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Bulletin

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July 2006

WMI Outdoor News Bulletin * July 2006, Volume 60, No. 7

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"WMI Outdoor News Bulletin * July 2006, Volume 60, No. 7" (2006). *Wildlife Management Institute Outdoor News Bulletin*. 6.
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WMI Outdoor News Bulletin

Richard McCabe, Editor

Issued monthly by the

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

Suite 700, 1146 19th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036

Phone 202-371-1808 | FAX 202-408-5059

Back issues are archived online @ http://www.wildlifemanagementinstitute.org/News_Bulletin/archive.cfm

Volume 60

July 17, 2006

Number 7

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New refuge policies finally make it across the finish line:

Beginning later this month, management of national wildlife refuges will be guided by three new policies that have been developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state fish and wildlife agencies over the past six years, reports the Wildlife Management Institute.

These policies provide direction to assist the Service in carrying out the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 in coordination with state fish and wildlife agencies. Under this law, the mission of the 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 Americans."

The first policy defines this official mission and establishes goals and purposes for the Refuge System to ensure consistency in management across its 545 refuges. The goals established by the mission policy include (a) conserving fish, wildlife, plant diversity and unique plant communities and ecosystems; (b) developing and maintaining a network of habitats; (c) providing and enhancing opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation; and (d) fostering public understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife and their habitats. The mission policy also provides guidance to determine the purpose(s) of each refuge and to explain the relationship of the overall System mission and goals to these individual refuge purpose(s). Generally, the policy directs the Service to interact, coordinate, cooperate, and collaborate with state fish and wildlife agencies in a timely and effective manner on the acquisition and management of national wildlife refuges.

The second policy calls for refuge managers to work with state fish and wildlife agencies to develop and implement quality wildlife-dependent recreation programs on refuges. Prior to opening a refuge to new wildlife-dependent recreational uses, the refuge manager is directed to develop and follow an approved visitor services plan (VSP) and tailor programs to the refuge and its ability to administer the proposed wildlife-dependent recreational uses. This second policy also establishes that the Service will not close ongoing refuge hunting and fishing programs while new VSPs are being prepared. Under the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, wildlife-dependent recreation is defined as a use of a refuge involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, or environmental education and interpretation. Compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are the priority general public uses of the Refuge System. The wildlife-dependent recreation policy encourages refuge managers to work hand-in-hand with state fish and wildlife agencies to provide more opportunities on refuges for these recreation uses.

The third policy establishes a national framework for refuge managers to follow when deciding whether activities that are not wildlife-dependent nevertheless may be appropriate for a particular refuge. The policy describes when refuge managers should deny a proposed use as inappropriate, without determining whether it is compatible with the purposes of the refuge and the Refuge System. By providing guidance on when to screen out proposed uses not appropriate to a refuge, the policy helps refuge managers avoid unnecessary compatibility reviews. Under the policy, if the Service finds that a use is appropriate, it then must determine if the use is compatible before it is allowed on a refuge. The policy does not apply to refuge management activities conducted by the Service, which are designed to meet individual refuge or Refuge System purposes. Importantly, state fish and wildlife agency activities also are considered refuge management activities not subject to the appropriate-use policy when such activities directly contribute to refuge and Refuge System purposes, are addressed in refuge plans or are approved under national policy.

The policies go into effect on July 26, 2006. They are available at www.fws.gov. (rpd)

USDA creates NRCS Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center:

U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced in June the creation of a new Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) in Madison, Mississippi, reports the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI). The AWCC will be an arm of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). It anticipates an initial budget of approximately \$3 million, to develop and transfer wildlife habitat management technologies applicable to working lands. L. Pete Heard, a 44-year NRCS veteran, including stints as State Conservationist in Mississippi and Director of the former Wildlife Habitat Management Institute, will serve as the AWCC Director.

The AWCC unveiling was punctuated with the announcement of a new competitive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Grants program to be administered by the Center. The AWCC will be awarding \$1.6 million in 2006 to 12 successful applicants for projects designed to develop and promote wildlife habitat technologies for farmlands.

Heard aspires for the Center to help raise the wildlife interest and capabilities of USDA agencies, agricultural landowners and myriad other partners, for mutual benefits: "Decisions made by America's farmers and ranchers directly affect the land's plant life, soil, water and wildlife. Decisions affecting stewardship of these resources cannot be understood apart from landowners' most basic need—the ability to support themselves and their families."

