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News Release



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Refuge Posting Signs on Six Islands; Increasing Boat Patrols

Refuge managers are posting additional signs on six islands in the Columbia Rivers' Hanford Reach area to clarify ownership and inform the public that the islands are not open to recreational uses during spring and summer months. The six islands start upstream from the Snyder Road boat launch and across from the Washington State University Richland Campus in Richland and include the next five islands upstream, ending at Wooded Island. "Although the public considers these islands part of the Hanford Reach Monument, they are in fact owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and have been managed as part of the McNary National Wildlife Refuge since 1956", according to McNary Refuge Manager John Gahr.

The Refuge islands were at the center of a 1993-94 nationwide lawsuit (National Audubon Society vs. Babbitt) against the Fish and Wildlife Service over recreational uses on Refuges. As part of the national settlement of that lawsuit, the Refuge islands were closed to all spring and summer public use to protect nesting birds and other wildlife.

Refuge Manager Gahr is responsible for patrolling the Refuge islands and enforcing the summer closure. "Back in the 80's and early 90's the Refuge issued hundreds of tickets to area boaters and beach users for being on those islands", said Gahr. He believes the overwhelming majority of boaters know the islands are closed and voluntarily comply with the closure. "It's pretty obvious with the Refuge signs and thousands of birds circling the islands . . . but we have to be vigilant and keep getting the message out that the islands are closed". So this year the Refuge is adding signs, increasing law enforcement boat patrols, and getting the word out about the island closures. "People need to know to use the beaches on the river shoreline, not the Refuge islands" said Gahr.

Gahr added that there has been an increase in wildlife use of the islands in recent years that may be attributable to the closures. He cites the addition of nesting birds in the small trees on the shoreline of one island and the increase in the presence of white "great egrets" on island shorelines as possible benefits resulting from the closure. "Observing the birds and other abundant wildlife on the islands are a major attraction for boaters and recreationists on this portion of the Columbia River. Closing the islands to access ensures they'll continue to be here for everyone to enjoy".

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.