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June 18, 2026

Re: Docket No. FWS-HQ-NWRS-2026-1223; RIN 1018-BI71
National Wildlife Refuge System; 2026–2027 Station-Specific Hunting and Sport Fishing
Regulations

Submitted via: <https://www.regulations.gov/commenton/FWS-HQ-NWRS-2026-1223-0001>

Brian Nesvik
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Nesvik:

Footloose Montana strongly opposes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to open or expand hunting and fishing opportunities at 111 federal field stations, including 107 National Wildlife Refuges and four National Fish Hatcheries. According to the Service, this proposal would open up 95% of the national wildlife refuges and create more than 1,450 new hunting, fishing (and trapping?) opportunities. This would represent the largest expansion of killing opportunities for so-called 'sportsmen' in the history of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

With this sweeping proposal, the USFWS again demonstrates its willingness to yield to pressure from sportsmen's organizations, even to the point of handing over control over federal lands and wildlife to state wildlife agencies—and the organized trophy hunting, fishing and trapping interests that direct them. It has been estimated that hunters in the US alone kill between 100 and 200 million wild animals annually, the majority for 'recreation. In addition, trappers kill between 6 and 21 million wild fur-bearing animals annually. But even these staggering numbers of animal victims along with the fact that hunting is already allowed on 400 refuge units and trapping occurs on more than half of the refuges don't seem sufficient to satisfy state wildlife agencies and sportsmen.

The National Wildlife Refuge System (NWR) spans more than 95 million acres and includes 568 national wildlife refuges that provide habitat for more than

700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, 250 reptile and amphibian species, and more than 1000 species of fish. These lands, water and wildlife are owned by the American people, funded largely through taxpayer dollars and are intended to conserve wildlife, habitats, biodiversity, and ecological integrity for present and future generations.

National Wildlife Refuges Should be “For Wildlife First!”

National Wildlife Refuges were created because Americans recognized that wild animals needed places where protection from harm came first. The first refuge, Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, was established in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt in response to the commercial slaughter of colonial nesting birds. The refuge system emerged as a corrective to excessive killing and habitat destruction. Killing wild animals was prohibited as its central purpose was to provide refuge.

Today, millions of people visit refuges each year to observe wildlife, photograph birds and mammals, hike, learn about nature, and experience the wonder of encountering wild animals living freely. According to the Service's own visitation statistics, wildlife observation and photography attract far more participants than hunting. Yet this proposal prioritizes expanding chasing, shooting, fishing and trapping wild animals while doing nothing to expand opportunities for wildlife or for the benign public (‘non-consumptive’) recreation.

Wildlife Refuges Are Already Compromised

While the original concept created refuges as sanctuaries for wildlife, this was followed by an era of erosion when ‘sportsmen’ organizations, especially trophy hunting and trapper organizations, started to demand more access and more killing opportunities ...even in places of ‘refuge.’ The USFWS has strayed far from the original concept of refuges as sanctuaries. Indeed, on its various website pages dedicated to the promotion of hunting in wildlife refuges, USFWS explains that the “refuge habitat produces a surplus of renewable resources that are harvestable.” According to the agency’s view, hunting (and trapping) apparently are “healthy recreational activity that are not only steeped in tradition as part of America’s heritage but does not threaten the resident animal populations or species.” Motivated by such anthropocentric convictions, for the past three decades, the USFWS has been involved in constant efforts to expand hunting opportunities for sportsmen by increasing acreage, the number of species to shoot and trap, and the types of weapons that can be used. The agency even goes so far as to advertising wildlife refuges as destinations for “trophy hunting ... or bucket-list destination hunting.”ⁱ

National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997

Congress reaffirmed the purpose in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, which established the mission of the Refuge System:

"to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant

resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."

While hunting, fishing (and trapping?) are designated as "priority public uses," Congress made clear that these uses may occur only when they are compatible with the mission and purposes of each refuge. Priority use does not mean primary purpose, and hunting was considered only one priority among fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation.

Congress never declared that wildlife refuges exist for hunters, anglers and trappers. Congress declared hunting (and trapping?) a priority use but only one of several and only if it is compatible with the refuge's mission, not an automatic right. This radical proposal would change that.

The Current Proposal—Extremely Problematic

1) This proposal omits information on whether hunting also means trapping. Montana's state wildlife agency, the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) commonly view trapping as a type of hunting.ⁱⁱ If this proposal assumes the same definition, it is incomplete, possibly misleading and needs to be revised. For the purpose of this letter, we assume that trapping is included in the definition of hunting.

2) Overall, this proposal fails to explain how killing wild animals for recreation, fun, trophies and profit is compatible with any purpose of any wildlife refuge.

3) This proposal fails to adequately address the ecological role and intrinsic value of wild animals themselves. Despite governmental agencies' human supremacy views and attitudes, wild animals such as wolves, mountain lions, bears, coyotes, ducks and birds are not living targets or 'natural renewable resources.' To the contrary, scientific research increasingly recognizes their ecological importance, their intelligence, their sentience, and their complex social and behavioral lives. We are in an era of rapidly accelerating species extinctions, and at a time when growing human development, ongoing biodiversity loss, habitat fragmentation and loss, climate change, drought, severe wildfires, food shortages, and diseases are placing unprecedented pressures on wild animals. It is now that refuges should serve not as additional arenas for 'sportsmen' killing even more unsuspecting animals but rather, as places of heightened protection and resilience. If refuges simply mirror surrounding state regulations, they cease to function as refuges in any meaningful sense.

