

General Session

Keynote Address—the 41st Annual Southeastern

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The Southeastern is one of the most important natural resource meetings of the year, as I know each of you realizes. I particularly like it because the Southeastern affords me the opportunity to meet with fully one-third of the states all at once. And I am always impressed when I hear about the wide variety of projects your agencies have under way. From Florida to Missouri, and in that wide arc from Maryland to Texas, we see some of the most innovative and aggressive wildlife and fishery management programs in the country today.

I am sure that I could spend my entire allotted time here this morning singing your praises. But you all did not become the successful forces you are today by reflecting on and basking in your achievements. You became successful by meeting challenges. This morning, I have two new challenges to share. Both are timely. Both are important. Both will affect your agencies and mine well into the next century. And both can have a great impact on the sportsmen and citizens we serve.

We are all aware of the waterfowl situation. Indeed, as one wag on our staff puts it, we ought to change the name of the Fall Flight Forecast to the Fall Plight Forecast, because, in the past few years, the news has not been good at all. Waterfowl on this continent will rapidly approach the crisis stage—unless we act decisively and act now.

Last year, the Secretary of the Interior and the Canadian Minister of the Environment signed a document—The North American Waterfowl Management Plan. It is, as I am sure most of you will agree, an outstanding plan. But, in order to improve the status of waterfowl, it must cease being a mere paper plan and become a living, working array of activities. That is one of the reasons I am here today—to seek your support, your cooperation, and your commitment to addressing the needs outlined in the North American Plan.

One of my first, and continuing, priorities as director of the Fish and Wildlife Service is to improve the quality and the quantity of habitat for wintering waterfowl. But it is not a job that I can do alone, especially in the area of land acquisition. The Lower Mississippi Valley represents one of the most important waterfowl wintering regions in the nation. I understand that Gary Meyers of Tennessee will be conduct-

ing a session later in this conference about this vital region and its land acquisition needs. Suffice it for me to say right now that the Fish and Wildlife Service is a willing and eager partner to help conserve portions of this crucial resource. As our current refuges in the Mississippi Valley attest, we are committed to preserving and improving wintering habitat. We hope to expand that commitment—indeed, we must if our waterfowl are to enjoy a measure of security in the future.

I would ask each of the state directors here present, and each of their wildlife chiefs and each of their I&E chiefs, to devise new and creative and cost-effective ways to bring the importance of The North American Waterfowl Management Plan to the attention of sportsmen and the general public alike in this region.

I know the very name, “North American Plan,” seems to suggest to some folks images of the Saskatchewan prairies or North Dakota potholes. That’s fine. But if the North American Plan is ever to become a fully functioning reality, then the phrase should also conjure up pictures of sycamore bottomlands along a west Kentucky river, of lowland oak woods in Arkansas, playa lakes in Texas, and small ponds in south Florida.

Just two weeks ago, I had the great opportunity to participate in the rededication of one of our oldest national wildlife refuges—the National Elk Refuge out in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. And that event gave me the opportunity to share with the assembled citizens there my personal view that, at root, conservation is an exercise in freedom. It is proof that our way of government works. Conservation programs have succeeded in this great land of ours because the people were free to make them work. I believe in the people of this nation—once they learn the true needs of waterfowl and the great potential of this plan, they will respond. Our task is to demonstrate to them, credibly and candidly, what is at stake. We are not out to “snow” anyone. We are out to state the facts, the serious nature of this situation, and what the costs are to effect a workable and lasting remedy. But I believe we should also point out that the North American Plan will materially benefit many more creatures than just the waterfowl for which it is primarily intended. I believe it is also our duty to let the public know that scores of other species of migratory birds will find safe resting and feeding places on habitats acquired under the plan. The fur-bearers and small game will benefit; so, too, the deer, black bear, and turkey. And for those folks whose interests focus on the nongame species, these, too, will face a brighter future.

