

National Wildlife Refuge Association

State of the System *Member Briefing*

April 8, 2026



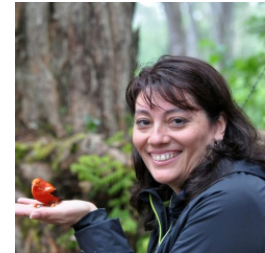
State of the System Report

- Status of the Refuge System today
- President's FY 2027 Request
- Outlook for remainder of 2026
- How you can help



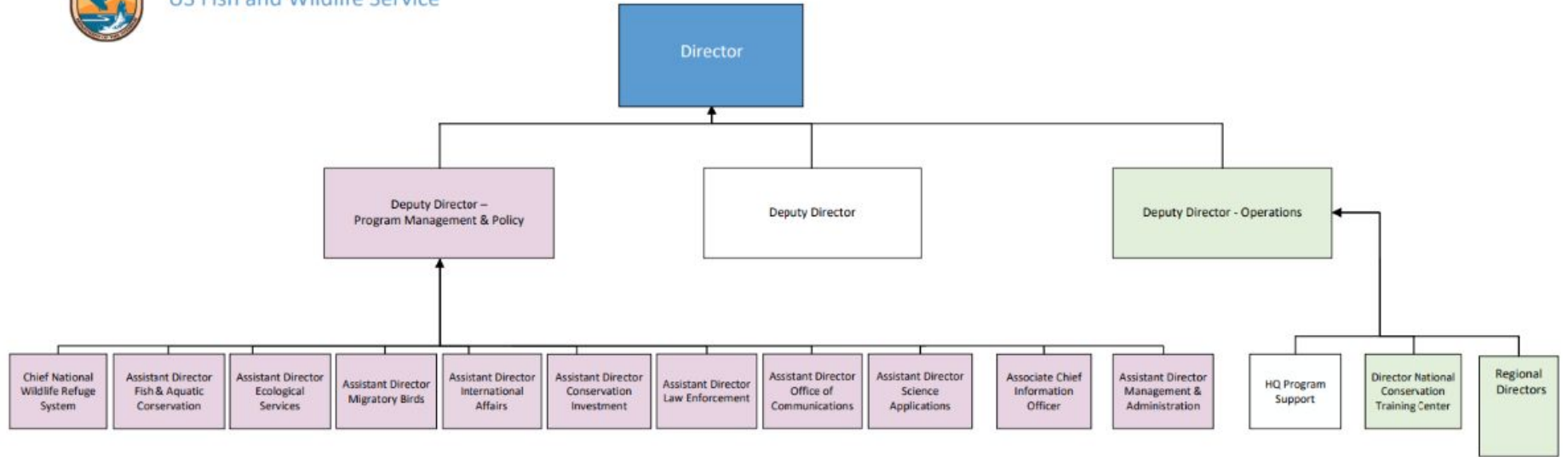
State of the Refuge System Today

- FWS and NWRS leadership
 - FWS Director - Brian Nesvik
 - Principal Deputy Director - Justin “J.” Shirley
 - Senior Advisor to the Director - Joshua Coursey
 - NWRS Chief - Cynthia Martinez
 - Acting Deputy Director for Operations - Dave Miko
 - Acting Deputy Director for Program Management and Policy- Janine Velasco
 - Many Acting Regional Directors and Regional Refuge Chiefs





US Fish and Wildlife Service



State of the Refuge System Today

- Current Staffing - 1948 FTEs (loss of 405 - *down from 2353 at the beginning of 2025*)
 - For instance - in the Southeast, refuges lost 51% of their full time staff (doesn't include temporary or seasonal people - but even with them, it is significant)
 - Drilling down: Coastal NC Refuge Complex - 9 years ago had 53 staff for 6 refuges - now 10 staff for 9 refuges



State of the Refuge System Today

- Current Funding - \$522 m (essentially flat from FY2024)
- Administration Priorities - FWS
 - Strengthening relationships with state wildlife agencies
 - Opening refuges to hunting and fishing opportunities whenever possible and appropriate
 - Create efficiencies - use of AI (counting birds, management plans, looking through comments, etc...)
 - More “boots on the ground” on refuges



Fiscal Year 2027 President's Budget Request

Released April 3, 2026

- Funding - \$417 million (21% decrease or -\$105 m)
- Proposed loss of 276 FTEs:
 - 215 from Wildlife & Habitat series
 - 37 from Urban Wildlife Conservation Program
 - 3 from Youth and Careers in Nature Program
 - 5 from Conservation Planning
 - 21 from Refuge Maintenance
 - 5 additional FTEs for Refuge Law Enforcement



Hard to quantify what this really means - could be not filling vacancies which wouldn't necessarily mean fewer staff.