4) We are particularly concerned that this proposal advances a broader policy direction that increasingly hands over the management of federal land and wildlife—both owned by the American public—to the states and with that, to trophy hunting and trapping interests. Specifically, the alleged 'inconsistency' in and 'need to align' wildlife refuge regulations with state regulations is nothing more than an attempt to liberalize the typically more restrictive

refuge regulations down to the state level and provide even more access to land and wildlife, and even more killing opportunities for trophy hunters, including bow hunters, anglers and trappers.

The USFWS explicitly states that it seeks to "align" refuge regulations with state fish and wildlife laws and to remove what it characterizes as "unnecessary restrictions" (Federal Register, 91 Fed. Reg. 23541, 2026). This raises legitimate questions including:

1. Who considers restrictive hunting regulations on wildlife refuges “unnecessary”?
2. Who benefits?
3. Why does the supposed need to align only go in one direction? Why not make liberal state regulations align them with stricter wildlife refuges regulations?

The USFWS’ website states that “The decision to permit hunting on national wildlife refuges is made on a case-by-case basis. Considerations include biological soundness, economic feasibility, effects on other refuge programs and public demand.” Obviously, more restrictive regulations about killing wild animals on refuges exist for good reasons. However, this proposal reflects a troubling philosophical shift as it aims at eliminating this case-by-case evaluation and provides a blank check to trophy hunters, anglers and trappers. If this proposal is adopted, ecological and biological considerations would be subordinated to the goal of expanding hunting opportunities. National wildlife refuges would be managed not according to what wildlife and ecosystems need, but according to what trophy hunting and trapping interests demand.

Ostensibly, the true goal is to liberalize more restrictive refuge regulations down to the state level, in order to provide even more access of public lands, this time around, special refuge land, to ‘sportsmen.’ More control handed to the trophy hunting and trapping industries, and even more killing opportunities for outfitters and ‘sportsmen,’ For example, Montana state regulations allow hunting and hounding of mountain lions (the latter includes using a pack of dogs to chase mountain lions to exhaustion up a tree) from which the outfitter’s client or the ‘sportsman’ then can conveniently shoot the animal. Montana’s second-largest wildlife refuges, the CMR and UL Bend refuges, only allow mountain lion hunting but not hounding for good reason as this would greatly disturb other wild animals. However, if this proposal passes, both hunting *and* hounding will be allowed on the two refuges.

Conclusion

Congress made wildlife conservation the mission of the refuge system, and aligning refuge regulations with state hunting rules should never be automatic. The USFWS has an independent legal obligation to determine whether an expansion of hunting or hunting methods, such as hounding, chasing mountain lions to exhaustion across the refuge landscape before s/he gets shot), is compatible with the conservation purposes of a National Wildlife Refuge. That compatibility determination—not state preference—is supposed to be the controlling standard. This proposal would radically eliminate this measure of caution and allow states aka trophy hunting, fishing and trapping interests to take over authority and control.

If adopted, this proposal would turn federal wildlife refuges into mere extensions of state hunting programs rather than distinct conservation landscapes governed by an independent federal mandate. Refuges would become places where the Safari Club International slogan, “For Hunters First!,” effectively prevails, elevating the asserted rights of trophy hunters, anglers, commercial outfitters and trappers while reducing wild animals to little more than supplying targets for hunting and trapping “opportunities.” Are we to expect next that the USFWS declares that trophy, recreational and commercial killing of wildlife on refuges is *the* priority use?

If adopted, this proposal would make state agencies—and the trophy hunting and trapping interests that influence them—the de facto managers of federal lands and wildlife held in trust for all Americans. It would create winners—outfitters, trophy hunters, anglers, and trappers—and losers,—the black bears, mountain lions, foxes, raccoons, elk, antelope, deer, ducks, geese, other waterfowl and birds, along with the benign public (those of us who want to see wild animals protected from human harm including hunting and trapping). This outcome is unscientific, unjust, undemocratic, and unacceptable.

Therefore, we request that the USFWS withdraws the proposed rule and returns to the original idea of refuges as sanctuaries where wild animals can rest, recover and have a home that’s safe and protects them from human harm, including hunting, fishing and trapping. In situations of conflicts, where human interference would benefit resident wild animals, non-lethal methods should be implemented. If recreational opportunities are to be expanded, this should be done for wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation commensurate with growing public demand and keeping impacts to wildlife to a minimum, all evaluated to ensure that they align with the purpose of wildlife refuges. We ask that the USFWS work toward National Wildlife Refuges as places where wildlife preservation, biological integrity, and public trust responsibilities are prioritized. Refuges are not for hunters, anglers and trappers but places where wildlife comes first!

Sincerely,

Anja Heister, Ph.D.,

Co-founder & Executive Director of Footloose Montana

ⁱ [Unforgettable Hunting | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#)

ⁱⁱ Although Montana law often distinguishes hunting from trapping as different methods of ‘taking’ wildlife, FWP repeatedly characterizes trapping as part of Montana’s hunting and ‘harvest’ heritage, provides information about trapping under the “hunting” tab on its website, combines hunting and trapping within shared regulations and bag limits, and administers trapping through the same recreational framework used for hunting