The team also reviewed popular inventory approaches, such as BioBlitz and Rapid Ecological Assessment, as possible ways to collect baseline information.

Based on its review, the team assembled a final report recommending a minimum collection of biotic and abiotic "data layers" covering such things as topography, soils, refuge boundaries, man-made features, vegetation classification, and species lists. The report not only suggests appropriate scales for these data layers, it also provides practical sources from which refuges can acquire the data. Finally, the report provides an implementation strategy outlining the best way for the Refuge System (i.e. field stations, regional offices, or the Washington office) to acquire this data.

Biological Database

WH9: Design or use existing database systems to store, analyze, and archive inventory and monitoring data to evaluate management practices on individual refuges, as well as link with System, flyway, and ecosystem databases.

Although each of the 544 national wildlife refuges has unique monitoring needs, most also have common monitoring programs that can help answer questions on a regional or national scale. Answering broader questions not only improves management at a larger scale, but can also solidify management decisions made at a local level.

For example, consider the refuge biologist who thinks burning grasslands in the summer may improve Henslow sparrow habitat. The refuge may be able to burn only one or two areas a year, far short of what's needed to validate the idea. But if the refuge is able to enter their monitoring data into a database that pooled it with similar data from several other refuges they might derive some statistically valid conclusions about

summer burning and Henslow sparrows. Such questions could be readily answered and defended if the Refuge System had a comprehensive database for survey and monitoring information.

The WH9 team has been designing such a data management system to serve users at all levels. The team began its work by surveying all refuges about current wildlife and habitat monitoring procedures and how the data are collected, stored and managed. Refuges conducted more than 1,970 distinct biological surveys, using more than 180 different procedures. Realizing that no single database can meet all needs, the team focused on developing a data management framework that would allow central themes to be carried from the refuge level up to regional and national levels. Additional modules could address ecosystem or refuge-specific needs.

Regions 3 and 5 are working to develop and pilot the database system on behalf of the System, and have 3 staff positions devoted to the endeavor. This project is being conducted with participation and input from all other Regions to assure that results will be applicable to the entire Refuge System.

An employee at Minnesota Valley NWR conducts a browse survey. Some habitat monitoring efforts will be standardized through the WH10 effort. The collective information will then be more available via the biological database proposed under WH9.

Habitat Monitoring

WH10: Develop systematic habitat monitoring programs at the refuge, ecosystem, national, and international levels.

Establishing System-wide monitoring protocols is an important step in understanding the status and trends of habitat changes. Based on a review of the most successful monitoring programs used in other organizations, the WH10 team concluded the Refuge System should develop a Web-based handbook to facilitate standardized habitat inventory and monitoring programs. The handbook will recommend protocols and provide examples of actual monitoring projects, all designed to foster science-based management. The team has already drafted an outline of the handbook, and will soon establish a pilot Website. The Website could be easily updated and will include links to related habitat monitoring resources.

It's likely the team will revise the Inventory and Monitoring Policy (701 FW2) to incorporate requirements from the Habitat Management Planning and Ecological Integrity Policies, and Baseline Inventory and Monitoring Team recommendations. They will also explore

development of habitat inventory and monitoring protocols in conjunction with related efforts to monitor fire effects and invasive species.

Biological Staffing

WH 11: Ensure an interdisciplinary staff of specialists…to provide habitat management and monitoring expertise for the System.

WH 12: Address inadequate and inconsistent staffing for biological programs by increasing biological staffing at all levels of the System (a biologist on every refuge).

WH 13: Develop a program to address career and professional needs of biological program staff.

The Leadership Development Council was created to address all elements of *Promises* dealing with leadership and staffing. The LDC, whose membership represents all major career series within the Refuge System, has worked to improve many aspects of the biological staffing. For instance, it piloted the Biological Sciences Intake Program, a recruiting/retention tool for biological staff. It also created the new Leadership Development policy chapter in Service Manual (230 FW 7), which addresses leadership skills and personal development for all job series. They have also worked to improve the Student Cooperative Education Program and the Career Internship Program as recruitment tools for biological staffing.

So what's the difference on the ground? During the period of 2001-2003 twenty-six new biological FTE's were added to the Refuge System. That's a major improvement, especially considering several other positions were added before and after that period. In addition, May of 2000 saw the first ever National Wildlife Refuge System Biological Workshop held at NCTC. Hopefully a second workshop will occur in 2005.

