

Presidential Documents

Executive Order 12996 of March 25, 1996

Management and General Public Use of the National Wildlife Refuge System

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, and in furtherance of the purposes of the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742a), the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (16 U.S.C. 661), the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (16 U.S.C. 668dd), the Refuge Recreation Act (16 U.S.C. 460k), the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531), the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act (16 U.S.C. 3901), the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 4401), the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. 4321), and other pertinent statutes, and in order to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitat, it is ordered as follows:

Section 1. *The Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.* The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System ("Refuge System") is to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, and plant resources of the United States for the benefit of present and future generations.

Sec. 2. *Guiding Principles.* To help ensure a bright future for its treasured national heritage, I hereby affirm the following four guiding principles for the management and general public use of the Refuge System:

(a) *Public Use.* The Refuge System provides important opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

(b) *Habitat.* Fish and wildlife will not prosper without high-quality habitat, and without fish and wildlife, traditional uses of refuges cannot be sustained. The Refuge System will continue to conserve and enhance the quality and diversity of fish and wildlife habitat within refuges.

(c) *Partnerships.* America's sportsmen and women were the first partners who insisted on protecting valuable wildlife habitat within wildlife refuges. Conservation partnerships with other Federal agencies, State agencies, Tribes, organizations, industry, and the general public can make significant contributions to the growth and management of the Refuge System.

(d) *Public Involvement.* The public should be given a full and open opportunity to participate in decisions regarding acquisition and management of our National Wildlife Refuges.

Sec. 3. *Directives to the Secretary of the Interior.* To the extent consistent with existing laws and interagency agreements, the Secretary of the Interior, in carrying out his trustee and stewardship responsibilities for the Refuge System, is directed to:

(a) recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation as priority general public uses of the Refuge System through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife;

(b) provide expanded opportunities for these priority public uses within the Refuge System when they are compatible and consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife management, and are otherwise in the public interest;

(c) ensure that such priority public uses receive enhanced attention in planning and management within the Refuge System;

(d) provide increased opportunities for families to experience wildlife-dependent recreation, particularly opportunities for parents and their children to safely engage in traditional outdoor activities, such as fishing and hunting;

(e) ensure that the biological integrity and environmental health of the Refuge System is maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans;

(f) continue, consistent with existing laws and interagency agreements, authorized or permitted uses of units of the Refuge System by other Federal agencies, including those necessary to facilitate military preparedness;

(g) plan and direct the continued growth of the Refuge System in a manner that is best designed to accomplish the mission of the Refuge System, to contribute to the conservation of the ecosystems of the United States, and to increase support for the Refuge System and participation from conservation partners and the public;

(h) ensure timely and effective cooperation and collaboration with Federal agencies and State fish and wildlife agencies during the course of acquiring and managing National Wildlife Refuges;

(i) ensure appropriate public involvement opportunities will be provided in conjunction with refuge planning and management activities; and

(j) identify, prior to acquisition, existing compatible wildlife-dependent uses of new refuge lands that shall be permitted to continue on an interim basis pending completion of comprehensive planning.

Sec. 4. *Judicial Review.* This order does not create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or equity by a party against the United States, its agencies, its officers, or any person.



THE WHITE HOUSE,
March 25, 1996.