



2007 Refuge Manager Survey

These are selected essays from refuge managers participating in the 2007 PEER survey in answer to the question:

“The NWRS could be most improved by—“

The essays are grouped by topic in the order of the frequency cited by refuge managers.

I. Reversing Resource Shortfalls (51 essays)

“Erosion of staffing is killing us.”

”Refuges are not being managed appropriately because of lack of funding.”

“More funding – it’s pretty simple.”

“Increased support & recognition by the American people leading to more dollars for O & M as well as land acquisition. Sadly, but truly, it takes a lot of money to hire enough people to do a good job.”

“Increase staffing levels back to at least some base levels. It does us no good to have equipment & facilities needs being filled/met if we do not have adequate staff. ‘Partners’ & volunteers help but are not the best long term solution.”

“Increase in O & M to be able to staff stations fully and have funds to do work!”

“More funds for operations! Not just maintenance, because operations funds is what funds species & habitat protection.”

“The FWS needs more biologists ‘in the field.’”

“Complexing – the largest impact is not to the NWR being complexed; the impact is at the NWR that is required to remotely manage that NWR.”

“More resources at field level – not creating another agency (bureaucracy). More prompt allocation of current year budget to field. Congress passes budget way too late & field doesn’t receive allocation until 2/3 of the way through the fiscal year.”

“1. Put more staff in the field – one GS14 takes more salary & benefits than two GS7[s]. 2 Need more maintenance staff during summer peak season. 3. Need more EE (Environmental Education) staff. Our complex has completely abandoned EE & interpretive programs. We need to reach 2000+ kids a year – they are our future constituency.”

“Currently the greatest factor negatively impacting our station is lack of funding.”

“A meek approach to budgeting has never worked for us – and so we should change our approach. The more aggressive buildup to the Centennial did work. Why else does every other Federal land managing agency get more dollars per acre than the NWRS?”

“Increased funding for maintenance needs [and] acquisition.”

“More resources to handle challenges such as wildlife diseases (CWD, West Nile virus, plague) and battle invasive species.”

“More fiscal resources & base budgeting (vs. regional micro-management of annual allocations)...”

“Re-establishing a land acquisition program with adequate funding. The time is NOW. Lost opportunities just outside our boundaries and new threats beyond refuge boundaries must be addressed.”

“Increased funding for habitat improvement and increased effort to encourage non consumptive users to participate in wildlife observation, philosophy, etc.”

“Increased funding levels [and] public support/awareness of refuge programs.”

“Improved funding dedicated to resource issues & set some #s at levels that protect & manage resources.”

“In this era of declining budgets we can not be all things to all people. But we continue to carry on like nothing has changed. For the public to see that we are hurting (budget) we should stop providing some services. This is the only way to put focus on the budget crisis we are facing today.”

II. Reforming Administration and Management (33 essays)

“More flexibility in utilization of funding, less administrative overload and administrivia...Less counting beans and accounting for pennies – more focus on habitat management and monitoring...If it doesn't happen in the Field it doesn't happen. Obviously, administrivia is not a product of the Field but it has eroded our efforts by 75%.”

“Getting Refuge Managers back on the land. We spend way too much time at the computer, especially working SAMMS, RAPP, ABC and various other programs that do nothing to help me run my complex.”

“Every year more of our time & our staff's time is consumed by useless reports, mandatory training (IT, security) that reduces what we can accomplish.”

“Less micromanagement/oversight by DOI. We are spending way too much time/effort/\$ counting the wrong things—trucks, minutes spent changing light bulbs, lawnmowers, etc.”

“Eliminating and/or streamlining programs such as SAMMS and eliminate so many data calls and administrative burdens.”

“Flexibility in budgets & spending.”

“Reduce administrative bureaucracy and do away with ‘business model.’ Managing wildlife is not a business.”

“A significant decrease in administrative workload that consumes all existing staff availability.”

“Remove the unnecessary administrative burdens and returning to our real mission.”

“The increase in Departmental policies that require extensive input from refuges into data bases that have little, if any, relevance to operating a refuge, yet demands an extensive amount of time/staff that is diverted from the job of wildlife management.”

“Abolishing SAMMS! SAMMS is a broken system that is field use unfriendly.”

“Our SAMMS and financial system are a disaster at the field level.”

“Focus on our important work and not SAMMS, RPI, FBMS.”

“Do away with limitless data calls! to free up more time to do wildlife work!”

“Reduced administrative workload, fewer databases, more flexibility, more field focus, and support for line authority to prevent non-mission diversions.”

“Fewer mandates from DOI. We are in a very top down authoritarian environment where consequences to field stations are irrelevant.”

“Fewer cumbersome computer-generated administrative and tracking systems.”

“Improving efficiency by streamlining (not eliminating) the ever growing burdensome accountability processes.”

III. Improving Agency Leadership (29 essays)

“We are our own worst enemy. Most problems with management on our refuge are internal rather than external.”

“Strong leadership.”

“The fiscal problems we are facing are self-inflicted. We are not asking for enough funds to adequately maintain and/or increase staffing, budgets, etc... we need to ask for more yet the W.O. folks refuse. Why? They’re afraid of being told no!”