Adaptive Management

WH14: Use adaptive management to evaluate effectiveness of wildlife conservation programs and periodically evaluate programs to determine if System, ecosystem, and individual refuge goals and objectives are being achieved.

Adaptive management endeavors to use management actions as "experiments"

WH14 proposes increased adaptive management and better use of habitat management plans so refuges can better understand and fine-tune management actions. (Adjusting water levels at Humboldt Bay NWR, CA)

whose results are later evaluated and used to refine future management. Most refuges already use some aspects of adaptive management in managing wildlife and habitats, but the Refuge System needs to expand its application.

Seeing the new Habitat Management Planning Policy (Service Manual Chapter 620 FW 1) as the most effective vehicle for improving adaptive management, the WH14 team focused on developing a training course on its implementation. They drafted a lesson outline that embodied topics like ecological integrity, identifying resources of concern, developing goals and objectives, setting habitat management strategies, and developing monitoring and evaluation programs.

The first Habitat Management Planning course was given August 2002; it was such a hit that all subsequent courses have filled. The remote course is delivered live over both the phone and Internet and is capped at 35 participants. By the end of 2004 more than 150 people from 70 refuges will have participated in the course, with an eventual goal of reaching all 544 refuges. Clearly, habitat management planning as an adaptive process is becoming a standard practice in the Refuge System.

Management-oriented Research

WH 15: Identify and accomplish management-oriented research needs for each refuge based on System, ecosystem, and refuge goals.

The Refuge System provides a network of outdoor laboratories for scientific research, and most refuges have a variety of research projects occurring simultaneously. To better capture and manage this wealth of research information, the Science Exchange Program (SEP) is being established. This database was designed to manage research projects funded through the USGS Science Support Program (SSP) and Quick Response Program (QRP) because these programs comprise such a large percentage of the total research on refuges. Housed at Region 9's Branch of Communication Technology, SEP will be accessible to all Service employees via the Service Intranet. Currently the SEP serves as a catalog for ongoing SSP and QRP research projects, storing products in a variety of data formats, such as Powerpoint, GIS data layers, Excel spreadsheets, and Word documents. Future plans call for the database to include unfunded research projects, thus tracking overall research needs and helping direct funding to high priority projects. A SEP User's Manual is scheduled for production in 2004-2005.

Thresholds of Wildlife Disturbance

WH 16: Identify thresholds of disturbance for public use programs and develop techniques to reduce conflict and achieve balance between public use and wildlife.

Visitation and public use of refuges has grown tremendously in recent years, and projections show the demand for outdoor recreation will keep rising. Although "wildlife first" has become a mantra for the System, refuges also want to facilitate priority public uses. Unfortunately, refuge managers often lack the analytical and planning tools needed to balance visitor programs with resource protection.

The recently formed WH 16 Team is tasked with identifying thresholds of disturbance for public use programs and developing standards and mitigation techniques that can be applied on refuges. The team is gathering information; however, by 2007 it expects to produce a report summarizing existing literature on the topic and providing case studies of "best practices" in use. The report will also identify potential policy/regulation revisions needed to implement an effective visitor capacity program. Ultimately the work should give refuges tools to reduce conflict and achieve balance between public use and wildlife.

Strategic Land Acquisition

WH 17: Develop a nationally coordinated approach for prioritizing lands and waters to support strategic growth in areas of greatest conservation concern.

Because numerous laws give the Fish and Wildlife Service authority to acquire land for a variety of purposes, the Refuge System has long struggled with the dilemma of which lands to bring into the System. Therefore, the WH17 team focused on developing a set of threshold standards to ensure that future growth includes only those lands poised to provide a substantial contribution to Service conservation objectives.

Specifically, the threshold standards will help ensure that all lands entering the Refuge System: contribute to conservation of priority species and ecosystems; are networked with other conservation lands; promote biological integrity; and are uncontaminated. The threshold standards are part of the soon to be finalized Interim Director's Order on Strategic

The driftwood "backbone" on the sand spit at Dungeness NWR, WA, plays a key part in managing public use. After much public input, most of the spit's bayside shoreline was closed while activities such as hiking, photography and fishing are allowed on the ocean side. The closure has allowed brant, oystercatchers, seals, even nesting Caspian terns to re-colonize the bayside.

