



National Association of Conservation Districts

Submitted Via: www.regulations.gov

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

May 6, 2024

Re: Docket FWS-HQ-NWRS-2022-0106-0001 – FRN 2024-02076

To Whom it May Concern,

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) thanks the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for accepting public comments to inform the development of the agency's proposed National Wildlife Refuge System: Biological Integrity, Diversity and Environmental Health (BIDEH) rule and policy updates (2024-02076). NACD appreciates the opportunity to provide input and commends the USFWS for their dedication to preserving and enhancing the ecological integrity of these vital habitats.

NACD represents America's 3,000 conservation districts, their respective state and territory associations, and the over 17,000 individuals who serve on their governing boards. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law to carry out natural resource management programs at the local level and work with landowners and operators in every part of the country to help them manage and conserve land and water resources on private and public lands. Conservation districts provide technical, financial, and other assistance to help landowners and operators voluntarily apply conservation to the landscape. Conservation districts work hand-in-hand with all levels of government to ensure that programs, regulations, and initiatives are tailored to address unique local resource needs. NACD looks forward to working with the USFWS and all stakeholders to ensure that any final rule supports voluntary, incentive based, locally led conservation while ensuring coordination and collaboration in the management and use of refuges and surrounding areas.

NACD values the USFWS's collaboration with conservation districts to promote healthy soils, waters, habitats, and wildlife in areas adjacent to and within the National Wildlife Refuge System. Through our shared commitment to conservation, we have helped to facilitate significant advancements in habitat restoration, biodiversity, and sustainable land management practices. Conservation Districts have worked side-by-side with USFWS staff to address issues related to water quality, soil health, invasive species, and other shared concerns. These partnerships are essential for achieving our mutual goals of preserving our natural heritage for future generations.

The effects of climate change have significant detrimental impacts on habitats and wildlife within National Wildlife Refuges and throughout ecosystems across the country. While NACD appreciates the efforts outlined in the proposed BIDEH rule, we have noted some concerns regarding the potential for economic impacts and delays in program development and implementation stemming from the potential for additional requirements for National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review in the development of comprehensive conservation plans and/or other approved management plan(s).¹ Certain beneficial practices such as cooperative agriculture may require a NEPA review under this new policy and is left to discretion of the refuge managers. The USFWS currently reviews Endangered Species Act determinations on a 5-year basis, which includes species and habitat review. These reviews are comprehensive and provide recommendations based on the best available scientific and commercial data. NACD believes it is important to recognize the strain that additional NEPA reviews may place on already stretched staff both within the USFWS and among partner organizations. As dedicated professionals working tirelessly to conserve our natural resources, staff members are often faced with large workloads and limited resources. Any increase in administrative requirements must be carefully balanced with the need to effectively implement conservation measures on the ground. NEPA is recognized as an intensive process, and adding additional conditions has the potential to hinder current and future efforts to effectively safeguard biodiversity and address environmental challenges. Streamlining NEPA reviews while ensuring thorough consideration of environmental impacts is crucial to maintaining momentum in conservation initiatives. NACD urges the USFWS to explore ways to expedite the NEPA process, and other, review processes without compromising the integrity of environmental assessments.

Furthermore, NACD seeks clarification on what coordination and cooperation at the local level entails in the context of the proposed rule and policy. The proposed regulation and policies “support ecological connectivity as a means of achieving refuge habitat objectives and landscape planning goals.”² There are no better partners in achieving this goal than local communities and conservation districts on the ground in those areas. Current USFWS policy³ requires coordination only with the affected states. The proposed changes would include coordination with recognized Tribes but offers no specific guidelines for coordination with local conservation districts, local communities, or adjacent private landowners. Effective engagement with local stakeholders, including conservation districts, is vital for implementing successful conservation strategies. Clear guidelines outlining the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved would help to facilitate more seamless collaboration, maximize the impact of conservation efforts, and foster greater partnership between refuge managers and the local communities.

¹ FR 89 23 7348

² *Id.*

³ 43 CFR 24.4(e) and 601 FW 7

NACD applauds the USFWS for their commitment to enhancing the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the National Wildlife Refuge system. Our organization remains committed to supporting these efforts and fostering strong partnerships with the USFWS to achieve our shared conservation objectives. We look forward to continued collaboration and dialogue to ensure the sustainable management of our natural resources.

Thank you for considering our input on this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kim LaFleur". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kim LaFleur

President, National Association of Conservation Districts