

# Blue Goose Alliance Bulletin

#10 - April 5, 2001

## High Country News Features Refuge Service Proposal

On February 26, 2001, the High Country News, in its Western Roundup Section, printed an article describing the troubles facing the National Wildlife Refuge System and efforts to create a separate agency for Refuges within the Department of the Interior. Below is the complete text of that article.

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WESTERN ROUNDUP, February 26, 2001  
An agency in need of refuge?  
by Rebecca Clarren

*Greens, managers wrangle over how to rescue neglected wildlife refuges*

In the last year, Barry Reiswig, manager of the National Elk Refuge near Jackson, Wyo., has issued DUIs, busted campers for taking drugs, and caught poachers trying to steal antlers. Understaffed and underfunded, Reiswig says he feels as if he spends the majority of his time policing the 900,000 annual visitors to the refuge, and less and less time doing his primary job: monitoring and caring for wildlife.

"It's a constant struggle to run a proactive program; a lot of management actions are going undone," he says. "Everyone here is working the equivalent of two or three jobs at once."

In Reiswig's 23 years with the National Wildlife Refuge System, a bureau of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, he has worked all over the West, from Oregon to Alaska, and the song is always the same.

"We've always felt the Service never gave us the support we needed," he says. "Managers have always said we could do very well as our own agency."

Now, the idea of splitting the wildlife refuge system from the Fish and Wildlife Service is becoming more than the frustrated grumblings of scattered managers. A coalition of 30 retired refuge managers and concerned citizens have started the Blue Goose Alliance, a budding organization that wants to make the refuge system an independent agency. The group is currently applying for nonprofit status.

Although still in its infancy, the Alliance has been joined by other mainstream wildlife organizations. In mid-February, the Audubon Society released *Refuges in Crisis*, a report that also recommends Congress make the refuge system its own agency, on par with the National Park Service.

But not everyone is on board. Although Fish and Wildlife Service officials, refuge managers and environmentalists agree that refuges need more attention, many say creating a new agency now, when the Bush administration is talking about opening refuges to oil and gas drilling, is not only unwise but politically infeasible.

### *Too many bureaus*

The National Wildlife Refuge System is composed of a far-flung and diverse group of land holdings. Each of the country's 530 refuges were created for different reasons: some to protect endangered species, some to provide forage for migrating birds and animals, and some to allow hunting, fishing and education for the public.

Despite the size of the refuge system, it is submerged in the Fish and Wildlife Service, says Don Redfearn, one of the founding members of the Blue Goose Alliance and a former refuge manager. The Service also administers the Endangered Species Act, enforces wildlife laws, operates fish hatcheries and conserves migratory birds. The current director of the Service, Marshall Jones, has 17 chiefs below him, and only one of those is in charge of refuges. That's a ludicrous situation, says Redfearn. He points to the Audubon report, which found that 90 percent of all refuges were underfunded.

"How can we have 93 million acres of land, and we're a fly speck on the wall in terms of funding and management?" asks Gene Hocutt, another retired manager.

Tucking refuges into a bureaucracy keeps them far from the public's radar screen, says Evan Hirsche, director of the National Wildlife Refuge Campaign for the Audubon Society. If one agency oversaw only refuges, he says, it could do more outreach with the public and consequently protect these lands from inappropriate political policies.

"You don't often hear of proposals to drill for oil in Yellowstone National Park," Hirsche says. "Unless the public understands how important these (refuges) are, we'll lose them from neglect."

### *Terrible timing*

But there is logic in keeping the refuge system under Fish and Wildlife, says Noah Matson of Defenders of Wildlife. These lands are specifically designated for wildlife conservation, he says, and the entire point of keeping refuges linked to the Fish and Wildlife Service is that the umbrella agency also deals with endangered species and migratory birds.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service is the only agency that can give landscape level protection," says Matson. The agency has both incentive programs for private landowners, like conservation easements, and regulatory hammers, like the Endangered Species Act, that are instrumental in protecting wildlife beyond refuge boundaries. "I'm not saying the Service does this in the most organized and efficient manner, but the potential is there."

Dan Ashe, chief of the refuge system, says he knows from experience that splitting up the Fish and Wildlife Service is a bad idea. Ashe remembers when former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt consolidated the research arms of all public-land agencies to create the National Biological Survey. While the idea was a good one, says Ashe, the political fallout was horrible.

"The agency was constantly under attack by property-rights advocates who feared the feds were creating more big government," says Ashe. After only a few years, Congress dumped the entire new agency into the United States Geological Survey. Ashe says the FWS has been hurt by the loss of its research arm, and that makes him wary of separation.

