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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

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NOVEMBER 23, 1979

RELEASED



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The Honorable Fernand J. St. Germain
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. St. Germain:

Subject: [The Fish and Wildlife Service's Management of the Sachuest Point and Ninigret National Wildlife Refuges in Rhode Island] (CED-80-26)

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Your July 23, 1979, letter requested us to determine whether the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, has the resources to properly manage the Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge in Middletown, Rhode Island. Your letter also questioned whether the Service can properly manage 307 acres of excess Navy property in Charlestown, Rhode Island, transferred to the Service as an addition to the Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge.

Our review of these matters showed that the Service is implementing a management and development plan at the Sachuest Point refuge which will protect the habitat for wildlife while providing passive public recreation (e.g., nature study, hiking, fishing, bird watching, and swimming). A management and development plan has also been developed for the Ninigret refuge and will be implemented when title to the land is transferred to the Service. Both plans were developed in cooperation with the respective towns and compliment ongoing or planned uses of the contiguous town-owned lands. The details relating to the transfer, management, and development of the two refuges are as follows.

THE SACHUEST POINT NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The Navy originally owned about 184 acres of land at Sachuest Point, using it for a communications station. In 1973 the Navy began to close stations and consolidate activities in the Newport, Rhode Island, area. As each parcel of land became excess to the Navy, the 184 acres of property were subdivided into parcels of 32, 50, and 102 acres.

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The 32-acre parcel was transferred to the town of Middletown on July 1, 1976, for park and recreation use. The 50-acre and 102-acre parcels were transferred to the Service on August 20, 1976, and August 8, 1979, respectively for the Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge.

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In March 1975, the Service prepared a proposal for managing and developing the refuge in response to a request by the Middletown Town Council. The proposal identified 10 actions to protect wildlife and provide compatible public uses. The Service solicited public review and comment on the proposal. In May 1978, the Service published a management and development prospectus for the refuge proposing eight development actions. (There was some overlap and duplication between the 10 actions identified in the March 1975 proposal and the 8 actions identified in the May 1978 prospectus.)

By October 1, 1979, the Service had implemented or was taking steps to implement 9 of the 10 actions identified in the March 1975 proposal. On the one action not implemented, the Service had reversed its decision to terminate a 20-year special use permit, choosing instead to permit the Navy to continue to use about 2 acres of refuge land as a beach club through 1995. The Service had also implemented or taken steps to implement five of the eight actions identified in the May 1978 prospectus. Implementation of the remaining three actions--developing more than 2 miles of foottrails, constructing overlooks and observation platforms, and installing signs to aid visitors using the refuge--had been delayed pending completion of other actions and/or because of funding and staffing constraints.

Actions identified in the March 1975 proposal and the May 1978 prospectus being implemented by the Service included the appropriation of \$185,250 to renovate an existing Navy building to serve as a visitor contact station, refuge office, and storage facility. According to Service officials, once renovated, the building will be staffed full-time to reduce incidents of vandalism at the refuge. Other actions taken to enhance the area's potential as a wildlife habitat included (1) increasing the tidal flow throughout the marsh areas by placing culverts under a road to one of the beaches, (2) removing the privately owned cabins that lined the beach and the town's solid waste collection and transfer station, and (3) planting grass and food shrubs.

Recognizing that at least 1.6 million people live within an hour's drive of the refuge, the Service had also taken

steps to provide opportunities for public recreation to the maximum level consistent with wildlife preservation. Besides permitting the Navy to continue to use about 2 acres of refuge land as a beach club, the Service had placed culverts under a road to one of the beaches instead of removing the road as originally planned. This facilitated public access to the beach. Management of that beach for recreational purposes during the summer of 1979 was under a cooperative agreement between the Service and the town. Both parties informed us that the cooperative agreement will be renewed next summer. Also, access to the town-owned, 32-acre parcel for fishing and wildlife observation is by a road through the refuge permitted under a Service easement.

THE NINIGRET NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Under a conveyance announced by the General Services Administration on June 20, 1979, the 604-acre, former Naval Auxiliary Landing Field at Charlestown, Rhode Island, is to be transferred as follows: *DLG 03423*

- The Service will receive 307 acres as an addition to its Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge.
- The Environmental Protection Agency will receive 60 acres to study the effects of pollution on Ninigret Pond and the surrounding marshland ecology system.
- The town of Charlestown will receive 182 acres for recreational uses and will purchase the remaining 55 acres for municipal uses. *DLG 03424*

As of October 1, 1979, title to the 307-acre parcel had not been transferred to the Service, precluding implementing a management and development plan. Once the title is obtained, the Service intends to manage the land in a natural state for the benefit of migratory waterfowl and other wildlife. Thus, development will be limited primarily to cleaning up and restoring the area to its natural condition, including removing the runway surfaces, taxiways, and structures where necessary and eliminating a small dump. Management policies, implemented by the Ninigret Refuge Manager located in Charlestown, will focus on providing the habitat and basic environmental conditions necessary to serve wildlife needs.

The refuge will be open to the public for wildlife-oriented recreation, except hunting, throughout the birds' non-nesting season--August through February. Limited use control regulations, fencing, and posting are planned to protect the wildlife habitat and the general ecology of the area.

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A cooperative effort to effectively mesh the town and the Environmental Protection Agency's management proposals with the Service's was initiated at an August 2, 1979, meeting attended by representatives of the three parties, the State of Rhode Island, the General Services Administration, and Interior's Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. Continued cooperation among the three parties should result in productive utilization of the area while minimizing potential conflicts.

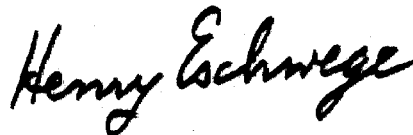
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As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from the date of the report. At that time we will send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others upon request.

Sincerely yours,



Henry Eschwege
Director