It is unclear how the new AWCC will affect or interact with the still-young NRCS Wildlife Team, based with the agency's Central National Technology Support Center in Fort Worth, Texas. This team was assembled in 2004 to lead NRCS acquisition, development and transfer to the field of science-based technology for enhancing wildlife habitat on agricultural lands.

Regardless, WMI Southeast Field Representative, Don McKenzie, sees the establishment of the AWCC as "important affirmation by the Ag Department and NRCS of their commitment to reconnect wildlife with the nation's privately owned working farmlands." McKenzie added that Heard's appointment to direct the AWCC has been roundly applauded within the conservation community.

NRCS assists woodcock restoration in the Northeast:

The soon-to-be-released Woodcock Conservation Plan calls for active management on public and private forestlands to return woodcock populations to 1980 levels. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has stepped to the plate by joining the coalition that is advancing woodcock recovery in the Northeast, reports the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI).

In June, Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced the awarding of a competitive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Grant to the WMI Woodcock Initiative to develop and evaluate technological tools for woodcock habitat improvements. The grants will be administered by the newly opened Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center in Madison, Mississippi.

The grant will assist NRCS efforts to promote habitat management on family farms and forestlands in the Northeast by developing model woodcock habitat Best Management Practices, habitat management demonstration areas, technical assistance deliveries and multiple outreach mechanisms to private landowners.

The Woodcock Initiative proposes an innovative approach to help solve a regional shortage of young forest and shrubland habitats, by focusing landowner attention to management for woodcock habitat requirements via a metapopulation approach. It will test, evaluate and demonstrate how to integrate habitat management for early successional species into a holistic management system that complements requirements for late successional species, wetland dependent species, threatened and endangered species and to improve water quality.

While woodcock are identified as the focal species of the Initiative, state Wildlife Action Plans in the Northeast collectively identify 58 Species of Greatest Conservation Need that are dependent on similar young forest and shrubland habitats used by woodcock. (sjw)

More on 72nd Conference Special Sessions:

Cochairs have been enlisted for three of the four Special Sessions at the 72nd North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, which will be held next March in Portland, Oregon.

Jim Gladen, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (jgladen@rmef.org), will cochair *Conservation and the Fuels Game*, with chair Tom Franklin (tfranklin@iwla.org). Evan Smith, The Conservation Fund (esmith@conservationfund.org), will cochair *The Future of Wildlife of Private Forest Land: Going Out on a Limb*, chaired by Susan Stein (sstein@fs.fed.us). Ron Regan, Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife (ron.regan@anr.state.vt.us), will cochair with chair John Cooper (John.Cooper@state.sd.us) *Targets of Opportunity: State Wildlife Action Plans. Casting a Broader Net for Fisheries Management*, is chaired by Virgil Moore (vmore@idgf.state.id.us).

The Special Sessions were annotated in the [June issue of the newsletter](#), and can be reviewed there. Persons who wish to be considered for presenting at any of the sessions, should contact the chair or cochair as soon as possible before the September 15 deadline for submission of abstracts.

Global warming is culprit in western forest fires?:

According to a recent study published in the journal *Scienceexpress*, global warming and not mismanagement of forests is responsible for the accelerating incidence of catastrophic forest fires in the West, reports the Wildlife Management Institute.

Authors of the study are scientists at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and the University of Arizona. The study was funded by the U.S. Forest Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the California Energy Commission. A key finding of the study is that the major factor leading to the increased fire risk is increasingly early spring snowmelts, which have extended the annual dry period and the fire season, and have produced drier vegetative conditions overall. The trend of earlier snowmelts is attributed to global warming.

The average number of wildfires reportedly increased by a factor of four in the mid-1980s and burned 6.5 times the acreage burned in the 1970s. The study also showed that annual changes in wildfire frequency were linked closely to annual spring and summer temperatures, with greater fire frequencies occurring in the comparatively hotter years. Fifty-six percent of the fires studied and 72 percent of area burned occurred in early snowmelt years. In contrast, only 11 percent of wildfires occurred in late snowmelt years, and those fires burned only 4 percent of the area.

The study presents information from climate models that predict that warmer springs and summers will continue to intensify, further exacerbating the western wildfire problem. Such will predictably result in increased threats to ecosystems and human communities, and at an annual cost greater than the \$1 billion plus in recent years. Already in 2006, according to the National Interagency Fire Center, fires have burned nearly 4 million acres nationwide, with over 2.8 million acres burned in the 11 western states plus Texas and Alaska.

