

[From Winter 1994-95]

Few Incompatible Uses are Found on Wildlife Refuges

An overwhelming majority of public uses on national wildlife refuges, including hunting, are compatible for refuge purposes, according to the Interior Department.

The findings are based on 70,000 pages of documents resulting from a year-long evaluation of more than 5,600 recreational, commercial, and other uses occurring on 500 refuges. Fewer than 100 uses have required correction. The written review was conducted in response to a settlement agreement resulting from a lawsuit brought by environmental groups.

During fiscal year 1994, 46 uses were either modified, discontinued, or corrected under existing regulations or long-range plans. Pending notification to Congress in January, another 23 uses are proposed to be discontinued or modified on 18 refuges during fiscal year 1995. Activities on another 30 refuges are still being reviewed or coordinated with other agencies.

"This review caused us to take a critical look at how we manage this country's National Wildlife Refuge System," said Mollie Beattie, Director of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers the refuge system. "We found some problems and we corrected them. We also gained a lot of valuable data that will help us better manage the system in the future."

"Overall, I am pleased to report to the American people that its National Wildlife Refuge System is well managed and remains a natural jewel. I hope all who care about the National Wildlife Refuge System will now close ranks and help it to flourish."

The 23 uses proposed to be discontinued or modified during fiscal year 1995 cause disturbance to fish or wildlife or their habitat. Among the uses were grazing on three refuges where livestock compete with refuge wildlife and impact habitat, and beach

use and jogging on several refuges that disrupt nesting and chick-rearing the threatened piping plover, a small shorebird.

Closer to home, these compatibility reviews were also required for the Chincoteague, Eastern Shore of Virginia, Fisherman Island and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges. The Chincoteague Refuge staff conducted reviews on 24 secondary uses, which included both Chincoteague and Wallops Island Refuges. The Eastern Shore staff reviewed 6 such uses, to include Eastern Shore of Virginia and Fisherman Island Refuges. No activities were found to be incompatible on these two refuges. Already existing, restrictions on public use and, in particular, closure to protect the threatened nesting piping plovers led to the determination that these two refuges provide adequate protection to wildlife. In addition, the grazing of the Chincoteague ponies is considered permissible due to the conditions imposed on the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company which include such

items as limiting the number of ponies and keeping them contained in designated compartments, conditions which have been in place for many years.

The compatibility review was conducted by refuge managers to comply with the requirements of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, the Refuge Recreation Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act, as well as the terms of the compatibility lawsuit settlement agreement. The lawsuit, settled in October 1993, was brought against the the Fish and Wildlife Service by several environmental groups that had charged that, contrary to the requirements of Federal wildlife refuge law, the Service as permitting activities on refuges that were not compatible with the purposes for which those refuges were established.

Under the Refuge System Administration Act and the Refuge Recreation Act, activities are not to be allowed within wildlife refuges unless they have first been found to be compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. Refuge managers have now made those required compatibility findings in writing. As the the Refuge Recreation Act also requires, refuge managers certified that adequate funds were made available in FY 1994 to manage recreational programs not related to refuge purposes.

"I am proud of the quality and diversity of the wildlife - oriented recreational and educational programs offered to the American public by the refuse system," Beattie said. "I am also very proud of, and want to share, the refuge system's century-old heritage of caring for wildlife and its habitat. Refuges are special places that help ensure our ability to enjoy and appreciate wildlife."

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the largest collection of lands and waters in the world set aside for wildlife conservation. It was started in 1903 at Pelican Island, Florida, and the 500th unit was recently dedicated at Canaan Valley, West Virginia. Some 30 million visits are recorded each year of adults and children who come for environmental education, to observe or photograph wildlife, hunt or fish, or just enjoy nature. The system also includes 51 coordination areas and many waterfowl production areas that together encompass some 92 million acres throughout the United States, its commonwealths, and territories.