



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# A Message from the Director

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I believe that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is vital to the future of fish and wildlife resources. I think most of you believe this as well. We are the *only* federal agency whose *primary mission* is conserving fish, wildlife and plants.

Think about this for a minute. Because while other agencies work with us, and contribute greatly to conservation and environmental protection, all of them also have other missions—and many times, those missions may diverge from fish and wildlife conservation.

Why am I writing about this? Because I think perhaps we need to take a minute to reflect on, and acknowledge, the great strengths of the Fish & Wildlife Service.

Late in 1999, various groups or individuals advanced proposals that would break off parts of the Service, taking core functions and making them into separate agencies or moving them to agencies in other cabinet departments. One of the proposals, which came up briefly this fall, would have moved Federal Aid to some other department, perhaps combining it with other state grant programs. A more serious and public proposal—to form a separate bureau for the National Wildlife Refuge System—was supported by no less distinguished an organization than the National Audubon Society as well as some of our own current and retired employees. About the same time, the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility released results of their own survey of refuge managers which reported continuing concern by refuge managers over resources and leadership for the refuge system.



*Photo: FWS.*

I have worked hard during my tenure to support the refuge system, and I want employees to know that I am truly listening to the concerns and needs of our managers in the field. At the same time, I cannot help but think back to the last time something like this happened—and it wasn't that long ago. Most of you remember when the Service had a research function. Some of our employees thought research should stand on its own, as a renewed National Biological Survey. The idea had significant merit—indeed, enough merit to gain the Secretary's support. Unfortunately, as we learned, the trend in government (particularly in Congress) does not smile upon small, independent agencies. Like NBS, now a division of the U.S. Geological Survey, they tend to be reorganized or subsumed into larger, existing agencies with related functions. Another example from right here in the Interior Department: the former Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, which briefly became the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service before being merged with the National Park Service.

Many long-time Washington-watchers are skeptical that an independent National Wildlife Refuge Service would survive long in a political climate that favors consolidation of services. Many have grave concerns, as well, about what would become of the remaining functions of the Fish & Wildlife Service. Such concerns are fueled by the knowledge that political winds can shift unexpectedly and that challenges to the survival of land managing agencies continue. For example, just this month, the Cato Institute issued a "blueprint for auctioning off all public lands over 20 to 40 years."

In December, I met with a number of Service employees and with representatives from the conservation community to discuss the National Wildlife Refuge System. I listened closely to what they had to say and I committed to take those issues to the Service directorate. That same month, I also received the report of the federal/state task force which has been reviewing our Federal Aid program and met with many constituent groups to hear their concerns about the management and future direction of the Federal Aid program.

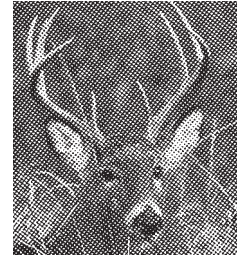
At the January directorate meeting, I kept my commitment to raise these issues for discussion. The directorate decided to initiate a review of the current regional office organization to evaluate whether implementation of this structure meets the intended goals of the original decision. This decision follows up on the commitment we made nearly 2 years ago, when the current organization was established, to monitor its implementation. The review will be conducted by the deputies team of deputy regional and deputy assistant directors, with

input from the Ecosystem Implementation Team. Our goal is for the team to complete its review, including a report with findings and recommendations, to allow discussion and decision at the directorate meeting in April. With regard to Federal Aid, we are continuing to work closely with the states and constituent organizations to forge a solution that will resolve problems while maintaining a strong Federal Aid program.

The refuge proposal and the recent controversy over the Federal Aid program both raise issues which deserve serious consideration and thoughtful action. Unfortunately, the refuge proposal in particular has been phrased in a way that tends to foster divisiveness with other segments of our organization. I hear many refuge employees worrying about the future of the refuge system, but I also hear refuge employees and employees in other parts of the Service voicing a rising concern about the divisiveness of this discussion and its effect on the very future of our agency. To a lesser extent, the Federal Aid situation has raised issues about how Federal Aid “fits” into the rest of the Service.

The Fish & Wildlife Service has always been composed of a variety of parts, from the days when the Bureau of Fisheries was combined with the Bureau of Biological Survey. All of us know this and many of us have strong loyalty to our core organizations—our divisions, our programs, our regions. The diversity of our organization is one of our strengths. We learn from each other. We work together and support each other. When a field station does not have the needed expertise, it can call on another Service office that does have it.

National wildlife refuges are unique and wonderful places—but they are not islands. Many refuges benefit from the support and assistance of fisheries and ecological services offices, as well as from the expertise of migratory bird specialists or the support of Service specialists in other disciplines. As just one example: it was Ecological Services field stations that conducted much of the work to support the Service in its effort to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil development.



Photos: FWS.

Our Federal Aid program is integral to our effectiveness as well. It is a keystone of our relationship with states, with hunters and anglers, and with the organizations that represent them. A strong Federal Aid program is essential to the Service’s mission.

The Service is not unlike the United States of America—a whole made of disparate parts. Our forefathers faced the daunting task of creating a union from the individual colonies—and they had to fight to maintain that union. Perhaps we are no different. Perhaps we have not yet found the magic formula—the right organization, the right administrative system—which somehow keeps all our different parts working together in perpetual harmony and balance. Or perhaps there is no one “right” answer and we must count some friction as the cost of maintaining the diversity, energy, and creativity that is our Service family.

Certainly, we always have to keep working to make things better. As we do, I hope we will remember one thing: we are strongest when we all stand together. Together, we can be an effective, insistent, unmistakable voice for conservation. Apart, we are weaker at best, with new bureaucratic separations placed between core conservation functions, constituents and partners. At worst, we are fodder for reorganization into some other agency or department where our mission may be watered down, our visibility lessened, our effectiveness diminished.

So let us take a moment to reflect upon what’s “right” with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service—an agency unique in our nation and perhaps in the world; an agency that Congress has entrusted to carry out conservation laws that actually have teeth; an agency where dedicated employees from many disciplines can work together and assist each other.

And if you need inspiration for the continuing struggle to balance competing priorities, overcome differences and find strength in diversity, just dig in your pocket for a penny and look at the motto of our forefathers: *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one.

*Jamie Rappaport Clark*