

By The Honorable Gale Norton
Secretary of the Interior
National Wildlife Refuge Association Friends
February 3, 2003

Thank you Evan, it is a pleasure to be here.

It takes dedication to be a volunteer and that dedication is evident in your presence here this morning at this early hour. It is either that or the free continental breakfast. Either way, I'm glad to see you.

It is a privilege to be here with people who have so much to teach us about the value of safeguarding our country's natural treasures.

President Bush is very enthusiastic about the role of volunteers in America. Volunteerism is a long tradition for this country.

When he traveled to America in the 1830's to observe the new democracy, French statesman and author Alexis de Tocqueville recorded a number of comments about the role of service in American society.

He said, "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations...of a thousand different types."

"I have often admired the great skill they show in proposing a common object for the exertions of very many and inducing them voluntarily to pursue it..."

"As soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment...They seek each other out...and unite. Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power...whose actions serve as an example."

De Tocqueville might as well have written these words about Friends groups.

Wildlife refuges provide an oasis of shelter and protection to the plants and animals that reside in them. But they also give quiet refuge to the people who visit and learn. Nature has a healing power that is hard to find in our concrete jungles and suburban malls.

Visitors frequent refuges for all of those reasons. Often, they volunteer to help in some way and soon they are hooked. The volunteer becomes organizer as he or she recognizes

needs that are unmet.

They then recruit other people, as de Tocqueville said, “voluntarily to pursue it.”

There are, as you know, 220 refuge friends groups across this country and they include some 40,000 volunteers.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association has aided and abetted that proliferation, and channeled it into a coordinated effort working both locally and nationally on behalf of the Refuge System.

As de Tocqueville concluded, “Thenceforth they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power...whose actions serve as an example.”

Every one of you who has taken time from your busy lives to strengthen our country’s National Wildlife Refuge System is an example.

To all of you who have spent countless hours outside, undaunted by frigid temperatures and oppressive heat-- unfazed by wind, rain, mud, mosquitoes and a host of other outdoor challenges on national wildlife refuges, I say thank you!

I am talking about people like Dr. James Montgomery, who has been recognized by the Fish and Wildlife Service as the 2003 Volunteer of the Year. Dr. Montgomery would you please stand.

Over the last two decades, Dr. Montgomery has logged no fewer than 10,000 volunteer hours at the Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge, near Roswell, New Mexico. His work has helped us to better understand the ecology of the interior least tern and the Sandhill Crane.

The Fish and Wildlife Service chose the Friends of Blackwater as the 2003 Friends Group of the Year. Is there someone here from the Friends of Blackwater?

Their contribution to the Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Maryland runs the gamut—from hosting receptions for visiting foreign dignitaries to working with the National Aquarium in Baltimore.

Congratulations to both honorees. And again, thank you for all that you do.

In the past two years, I have visited many Wildlife Refuges from California to Kansas to Florida.—and I may be visiting another in Washington state this week.

At Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, I toured by both boat and helicopter to understand the devastation of an invasive species in the region, the melaleuca tree.

And, I had the pleasure of dedicating a new refuge in Natchitoches) Louisiana back in August. The Red River National Wildlife Refuge serves as a model for conserving our nation's environment and wildlife for future generations—while addressing global climate change.

A conservation group, a refuge Friends group, and the Fish and Wildlife Service are working hand-in-hand with an energy company to restore fish and wildlife habitat.

The energy company, Entergy, worked closely with the Conservation Fund to acquire the first 600 acres of the refuge and to plant more than 180,000 native hardwood trees.

These trees will ultimately sequester or trap 275,000 tons of atmospheric carbon. Entergy hopes this may someday receive credit if we go to an emissions trading system for greenhouse gases.

As you all know, this year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 95-million acre National Wildlife Refuge System. It is the largest area of lands in the world devoted to wildlife.

Our 540 refuges are home to millions of migratory birds, hundreds of endangered species and an enormous variety of other plants and animals.

We have great events underway later this year to celebrate the centennial.

Without the million hours of time you donate each year, the refuge system could never have come this far. Quite frankly, we can't do it without you.