"When you talk about separating the refuge service, you say you'll still deal with endangered species and migratory-bird people, but the reality of life is people don't talk to each other," he says. "Agencies worry about their own turf, and if you're not part of the same team, there's competition."

The political climate for separating agencies has only gotten more dangerous, says Don Barry, a former assistant Interior secretary under Babbitt and current vice president of The Wilderness Society. After the last election, Barry says, many federal champions of wildlife protection are gone. He worries that if the agency were separated, some politicians would take the opportunity to weaken the power of the refuge system. "You don't have people in the administration or in Congress who are in positions of power to pull a veto or pull back on the break if things get out of hand."

Under a Bush administration that wants to drill in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Barry says, wildlife is under a greater threat than ever before.

"This is not a time for division," he says. "This is a time for unity."

#### *Collaborating for cash*

Bringing people together is just what Rollie Sparrowe and his eclectic group, Co-operative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement, are trying to do. For over six years, his alliance of 17 people representing groups like the National Rifle Association and the Wilderness Society, has cast aside ideological differences to focus on a single goal: providing refuge managers with enough money to protect wildlife.

Their efforts have already had an impact, says Sparrowe. In the last few years, CARE has convinced Congress to double appropriations for the refuge system at a time when all other agencies were losing money.

"The bottom line is there is not widespread support to separate refuges from the Service," says Sparrowe, who worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service for 22 years. "I think the way to elicit change more quickly is to work within the system."

Rebecca Clarren is assistant editor for High Country News.

You can contact ...

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Read the Audubon Society's report online at  
[www.audubon.org/campaign/refuge\\_report/index.html](http://www.audubon.org/campaign/refuge_report/index.html);

Dan Ashe, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 202/208-5333; [refuges100@fws.gov](mailto:refuges100@fws.gov).

#### **Alliance Responds to High Country News Article**

On March 2, 2001, Blue Goose Alliance President Noreen Clough wrote a letter to High Country News responding to the above article. Below is the text of that letter.

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BLUE GOOSE ALLIANCE  
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Duluth, Georgia 30096-3176

March 2, 2001

The Editor  
High Country News  
P.O. Box 1090  
Paonia, Colorado 81428

Dear High Country News:

Thank you for the recent article by Assistant Editor Rebecca Clarren, regarding the Blue Goose Alliance, and more importantly, the plight of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

As the paramount wildlife and wildlands conservation system in the world, it is most important that the public become increasingly aware of the situation that their National Wildlife Refuge System is in. Your leadership in helping to publicize this is appreciated.

As Ms. Clarren pointed out, there are a variety of positions as to the best approach to help solve the myriad woes of National Wildlife Refuges. While this helps to provide balance, which is necessary to fully understand the issue, we fear this may have created a misimpression. Anything short of creating a National Wildlife Refuge Service by conferring separate agency status in the Department of the Interior is likely to be ineffective.

Even with the increased attention to Refuges from the more recent Directors of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the laudable funding efforts of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), National Wildlife Refuges continue to regress, face an almost insurmountable maintenance backlog, and remain understaffed, underfunded, and buried as "one of many" within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

As a former Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I am only too familiar with trying to juggle the priorities of more than enough programs, especially when one of those is as comprehensive as the National Wildlife Refuge System. It is easy for me to conclude that Refuges need a solo role in wildlife conservation, where they can get the focus and attention they so richly deserve.

Unlike the CARE approach, we do not concur that increased funding alone is the solution. If it was, then Refuges should be suffering less, and they are not. Inefficiency, low morale, and ineffectiveness continue to be problems.

Nor, as others have stated, do we feel that there is great peril to either Refuges or the Fish and Wildlife Service by creating a separate National Wildlife Refuge Service. The Fish and Wildlife Service has many vigorous programs and separating out Refuges will allow the Service to devote more attention to programs such as: the National Fish Hatchery System and interjurisdictional fisheries management; Lacey Act and other wildlife law enforcement; administration of the Endangered Species Act and CITES; cooperative international wildlife programs; research and management of migratory birds, including regulation of waterfowl and game bird hunting; wetlands protection; and, administration of the \$0.5 billion Federal Aid program.

Creation of a National Wildlife Refuge Service will put it on a par with the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service. How could we consider it less? The National Wildlife Refuge System richly deserves this distinction in recognition of its value as a world-class system of 93-plus million acres of land and natural resources. And the American public deserves no less than a separate agency to carry out those stewardship responsibilities for them.

Thank you once again for helping to highlight the National Wildlife Refuges. We look forward to your being able to publish an article announcing creation of the National Wildlife Refuge Service on the centennial anniversary of the National Wildlife Refuge System in 2003! It will be a milestone in conservation!

Sincerely,

Noreen K. Clough  
President

National Wildlife Refuges -- Where the Extraordinary is Everyday"