THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR

WASHINGTON

Order No. 3455

Subject: Making America's National Wildlife Refuges Great Again

Background. In the early 1900s, members of the Boone and Crockett Club, co-founded by Theodore Roosevelt in 1887, advanced efforts to protect wildlife and habitat for present and future generations. As President, Roosevelt carried that conservation vision forward by establishing the first national wildlife refuge at Pelican Island, Florida, in 1903.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. Refuges also connect people to nature, clean our air and water and help protect coasts against storms.

That conservation legacy continued with the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, which strengthened the Federal commitment to fish and wildlife conservation. As we mark the Act's 70th anniversary, this Order renews the commitment to conserve wildlife and habitat for present and future generations.

Sec. 1 Purpose. The purpose of this Order is to restore the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) to its foundational and statutory mission by ensuring that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) manages national wildlife refuges first and foremost for the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats; fulfills the specific purposes for which individual refuges were established; strengthens active, field-based management; expands compatible access to wildlife-dependent recreation, and opportunities for Americans to learn about wildlife, conservation and our Nation's outdoor heritage; and directs personnel and resources toward on-the-ground stewardship.

This Order directs USFWS to undertake a comprehensive review and revision of System policies, personnel, resources, programming and management practices consistent with these principles, and to develop the specific implementing guidance necessary to carry them out.

Sec. 2 Authority. This Order is issued under the authority of the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary), including the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended, 16 U.S.C. §§ 668dd–668ee; the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act); the Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, 16 U.S.C. §§ 460k et seq.; and other authorities vested in the Secretary.

Sec. 3 Background. The System is one of America's great conservation achievements. Its origins date to March 14, 1903, when President Theodore Roosevelt established Pelican Island in Florida as the Nation's first national wildlife refuge to protect nesting birds threatened by commercial exploitation. Roosevelt went on to establish dozens of additional Federal bird reservations and game preserves, laying the foundation for today's System.

Roosevelt described the reservations he created in enduring terms, observing in 1915 that "wild beasts and birds are by right not the property merely of the people who are alive today, but the property of unborn generations, whose belongings we have no right to squander." That principle remains the core value of the System, and it is simple: protect wildlife and habitat for the benefit of current and future generations.

Congress reaffirmed and clarified this mission through the Improvement Act of 1997. The law establishes the mission of the System as administering a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. The law further directs that the purposes for which individual refuges were established be fulfilled and recognizes compatible access for wildlife-dependent recreation – including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation – as priority general public uses of the System.

Where the purposes of an individual refuge and the System's statutory mission diverge, USFWS policy directs that the specific purposes for which that refuge was established govern refuge management. This Order reaffirms that hierarchy as a guiding principle for the realignment directed herein.

Since the early 2010s, however, the System has increasingly become burdened by centralized decision making, administrative requirements, diminished field capacity, aging infrastructure and policies that can impede the active management tools necessary to achieve refuge purposes. A recent USFWS-led review of the System found that staffing growth favored headquarters over refuge operations between 2013 and 2025, creating an imbalance between administrative overhead and on-the-ground conservation capacity. The review also identified barriers to active habitat management, insufficient maintenance capacity, a deferred maintenance backlog exceeding $2.8 billion, overdue comprehensive conservation plan updates and management layers that distance decisions from field conditions.

These trends have diverted personnel, resources and attention away from the places where the System's mission is ultimately accomplished: on the refuge and on the ground. The Department of the Interior (Department) must therefore renew the principles that built the System: purpose-driven conservation, active stewardship, strong field leadership, responsible public access, partnerships with States and local communities, including gateway communities, and accountability for achieving measurable conservation results.

Sec. 4 Policy. It is the policy of the Department of the Interior that the National Wildlife Refuge System shall be managed in accordance with the statutory purposes of individual refuges and the mission established by Congress, with wildlife conservation and habitat stewardship at the center of refuge management. In carrying out this policy, the Department shall:

a. **Restore Mission-Focused Management.** Ensure that management decisions, policies, programs and expenditures advance the statutory mission of the System and the specific purposes for which individual refuges were established, with refuge-specific purposes governing where the two are in conflict, consistent with applicable law and USFWS policy.

b. **Put Refuge Management Back in the Field.** Direct staffing and resources toward refuge operations, clarify refuge managers' responsibilities, and provide consistent guidance and practical support while reducing unnecessary administrative burdens and management layers. Strengthen coordination between USFWS and the U.S. Wildland Fire Service to ensure refuge habitat objectives and field expertise inform prescribed fire planning and implementation, while supporting wildfire preparedness and response.

c. **Restore Active Habitat Management.** Ensure refuge managers have access, consistent with applicable law, to the full range of appropriate land and wildlife management tools necessary to improve habitat, manage wildlife populations, control invasive species and use appropriate predator management to protect sensitive species, support ecosystem balance and maintain healthy landscapes. These tools include but are not limited to active forest management, prescribed fire, livestock grazing, targeted cropland management and water management.

d. **Expand Compatible Wildlife-Dependent Recreation and Public Access.** Consistent with applicable law and individual refuge purposes, prioritize and facilitate hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation, and consider other public uses where appropriate and compatible with refuge purposes and the System mission. Recognize every refuge as a teaching platform where environmental education and interpretation help citizens and visitors understand wildlife, habitat and conservation, now and for future generations.

e. **Align Resources with the Mission.** Prioritize personnel, funding, maintenance, infrastructure and other resources that directly support refuge purposes and on-the-ground conservation, while identifying opportunities to reduce unnecessary administrative overhead.

f. **Strengthen State, Tribal, Local, and Community Partnerships.** Improve coordination with State governors' offices and fish and wildlife agencies, tribes, local governments, gateway communities, landowners, conservation organizations, ranchers, farmers, sportsmen and women and other partners whose expertise and participation contribute to successful refuge management.

g. **Ensure Timely Action on Issuance of Compatibility Determinations, Permits and Easements.** USFWS shall act promptly on compatibility determinations and associated permit, easement and right-of-way applications, including applications for grazing, utilities and other infrastructure uses. USFWS shall establish a goal of completing all necessary actions within 180 days after receipt of a complete

application, assuming timely action by the applicant. Any proposed determination that a use is not compatible shall be elevated to the USFWS Director for review before final action.

Separate from the 180-day processing goal, unresolved compatibility determinations associated with complete applications for right-of-way, utility or other infrastructure permits that do not require an easement shall be elevated to the USFWS Director for review and/or decision 180 days after receipt of the complete application. Unresolved compatibility determinations associated with complete applications for right-of-way, utility or other infrastructure projects that require an easement shall be elevated to the USFWS Director for review and/or decision 270 days after receipt of the complete application.

Sec. 5 Implementation.

a. The Director shall take all appropriate actions necessary to implement this Order and shall review existing System regulations, policies, USFWS Manual chapters, guidance, organizational structures, staffing practices and resource allocations for consistency with the principles established herein.

b. Within 90 days of the date of this Order, the Director shall submit to the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks an implementation plan identifying actions necessary to do the following:

1. restore field capacity and clarify refuge managers' responsibilities;

2. eliminate or streamline administrative requirements that do not materially advance refuge purposes or statutory requirements;

3. identify policies that unnecessarily restrict appropriate active habitat and wildlife management;

4. improve opportunities for compatible hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-dependent recreation;

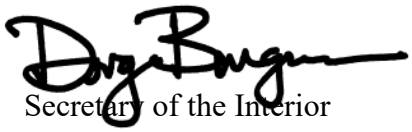
5. align staffing, funding, maintenance and infrastructure priorities with refuge purposes and the statutory mission of the System by reducing administrative overhead and directing staffing and resources to field operations; and

6. strengthen coordination with states and other conservation partners.

c. The Director shall thereafter issue such policies, guidance, directives, or other implementing actions as necessary and appropriate to carry out this Order, consistent with applicable law, within 180 days of submission to the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks.

Sec. 6 Effect of the Order. This Order is intended to improve the internal management, operational outcomes and external effectiveness of the Department. This Order and any resulting report or recommendation are not intended to, and do not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, instrumentalities or entities, its officers or employees, or any other person.

Sec. 7 Expiration Date. This Order is effective immediately and shall remain in effect until its provisions are converted to the Departmental Manual, superseded, or revoked, whichever occurs first.



Secretary of the Interior

Date: **NOV 6 2026**