Growth. Eventually, these standards will dove-tail with the Service's existing Land Acquisition Priority System and the WH1-3 Habitat Goals process into a new Service policy on Strategic Growth.

Land Management Research and Demonstration

WH 18: Designate Land Management Demonstration Areas to facilitate development, testing, teaching, publishing, and demonstration of state-of-the-art habitat management techniques.

While nearly all refuges serve as demonstrations of good habitat management, the Refuge System needs a collection of refuges that combine state-of-the-art habitat management techniques with good accessibility and the infrastructure to support visitors and researchers. The WH18 team worked to develop such a group of refuges, utilizing a rigorous review process both inside and outside

Salt ponds being restored to wetlands at Don Edwards San Francisco Bay NWR, CA. The 9,600 acre Refuge acquisition was strategically planned with a 6,900 acre acquisition by the State of California. The acquisitions were part of the over-arching South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, the largest wetland restoration project on the west coast.

LMRD biologists have two main tasks: First, staying abreast and involved in land management techniques. Second, communicating knowledge and techniques to large audiences. Here, John Taylor, past LMRD Biologist at Bosque Del Apache, NWR, NM, explains moist soil techniques to a wetland management class. John died this past September; however, he will long be remembered as the consummate LMRD biologist, combining biological savvy with great skill in communicating.

the Service. Fourteen were selected, each of which showcases management techniques for a major habitat type. These refuges are known as Land Management Research and Demonstration (LMRD) sites.

To date, five of these LMRD sites have been staffed with additional biologists responsible for operating their LMRD program. The LMRD biologists are specialists in their given habitat types, not only demonstrating proven management techniques, but also publishing regularly in scientific journals, and serving as professional advisers to other natural resource agencies. This cadre of LMRD biologists is building on the Refuge System's reputation for expert habitat

Refuges are "greening" in a lot of ways. These animal-proof recycling containers help visitors recycle at Okefenokee NWR, GA.

management, and making it available to an ever-larger audience.

Land Management Outreach Message

WH 19: Develop an outreach and interpretive program on refuges which specifically demonstrates and conveys to the American people the importance of sound land management.

An outreach program voicing the importance of sound land management techniques would complement several Refuge System initiatives. However, no team has yet been established to address this recommendation, primarily because most employees believe the message is fairly well conveyed in the Refuge System's current outreach efforts. A future action team may be created to develop a new policy on incorporating resource management messages into all refuge visitor services programs.

Greening the Refuge System

WH 20: Renew emphasis on reducing, reusing, and recycling of materials and products used on refuges, and ensure environmentally sound and sustainable management practices.

As a model of sound land management, the Refuge System should also set an example in material conservation of the use of the earth's natural resources. The WH 20 team focused on implementing Environmental Management Plans on

refuges. In 2003, 13 refuges implemented new EMP's, and another 18 will be implemented in 2004. These refuges receive on-site written EMPs, training, technical assistance and funding for EMP implementation. One example of the program's success is that it has helped raise the recycling rate of most refuges to meet or exceed the national goal of 40%.

Coordinated GIS Resources

As several *Promises* teams got underway with their assignments, it became evident that many recommendations would require improved GIS capability within the Refuge System. To synthesize their needs and insure national coordination for GIS resources, a *Promises* GIS team was established. The team first developed a "Data Needs" matrix which compared GIS data needs among *Promises* teams and refuge programs. Soon after, they compiled a "Survey of Spatial Data Holdings" by refuges, by region, and by ecosystem-programs. This survey identifies which refuges already have some level of GIS capability, compares each region's GIS data holdings, and identifies ecosystem programs that provide spatial data to refuges. By 2005, the team will complete a report on the role of GIS in the Refuge System, necessary levels of GIS capability for field offices, and investments required for achieving higher levels of capability.

Visitor Services is increasingly complex, as the diversity of refuge visitors expands. From wheelchair access at Minnesota Valley NWR (above), to environmental education at Sacramento NWR, CA, (next page), to backcountry hiking at Arctic NWR in Alaska, the demands of maintaining quality public use programs are constantly growing. P3 works to ensure all refuges have professional public use staff.

People

Visitor Safety and Resource Protection

P1: Assess the status of public safety and resource protection provided by refuge law enforcement programs.