“Have upper management strong enough to take lumps from ‘partners’ when it interferes with efficiency, policy, and sound biological reasoning. States need to back off & recognize NWRS differences w/ broader national scope which can differ from the narrow state perspective.”

“Leadership that supports the NWRS & at least asks Congress for adequate funding.”

“If the Director won’t or can’t we need someone with a loud voice to be our advocate to Congress.” “New leadership in the Regional, Washington and Department levels.”

“Leadership that can stand up to the Department.”

“I blame Interior for most of our issues now. Our Leadership just reacts to Interior’s demands, which is a change I’ve seen over the last 10 years, or so.”

“A change in leadership in Washington D.C., Service offices and Regional Offices...Our leadership has little concern for refuges...refuges are led by people with ES experience and that is where their focus remains.”

“Require all line supervisors in the refuge system to have actual refuge experience, this includes Regional Chiefs.”

“Top FWS leadership that supports NWRS as primary mission/responsibility of FWS—without a land base of conservation units, fish & wildlife will lose out.”

“The RO and WO should support the field stations. It has become the opposite. The tail wagging the dog. The current leadership have no field experience or have forgotten any they had. They do not listen to the field managers but instead tell them what they want.”

“Better leadership and vision of what the future holds.’

“Leadership that supports the mission statement with concrete decisions. It’s not that we have too many layers or people that lack knowledge but our leaders need to make definite decisions and lead.” Too much time is spent analyzing, getting opinions and making sure that all will agree.”

“We have no leadership in this Region or in Division @ WO.”

“Not using employees as pawns in times of budget crisis. Showing support to the people/employees that are supposed to be the most important asset. Not playing ‘games’ with employees’ lives & futures.”

“Leadership rekindling the passion, commitment and ‘ownership’ that used to be felt by refuge employees. Project leaders and refuge staff are currently frustrated with the lack of vision, listening and real problem-solving exhibited by Regional & Washington leaders. In 30 years with the FWS, I have never seen so many employees eager and relieved to be leaving the Service. Many formerly passionate employees now ‘work for a paycheck.’”

“Aspire to place leaders in the right positions. This may mean more leadership roles in the field where managers’ passion and heart lies.”

“Doing a better job of recognizing effective leadership and promoting those individuals and removing ineffective leaders or troublesome individuals.”

“More NWRS employees stepping up to leadership positions in RO’s & in Washington.”

“Having leaders that have actually worked on a refuge!”

IV. Addressing Lack of Autonomy (and Need for a Separate Agency) (27 essays)

“Being a separate agency. I feel the NWRS has strong political support but the FWS (ES) does not. I feel \$ meant for the NWRS are siphoned off into other FWS divisions because they don’t have direct support.”

“1) A separate chain-of-command w/in Agency. 2) Clearly distinct, transparent program funding; 3) Clearly distinct, transparent program identity. 4) Refuge program specific External Affairs. ”

“Separating the Land Management part of the agency from the purely administrative/policy, enforcement part of the Agency.”

“Recognition/Identity @ Washington level outside the agency.”

“Line authority of Regional NWRS Chief reports to Chief of NWRS rather than via the Regional Director. This would provide a less hardcore stance than a separate agency.”

“Becoming a separate agency. Refuges continue to wear the white hat for the Service, while being the ‘red-headed stepchild’ when it comes to attention and funding.”

“Separate Agency! We are hampered by too many layers; must compete internally and externally for funding, and too often lost in the agency (just look at the Service website and try to find Refuges).”

“Becoming a separate agency. After 25 yrs. as a refuge manager in charge, I have absolutely no confidence in status/conditions improving otherwise.”

“Separating refuges from Ecological Services within the budget process.”

“The FWS Directorate does not fully understand the Refuge System, and due to the fact that very few of its members have any refuge field experience, I feel that cannot change without us becoming a separate agency. Present Director had 2 chances to promote RD’s from refuge background and did not on either occasion.”

“Split refuges off as their own identity to eliminate the huge impacts (budgetary) that their other non-refuge divisions such as ES, etc. have.”

“Either having a separate chain-of-command or becoming a separate agency...Bottom line – change is needed because what we’ve been doing isn’t working!!”

“Placing all wildlife partnership programs...including those in NRCS under the Refuge System. Removing the regulatory aspect of FWS and placing it in EPA...I believe the regulatory aspects of FWS is what drives support down.”

“Recognizing that the NWRS is the land base for FWS and that we (refuges) play a major role w/in the Service and should be recognized as such in the new Service mission/vision statement. We are the biggest program, we accomplish our work based on sound professional science and we have to maintain a strong land ethic.”

“I strongly oppose refuges becoming a separate agency—this would be a difficult blow to FWS & refuges.”

V. Cutting Back Layers of Management (18 essays)

“Streamlined management & decision making. RO folks on travel too much w/ no actual acting managers to make decisions in their absence.”

“Reversing the complexing theme. Reducing RO-WO overhead & costs that should go to refuges.”

“Flattening the organization...Much too cumbersome for dealing w/ National Conservation issues.”

