

Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council

April 18, 2011

The Honorable Ken Salazar
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington DC 20240

Re: Vision Document for the National Wildlife Refuge System

Dear Secretary Salazar:

At our February 14th meeting and during our April 12th teleconference call, the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council had an opportunity to be briefed on and to discuss the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Vision Document titled "Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation." This document is to guide management of the National Wildlife Refuge System for the next decade.

The hunter's role in the Refuge System has been ingrained since 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt, with the Boone & Crockett Club, established Pelican Island, Florida as the first national wildlife refuge. Since that visionary step, hunters have contributed more than any other group of individuals to the System's funding, helping to ensure that refuges maintain healthy, sustainable wildlife populations.

The important historic and ongoing role of the hunter was enshrined when the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act elevated hunting and other wildlife-dependent recreation to priority public uses. This was specifically highlighted in "Relevance to a Changing America," one of the papers written for the Vision Document. In describing what the Act sets forth, the Service noted that its commitment "to hunters and anglers as the early and foundational support for the System is unwavering." In addition, the National Wildlife Refuge System must comply with various Congressional mandates (i.e., specific authorizing language, Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) when managing individual wildlife refuge properties for hunting and fishing.

Hunters and the Refuge System share an unbreakable bond because hunting and the other priority uses depend on healthy wildlife populations and habitats and are directly related to the System's mission and the purpose of many of its refuges. We also note in the "Relevance" paper that the Service has committed itself to continue to encourage hunting and fishing by a new generation.

The Council reviewed the Vision Document through the lens of hunting access and opportunities and the role of the hunter in the future management of the System. We believe the Vision Document did a good job in capturing the essential elements of the "Relevance" report, but there are several areas where the description of the hunter's historic role can be strengthened, as well as an explanation of how that role will remain relevant into the future. We would also like to see those recommendations found in the 10-year Plan (Facilitation of Hunting Heritage and Wildlife Conservation) that are relevant to the Vision Document incorporated. As you know, one of the Council's charges is to provide recommendations for implementing that Plan.

Attached with this letter are our recommendations for improving the Vision Document. We appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts with you on this important document.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Tomke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a long, sweeping underline.

John Tomke, Chair
Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council

Cc: Dan Ashe, USFWS
Rowan Gould, USFWS

The Role of Hunting Heritage in the National Wildlife Refuge System's Vision Document:
Recommendations from the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council

Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation

Chapter 1- Introduction

- On page 4 (lines 44-46) the Document states that: “Sometimes called America’s “first conservationists,” hunters and anglers have played a role in the conservation of the nation’s fish and wildlife resources since the late 19th Century. They have been longtime partners of the Refuge System, and will continue to be so as long as there is a National Wildlife Refuge System.”

This statement is set within the context of the NWRS Improvement Act. It needs to be a standalone statement or should precede the statement regarding the Act and its relationship to recreation. The following language in the December 2010 draft under the heading “Broadened Refuge Visitation and Public Awareness” is a good starting point and should be incorporated and expanded upon:

A major milestone in our history was the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. The Act defined our mission and identified six wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities for National Wildlife Refuges: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Our commitment to hunters and anglers as the early and foundational support for the System is unwavering. Because these priority uses are dependent on healthy wildlife populations and habitats, they are directly related to the System mission and the purposes of many refuges. Further, in the administration of the System, the law states that the System should provide increased opportunities for families, particularly parents and their children, to safely engage in traditional outdoor activities like hunting and fishing. As the House Report accompanying this law notes: where compatible, these priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses should be facilitated, “the law will be whispering in the manager’s ear that she or he should look for ways to permit the use if the compatibility requirement can be met.”

- Hunters and anglers have played a **significant** role in wildlife conservation, but the Document does not adequately reflect that fact.

Not only have sportsmen and women contributed significant revenue to state wildlife conservation through excise tax revenue and license fees, but they have been responsible for adding some five million acres to the Refuge System through Duck Stamp revenue.

- In furtherance of the above point, the Document does not mention the Duck Stamp, which is the only form of citizen-based revenue for land acquisition in the world. Nearly 98% of every Duck Stamp dollar is spent directly on purchasing land for the Refuge System. Nearly \$25 million is raised annually and more than \$750 million has been generated over the last seven decades, largely from waterfowl hunters. Adjusted for inflation, the number would be in the order of \$2 billion.
- The Document needs to provide a stronger statement on the historic tie between sportsmen and the NWRS in order for the public to understand why hunting and fishing are two of the six public uses that the Improvement Act has given priority on refuge lands.

Hunter- conservationists are responsible for the establishment of many refuges, including the early refuges for waterfowl and big game mammals that had been depleted on public lands. The importance of the American hunter to the Refuge System should be more explicit and detailed. Even among the six priority public uses, American hunters should be better recognized and appreciated for their historic and current support of the Refuge System. Anything less borders on historical inaccuracy.

Chapter 4 – Human-Nature

- The statement that prefaces the first three recommendations in this chapter is an important one: “The Refuge System has a steadfast commitment to the long-standing conservation partnership with America’s hunters and anglers to expand and improve hunting and fishing opportunities for children and people with disabilities.” The NWRs commitment to sportsmen would be better understood if the role of sportsmen as conservationists was better explained in Chapter 1.
- As an umbrella comment to the specific recommendations, all should identify the responsible person or office for implementation, a timeline for implementation, and periodic status reports. Both the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council and the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council (both Federal Advisory Committee Act – FACA - councils) should be provided status reports on the progress of the Document’s recommendations at their respective Council meetings.
- **Recommendation 4.1:** Both FACA Councils should be involved in the conduct of the analytical review of refuge hunting and fishing opportunities.
- **Recommendation 4.2:** Both FACA Councils should be included in the strategy development with the state fish and wildlife agencies. The term “quality” needs to be defined in the context of quality hunting and fishing opportunities.
- **Recommendation 4.3:** It is unclear how the FACA Councils are expected to “improve coordination, effectiveness and efficiency among federal agencies in the support of access and opportunities on refuges.” This needs to be a more substantive and directed recommendation.
- **Recommendation 4.27:** An interpretation program needs to build in the story of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

Chapter 5 – Organizational Excellence

- **Recommendation 5.11** recommends that employee training will include information about the North American model, and will offer training courses on hunter safety and managing hunting programs on national wildlife refuges. This recommendation is responsive to Recommendations 23, 24, and 25 in “The Recreational Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Plan” (10-year plan). All three recommendations should be incorporated in their entirety. The WHHCC’s charter states that its first priority is to implement the recommendations that are contained in the 10-year plan. This document should incorporate Recommendations 23, 24, and 25 as prescribed by this Administration in the WHHCC charter.