



**To:**            **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**  
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge  
5396 VT Route 105  
Brunswick, VT 05905

**Re:**            **Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Recreational  
Hunting and Fishing Plan for New Hampshire and Vermont**

**Position:**    **Support**

**Date:**        **July 6, 2021**

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To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Joseph Mullin, and I am the Assistant Manager, Northeastern States for the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF). As an avid sportsman, and a non-resident license holder who enjoys participating in the many outdoor opportunities that New Hampshire and Vermont have to offer, I submit this letter to express our general support while providing additional recommendations on the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Recreational Hunting and Fishing Plan for New Hampshire and Vermont (Hunting and Fishing Plan). It is my earnest hope that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service takes these recommendations into account when producing a final plan for this National Fish and Wildlife Refuge.

Since 1989, CSF has dedicated itself to the mission of working with Congress, governors, and state legislatures to protect and advance hunting, angling, recreational shooting and trapping. The unique and collective force of the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus, the Governors Sportsmen's Caucus, and the National Assembly of Sportsmen's Caucuses, working closely with CSF, and with the support of major hunting, recreational fishing and shooting, and trapping organizations, serves as an unprecedented network of pro-sportsmen elected officials that advance the conservation interests of America's hunters and anglers. It is from this voice – with more than three decades of organizational history and a staff with more than a century of combined policy experience on sportsmen's issues – that we strongly support the proposed Hunting and Fishing Plan and offer additional recommendations.

Hunting is one of six priority elements of public use under the National Wildlife Refuge System, as supported by: Executive Order 12996 (March 25, 1996); legislatively mandated by the Refuge

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System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57); and reinforced as a priority use by Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3356 (September 15, 2017). As the Hunting and Fishing Plan highlights, the Refuge System Improvement Act established the mission of administering “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.” (Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997). The Hunting and Fishing Plan goes on to state that “Regulated sport hunting and fishing has been an important management tool and recreational activity at Silvio O. Conte NFWR for over a decade.” Therefore, proposing additional hunting and angling opportunities at Silvio O. Conte NFWR highlights the essence of why we set our nation’s lands aside as refuges.

As all sportsmen and women understand, access and opportunity are at the core of keeping our country’s time-honored sporting traditions alive and well. The Hunting and Fishing Plan’s proposal to keep open “all refuge lands that are found to be compatible with hunting and fishing” is an extraordinary step towards providing sportsmen and women with an influx of real estate – over 36,800 acres – in which they may pursue game and introduce the next generation of conservationists to the great outdoors. Access has a significant and empirically-proven relationship towards hunter participation, resulting in immediate effects on conservation funding through the sale of hunting licenses and excise taxes on hunting gear through the American System of Conservation Funding. Increasing hunting and fishing on lands that previously had not held such opportunities has the absolute potential to benefit sportsmen and women participating in sporting activities that have been woven into our nation’s cultural fabric. It is through this lens that CSF is grateful to see the access that hunters and anglers may acquire through the Hunting and Fishing Plan.

Though we support the Plan generally, CSF has identified certain sections that, from a sportsmen’s perspective, could be improved upon. For this reason, CSF is providing the following recommendations for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s consideration.

### **Recommendation I: Expanding the Proposed Hunting Hours**

The Hunting and Fishing Plan explicitly states that “Hunters are allowed on refuge lands 30 minutes before sunrise and 30 minutes after sunset.” The overwhelming majority of sportsmen and women would immediately recognize how inconsistent this rule is with practical hunting methods. Upon parking one’s vehicle on the refuge, much time is spent trekking out to identified hunting area (in many cases, this accounts for miles of walking/hiking), setting up a tree stand, and then sitting in silence and allowing the land to return to its calm ambiance. Similarly, after the established sunset has occurred, sportsmen and women must replicate the process in reverse, taking down their tree stands and then walking any variable of distances back to their vehicles.

Only allowing hunters onto the refuge land 30 minutes before sunrise and 30 minutes after sunset (i.e., dawn to dusk) is requiring them to forfeit valuable moments in the woods during the times when many game species are the most active. CSF recommends that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service revises the Hunting and Fishing Plan to account for a greater amount of time during which hunters are permitted to remain on refuge lands to allow for hunters to be set up prior to first light and to remain hunting until the light of day has faded, rather than sacrificing the most productive times of the day to ensure they are not in the woods prior to first light or past last light. Speaking from experience, I will typically be sitting in my tree stand at least one hour before sunrise, as the

pre-dawn hours tend to be when the game species are out foraging for food. Additionally, should I harvest an animal near the final moments of available daylight, I would be hard-pressed to track, process, and carry the meat out before I would be in violation of the Hunting and Fishing Plan. The prohibition on hunters being “on refuge lands 30 minutes before sunrise and 30 minutes after sunset” is not only burdensome – it’s unrealistic.

