

## Weathering the Storms

I'd like to begin my first column as director by expressing my deep appreciation to all of the Service employees, retirees and friends who have offered me their congratulations and support over the past weeks. I will do my very best to justify your confidence in me over the next several years. The challenges in front of us are immense, and it makes a huge difference to know that we will face those challenges together.

The value of teamwork and a shared sense of mission cannot be overstated—especially in light of the Service's inspiring response to the devastation hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma wreaked this fall across the Gulf Coast.

Hundreds of Service employees live and work in the areas affected by Katrina and Rita. Thankfully, none lost their lives, but 40 Service families lost their homes and personal belongings. In spite of this, some of those employees were quick to volunteer to help others less fortunate.

More than 600 Service employees worked shifts at the full-service base of operations established at Big Branch National Wildlife Refuge immediately after Katrina dissipated. This facility provided food, water, shelter, fuel, showers and laundry facilities to our displaced employees and their families, as well as local police and fire departments and relief workers from across the country.

Across the region, Service crews cleared roads, driveways and fire breaks of debris, establishing access to the Louisiana Heart Hospital, among other critical facilities. Our personnel helped rescue some 4500 people. Service employees who could not make it to the hurricane zone helped by contributing thousands of dollars—including \$32,000 raised so far specifically for the Service employees who lost their homes.

During a live interview, CNN Commentator Donna Brazile made a plea for help in finding her sister, Sheila, who lived in an assisted living facility in New Orleans and had not been heard from since the storm. We sent a boat to the last place where Sheila had been seen—a flooded area of New Orleans that had not yet been visited by rescuers. They found Sheila and five other people in the building with no food or water. Donna Brazile said without the efforts of the Service, her sister probably would have died. This is just one of many stories of Service employees going beyond the call of duty to rescue people in need during the crucial time after the hurricane hit. All of us are tremendously proud of the way our employees responded to this crisis.

Our focus now turns to the 37 refuges damaged by the storms, and to the wildlife that depend on habitat that has now been significantly degraded or destroyed. In the Southeast, an area roughly equivalent to 100 square miles was transformed from wetlands and marsh to open water. In some areas the loss of wetland and marsh areas was accelerated to levels we did not expect to reach until 2050. Some 50 sea turtle nests were destroyed, as were nesting cavity trees for red-cockaded woodpeckers. Habitat for brown pelicans and many other species was lost or damaged.

We face a big task—but our employees have shown time and again their ability to adapt and move forward under the toughest circumstances. It will take time, but we will restore the habitat and facilities that were damaged by these storms. We also have a responsibility to ensure that the lessons from these storms are not forgotten. The Service has a crucial role to play in the national conversation about the role of wetlands in protecting lives and property from the effects of storms and floods, not only in hurricane zones but along our rivers. I'm privileged to work with you and confident that together we will succeed.