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NWRA Hopeful for Successful FWS/Tribal Partnership at National Bison Range, MT

Washington, DC- The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) expressed hope today that the newly signed Annual Funding Agreement (AFA) for the National Bison Range in Montana between the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) will successfully advance the mission and purposes of the refuge and the Refuge System, while meeting NWRA's core criteria for tribal agreements.

“Our hope is that this agreement will result in a National Bison Range that thrives in achieving its vital wildlife conservation mission,” said Evan Hirsche, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. “Yet, we remain concerned that such an agreement may be implemented absent a national FWS policy governing such partnerships.”

The NWRA has repeatedly called for a national AFA policy for the FWS that would guide how such agreements are managed, and ensure that they advance the mission and purposes of the refuge and Refuge System. The lack of such a policy contributed to the breakdown of a previous AFA at the Bison Range between the CSKT and the FWS in December 2006.

“A successful agreement must incorporate NWRA good governance recommendations such as ensuring the FWS retains inherently federal positions and line authority at the refuge, and clear standards of accountability for work performed by the tribes,” said Hirsche. “In addition, funding for tribal work should be dependent on overall funding levels for the System and subject to FWS allocation priorities.”

Under the Tribal Self-Governance Act of 1994, native tribes can enter into AFAs with agencies within the Department of the Interior, including the FWS at national wildlife refuges. The National Bison Range agreement, which outlines how the CSKT will partner with the FWS at the Range for the next three years (fiscal years 2009 – 2011), will be available for public comment and Congressional review for 90 days prior to implementation.

“We urge the FWS to expedite completion of a tribal agreement policy that incorporates NWRA good governance provisions, and include them in a final FWS/CSKT agreement,” continued Hirsche. To view NWRA's AFA principles, visit www.refugeassociation.org. A full review of how the new agreement complies with these principles will be available in the coming days.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries that secure its ecological integrity.