Protecting refuge resources and the safety of visitors are fundamental responsibilities of the Refuge System. For various reasons, the System's law enforcement program has gone through tremendous scrutiny and change during the last five years, culminating in a contract with the International Association of Chiefs Police (IACP) to develop a Law Enforcement Assessment and Deployment (LEAD) model. The P1 team is serving as an advisory group for developing this model, which will be the primary tool to determine appropriate law enforcement staffing for each refuge. Trials with the LEAD model have been well received since its projected staffing patterns are generally considered adequate by seasoned refuge officers.

National Public Use Requirements

P2: Update the National Public Use Requirements. Each region will conduct evaluations of refuge public use programs to aid refuges in meeting new standards, identify deficiencies in the delivery of visitor services, and document needs and set priorities in operational, maintenance, and construction project databases.

Public use standards create a more consistent application of public use policies for a stronger Refuge System, where visitors will always recognize they are on a national wildlife refuge and have a clear expectation of the experiences and services. To facilitate such standards, the outdated Visitor Services Requirements Handbook is being updated to reflect changes in numerous public use policies. Like the old version, the new handbook will serve as both a guide to refuge managers and public use staff for operating a visitor services program, as well as a checklist for reviewing a refuge's public use program.

Public Use Staffing

P3: Provide each refuge with access to responsive, professional, public use management staff.

The Refuge System must have professional public use planners and specialists in recreation, interpretation, and education to give visitors better wildlife-dependent experiences. This idea was underscored at the Conservation in Action Summit, when delegates voted increasing environmental education programs as a high priority within visitor services. To this end, both the Visitor Service Career Team and the Leadership Development Council (see WH 11-13 above) have worked on improving public use staffing.

The Visitor Service Career Team developed a set of standard position descriptions for the public use (Park Ranger-025) series, plus established the Introduction to Visitor Services course at NCTC. They also helped plan the first National Visitor Services and Communication Workshop held at NCTC in December 2001. The second national workshop may be held in 2005.

The LDC created the new Leadership Development policy chapter in Service Manual (230 FW 7), which addresses leadership skills and personal development for all job series. The LDC has also worked to improve the Student Cooperative Education Program and Career Internship Program as vehicles for recruiting public use staff. Finally, the LDC is overseeing a Workforce Planning contract, which will include identifying career paths for the public use series. All of these programs help the Refuge System cultivate a professional cadre of visitor services staff capable of managing an ever-growing public use program.

Computer generated image of future Ottawa NWR, OH, visitor center. This center is scheduled for completion in Fall 2005, and was one of the first to be designed according to the Unified Design Model.

Compatible Use Policy

P4: Develop and implement policy that gives clear guidance to refuge managers for determining appropriate and compatible public uses of the Refuge System.

In the 1970s and 1980s concerns were raised that some refuge uses, such as water skiing and grazing, may be harmful to wildlife. However, the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 made clear that uses of a refuge should be allowed only after they are found compatible with the System mission and with the purpose of the Refuge. To implement the Act, a new Compatible Use Policy (603 FW 2) was finalized in November 2000. This milestone policy gave refuge managers the tool to objectively evaluate refuge uses and phase out those deemed incompatible.

After the policy was finalized a team of managers familiar with the new policy conducted a series of courses nationwide to instruct every refuge manager on how to implement the new policy. The new policy, in effect four years now, has become one of the strongest tools managers have to ensure biological well-being of refuges.

National Visitor Improvement Priority System

P5: Establish criteria for a national Visitor Improvement Priority System to rank operational, maintenance, and construction projects for public recreational use programs and facilities.

Competition for funds to construct visitor facilities and hire new visitor services staff is sometimes fierce, as each refuge strives to provide better services. Refuge System staff have worked diligently to reduce the political influence involved in distributing funds, trying to make the overall distribution more equitable and based on System priorities.

A Unified Design Model was created for refuge visitor centers, which standardizes the basic size and design for these buildings, but still allows tailoring the buildings to specific sites. Also, the Refuge System has worked to adhere to priority rankings in its RONS and MMS databases. For example, in 2003 all field stations were asked to rank their small MMS visitor services projects (including small construction projects) so funding could be targeted to the highest priorities. While still imperfect, the current system is greatly improved over a few years ago.

Fee and Concession Management

P6: Complete fee and concession management policies and accounting procedures to increase funding returned to the collecting refuge.

