

# Blue Goose Alliance Bulletin

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## Separate Agency Status Not Entirely New Idea

They say that history repeats itself. One might conclude that the recent interest in the establishment of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) as a separate agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior is a new idea. However, a review of the historical record of the National Wildlife Refuge System reveals that separate agency status was proposed over a quarter century ago, by, among others, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). As part of the proposal, the then-fledgling NWRA identified intense problems facing the National Wildlife Refuge System and developed colorful posters to publicize this issue.

The NWRA posters described the problem, in part, by stating, *"Today, the results of thirty years of neglect are evident throughout the refuge system. Except for a few individual refuges where special political interest has given a semblance of proper development, the refuge system, built by the CCC's in the 1930's is crumbling to ruin. Its responsibilities for wildlife management, environmental study, public recreation, and other uses have multiplied while the funding necessary to maintain and to sustain these programs has diminished. The financial crisis has become so acute that the Fish and Wildlife Service and the USDI have laid plans to move parts of the refuge system from Federal funding responsibility in order to make use of existing funds elsewhere. Current reorganization plans mean that the identity of the National Wildlife Refuge System will be lost."*

If this sounds familiar, it should. From an historical perspective, only two major things have changed. First, the NWRS has grown considerably in the intervening years, from 384 refuges and wetland management districts when the NWRA posters were developed, to 542 today which encompass 95 million acres. Second, the unfunded liability of resource management and development has grown astronomically - to some two billion dollars!

While the NWRS has financially benefited from the efforts of some 20 highly respected conservation organizations, the Fish and Wildlife Service has provided little sustained initiative for funding increases. Furthermore, the FWS apparently is having to take a backseat in negotiations regarding the turnover of management of the National Bison Range to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Montana, a decision that could eventually result in loss of management control on many refuges over time. Other federal land management agencies which enjoy separate agency status consistently hold the advantage.

Twenty five years ago, in its call for separate agency status, the NWRA posters stated, in part, *"If the refuge system is to be saved, legislation must be passed that will accomplish the following: enable Congress to deal with an agency directorate whose major responsibility would be to administer, manage, and be responsible for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Presently, Congress is dealing with a directorate which spends only a small portion of it's time on the affairs of the National Wildlife Refuge System."*

While the stated NWRA objective of achieving separate agency status has not yet been realized, a renewed enthusiasm and dedication is being generated by the Blue Goose Alliance, and other major conservation organizations, to reach that goal.

Not only is history repeating itself, it is being made. As one NWRA poster stated, "*Don't Pull The Plug On A Good Thing.*"