

General Session

Wildlife Management and the Challenge of a New Century

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It's a privilege for me to be with all of you here in St. Louis this morning.

I had the pleasure of meeting some of you at the International in Pierre. But there are also many new faces here. I imagine some of you are wondering how I came to be Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. This is a question I have asked myself a few times since I got to Washington.

For those of you who don't know me yet, let me just tell you a little about myself. I come from a place called Moose, Wyoming. My brothers and I are the third generation of our family to run the "Triangle X" ranch near Jackson Hole, and I've spent a good part of my life outfitting and guiding fishing, hunting, and wilderness pack trips.

Although admittedly a little academically stale, I have a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Notre Dame and a Master's in Zoology from the University of Michigan. I was privileged to conduct some of the pioneer research on ospreys and bald eagles in the Yellowstone ecosystem.

Some years ago I decided I could make a contribution to protecting the things I care about through the political arena. I served nearly 20 years in the Wyoming State legislature, where I worked on a whole range of issues including fish and wildlife conservation.

On the Federal level I have served on a number of wildlife committees including the National Wetlands Policy Forum and the National Park System Advisory Board.

I came to Washington because I believe our nation's fish and wildlife resources are under unprecedented siege. I want to help solve those problems. I believe that, under President Bush's leadership, the next few years may be the most exciting in the history of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

It is rare to have a President who is so personally involved in our out-of-doors. This guy loves to hunt, fish, and rejuvenate himself in our refuges, parks, and forests.

The President and Secretary of the Interior Lujan share a desire to leave a legacy of stewardship. The Secretary's firm stand on banning the importation of

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African elephant ivory into the United States has helped increase international support for ending trade in elephant ivory. In addition, he is a strong supporter of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and has backed the Service on other important matters.

Our Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks is Connie Harriman. She is a very bright lady who has practiced law and has the added benefit of having served previously in the Interior Department. Connie led our delegation very effectively at the recent meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. I believe you will find her to be knowledgeable, a good listener, and willing to make hard decisions.

Most of you know I have nominated Dick Smith as my deputy. Dick is a career Service employee and our former Regional Director for Research. He knows the Fish and Wildlife Service; he knows the states; and if you know him, you know he's not afraid to ask questions or speak his mind. I think we're a good team.

The President gave me some marching orders when I accepted this job, and I don't think he'd mind if I share those with you. He said, think big, challenge the system, and fight like hell for your position. I intend to do just that.

All of us here know the challenges facing natural resource managers today. We have a growing human population, increasing pressure on natural habitats, threats from contaminants, a growing number of species that are either already endangered or headed in that direction, and a host of other problems.

We are at a critical point in our history. What we do during the 1990s will to a great extent determine the fate of our fish and wildlife resources in the 21st Century. We have an opportunity now to make a real difference. I truly believe our grandchildren will one day look back to this era and either thank us for what we were able to conserve, or condemn us for the natural treasures we allowed to slip through our fingers.

To tackle these tough conservation challenges, we must find new approaches, new ways of working in partnership, that set the course for conservation in the 21st Century.

My goal is to nudge the Fish and Wildlife Service into some new directions as we travel down the road to the next century. In particular, I believe the Service can and must play a leading role in meeting the President's commitment to a national policy of no net loss of wetlands. I have directed the Service staff to develop a new initiative to see if we can unify and improve our diverse wetland activities. We also want to increase cooperation with other Federal and State agencies to protect, restore, and manage wetlands nationwide.

As part of our wetlands initiative, I have recently established a task force to identify the special problems facing the Service in coastal estuaries and wetlands. The task force will be looking at resource problems in all coastal areas, including the Great Lakes, and recommending actions the Service should take to address those issues.

A critically important element of our wetlands initiative will be improving our

dealings with private landowners. About 74% of our country's remaining wetlands are privately owned. We—and by that I mean federal and state agencies—need to be able to provide information and technical assistance to these landowners in order to preserve these wetlands and improve their value to wildlife.

We have already made a good beginning in this direction. Last year the Fish and Wildlife Service restored about 8,100 ha of wetlands under Farm Bill programs, and we were not even able to respond to all the requests we received from farmers. The interest in these programs shows there is room for wildlife managers to do much more work with the agricultural community.

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan offers many opportunities for us to work more effectively with private landowners as well as with each other. Indeed, when it is working at its best, the Plan is a good example of how much can be accomplished when we pool the resources and enthusiasm of State and Federal agencies, conservation groups, and private companies.

A number of successful Joint Venture projects are now underway across the country. Some of you here today have played a key role in these projects. I'd go way over my allotted time here if I named all the projects, but just as examples, South Carolina is working on the ACE Basin project to conserve a major undeveloped coastal wetland complex; Arkansas is working with its partners to protect and manage a prime waterfowl migration and wintering area at Blackwell Bottoms; and Louisiana has a strong initiative to enhance wintering waterfowl habitat on private lands.

My goal is to continue with strong implementation of the joint venture concept, because I believe it offers state, federal, and private conservation interests a chance to form a unified force for important habitat conservation projects.

I think the outlook for the North American Plan is promising. Although our final budget figures are somewhat uncertain right now, due to efforts to meet deficit reduction targets, Congress has signaled its interest in the North American Plan by appropriating \$1.2 million for joint ventures and wetland restoration and enhancement, and \$11 million for acquisition of high priority wetlands under the North American Plan. The strong participation and contributions by states and private interests have been essential in winning this level of support. I will make an even stronger pitch for support in our upcoming budget cycle.

Legislation has passed the House and is under consideration in the Senate that would provide a stable source of federal funds, about \$10 million yearly, for the North American Plan, by creating an interest-bearing trust fund on the Pittman-Robertson account, with a possibility of up to \$15 million more in annual appropriations.

