

# Three Policies Implementing the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997

## *Mission and Goals and Refuge Purposes; Appropriate Uses; and Wildlife-Dependent Recreation*

### Background

These three policies implement the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, the organic act for the National Wildlife Refuge System. It provides the mission of the Refuge System: “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 Americans.”

The policies provide general goals for the Refuge System. In addition, they provide guidance to refuge managers in a number of areas, including determining appropriate refuge uses and the development of wildlife-dependent recreation. Collectively, the new policies will enhance the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s ability to manage the Refuge System for wildlife and for people in a more consistent manner.

After initial development, the policies were published in the *Federal Register* for public comment in January 2001. The comment period was extended three times and closed June 30, 2001. Throughout the past six years, development of the policies has been closely coordinated with the States. After several meetings with the States, the Service entered into an agreement with the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies that served to include State representatives in the crafting of the final policies.

### Mission and Goals and Refuge Purposes

This policy sets forth the Refuge System mission and its relationship to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service mission. In addition, the policy identifies Refuge System goals that include:

- Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants.
- Develop and maintain a network of habitats.
- Conserve those ecosystems, plant communities, wetlands that are unique within the United States.
- Provide and enhance opportunities to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

- Help to foster the public’s understanding and appreciation of the diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

The policy also establishes management priorities:

- Conserve fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.
- Facilitate compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses.
- Consider other appropriate and compatible uses.

### Appropriate Uses

This policy helps the Refuge System say “yes” to the six wildlife-dependent recreational uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation) by focusing resources on these uses. It provides a standard that refuge managers use first when a refuge use is requested. It also ensures that the process refuge managers follow will be consistent, although the outcome could vary, depending on refuge purposes and local conditions.

- It applies to all proposed and existing general public uses where the Refuge System has control/jurisdiction.

- It does not apply to the taking of fish and wildlife regulated by the States.
- Refuge managers must review all existing uses within one year of the effective date of the policy and modify or phase out uses expeditiously if they are not appropriate.



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## Wildlife-Dependent Recreation

This policy provides national guidance on the management of wildlife-dependent recreation within the Refuge System. It focuses on the six wildlife-dependent recreational uses defined by the Refuge Improvement Act: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

- Hunting and fishing programs are to be consistent with State regulations to the extent practicable and consistent with laws, regulations, and policies.
- The policy provides guidance on developing a visitor services plan that will cover wildlife-dependent recreation programs, outlines the criteria for providing quality programs, and provides tools and standards for managing programs.



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