- DRP 3.0 (Deferred Resignation/Retirement Program) - fire, LE, field staff exempt (they CANNOT participate in this program)

Fiscal Year 2027 President's Budget Request

Released April 3, 2026

- Zeroed Out Programs
 - State Wildlife Grants
 - Multinational Species Conservation Fund
 - Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Fund
 - Refuge Fund
 - Urban Wildlife Refuge Program
- Continued Programs
 - Land and Water Conservation Fund
 - Great American Outdoors Act (very important to the NWRs!)
 - Funds maintenance projects on refuges



**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
FY 2027 LWCF Land Acquisition Requested Project List
(Dollars)**

Priority	Project	State(s)	Funding ⁽¹⁾	Acres
1	Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area	FL	5,000	833
2	Dakota Grassland Conservation Area	SD, ND	2,800	1,647
3	Dakota Tallgrass Prairie Wildlife Management Area	SD, ND	2,000	952
4	Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area	FL	5,000	714
5	Middle Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge	IL, MO	500	500
6	Big Boggy National Wildlife Refuge	TX	10,700	2,042
7	Bear River Watershed Conservation Area	ID, UT, WY	1,200	840
8	Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge	IN	500	150
9	Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge	TX	1,600	80
10	Upper Ouachita National Wildlife Refuge	LA	6,000	2,899
11	Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge	GA	6,000	2,000
12	Blackfoot Valley Conservation Area	MT	1,500	1,763
13	Aransas National Wildlife Refuge	TX	5,000	1,687
14	Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge	NJ	500	332
15	Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area	KS	1,000	333
	FY 2027 Requested Project List		49,300	17,165

(1) Bureau line item funding amounts are Net Budget Authority, the amount available to execute after sequester and pop-up adjustments. All mandatory LWCF funding is subject to a sequestration reduction of -5.7% across all programs.

- Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)
\$49 m for projects



2026 Outlook

- Director's Order
- FWS Reorganization
 - Fire already moved out of refuges
- Election Year
- 250th Anniversary of our nation
- 2nd Reconciliation bill
- Lame Duck Opportunities
- Refuge Association priorities:
 - Refuge System Funding and Staffing
 - Reauthorize the Great American Outdoors Act with increases for the Refuge System
 - Transportation bill with increases for the Refuge System



2026 Outlook - Administration

New Director's Order (Dec 16)

- One outcome will be to identify gaps that can be filled so more staff can be on refuges, “My desire is for more boots on the ground for refuges.” Brian Nesvik, FWS Director
- Transfer of refuges to states is OFF the table
- Co-management of refuges with states is ON the table
- Four phases of review:
 1. Ends in May
 2. May - November
 3. November - March, 2027
 4. March, 2027 - onward
- FWS Reorganization - could come before a Refuge Review is released



2026 Outlook - Election Year

- Politics is part of everything from here to election day
- Second Reconciliation bill (GOP only)
 - Making the American Dream Affordable Again - proposal released by The Republican Study Committee - includes the sale of public lands
- Don't expect appropriations bills to pass by October 1
 - Likely a short term Continuing Resolution until after the election
 - Lame Duck could be very active
 - Possibility of a wildlife centric package which could include the Great American Outdoors Act reauthorization and other bills.



2026 Outlook - 250th Anniversary

- FWS and Refuges doing projects nationwide
 - Flags across America
 - Existing events turned into F250 events - a good thing
- Congress WILL do something to commemorate our 250th anniversary - but perhaps not in time for July 4th
- Freedom 250- White House led (what DOI events will be)
- America 250 - chartered by Congress in 2016



Freedom 250

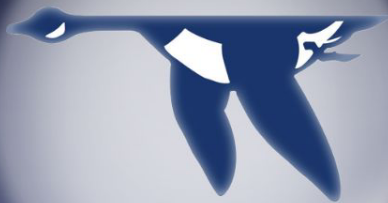
AMERICA



2026 Outlook - Refuge Association Legislative Priorities

- **Fiscal Year 2027 Appropriations**
 - **\$761 m - FY2010 number adjusted for inflation**
- **Reauthorization of the Great American Outdoors Act and its Resource Legacy Fund with an increase to the FWS**
- **Reauthorization of the Transportation bill with an overall increase to the Refuge System AND include inflationary increases (*something all other public lands already have*)**

How to Help!



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

Operation Blue Goose - Friends Groups



- 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!
- Submit testimony to the House Interior Appropriations Committee - due April 24, 2026

(<https://appropriations.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-appropriations.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/fy27-instructions-for-submitting-written-public-testimony-all-groups.pdf>)

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!

Protecting our wildlife heritage is up to us.

"What a country chooses to save is what a country chooses to say about itself." - Mollie Beattie
Director, U.S. Fish and
Wildlife Service,
September 1993-June
1996.