### **Recommendation II: Permitting Night Hunting**

In accordance with the Hunting and Fishing Plan, “Hunting on refuge lands will follow the New Hampshire Department of Fish and Game’s (NHDFG) hunting regulations with some additional restrictions to protect wildlife and habitat, and to reduce potential public use conflicts.” Additionally, the plan proposes to open hunting opportunities for furbearer species, such as coyotes and raccoons, and remain consistent with the hunting regulations in New Hampshire and Vermont. However, the Hunting and Fishing Plan continues to state that “Night hunting is prohibited except by special use permit at the Nulhegan Basin Division.” In the pursuit of certain furbearing species, such as coyotes and raccoons, a hunter’s success often hinges on the ability to head afield at night. Both New Hampshire and Vermont permit sportsmen and women to hunt certain species in the post-dusk hours, and we suggest the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to revise the proposed plan to remain consistent with the practices that are currently in place in both states.

CSF is unaware of any conflicts between hunters pursuing furbearers at night and non-consumptive users. The proposed Hunting and Fishing Plan emphasizes that it intends to reduce conflicts between national wildlife refuge stakeholders, though we are unsure how a prohibition on night hunting would accomplish this task. State fish and wildlife agencies, such as the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, recognize the importance of allowing night hunting for certain furbearing species – from both a sporting perspective and the management of the state’s wildlife. These departments are experts at balancing the interests of the sporting community and other recreational consumers, and they continue to permit night hunting; therefore, we encourage the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to do the same.

### **Recommendation III: Permitting the Use of Recorded and Electronic Calls**

The Hunting and Fishing Plan also prohibits the use of recorded and electronic calls by hunters on the refuge. As was mentioned above, the Hunting and Fishing Plan calls for hunting on refuge lands to comply with state fish and wildlife regulations. In the case of barring the use of electronic game calls, the Plan would actually conflict with what’s allowed by the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. Both state agencies allow the use of these calls while hunting numerous species, including fox and coyote. For sportsmen and women across the nation, the use of electronic calls has become relatively commonplace, allowing them to utilize newer technology in the harvesting of species such as coyotes and crows.

Understanding the general applicability of electronic and recorded calls on certain species, such as coyotes (which are most certainly prevalent in New Hampshire and Vermont) CSF encourages the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remain consistent with what is allowed under both New Hampshire and Vermont’s regulations and permit their use.

### **Recommendation IV: Authorizing Baiting**

Per the Hunting and Fishing Plan, “No baiting is allowed on refuge lands.” The practice of baiting serves as an invaluable management tool for state fish and wildlife agencies in relying on hunting to control certain species populations and reduce human-wildlife conflicts. The use of bait allows

sportsmen and women to be more selective in their harvest, as they are afforded the opportunity to better judge the animal's size and age than they would otherwise be able to. Additionally, empirical studies within the region have shown that the use of bait is directly correlated to success rates for hunters.<sup>1</sup> As such, eliminating the use of bait has the absolute possibility of lowering success rates, which in turn may result in lost business – a crippling outcome for the state and local economies.

Baiting is a crucial ingredient to several forms of hunting. New Hampshire recognizes this and has a separate season for hunting bears over bait. Therefore, CSF encourages the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to permit the use of bait on the portions of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge that lie within New Hampshire, where it would be consistent with state law to do so.

CSF is entirely grateful for the proposed plan's intentions to increase hunting and fishing opportunities throughout the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge. Having said that, I respectfully urge the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to consider implementing the recommendations mentioned above. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on this issue. Should you require any additional information on this, or any other sportsmen-related topic, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,



Joseph Mullin  
Assistant Manager, Northeastern States | Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation  
110 North Carolina Ave., SE | Washington, DC 20003  
[Jmullin@congressionalsportsmen.org](mailto:Jmullin@congressionalsportsmen.org) | 202-253-6883

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<sup>1</sup> 2019 Maine Black Bear Harvest. Accessed on June 23, 2021. <https://www.maine.gov/ifw/docs/2019-Bear-Harvest.pdf>.