



U.S. Department of the Interior News Release

Date: Tuesday, May 4, 2021
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Promotes Public Access to Hunting and Fishing in Largest Expansion of Opportunities to Date

New Opportunities at 90 National Wildlife Refuges and 1 National Fish Hatchery

WASHINGTON – Continuing the Department of the Interior’s efforts to increase recreational access on public lands, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today a proposal for new or expanded hunting and sport fishing opportunities for game species across 2.1 million acres at 90 national wildlife refuges and on the lands of one national fish hatchery.

“We are committed to ensuring Americans of all backgrounds have access to hunting and fishing and other recreational activities on our public lands,” said **Service Principal Deputy Director Martha Williams**. “Hunters and anglers are some of our most ardent conservationists and they play an important role in ensuring the future of diverse and healthy wildlife populations. Our lands have also provided a much-needed outlet to thousands during the pandemic and we hope these additional opportunities will provide further connection with nature, recreation and enjoyment.”

Increasing access to public lands and waters is a central component of the Biden-Harris administration’s approach to conservation, including the efforts to conserve 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. This proposed rule would open or expand 939 opportunities for hunting or sport fishing (an opportunity is one species on one field station). The expansion proposed in this rule is the largest in recent history – including last year’s proposed rule which itself was larger than the previous five rules combined.

Hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities contributed more than \$156 billion in economic activity in communities across the United States in 2016, according to the Service’s [National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation](#), published every five years. More than 101 million Americans — 40 percent of the U.S. population age 16 and older — pursue wildlife-related recreation, including hunting and fishing.

Today’s action proposes to bring the number of units in the Service’s [National Wildlife Refuge System](#) where the public may hunt to 434 and the number where fishing will be permitted to

378. The rule also proposes to formally bring the total number of [National Fish Hatchery System](#) units open to hunting or sport fishing to 22.

New proposed refuge opportunities include opening big game hunting (turkey) and sport fishing at Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge in Florida for the first time; opening Muleshoe and Neches River National Wildlife Refuges in Texas to migratory game bird, upland game and big game hunting for the first time; and opening Featherstone National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia for the first time to migratory game bird hunting and sport fishing.

A change at hatcheries includes the proposed formal opening of lands to sport fishing at Green Lake National Fish Hatchery in Maine for the first time.

The proposed rule also continues the effort from previous rules toward revising refuge hunting and fishing regulations so that they more closely match state regulations where the refuge is located. This year's rule also proposes revisions that ensure whenever refuge regulations depart from state regulations, for safety or conservation compatibility reasons, these extra regulations are consistent across all refuges in the given state. The Service worked closely with the states in preparing the proposed rule.

The Service will seek comments from the public on the proposed rule for 60 days, beginning with publication in the *Federal Register* on May 4, 2021. The notice will be available at <http://www.regulations.gov>, Docket Number: FWS-HQ-NWRS-2021-0027, and will include details on how to submit your comments.

The Service intends to finalize the proposed changes in time for the upcoming 2021-2022 hunting seasons. A complete list of all refuges and hatcheries in the proposal is available in the proposed rule.

Under the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, the Service permits hunting and fishing along with four other types of wildlife-dependent recreation, including wildlife photography, environmental education, wildlife observation and interpretation, when they are compatible with an individual refuge's purpose and mission. [Hunting](#), within specified limits, is currently permitted on 427 units and [fishing](#) is currently permitted on 376.

There are 70 national fish hatcheries visited by more than one million people each year. Hatcheries offer opportunities for viewing the operations and learning about fish, as well as activities such as fishing, hunting, hiking, sightseeing, nature study, birdwatching and photography. Hunting and/or fishing is currently permitted on the lands of 21 units of the National Fish Hatchery System.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is an unparalleled network of 567 national wildlife refuges and 38 wetland management districts. There is a national wildlife refuge within an hour's drive of most major metropolitan areas. The Refuge System receives more than 59 million annual visits. National wildlife refuges provide vital habitat for thousands of species and access to world-class recreation, from fishing, hunting and paddling to nature watching, photography and environmental education.

The Service manages hunting and fishing programs to [ensure sustainable wildlife populations](#) while also offering other wildlife-dependent recreation on public lands.

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