

Does the National Wildlife Refuge System merit separate agency status?

Early in the past Century, the National Park Service was created to protect the scenic, historical, cultural and other wonders of America and to provide for their enjoyment by the public. Similarly, the U. S. Forest Service was given responsibility for the forested estate, so those lands and resources would provide on-going benefits of timber, clean water, recreation, and more. At that time, wildlife refuges were a small component of lands, the vision for them was incomplete and the profession of wildlife management itself was in its infancy. That has changed markedly as we prepare to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first unit of the Refuge System and begin planning for the conservation of America's beautiful, appealing, and beneficial wildlife into this new century.

The Refuge System ranks third in size of all federal land management systems, and it continues to grow at a rapid pace due to public support and the need to protect sensitive or under represented habitats within the System. Units of the System are found in every State and throughout U.S. possessions in the Atlantic, Caribbean, and Pacific. It is the largest system of lands devoted primarily to conserving wildlife in the World. The complexities of its management as a system, required range of professional expertise, planning (individual units and the System overall), coordination, training, leadership, baseline information and monitoring needs, research (decision-making, gap-filling and long-term), and other needs are enormous and generally specialized.

The developed physical plant is substantial and its maintenance has continuously lagged for decades. Needed major rehabilitation projects will soon reach monumental proportions as the facilities at many units reach their maximum design life span (50-60 years). The passage of the Refuge System Improvement Act in 1997 offers, for the first time, Congressional mandates and guidelines for the System; it alone is a challenge of the highest order.

Yes, America's National Wildlife Refuge System merits full agency status; and it requires it in order to achieve its fullest potential for benefiting mankind through its conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats.