

National Wildlife Refuge Association Member Briefing

December 18, 2025



NATIONAL
Wildlife Refuge
ASSOCIATION

2025 In Review



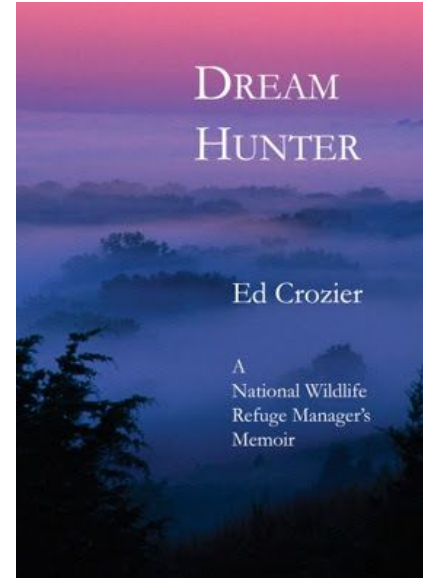
Forrest Carpenter

The 50th Anniversary of the
National Wildlife Refuge
Association



NATIONAL
Wildlife Refuge
ASSOCIATION

Remembering Ed Crozier, last surviving founder of the National Wildlife Refuge Association



NATIONAL
Wildlife Refuge
ASSOCIATION

2025

State of the System



NATIONAL
Wildlife Refuge
ASSOCIATION

In the waning days of 2024 we:

- Secured \$500m in emergency supplemental funding for the NWRS
- Created the first ever Refuge System Staff Appreciation Day (December 17th) - yesterday was our second!
- We moved into 2025 with purpose, conviction, and a plan- grow programs and stay true to our mission



NATIONAL
Wildlife Refuge
ASSOCIATION

NWRA Organizational Updates: Staff

Added 3 New Full Time Staff:

Urban Refuge Program:

- Natalie Balaguer - South Florida Regional Partnership Specialist, Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee NWR
- Stephanie Menendez - Lenape Refuge Complex (NY/NJ) - Regional Partnership Specialist



Conservation Programs:

- Marianne Kelso - Biologist, Bitter Lake NWR, Pecos River Restoration Project, NM



NWRA Organization Updates: Regional Reps

Two New Regional Representatives: Tom Worthington (R3) and Kim Trust (R1)

Joining Jan Taylor (R5) and Howard Phillips (R4)



NWRA Organization Updates - Board

New Chair: The Honorable Lynn Scarlett

New Vice Chair: Mark Musaus

New Members:

Wendi Weber

Holt Thrasher

Bruce Pasfield

Giselle Espinosa

Greg Knadle

Heather Meier

Bill Millar



Opening Months of 2025 - 2 themes from new admin:

Shrink the Federal Government (size and spending)

Find Revenue

- Shrink the federal workforce
 - Firings, incentives to resign, incentives to retire
- Shrink how much government spends
 - Appropriations, grants, foreign aid - anything
- Shrink how much the government owns or leases
 - Cancel leases, sell public lands, sell public buildings
- Expand the power and role of the Executive branch
 - Broad interpretation of executive power (including of spending)



Secondary Theme - Find Revenue

In order to justify extension of 2017 Tax Act - Executive Branch and Congress are looking for any way to find revenue to offset cost

- Sell public lands
- More drilling for oil and gas
- Run government like a business



It was designed to be Fast & Furious
but instead of Vin Diesel, we got Elon Musk



2025 Catch up - Overview of Challenging Times

- **Day One – federal hiring freeze**
 - Largely still in place
- **Efforts to demoralize staff:**
 - No Remote Work
 - Weekly summaries of work
 - No Equity, Diversity, Inclusion
- **Firing of Probationary staff - Valentine's Day**
 - Staff were reinstated after a court order but many didn't come back or resigned soon thereafter
- **Resignation Offers**
 - March, April and May
 - Huge losses in the Refuge System and FWS
 - Some retirements just taking effect at the end of December
- **Retirements**
 - Brain drain in the Refuge System

2025 Catch Up - Congressional Actions

- FY 2026 Appropriations
 - Lapse in Appropriations leads to longest Government Shutdown and Furloughs
 - Operating until January 30th under a Continuing Resolution (still at FY24 numbers)
- Budget Reconciliation - the “Big Beautiful Bill”
 - Key environmental protections such as NEPA were weakened
 - Increased oil and gas development - including Arctic
 - Selling public lands removed because of 5 GOP House members
- New Public Lands Caucus formed



Today's status:

- Estimated 20% loss of Refuge System staff since January, 2025 - on top of the 30% loss from 2010-2024
 - FOIA information this week (FWS wide) from Center for Biological Diversity
- No refuge has the resources and staffing it needs
 - FOIA information obtained by Defenders of Wildlife
- Four Categories:
 - **Category 1 - Full Required Resources** - has the required staffing and funding to achieve mission goals and objectives - ZERO
 - **Category 2 - Limited Resources** - has a portion of required staffing and funding and can only partially achieve mission goals and objectives - **35%** (215 REFUGE UNITS)
 - **Category 3 - Insufficient Resources** - lacks sufficient staffing and funding to meet mission goals and objectives (typically in a complex) - public access may be permitted contingent on public safety - **56%** (350 REFUGE UNITS)
 - **Category 4 - Shuttered** - public access if previously authorized may no longer be permitted - **9%** (53 REFUGE UNITS)
- Example: Coastal NC Refuge Complex - 9 years ago had 53 staff for 6 refuges - now 10 staff for 9 refuges

2026 Outlook - Administration

New Director's Order (Dec 16)

A review of the NWRS and Fish Hatchery System must consider the following factors:

1. Overall mission of the bureau and NWRS and NFHS alignment; look for refuges or hatcheries established for a purpose that no longer aligns with the mission;
2. Organizational structure required to achieve the mission of the NWRS and NFHS, including existing barriers and opportunities to remove those barriers;
3. Current resources (both operational funding and workforce);
4. Refuge and hatchery staff capacity to build and maintain relationships and ability to work in partnership with local communities and State and Tribal wildlife management agencies;
5. Consistent, transparent policy and guidance to ensure system-wide land, water, and resource management;
6. Asset and infrastructure management with a particular focus on accurate deferred maintenance assessments and actual maintenance needs; and
7. Opportunities to achieve efficiencies in the areas of governance, oversight, and span of control



2026 Outlook - Administration

- A Reduction in Force (RIF) is possible, but perhaps not probable - the information gleaned from a lawsuit from federal employee unions said that FWS would eliminate another 143 positions
 - No firings can occur while the current CR (Continuing Resolution) is in place until January 30, 2026
- More oil and gas drilling
- Seek to allow commercial fishing in the Marine National Monuments
- Allow more land transfers - Izembek, others
- Allow commercial use of refuges - SpaceX landings on remote atolls





Operation Blue Goose - Our Plan to help the Refuge System in 2026!

Operation Blue Goose - Administration



- Support the Refuge System as a priority for the FWS
 - Focus on where we agree
- Encourage administration to seek increased appropriations (*although unlikely*) and other pots of funding
 - Reauthorization of the Resources Legacy Fund
 - Inflationary increases for refuges in Transportation bill
 - Resource Protection Act

Operation Blue Goose - Congress

- Congressional oversight where appropriate
- Advance bipartisan measures to support the Refuge System
 - Increased annual appropriations
 - FY 2026
 - FY 2027
 - Reauthorization of the Resources Legacy Fund
 - Increase to the Refuge System
 - Transportation Bill Reauthorization
 - Funding increase overall
 - Inflationary increases
 - Resource Protection Act
 - Grow Congressional Wildlife Refuge Caucus
 - Grow Public Lands Caucus (House) and Stewardship Caucus (Senate)

Operation Blue Goose - Friends



- Raise awareness in communities about the benefits of local refuges and the challenges
- Create local coalitions - hunt/fish groups, birding groups, hikers, kayakers, educators
- Get elected officials out to your refuge!
- Invite reporters to tour your refuge - share your stories
- 90% of refuge visits are LOCAL - engage your community even more!

Operation Blue Goose - Individuals



- Tell your friends and family that these public lands are important to you
- Respond to action alerts - from us, but also other organizations
- Join a Friends group if you haven't already!
- Volunteer
- Write a Letter to the Editor
- Support us!



Operation Blue Goose - “When that light hits the sky,
it's not just a call. It's a warning” (Batman 2022)