**Frequently Asked Questions**

***What are national wildlife refuges?***

The National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is managed by the U S Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) on behalf of the American people, and is the largest assemblage of lands and waters devoted to fish and wildlife conservation in the world. It consists of 568 refuges across all 50 states and 5 U.S. territories, encompassing 95 million land acres, 760 million acres of submerged lands and waters, 38 wetland management districts, and 5 marine national monuments.

***How does the Service decide which lands to include in a refuge proposal?***

There are many considerations in developing a refuge proposal. The Service usually initiates the process by working with state fish and wildlife agencies and other partners to identify lands that are important as habitat for federal trust resources but are not considered to be permanently protected. This process is also vetted in a public forum in an effort to share information, engage stakeholders, and seek input to better inform the final recommendation. Areas of interest to the Service are generally based on such considerations as habitat values, long-term sustainability, connectivity to other core habitats and partner-conserved lands, the potential for impacts from climate and land use changes, administrative and operational efficiency, and ease of access for compatible public uses.

***What is the process for establishing new refuge boundaries and will there be opportunities for public input?***

The Service is following its internal policy and guidance from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Service policy requires preparation of a Land Protection Plan to inform landowners and interested stakeholders about the details of the proposal. This document will be combined with an Environmental Assessment (EA) as required by NEPA. The combined document will be developed in draft and will be made available for a public comment period of at least 45 days. The draft document will describe the purpose and need for action, a description of the affected environment, alternatives including the Service’s proposed action and a “status quo” alternative, the predicted environmental consequences of each alternative, and a description of consultation and coordination efforts. Public input will be incorporated into the final document. The Director of the Service has the authority to approve or disapprove the proposal.

***How will the refuge be created?***

Once a new refuge boundary is approved by its Director, the Service and its partners will work with willing landowners to protect land within the boundary area by either purchasing land at fair market value or purchasing development rights through conservation easements. Creating a new refuge boundary will also allow the Service to accept donations of land or interests in land.

***If my land is within the proposed refuge boundary. What does that mean?***

The rights of a private landowner are not affected by the designation of a refuge boundary or the establishment of the refuge. Refuge acquisition boundaries identify areas the Service believes are important for our federal trust resources. The acquisition boundary merely gives the Service the approval to negotiate with landowners that may be interested in selling their land or may become interested in selling their land in the future. Landowners have no obligation to sell their land or otherwise participate in the proposed refuge at any time. There is no additional regulatory burden for landowners within the refuge boundary.

***What if the Service wants to buy my land, and I do not want to sell?***

You don’t have to sell your land as part of this proposal. You would be unaffected by the establishment of the refuge.

***What is the timeline for completing the refuge?***

Service policy is to work with willing sellers as funds become available. This is a long-term effort that may take decades to complete. The number of willing sellers and availability of funding will determine the timeline.

***What types of activities will be allowed on the refuge?***

The Service supports wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Additional activities offered at Umbagog NWR include snowmobiling, cross country skiing, biking and horseback riding, which can be included in this proposal.

***What are the potential impacts to local economies if lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System?***

The Federal Government does not pay state or local taxes. However, the Service annually reimburses localities to compensate for the lost revenue of real estate tax, based on a formula that is the greater of: 75 cents per acre; three-fourths of one percent of the fair market value; or 25 percent of the net receipts collected from operation and management of the refuge. Payments to localities are subject to annual appropriations by Congress. In Fiscal Year 2022, Congress appropriated $13,228,000 for Refuge Revenue Sharing, which allowed the Service to pay localities 21.7% of what would constitute full payment under the formulas described above. Congress may appropriate additional funds to compensate local governments. Other economic benefits typically associated with refuge lands include increased tourism, improved property values adjacent to the refuge, preservation of ecosystem services, and enhanced consideration for federal, state and other grant programs to name a few.

***Where does the Service obtain funding to purchase land?***

The Service receives funding for land acquisition from two major sources: the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. These funding sources are not derived from traditional tax revenues but are collected from the sale of Federal Duck Stamps, entrance fees from certain national wildlife refuges, import duties on arms and ammunition (Migratory Bird Conservation Fund), and from the sale of offshore oil leases (Land and Water Conservation Fund). Funding from these sources supports conservation of land across the nation.

***What are the next steps?***

Following these public scoping meetings, we expect to write and publish a draft Environmental Assessment and Land Protection Plan this summer/early fall, complete with maps showing where the Service would like to create a proposed refuge. The Service will provide additional opportunities for public engagement and comment on the proposal. Once the public review and comment period ends, the Service will evaluate the comments and make any changes needed before developing a final plan. When completed the proposal will be submitted to the Service Director for approval.

**For more information:**

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Questions/Comments can also be sent to: FW5mainehighpeaksplan@fws.gov