

As I Take the Helm

*By Greg Siekaniec
Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System*

The National Wildlife Refuge System has changed a great deal since I last served eight years ago as deputy chief in the Washington Office. At the end of 2000, we had 530 national wildlife refuges, having established, among others, Big Oaks Refuge in Indiana and the then 66-acre Northern Tallgrass Prairie Refuge in my home state of Minnesota. Today, we have 550 units within the Refuge System.

In 1999, while I was still deputy chief of the Refuge System, an Assistant Director of the Division of Refuges and Wildlife not only oversaw refuges and realty, but also directed other programs, including the Fish and Wildlife Service's law enforcement, Office of Migratory Bird Management and Duck Stamps. Now, the Refuge System is a stand-alone program within the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Times have changed.

Not only does the National Wildlife Refuge System have an Assistant Director now – a position I am honored to occupy -- but we have 550 units of the Refuge System, plus 37 Wetland Management Districts, together spanning more than 150 million acres. Those acres include the recently-established Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, now managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

We have more than 200 Refuge Friends organizations. The National Friends conference to be held in late February will be the largest we've ever hosted, with about 500 people in Washington, DC, to show their support for the world's most important network of public lands devoted to wildlife and wildland conservation. The Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE) continues to urge Congress to provide the Refuge System with \$1 billion for green jobs as part of the nation's economic stimulus package.

In the midst of all of this – and so much more – I have been given the privilege of serving as Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

That's far more than I dreamed of when I was growing up in Minnesota on the boundary of Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge. That's a great deal more than I imagined 24 years ago when I started my career as a refuge clerk at J. Clark Salyer Refuge, named for a man who may have been the greatest Refuge System Chief in our history.

There is a steep learning curve inherent in any new position, and I have begun to move up that curve. One of our most pressing challenges is to plan our conservation strategies in the face of climate change. Others include funding for a Refuge System with growing responsibilities; strategic habitat conservation with partners who can help us ensure the

long-term health of our precious resources; engaging our supporters in helping a new generation learn the joys of the outdoors; and enhancing leadership development for a workforce that too often is asked to do more with less.

For now, I am humbled to become even a small part of a Fish and Wildlife Service's history. I am energized by the millions of people who know that wildlife refuges are some of the best places to learn an appreciation of the natural resources that are the very foundation of our nation's greatness. And I hope to see you soon on a national wildlife refuge.