The Recreation Fee Demonstration Program has been a boon to the Refuge System because it allows entrance fees and user fees generated by public use programs to be re-invested into the programs where they were originally collected. Unfortunately, the Refuge System's participation in the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program remains

Sandy Perchetti, Volunteer Coordinator at E.B. Forsythe NWR, NJ, helped children plant Atlantic White Cedar during Make a Difference Day. Sandy's position was created through the Volunteer and Community Partnership Act.

temporary until new legislation makes it permanent. The Service and several partners continue to press for this permanent legislation, but in the meantime no permanent policy can be developed.

The refuge concessions program is in a similar situation. The existing concessions policy is out-dated and sometimes unclear, so the P7-P8 Promises Team began drafting a new policy. However, this effort was put on hold when it became clear that new legislation was necessary. Work on the legislation is also underway; however, it will require extensive coordination because of the wide range of concessions occurring on refuges. The legislation and policy must equitably address programs as diverse as fly-in big game hunting which is often dependent on state lottery systems, down to simple boat rental and food service vendors. Fortunately, 2004 saw much progress towards agreement on how the legislation and policy should be structured.

Volunteers and Partnerships

P7: Forge new and non-traditional alliances to broaden support for the System by establishing citizen and community partnerships on all staffed refuges.

P8: Strengthen partnerships with states, Tribes, nonprofit organizations, and academia, …and the business community.

A strong National Wildlife Refuge System depends on an involved public. Perhaps the biggest advance in increasing public involvement and the public's feeling of "ownership" with refuges was passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act of 1998. The Act sought to encourage volunteerism and the use of cooperative agreements to promote local involvement with refuge projects. The Act established 20 full-time volunteer coordinators on refuges to improve the use of volunteers in implementing refuge programs. The Act also streamlined the administrative and contracting procedures to implement partnerships. For instance, an organization or individual can now contribute money directly to a refuge and have it earmarked for a specific project—a process that was nearly impossible before.

The team who worked on implementing the Act also worked to clarify related issues. For instance they drafted the recently approved Volunteers Chapter of the Service Manual, which answers many questions about operating a volunteer program. It clarifies how to compensate volunteers, not only in terms of food and travel reimbursement, but also such

things as awards and tax reporting. It also answers longstanding questions about U.S. citizenship and safety standards for volunteers. Finally, this same team also drafted a Manual chapter (policy) on support groups/cooperating associations (i.e. Friends groups), which is now under administrative review.

Refuge Centennial and Outreach

P9: Update and strengthen the System's 100 on 100 outreach campaign. The revision should incorporate provisions of new legislation, complement the Service's National Outreach Strategy, seek support from nontraditional constituents, and take advantage of the outreach potential of the System's centennial in 2003.

The Refuge System developed many new partnerships in preparing for and celebrating its Centennial Anniversary. Besides its long-standing relationships with several non-profit organizations, the Refuge System branched out into a larger realm of business and private sector partnerships. These partnerships were struck not only at the national level, but also at regional and local levels. While these partnerships gained the Refuge System much notoriety during the Centennial campaign, perhaps more importantly the System gained greater capacity for working with a broad array of partners. One very tangible improvement was establishing the Refuge System Branch of Communications in the Washington Headquarters. This increased capacity for outreach and partnerships should serve the Refuge System for years to come.

Broader Base of Support

P10: Build a broader base of public support for wildlife conservation by reaching out and involving a larger cross section of the American public in our public use programs and community partnership efforts.

By involving a diverse group of Americans in stewardship of wildlife resources, the Refuge System gains new ambassadors who communicate with their peers, promote the System, and the larger conservation cause. By implementing the National Outreach Strategy, combined with the limelight the System enjoyed during its Centennial Year, the Refuge System is now feeling its broadest level of public support ever. However, this level of support will wane if efforts are not made to stay connected to this diverse public.

The Service's Stepping Up To Leadership (SUTL) program begun in 2001, together with the more recent Advanced Leadership Program, has graduated more than 300 students to date. About 30% of participants are from the Division of Refuges. Openings in both programs are extremely competitive. Here is the SUTL Class of October 2003.