Recent forest management strategies for the West have concentrated on buildup of fuels to fire suppression and reduced logging on national forests. They reflect concerns that led to the 2003 Healthy Forests Restoration Act. This study assessed forest management versus climate variables in terms of the cause of wildfires. It concluded that climate variables are more important, especially in the Rocky Mountains and high-elevation forests.

An interesting sidelight to this scenario is that increases in forest fires will result in increased atmospheric carbon, reduction in tree densities and reduction in capacity of western forests to sequester carbon—all of which will likely contribute to more global warming. (lhc)

ONB survey:

The Wildlife Management Institute appreciates sincerely the information provided by those who completed last month's survey about the "Outdoor News Bulletin" (ONB). The results have affirmed for us some aspects of the monthly newsletter coverage and provided some ideas and inspiration for refinement.

Readers are welcome at any time to provide ideas, opinions or criticism about this newsletter generally, wholly or regarding specific coverage. It can be done by linking to ONB at the end of this and future issues.

Worth reading:

Of Mice and Mountain Lions: The Adventures of a Wildlife Biologist (2004) is authored by my friend and colleague Ronnie Ridley George, currently the Deputy Director of the Wildlife Division for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. It is an autobiographical work.

After a brief introduction to his early years on the family farm in northeastern Texas, the narrative leapfrogs Ron's college years at East Texas State University (B.S. degree). It also omits his service as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force, including a stint in Viet Nam during fateful 1968, although that era is detailed in an earlier book, *Airspeed, Altitude, and a Sense of Humor: The Adventures of a Jet Tanker Pilot* (2001).

Of Mice and Mountain Lions picks up again in 1970, when civilian George was vaulted into conservation courtesy of an advertisement in *Outdoor Life* (not too different than the *Classic* comic book promise/snooker of a life as a free-spirited government hunter in the American West that lured this reviewer into the profession and a life tethered to a desk on the seventh floor of a building in the American East...but I digress).

In 1970, Ron followed his advertised dream to Stephen Austin University, but moved on when confronted with "working up" 2,000 frozen squirrel uteri as some manner of grad school audition or hazing. Next he tried to get into Texas A&M, but the self-proclaimed "friendliest school in the world" didn't waste a "Howdy" or "Welcome" on a purposeful veteran. Ronnie's road show then took him to the city Austin, to get some advice from someone in the state wildlife agency about a career in wildlife science. Here, too, he was waved off...by an Aggie alum, go figure. Lesser men might have demurred and gone into shoe sales or fisheries at that point, but Ron had inherited a degree of Texan tenacity (which normal Americans refer to as blockheadedness). On a subsequent visit to scenic Lubbock and the Texas Tech campus, he fortuitously found its Department of Range and Wildlife Management. Better yet, he found tutelage with one of the profession's foremost educators, Eric Bolen.

From that point to being glad-handed by Texas Governor George Bush at some Parks and Wildlife Department awards function in 1999, Ron's story tracks him through a series of professional assignments and with a variety of characters. It also serves up anecdotes of the family life of a wildlife biologist, including duty with the Iowa Conservation Commission near Boone, Iowa, which ended when the Georges became convinced that Boone is centered atop the polar ice cap.

That takes the reader about two-thirds the way through the 182-page book. The rest documents Ronnie's various travels with wife Barbara to Costa Rica, China, Hawaii and Australia, where some interesting touristy things were observed and done. For all but travelogue vicariates, Ron's life list of interesting touristy things lacks the gusto of his professional adventures. I wanted to read more about the trials, tribulations, insights, snafus and postscripts of his work with animals, other characters, and bureaucracies and their constituents from 1970 to 1999.

I liked best of all the several chapters wherein he wrote of his growing up on the farm along Hunt County's Timber Creek. This included the episode when young Ronnie didn't burn down Paw Paw's barn. It was a time of wosshoppers, Rover the world-class diller dog, Wuff the prairie dog, fishin' poles and Nellie Belle the opossum. And there was Tex, a big game-hunting barred owl that found it necessary to protect the homestead from newlywed Barbara.

I especially liked that Ron grew up apparently thinking that "sort of" was a ponderous term for "sorta." He still does.

I'm told that there will be another volume of Ronnie Ridley's believe-it-or-not life as a wildlifer. I certainly hope so.

Of Mice and Mountain Lions (\$19.95) was published by Eakin Press (www.eakinpress.com) of Austin, Texas, as was Ron's first book (\$16.95).

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1146 19th Street, NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-371-1808 . FAX: 202-408-5059