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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE HOSTS FIRST-EVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM CONFERENCE; INVITES COMMENTS ON STRATEGY TO IMPROVE MANAGEMENT

On October 18-22, 1998, in Keystone, Colorado, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will, for the first time, host a National Wildlife Refuge System Conference to chart the future course for this magnificent network of federal wildlife lands.

The Service also announced today a comprehensive draft strategy to improve management of the 93-million-acre Refuge System. The strategy, called "*Fulfilling the Promise: Serving Wildlife, Habitat, and People through Effective Leadership*," will be distributed throughout the agency and available to all partners, state and tribal organizations, Congress, and the public for review and comment.

"The Keystone Conference will be a pivotal moment for America's National Wildlife Refuge System," said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark. "This gathering and the strategy the Fish and Wildlife Service unveils today are vital investments in the Refuge System's future.

"The Service's land base is at a crucial crossroads. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 and growing support from our partners, Congress, and the American public offer tremendous new opportunities to strengthen its wildlife conservation legacy," Clark said.

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AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES...
where wildlife comes naturally!

The Keystone Conference represents the first time in the 95-year history of the Refuge System that all refuge managers nationwide, other Service experts, the agency's top leadership, and key partners will be united in one location.

Refining *Fulfilling the Promise* will be a major focus of the first two days of the conference. The strategy discusses improving Refuge System management in the areas of wildlife and habitat conservation, public use and communications, and leadership and employee development. Issues covered in the strategy include expanding biological expertise, improving guidelines for land acquisition, enhancing community partnerships, ensuring high quality public use facilities and programs, and cultivating tomorrow's leaders.

Copies of *Fulfilling the Promise* will be available over the Internet at "<http://refuges.fws.gov/library/index.html>" or upon request by calling the Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of Refuges at 703-358-1744. Written comments on *Fulfilling the Promise* will be accepted through November 16, 1998, and may be provided over the Internet to "NWRS_Conference@fws.gov" or mailed to: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Refuges, 4401 North Fairfax Drive, MS 670, Arlington, Virginia, 22203. Electronically transmitted comments are preferred to aid in the sorting process. The Service expects the final version of *Fulfilling the Promise* to be completed early next year.

"We are excited about the recommendations and challenges reflected in the draft strategy," said Director Clark, "and look forward to 'Fulfilling the Promise' of America's National Wildlife Refuge System with the help of our partners."

During the second two days of the Keystone Conference, agency representatives will be joined by conservation partners and Administration officials. Special conference presentations will include panel discussions on the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 by those who helped develop it; discussion on the Cooperative Alliance For Refuge Enhancement, a group of 18 sportsmen's and environmental organizations working to increase funding for refuge operations and maintenance; and panel discussions led by refuge managers and other Fish and Wildlife Service employees.

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Guest conference speakers will include Ted Turner, founder of Cable News Network; Theodore Roosevelt IV, managing director of Lehman Brothers, Inc. and great-grandson of the President who established the first refuge; Rollin Sparrowe, president of the Wildlife Management Institute; John Turner, president of The Conservation Fund; Curt Meine, renowned author on Aldo Leopold; and Phil Pister, executive secretary of the Desert Fishes Council. Assistant Interior Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks Donald J. Barry and Service Director Clark also will address those gathered in Keystone. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Vice President Al Gore have been invited to attend.

On the cusp of its centennial anniversary, the Refuge System is undergoing tremendous challenges as well as promising change. Over the last few decades, the System has faced increasingly complex land management issues, including growing demands for a variety of public and commercial uses and funding shortfalls for conservation and visitor programs. Recent milestones, however, bode well for strengthening and unifying the Refuge System.

Comprehensive legislative guidance on how the Refuge System ought to be managed by the Service and used by the public came for the first time in the System's history with the landmark National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.

The Refuge Improvement Act established a "wildlife first" conservation mission for the Refuge System and designated hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation as priority public uses when compatible with the mission of the System and the purpose of individual refuges. The law also calls for more public and partner involvement in management decisions and development of comprehensive conservation plans for each refuge.

"The Refuge Improvement Act laid the groundwork for more effective and consistent management of America's National Wildlife Refuge System," said Director Clark. "We have been given a solid framework, and now the Fish and Wildlife Service must use that framework to build a bright future for the Refuge System. This is what we will begin to do at the Keystone Conference."

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Another milestone was an historic \$41 million increase in funding in 1997 to begin addressing a billion dollars worth of operations and maintenance needs on refuges. The increase was due largely to support from the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement. In addition, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century passed earlier this year provided \$20 million each year for the next five years to address \$150 million needed for refuge road and bridge repair. The Refuge System also is witnessing a surge of support from more than 150 community partners and its nearly 30,000-member volunteer workforce.

Since 1903, when President Theodore Roosevelt established the first refuge at Pelican Island, Florida, the National Wildlife Refuge System has grown to a diverse network of strategically located habitats in all 50 states and several U.S. territories. The System hosts millions of migratory birds, hundreds of endangered species, and countless other fish, wildlife, and plants of virtually every variety. The System's 514 refuges and thousands of small waterfowl production areas also host more than 30 million visitors each year.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.