



U.S Fish & Wildlife Service

National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997

Landmark Law

During the 105th Congress, a bipartisan congressional coalition joined with a diverse group of nongovernmental organizations, state fish and wildlife agencies, and the Interior Department to craft the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-57). The Act amends the National Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 668dd-ee), and provides significant new guidance for management and public use of the Refuge System.

New Mission Statement

“The mission of the System is to administer a 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 generations of Americans.”

Administration of the Refuge System

The Refuge System is to be consistently directed and managed as a national system of lands and waters devoted to wildlife conservation and management. The Refuge Improvement Act also requires

maintenance of the Refuge System’s biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health; and monitoring of the status and trends of refuge fish, wildlife, and plants. Continued growth of the Refuge System is to be planned and directed in a manner that will contribute to conservation of the ecosystems of the United States.

Management Hierarchy

As a first priority, the Refuge Improvement Act requires that each refuge be managed to fulfill the Refuge System Mission as well as the specific purpose(s) for which the refuge was established. The Act also declares that compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are legitimate and appropriate priority general public uses of the Refuge System. There are six uses—hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation—that receive enhanced consideration in planning and management over all other general public uses of the Refuge System. When compatible, these wildlife-dependent recreational uses are to be strongly encouraged.

Comprehensive Conservation Planning

The Act requires development of a comprehensive conservation plan for each refuge and management of each refuge consistent with its plan.

Interagency Coordination and Public Involvement

When planning for expanded and new refuges, and when making refuge management decisions, the Act requires effective coordination with other Federal agencies, state fish and wildlife or conservation agencies, and refuge neighbors. In addition, a refuge is to provide opportunities for public involvement when making a compatibility determination or developing a comprehensive conservation plan.

Guiding Policies

Policies developed to implement provisions of the Improvement Act 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.

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, and 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.

Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Health

This policy provides for the consideration and protection of the broad spectrum of fish, wildlife, and habitat resources found on refuges and associated ecosystems. Further, it provides refuge managers with an evaluation process to analyze a refuge and recommend the best management to prevent additional degradation of environmental conditions and, where appropriate restore lost or severely degraded components.

Appropriate Uses

This policy provides a standard for refuge managers to use first when a refuge use is requested. It also ensures that the process refuge managers follow will be consistent, although the outcome can 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 refuge management activities and the six wildlife-dependent recreational uses—hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.
- It does not apply to the taking of fish and wildlife regulated by

the states, where state fish and wildlife agency activities have been documented to directly contribute to achievement of refuge purpose(s), goals, and the NWRS mission, and it does not apply to certain other specific conditions.

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 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.

Compatibility Determination

A compatibility determination is required for a wildlife-dependent recreational or any other public use of a refuge. A compatible use is one which, in the sound professional judgment of the Refuge Manager, will not materially interfere with or detract from fulfillment of the Refuge System Mission or refuge purpose(s).