The refuge system's accomplishments have been highlighted in a recent study:

More than 90 percent of refuge visitors are "satisfied or very satisfied" with their refuge experience.

Almost 90 percent say they are likely to visit a refuge again within two years.

More than 95 percent say they do not mind paying a small fee for exceptional services or educational programs provided by refuges.

This study reinforces the fact that the American public knows its refuge system is in good hands. Give yourselves a pat on the back.

As you probably know, today we unveil President Bush's budget for 2004. Reporters,

lobbyists and others are right now standing in a chilly line at the Government Printing Office for their copies of the President's spending blueprint for next year.

As with all blueprints, there will be changes made along the way, but the budget serves as a guide to our priorities and needs.

At the Interior Department, refuges are a priority and the President's budget proposal reflects that.

I won't make you wait in a long cold line to hear these figures.

The first one is good news for you. President Bush is strongly committed to the future of the refuge system. He has proposed an increase of almost \$26 million for the National Wildlife Refuge program. The 2004 budget builds on last year's historic almost \$57 million budget increase. It brings the total to \$402 million to support high priority needs, operation and maintenance.

The President's budget fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund at \$900 million to support federal, state and local conservation and recreation programs.

It increases the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program by \$9 million for a total of almost \$40 million to restore thousands of acres of wetlands, native grasslands, riparian and stream habitat.

These are often private landowners who want to see conservation begin with them. They are among our strongest partners.

The budget provides a total increase of \$9 million for the North American Wetlands Conservation fund and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan making the total about \$60 million.

Last week I announced to a conference of our fisheries people that their budget was going up by \$8 million.

Everglades funding goes up \$12 million to a total of \$256 million for Interior and Corps of Engineers proposed spending to rescue the sea of grass.

If you think I've just unloaded a lot of numbers on you—feel sorry for the people who are looking at the entire federal budget today.

Earlier I mentioned an invasive species—the melaleuca tree in Florida. Invasives are a

silent enemy that you deal with in many refuges.

I came across one of the ugliest examples this summer when I met the snakehead fish.

Here in the Washington, D.C. area, the State of Maryland was fighting the proliferation of this foreigner. They acted quickly enough that we were able to ban its trade and import under the Lacey Act, and stopped it in its tracks. Note I said "in its tracks."

That would be a strange way of putting it, except that this singular snakehead could move on land from one body of water to another. It only served to make it more dangerous as an invasive species.

Our Fish and Wildlife Director Steve Williams describes it as-- this fish that eats all the other fish in a pond and then crawls out and over to the next pond, where it also eats all the fish. He says, "Maybe it does belong in Washington after all."

In any case, the snakehead brought a lot of publicity.

Perhaps that helped inspire the \$1 million increase in the Fish and Wildlife management program for aquatic invasive species control.

Let me discuss one final number in the budget. Last year we announced the Cooperative Conservation Initiative.

The proposal would have given \$100 million to allow citizens to undertake conservation projects on wildlife refuges and other public lands as well as on their own property.

We are building on existing conservation partnership programs. These include challenge cost share programs with the Bureau of Land Management, The National Wildlife Refuge System, the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Services' Partners for fish and Wildlife and the Coastal and Migratory Bird Joint Ventures programs.

The CCI will provide new and expanded opportunities for landowners, land managers and others to participate in projects that foster innovation and create incentives for stewardship.

In the President's proposed budget for next year, he has asked for a 13 percent increase for CCI.

These include challenge grants --an opportunity you might want to pursue in a watershed at your home refuge. If you and your refuge manager can put together a partnership where the private sector puts up at least half the cost, you can compete for federal matching dollars.

CCI is a program I believe in strongly. Our success in protecting the environment will be measured by real conservation and restoration on the ground—one acre at a time—by Americans working in partnership with scientists, neighbors and the government.

I often talk about what I call the Four C's as the touchstone of effective natural resource conservation. They are communication, consultation and cooperation all in the service of conservation.

At the heart of the Four C's is the fact that for conservation to be effective, it must involve the people who live and work on the land in communities across the country.

That is why the Friends program works so well. It begins in the communities with people like you. People I am very proud to call friends.

Thank you.