



STATE OF DELAWARE
**DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL**

OFFICE OF THE
SECRETARY

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February 4, 2013

Tom Bonetti
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Northeast Regional Office
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035

Dear Mr. Bonetti:

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (Department), thank you for the numerous efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to improve wildlife habitat across our state. The Service plays a critical role in protecting and improving the resiliency of our wildlife areas and natural heritage. We are especially grateful for the strong partnership through Secretary Salazar's "America's Great Outdoors" Initiative. We also appreciate the Service's ongoing restoration efforts at the Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge and the efforts to incorporate the State's comments on the recent Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (CCP).

Upon review of the final CCP dated December 2012, we have a few remaining concerns about some of the proposed habitat management, hunting program, and mosquito control management practices included in the Service's selected modified Alternative B, that we would like to work with you collaboratively to address in the months and years ahead. We respectfully request that you incorporate some flexibility into the CCP final Record of Decision to include the potential for adopting the management practices that we present in these comments. We will be providing additional, more specific comments under separate cover from the Division of Fish and Wildlife, which will further detail the basis and rationale for our recommendations.

Habitat Management

Certain habitat management practices proposed in the CCP may eliminate or limit opportunities to restore or establish a diverse array of habitats that support a diverse range of species. We respectfully request that the Service implement a more proactive management approach to achieve and support such diversity. For example, while we recognize the benefits of and support reforestation, upland habitat management appears to be weighted heavily toward select individual wildlife species, such as the Delmarva Fox Squirrel. We request consideration of a more diverse upland habitat management approach that includes establishing and maintaining meaningful acreage of non-forested habitats to include early successional upland habitats.

Delaware's Good Nature depends on you!

We are grateful for the incorporation of the State's comments regarding the need to close the breaches as an early phase of the broader marsh restoration effort, which we believe is critical to enhancing the long-term resiliency of the globally important wildlife habitat at the Refuge. In full recognition of the challenges associated with more extreme weather events and sea level rise, we request that the Service consider including the flexibility to restore Unit III to freshwater and brackish wetlands should it be determined to be feasible based on the findings of ongoing hydrological modeling investigations and a subsequent full assessment of interrelated restoration practices. Rather than rejecting this option today in favor of establishing salt-marsh habitat for all Units, we suggest postponing this decision until the pending investigations are completed, which may provide additional insight as to whether it is possible to procure sufficient funding and sediments necessary to establish Unit III as a salt-marsh habitat. Such freshwater and brackish wetland restoration, which may prove sustainable due to the long-term stability of Unit III's bayfront dune system and the predictable inflow of substantial freshwater from Prime Hook Creek, would support greater species diversity, particularly waterfowl, and provide valuable habitat in the Delaware Bayshore landscape.

We believe that allowing the flexibility for these habitat management practices will result in more diverse habitats and enhance related hunting and wildlife observation opportunities within the Delaware Bayshore landscape to best achieve the vision of the America's Great Outdoors initiative.

Hunting Program

We appreciate the Service modifying their previous proposals by maintaining a 4 day/week waterfowl hunting schedule and extending waterfowl hunting hours until 3 p.m. We still have some hesitancy about the hunting proposals that may reduce diverse recreational hunting opportunities. The total elimination of permanent hunting stands and blinds in favor of free roaming access for deer and waterfowl hunting, though attractive to some, may limit hunting options and reduce hunter participation for less-equipped hunters and hunters with disabilities. We hope that the Final CCP will provide the flexibility to maintain some hunting stands and blinds, so as to provide a broader range of hunting options that accommodate the full range of hunters.

The Service's decision to establish a pre-season drawing for waterfowl hunting may reduce administrative costs, but such an approach may not accommodate some waterfowl hunters, who prefer to plan their hunting trips based on current weather patterns. We request that the Service consider allowing some flexibility in the drawing process to accommodate these users.

We believe that implementation of our requested hunting program changes will provide more diverse hunting opportunities that better accommodate the hunter funding base, while also best achieving the vision of the America's Great Outdoors initiative.

Mosquito Control

We appreciate the Service eliminating the requirement that adulticiding on-refuge only occur in response to a “declared public health emergency” and rather now more practicably establishing that adulticiding could occur when there is a “documented human disease threat.” We still have concerns that this language could potentially impact our ability to provide environmentally-compatible mosquito control to sufficiently protect public health. We respectfully request that the final CCP Record of Decision clearly establish that the Department’s Mosquito Control Section has sole authority for determining:

- a) When mosquito populations and any arbovirus considerations might constitute a “documented human disease threat,” a role that the Delaware Division of Public Health fully defers to us. It is well documented throughout Delaware that mosquito-borne diseases such as West Nile virus or eastern equine encephalitis are chronically enzootic/endemic, with there always being a human disease or public health threat during unacceptably high population levels of mosquito species that vector arboviruses; and
- b) What arbovirus surveillance methods are employed, including the “why, when, where and how” aspects, and for how arbovirus findings are used to make spray/no-spray decisions, as has been successfully implemented for many years; and
- c) The contents of the Section’s statewide “Spray Threshold Criteria” applicable on-refuge or off and for how these criteria are used in making spray/no-spray decisions, as has been successfully implemented for many years.

Thank you again for all of the efforts of the Service to enhance wildlife habitat in the First State. We look forward to continuing our strong partnership to achieve our shared conservation priorities.

Sincerely,



Collin P. O'Mara
Secretary