“Eliminating unnecessary D.C. and RO positions/programs such as regional training coordinators, regional WG coordinators, regional WUI coordinators, and consolidate regional cultural resources, safety and LE programs. Ensure that law enforcement, fire management, and purchasing authority remain within the chain of command at refuges.”

“True delegation of authority to the Service and to the Refuges. The [Interior] Department is in the way on too many things!”

“Even during years the FWS was receiving budget increases the agency was not sending the funding on to the refuges to meet operational needs. Instead, the leadership was building new programs like the California/Nevada office, salary increases, and opening new projects. The increased funding generated by the CARE group lobbying effort was misused and not going to refuges.”

“Reduction in size of Washington Office and number of initiatives.”

“Returning management responsibilities to managers & significantly reducing Washington Office micromanagement.”

“Reduce staffs in Regional Office by 30% or more.”

“Reducing the size of Regional offices.”

“Delegating to the field!”

“We need good decision makers from RO and not the continuous layers of bureaucrats we currently have to deal with.”

“The NWRS needs to be field driven. Each refuge is unique & a one size fits all program driven at the Region and Washington level is not good for National Wildlife Refuges.”

“Empower the refuge manager—allow the field to make the correct biological decisions.”

“If no more \$ – 1) eliminate subactivities—spend where needed; 2) use 2-year budget authority; 3) Get personnel/HR to wake up & help, not hinder.”

VI. Getting Environmental Priorities Right (11 essays)

“Stronger sense of priorities. Get some botanists! And worry more about rare plants.”

“Abundant quality habitat is more important than shiny trucks. Too often we buy shiny trucks because it’s easier & it’s line-item funded but we neglect restoring & managing habitat, especially restoring/creating new habitat.”

“Smaller refuges are once again taking the majority of the cuts while bigger field stations are being left intact. What has happened to our ‘wildlife first’ mission?”

“There is too much emphasis on public use and not enough on resource management. Refuges being known as ‘a place where wildlife comes first’ is only lip service.”

“Return to ‘Wildlife First’ mission!!!”

“Codifying ‘Wildlife First’ in policies, regulations and plans.”

“Returning to its basic and original mission and eliminating all the flavor-of-the-month programs.”

“Following through with the improvements and decisions outlined in the Promises document.”

“Getting back to the field work necessary to manage public lands.”

“Back to natural resources habitat management. Encouraging hunting and fishing on refuges and other forms of public use. We need to go back to our roots...”

“Let’s get back to what we are supposed to be doing – protecting and managing the resource for the benefit of the Am. people.”

“Doing the best for wildlife in their core populations and not on the fringes of their range. Focusing on efficient programs not on traditions.”

“Staying the course...Wildlife and habitat first. Everything else, get in line.”

VII. Insulating Refuges from Politics (8 essays)

“Let people do what they know how to do. Best science, professional, objective communication in open, honest environment. Politics will do what it does.”

“The WO philosophy is filtering to the RO meaning that a very political solution is sought for field problems versus what is good for the resource.”

“Politics is running this agency.”

“The Service has abdicated its authority, ignores laws, regulations and policies; and worse, has compromised its mission in the name of partnerships.”

“Pushing back on pressure from individual congressmen – with SUPPORT from RO and WO – when that pressure does not further agency goals.”

“A new administration in Washington!”

VIII. Other (Miscellaneous) (12 essays)

“Bring back Law Enforcement personnel.”

“More easement acquisition [for] habitat, esp. Wetlands and grasslands are being destroyed rapidly for ethanol production. “Ease hiring restrictions so we can hire the most qualified applicant.”

“Getting rid of the deadwood, unproductive gov’t employees!”

“Allow more managers to become dual-function law enforcement officers; we now have less law enforcement officers & less protection because leadership pulled badges from dual-function officers.”

“Charging entrance fees to all refuges. Massive push to sell Duck Stamps, develop \$ for land acquisition and maintenance. Every visitor should own a Duck Stamp!”

“Need to update Service Manual to address current challenges (wilderness management).”

Reinstating trainee program. There used to be a position called “Manager Trainee.” They did away with it, for some reason. Now kids come out of college and start as 9/11’s. With very little experience they become 12 & 13 Project Leaders in just a couple of years. This does not serve the system well.”

“We need to develop a work ethic in our employees so that they are willing to do whatever job that needs to be done for the resource. There is too much feeling among employees today that many tasks are viewed a ‘It’s not my job’, ‘It’s not in my position description.’ Manual labor and/or working with your hands should not be viewed as degrading work.”

“Eliminating racist & sexist affirmative hiring policies & practices derived from diversity initiatives. These policies place color & gender above competency & qualifications.”

“Place term limits on W.O. & R.O. supervisory positions to help eliminate the politics & corruption.”

“Better supervision & accountability at all levels, especially at the field (station), complex and Regions.”

IX. Comments about PEER Survey

“Thanks for looking into this on our behalf. Most of us do not or cannot say much for fear of being shipped to Guam (although I hear it is a nice place).”

“Help from groups as yourselves, Refuge Caucus, NWR Association, CARES group & others. Be our voice.”