

Blue Goose Alliance Bulletin

#73 – April 19, 2011

President Ronald Fowler submits comments on behalf of the Blue Goose Alliance on the Draft Vision Document for the National Wildlife Refuge System

On April 19, 2011, Blue Goose Alliance President, Ronald Fowler sent comments to the Fish and Wildlife Service commenting on the Draft Vision for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Vision Document can be found at <http://americaswildlife.org/documents/>

The letter follows:



MISSION
TO PROMOTE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
AS A SEARATE AGENCY WITHIN THE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

6512 Williamsburg Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22213-1329

April 19, 2011

Mr. Rowan Gould
Acting Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C St., NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Gould:

The Blue Goose Alliance (BGA) has reviewed the Draft Vision document and has come to some conclusions relative to offering **BOLD** idea/s for consideration. The sentence beginning on line 19, page one of the Draft Vision is rather telling – "This draft vision document begins with a look back at the Refuge System's history of dealing with urgent conservation challenges through innovation, perseverance and leadership."

Yes! As portrayed in that sentence, the beginning did take innovation, perseverance and leadership. Without those elements there would be no National Wildlife Refuge System today. Perhaps it would help to analyze what it took by way of innovation, perseverance and leadership to achieve the Refuge System as we know it.

We are **BOLD** enough to suggest that to Conserve the Future we should go back to the Refuge System's history to determine how past generations dealt with Conserving the Future. We are all aware of the beginning - an action by the champion of all conservationists – President Theodore Roosevelt and his Executive Order establishing a bird sanctuary at Pelican Island. Before he was done he established scores of bird sanctuaries, the Bison Range as the first refuge for a truly endangered species, plus monuments, parks and forest reserves.

Everything had to be built from scratch – a home in the bureaucracy; protectors (wardens) of the lands and the wildlife (the military in Yellowstone National Park); managers (leaders) with knowledge, innovation and talent; and of course the funds to operate. The foundation for all the essentials was politicians with insight who recognized the need for legislation that was required to assure the authority and funding to function.

The next essential elements were (and still are) organization and leadership in that order. How an organization is structured in a bureaucracy (or in a manufacturing or business enterprise) is the determining factor in its success. “Staking Out the Terrain” by Jeanne Nienaber Clarke and Daniel C. McCool (Second Edition) is a classic study of Power and Performance among Natural Resource Agencies. During reorganization hearings in 1976 a departmental official characterized the Fish and Wildlife Service as "merely a little branch buried in the Department of the Interior." We all know today that the National Wildlife Refuge System is merely a program – "Buried in Bureaucracy" - in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

This leads us to Leadership. It is obvious the Refuge System had excellent leadership in the early years, particularly at the field level. Otherwise it would have died in ignominy. There are jewels in the system that are recognized worldwide for their contribution to the preservation and conservation of wildlife and their habitats. These units exist due to the dedication and leadership of successive managers (leaders) over the decades. This has not been an easy task when considering Fish and Wildlife Service expansion and continuous change in Directors does not allow time for each to acquire a real understanding of what the needs are of the Refuge system and how best to meet the needs of managing 553 units of more than 150 million acres of wildlife and wilderness. Recently, one individual, upon being appointed Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, observed he was concerned with five important issues, which he would address under his watch. The Refuge System wasn't one of the five - not worthy of his attention. Yet, there are more than 250 units that do not have any staff assigned on site, plus there is a shortfall of more than three billion dollars needed for operation and maintenance throughout the system.

Our **BOLD IDEA** is that the National Wildlife Refuge System be elevated to agency status within the Department of the Interior. This would provide a single purpose organization. Every staff member from the Director down to the only maintenance person on the smallest refuge in the system would all be working for wildlife and their habitats throughout the System.

The foregoing begs the question then of how has the Refuge System been able to survive and grow in area to the 3rd largest land resource management agency among our Nation's extensive living resource lands? The answer takes us back to leadership and the earliest organization. In the expansion and growth of the System, the leadership of refuges recognized it was a System. Migratory bird management was the most obvious of reasons. Migratory birds need a variety of habitats at various times of the year. To manage this resource requires the knowledge of habitat requirements during a yearly cycle. Through innovative management of habitat, perseverance of acquiring habitat and leadership that applied scientific methods in management, the refuge system has expanded over the years.

A single purpose organization (refuges) and quality leadership were key elements for training new generations of managers. Scientific knowledge is the basis for understanding ecology and the realization that migratory wildlife does not exist in a vacuum. Diversity of habitats provides a diversity of wildlife. Hence the challenge of expanding responsibilities called for special talents and disciplines. No one should question the collective ability of Refuge Managers and staff to evolve, to innovate, to persevere and to lead, since they have demonstrated their capabilities throughout the most trying of times for more than a century.

As refuges evolved, certain things were lost through rapid growth and battles with the organizational structure of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Early leaders recognized that to have a system function properly there was a need for training and guidance for new generations joining the ranks and as staff became more mobile in their career. With expansion it became essential to develop an Refuge Manual. It provided guidance for understanding the history of the organization, the laws that applied to protection of the land and resources, and the policies to be adhered to whether you were in California or Florida or Maine or North Dakota. This was the bible for any new employee and certainly a reference for old hands. That guidance has been lost for want of leadership and understanding at the Directorate level of the FWS.

Refuge Managers have long exhibited the ability to accept conservation challenges. Every generation through the history of the Refuge System has been faced with planning for the future. Likewise each generation has recognized the importance of science in management techniques. Even though the Refuge System has been characterized as 'America's Hidden Lands' it is not the fault of Refuge Managers. They all recognize the importance of refuges to wildlife, and that the system harbors the greatest outdoor laboratories in existence for American youth.

In Summary, the National Wildlife Refuge System needs an organizational structure with a single leader dedicated only to National Wildlife Refuges and to the employees - a leader who represents the system before Congress and before the public; who sets policy and directs the future course for the system. The Refuge Managers of today are in tune with the present. They understand global warming. They understand that Americans yearn for the opportunities offered by the Refuge System. They are acutely aware of what is needed for conserving the future, and they want the opportunity to demonstrate what they can accomplish with a leader who will guide them into the future. But, to Conserve the Future, we need to first step back in history and provide them an organizational structure which will unleash their dedication to the preservation, conservation and management of the Refuge System for wildlife for the enjoyment of all

Americans. Leadership can only keep pace with the challenges of the future if they are freed from the shackles of being "a mere program buried in the Fish and Wildlife Service."

The premise that the National Wildlife Refuge System should be elevated organizationally has been repeatedly recommended by prominent individuals and conservation organizations for decades. These recommendations have fallen on deaf ears and the System today is less prominent organizationally than any time in its history. The time has come for bold action to chart the Refuge System's future and provide the opportunity to correct this persistent deficiency.

Sincerely,

/s/ Ronald Fowler

Ronald Fowler, President
Blue Goose Alliance

This Bulletin and all previous Bulletins are available in PDF format at <http://www.bluegoosealliance.org>

The mission of the Blue Goose Alliance is to promote the establishment of a National Wildlife Refuge Service as a separate agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior.

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