In addition to wetlands and the North American Plan, the operation of the National Wildlife Refuge System is also a high priority for me. As you know, last month there were congressional hearings on a Government Accounting Office report that found a number of instances of incompatible or harmful secondary uses of refuge lands. I have appointed a task force to review the GAO's recommendations and earlier reports on refuge management, and determine the exact status of problems

with incompatible uses. Their report and recommendations are due to me next May. We are also revising our draft environmental impact statement on the refuge system. We will be taking an in-depth look at options for improving refuge management through that process.

I am also most interested in continuing our partnership with the states on behalf of fisheries. I commend the southeastern states for providing real leadership to improve management of saltwater recreational fisheries, especially through participation in the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast Marine Fisheries Commissions and Management Councils.

I understand, by the way, that Florida's new marine fishing license will make Florida eligible for full, 5% funding under the Wallop-Breaux program.

I'm also pleased about progress we're making in sharing Service technical assistance on fisheries. In just a few weeks, the Service and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture will sign the first cooperative agreement under the new aquaculture policy issued in August. That new policy underscores our commitment to make the expertise we use in our own hatcheries available to commercial producers; moreover, an important component of our new policy recognizes that aquaculture can make significant contributions to the protection of wild fish stocks.

Our new stance on aquaculture is but one component of the Service's participation in the National Recreational Fisheries Policy. We'll be telling you more about this in a few weeks when we unveil the Service's new iteration of that policy, entitled "Fisheries USA."

Some of you have asked whether the Service is really committed to carry out this policy. My answer is an emphatic yes. This is an important part of our direction for the next century.

Now, in all of this talk about new partnerships, I do not mean to imply that we must completely reinvent the wheel. Some of our tried-and-true programs will continue to prove their worth beyond the year 2000. The Federal Aid programs are strong and healthy. I know many of you responded to the Service's request for public comments on the need for updating the environmental impact statement on the Federal Aid programs.

The public comment period has just closed and we have not yet completed our review of the comments; I expect it will be about 60 days before we make any kind of decision as to whether we will proceed with an update of the environmental impact statement. Regardless of what kind of paperwork we ultimately file—or don't file—we can continue to count on the Federal Aid programs as a cornerstone of our 21 Century conservation efforts.

Our obligations to endangered species and nongame wildlife will weigh more heavily upon us in the coming years. This is inevitable because our growing society is placing more pressure on wildlife habitats, while at the same time demanding more in the way of wildlife-oriented recreation.

Since I have become Director, I have become increasingly aware of some of the exemplary work southeastern states have done on behalf of nongame. I am

interested in increasing the Fish and Wildlife Service's nongame efforts as well. This is in part because I believe we can expand public support for conservation by broadening our constituencies to include more of those people who enjoy wildlife but do not choose, or have the opportunity, to hunt or fish.

On the endangered species front, we continue to face deep and sometimes troubling challenges. An example of this is the recent discovery of mercury contamination in Florida panthers, one of our most endangered mammals. It appears that mercury is biomagnifying in the aquatic food chain. We believe raccoons are eating contaminated fish and crustaceans and are in turn being eaten by some of the panthers. Obviously this is a situation with very serious implications for human health as well as for endangered species and the overall health of the environment. The Service will continue to work closely with the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission to interpret this situation and decide what to do.

On a more positive note, we are working with the Florida Department of Natural Resources to limit boat speeds in key areas in order to reduce the number of manatees killed by boats. In addition, our recently completed recovery plan for the manatee represents the first time in the history of that program that state agencies, industry, and constituent groups have concurred with a species recovery plan. Bob Brantly and Tom Gardner, the executive director of the Florida Department of Natural Resources, are among those who signed the manatee recovery plan. We think having this kind of participation in the planning process will help smooth the way for the recovery actions. It's an approach I hope we can use more often in the future.

I also plan to take a look at the issue of how Section 6 funds under the Endangered Species Act are allocated to states. I am aware the formula for allocating funds is of concern to some people, and also that many of you would like to see the amount of money in this program beefed up. I honestly can't say how good the prospects are for future appropriations closer to the authorized limit of \$15 million, given what appears to be a renewed concern over reducing the federal deficit. It is, however, an issue that has my attention.

Overall, when it comes to dollars and resources, I have learned that the Fish and Wildlife Service is at one and the same time an agency for larger and far smaller than most people realize. On paper we command an impressive array of forces and dollars, but in fact we are stretched pretty thin because we have such a broad array of responsibilities. Maybe it's the nature of our business that we will always feel our resources and people are stretched to the limit, because we believe in what we do and always want to do more.

One way we have found to help do more is to put into practice President Bush's call for "a thousand points of light." There is a limit to what government can do, and we have all learned that—perhaps the hard way. As I said earlier, much more can be done in partnership, and there is a shining example of this in the wildlife field. Last year, volunteers—12,416 of them—provided 478,568 hours of free labor and time to the Fish and Wildlife Service at refuges, hatcheries, field stations and offices throughout the nation. This is an invaluable service, performed by citizens

without pay, purely for the satisfaction they get from doing something to help our nation and to help wildlife. The benefits we can gain from volunteers can, and should, be in our thoughts as we plan for tomorrow.

I've been talking about the road to the future, but in closing I want to come back to where we are now—St. Louis. This city's most famous landmark is the Arch. The Arch memorializes St. Louis' history as the gateway to the West and reminds us of the pioneers who gathered here before crossing the frontier on their wagon trains.

Our own journey to the 21 Century is an adventure into unknown territory. Like those pioneers, we have to find a way through sometimes hostile country in order to make a new and brighter future. With courage, initiative, hope and cooperation, the pioneers overcame mountains and deserts and every other obstacle. They succeeded—and we can, too.

I wish each of you a very productive meeting and I look forward to working with you in the future.