The second challenge I want to present to you today may seem at first glance less pressing; but, in the long run in our resource management efforts, it is no less important. I am referring to the formulation of the National Recreational Fisheries Policy.

Many of you are already aware of this endeavor. You know, for example, that the Fish and Wildlife Service has volunteered to serve as the national facilitator of the effort. You know, too, that Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland are already in various stages of national fishery policy implementation. What all of you are probably asking is this: just what is this policy and why do we need it now? These are certainly fair questions. Let me answer the second part first . . . the “why” part. A

National Recreational Fisheries Policy will serve to demonstrate and reaffirm just how important our sport fisheries are to us, to the economy, to our national character. As you have read, sportfishing represents tens of billions of dollars annually to state and local economies. A policy would remind us of these values and our responsibilities to safeguard and enhance these resources. What will the policy *not* be? It will *not* be a Federal law or regulation. It won't be a billy club. Rather, I see it as a national statement of recognition, a consensus, about why we value our fishery resources and why we work to conserve them.

There is a timetable on this policy initiative. We will publish a draft policy statement next month and seek your input and guidance on it. After that, we will amend the language accordingly and prepare for the policy's formal issuance during National Fishing Week, 6–12 June 1988. Once again, state directors, I&E chiefs, and fishery chiefs, please help spread the word. Later on this fall, we will coordinate a special mailing to the Outdoor Writers of America about the draft policy and why it is important to them and their readers. Likewise, I would hope that you could devote page space in your magazines to this effort. The National Recreational Fisheries Policy is something that each and every angler has a stake in; in fact, the policy itself will recognize the fact that each angler has a participatory role in the stewardship and conservation of our aquatic resources.

Thus far, I have made my pitch for two national initiatives, yet I hope that you don't think of these as just "Fed" stuff. I really do not consider them in that light at all. I consider them both "our" agenda, in the very real sense. We each have roles to play and special tasks to address in each. If all of us are successful, then 10, 20, or more, years down the road, the natural legacy of this region and the Nation at large will be assured for sportsmen, conservationists, and all our citizens.

Already, the needs of the future are being addressed here in the Southeast. I am particularly pleased and encouraged by the outstanding cooperative effort to restore the Gulf Coast populations of striped bass. It not only demonstrates that the Service is taking its new Roles and Responsibility Statement to heart, it is also clearly and convincingly showing how state expertise and cooperation are vital to the success of multi-jurisdictional fishery restoration efforts.

On the endangered species front, we are witnessing dozens of promising projects across the region. The cooperative work to help save the Florida panther deserves special praise, I believe, because it brings together the skills and interests of four agencies—the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the Florida Department of Natural Resources, and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. A special nod is due, as well, to each of the states here that has undertaken nongame inventory and restoration programs, especially as a means to identify and possibly preclude the need for formal listing activities.

I want to express our appreciation to each of the states, and especially to Mississippi and Louisiana, who have seized the grand opportunity to protect and restore habitat with which we are presented through our memorandum of understanding with the Farmers Home Mortgage Association.

In the area of law enforcement, too, we sincerely appreciate the excellent co-

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operation you have afforded the Service in supporting our undercover interdiction operations. The professionalism and esprit-de-corps of state law enforcement officers in this region is nothing short of outstanding.

And finally, let me say a word or two about your sportsmen. I have been advised by our law enforcement agents that steel shot compliance in the early teal seasons here in the Southeast this year was excellent. In fact, there wasn't a case to be made. This speaks very well indeed for the sportsmen and for the state wildlife agencies that communicate with them.

I want to conclude today with the two points I first raised. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the National Recreational Fisheries Policy afford us, federal and state agencies alike, some major challenges. But they are challenges that can only serve to help us and help our resources. The state fish and wildlife agencies in the Southeast have emerged as some of the strongest, sharpest, and most professional in the Nation—not by resting on their laurels, but by meeting new challenges head-on.

I want to thank you once again for the opportunity to participate in this, the 41st annual Southeastern—and I wish each of you a most enjoyable, successful, and productive conference.