

Feds slash staff at national wildlife refuges in midwest

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Over 70 Refuge Positions Cut in 8 Midwest States, 3 Refuges to Lose Entire Staff

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is making drastic reductions and redeployments of staff in the National Wildlife Refuge System throughout the Midwest region. Reductions in services will be felt in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Missouri. The consequence of these reductions will be the elimination of environmental education programs for school children, endangered species recovery programs, reduced habitat management and law enforcement. These cuts come on the heels of a crippling budget backlog of over \$2.5 billion.

"Years of neglect are finally having devastating impacts on the refuge system," stated Rodger Schlickeisen, president of the conservation group Defenders of Wildlife. "The only solution is to provide adequate funding for the refuge system; funding commensurate with the nationally significant benefits the system provides to the American people."

FWS released its "Midwest Region Workforce Management Plan" to cope with what it calls a "nationwide budget decline in the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the ever rising cost to conduct business." Instead of allowing budget-forced attrition of staff and resources to occur haphazardly across the region, FWS has proposed a management restructuring so that appropriate resources can be targeted to the highest priority needs.

"The cuts the Fish and Wildlife Service is being forced to make are damaging our nation's protected refuge system. The Bush administration and Congress need to step up to the plate and provide the funds the refuge system desperately needs before it collapses," stated Schlickeisen. "Wildlife refuges provide unique educational opportunities for tens of thousands of school children annually, many of whom will now be turned away. These refuges provide some of the last vestiges of open space for people to enjoy, whether for birding, photography, hunting, fishing or just taking a peaceful walk in nature. It's a tragedy to see them being abandoned one by one."

The Midwest region is home to 54 national wildlife refuges, 12 wetland management districts and more than one million acres of public land and water. According to FWS officials, refuges in each of the eight states will lose staff positions. Two refuges in Minnesota, Hamden Slough and Crane Meadows, and one refuge in Iowa, Driftless Area, will lose all their staff. This is on top of the 19 others that have never been staffed.

"Wildlife refuges are national treasures -- home to some of our nation's most imperiled wildlife and critical to

ensuring our nation's waterfowl remains healthy and abundant," said Schlickeisen. "Just four years ago we celebrated the centennial of the refuge system, which brought badly needed funding to these important lands. Yet today the refuge system is suffering the steepest cuts in its history. We must invest today to ensure that these special places are here for our children to enjoy tomorrow."

The announcement means that the Fish and Wildlife Service will not allow refuge managers to fill 35 already vacant positions. An additional 36 positions will be cut over the next three years. Combined, these reductions represent 20 percent of the Service's workforce in the region. The plan notes that if there are further declines in the budget or if budgets do not keep pace with increased fixed costs, FWS will be forced to close more refuges to the public.

Examples of the impacts of staffing reductions include:

Iowa will lose 15 percent of the workforce on its six national wildlife refuges and one wetland management district, which total over 100,000 acres and host over 600,000 visitors a year. De-staffing of the Driftless Area Wildlife Refuge will force recovery programs for endangered species to grind to a halt.

Illinois will lose 17 percent of the workforce on its 10 national wildlife refuges, which total over 110,000 acres and host one million visitors a year. Cypress Creek Wildlife Refuge has already eliminated the refuge's entire environmental education and interpretive programs attended by more than 5,000 school children and other visitors.

Indiana will lose 38 percent of the workforce on its three national wildlife refuges, which total 63,000 acres and host 94,000 visitors a year. Staff losses on Indiana refuges will eliminate all of the cooperative wildlife conservation programs the refuges had been able to accomplish with surrounding landowners, and cripple partnership programs with conservation groups used to leverage additional resources for wildlife.

Missouri will lose 18 percent of the workforce on its 10 national wildlife refuges, which total 70,000 acres and host almost 240,000 visitors a year. Staff losses at Mingo Wildlife Refuge will curtail habitat management activities important for migratory birds and other species.

Minnesota will lose 20 percent of its workforce on its 13 national wildlife refuges and eight wetland management districts, which contain over 539,000 acres and host 4.4 million visitors annually. Staff losses at Minnesota Valley Wildlife Refuge near Minneapolis will force day closures of its visitor center and reduced maintenance of public facilities.

Wisconsin will lose 25 percent of the workforce on its eight national wildlife refuges and two wetland

management districts, which total over 177,000 acres and host 800,000 annual visitors. Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge expects that with additional staff cuts, invasive plants "will expand unchecked across Refuge prairies and wetlands" and that education programs for 10,000 students and visitors will be completely eliminated.

Ohio will lose 10 percent of the workforce on its three national wildlife refuges, which encompass 9,000 acres and host 268,000 annual visitors. At the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, which is a nationally recognized Important Bird Area, reduced staff means that invasive plants will continue to ravage habitat for migrating waterfowl and songbirds, while the lack of dike and road maintenance will result in a reduction in public access to refuge facilities.

Michigan will lose 20 percent of the workforce on its seven national wildlife refuges and one wetland management district, which contain over 113,000 acres and host over 143,000 visitors annually. Seney National Wildlife Refuge will be forced to "discontinue its environmental education programs and teacher workshops."

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