Leadership

Of the *Promises Report's* 42 recommendations, 12 directly relate to leadership or leadership/management functions (*L1- L12*), and another four address workforce and career development issues (*WH11*, *WH12*, *WH13*, and *P3*). Recognizing that leadership is a multifaceted issue that reaches across the boundaries of job series, grade levels, ethnic backgrounds, and technical expertise, the Promises Implementation Team established the Leadership Development Council to address these recommendations collectively. The LDC membership represents all major career series within the Refuge System, such as refuge managers, biologists, administrative specialists, wage grade staff, realty, and others. The LDC has accomplished a prolific amount of work, including both broadscale projects that address several occupations, and more specific projects pertaining to particular job series. Because the volume of work accomplished by the LDC is too expansive to list here, this report focuses on three major elements of their work: Career Pathways, Recruitment and Retention, and the Leadership Development Chapter of the Service Manual.

Career Pathways

Perhaps the most effective way to address leadership and staffing issues within the Refuge System is along the lines of typical career paths. A collection of career pathways teams have addressed issues specific to their disciplines. For instance, career pathways teams were established for the disciplines of: refuge manager, biological, visitor services, wage grade, administration and others. Each team is developing a report that addresses topics such as required competencies, positive education requirements, training/development needs, and grade structure for their discipline. To complement these reports the LDC also contracted for a Workforce Planning Analysis, which will evaluate these same issues across the various disciplines and take a fundamental look at how the existing job series are structured. The culmination of these efforts will be recommendations on how to create distinct career tracks, give employees the tools they need to fully develop their own leadership skills, and give managers the critical information to plan future staffing needs.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention have been major issues in a variety of Refuge System disciplines such as refuge management, biological, and visitor services. The LDC is working on several fronts to address recruitment and retention concerns. For instance, it piloted the Biological Sciences Intake Program as a recruitment tool for a variety of job series in the Refuge System. It also popularized the Environmental Careers Organization (ECO) as a tool for recruiting diversity candidates for specific positions. Finally, the LDC has worked to improve the Service's existing Student Cooperative Education Program (SCEP) to make it a more effective recruitment program.

Recent changes in SCEP and other recruitment programs have sought to simplify the recruitment and hiring processes so managers can more easily reach people with the skills and commitment necessary for a refuge career. One new tool managers have to quickly hire highly qualified candidates is the Career Intern Program (CIP). The CIP Program was established by Executive Order in 2000 as a way to attract exceptional individuals into federal service. Individuals are appointed to a special 2-year internship, after which they may be eligible for noncompetitive conversion to a permanent position. The CIP program is being used to fill all sorts of Refuge System positions, including biological, law enforcement, and wage-grade.

The LDC has addressed retention in several ways. For instance, they reviewed the effectiveness of the SCEP program to convert participants into career Service employees. Also, each of

Refuges are recruiting all types of talented people through a variety of programs. (Top left) Michael Hames, equipment operator in the SCEP program at Deep Fork NWR, OK (center) Amber Ausmus, biologist intern recently hired at Washita NWR, OK (right) Julie Webster, SCEP student at St. Marks NWR, FL, (bottom left) Magaly Massanet SCEP at J.N. Ding Darling NWR, FL, (center) Jona Reasor, CIP Biologist at Tishomingo NWR, (right) Dusty Clift, Wage-Grade SCEP at Buffalo Lake NWR, TX.

the career pathways teams is working to develop national standard position descriptions and competencies. These position descriptions and competencies provide clear expectations for employees with specific professional or career goals, thereby increasing retention. Finally, the LDC sponsored a pilot project called the Biological Sciences Development Program. The BSDP includes an extensive Individual Development Plan for new employees in the biological sciences job family (GS-0400), with the goal of setting clear expectations for the employee's personal and professional growth, thereby increasing their retention.

Leadership Development Chapter

One of the broadest sweeping accomplishments of the LDC was development of a new chapter in the Service Manual titled: Leadership Development for the National Wildlife Refuge System national policy (230 FW 7). Soon to be finalized, this policy chapter outlines the following five Core Qualifications employees need to serve in leadership positions: 1. Leading People, 2. Business Acumen, 3. Building Coalitions/ Communication, 4. Results Driven, 5. Leading Change. Within each of the Core Qualifications, there are specific competencies that define areas where employees can assess

their knowledge and abilities, and target their training, job assignments, education and career path to further develop leadership skills. The level and scope at which these competencies are performed increase as grade and responsibilities increase. The Refuge System is serious about building leadership in all disciplines, and this chapter serves as both roadmap and license for employees to develop leadership skills to the utmost.

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