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Chicago Wilderness members inspire federal investment in region

Millennium Reserve projects and Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge authorization solidify Chicago Wilderness as hub for urban conservation

CHICAGO—The Chicago Wilderness region is unlike any other wilderness. We have sand dunes next to industrial parks; prairies next to sky scrapers; wilderness trails along rail lines; and incredible biodiversity amid great human diversity. This rare hub of urban conservation exists because passionate people, groups and agencies have planned, restored and used their collective voice. They infused this metropolitan region with a conservation ethic.

And now this regional work is yielding national results.

During a recent visit to our region, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar made two major conservation announcements in addition to visiting the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore with U.S. Senator Dick Durbin.

Secretary Salazar announced that Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, in southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois, has officially been authorized. With authorization as a national wildlife refuge, the 11,200 acres for habitat and recreation can be established through conservation easements, donations, and cooperative agreements. Hackmatack will be the first officially-designated wildlife refuge in our region and will connect the 12 million residents of the metropolitan areas of Chicago, Madison, Milwaukee, and Rockford to nature.

The Secretary also announced \$1 million in funding for projects of The Millennium Reserve: Calumet Core initiative to restore 140,000 acres of native habitat and provide increased recreational opportunities in the region.

“Thanks to the individual and collective achievements of Chicago Wilderness members, our federal partners see this metropolitan landscape as a valuable place to invest resources and ensure the conservation of our rich natural heritage for future generations,” said Melinda Pruett-Jones, Executive Director of Chicago Wilderness. “The momentum of these efforts speaks to the

significant success of the collaborative model Chicago Wilderness members pioneered to conserve and restore lands and waters across the complex landscapes of metropolitan regions.”

These projects support President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors (AGO) Initiative to reconnect Americans, especially children, to America’s rich outdoor treasures. Through four collaborative, landscape-scale efforts, the Chicago Wilderness region now hosts four AGO projects, including a Treasured Landscape (Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie), an authorized urban National Wildlife Refuge (Hackmatack), an Urban Waters Partnership (Northwest Indiana), and the Millennium Reserve: Calumet Core.

“One of the major goals of President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors initiative is to work with states, local communities and other partners to establish a network of great urban parks that will help expand outdoor opportunities in and around cities,” Salazar said. “With these grants, we are helping to achieve this goal right in the heart of Chicago, restoring native habitat while also creating new opportunities for millions of Americans to enjoy the great outdoors.”

Both the Hackmatack refuge and Millennium Reserve advance Chicago Wilderness’ biodiversity recovery goals and implement the alliance’s Green Infrastructure Vision. Through this initiative, Chicago Wilderness members guide land use planning to safeguard and nurture green infrastructure—the interconnected lands and waters outlined in the *Biodiversity Recovery Plan*. Establishing the Hackmatack refuge would provide habitat for a number of threatened species, including the endangered whooping crane, and migratory pathways for small mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians that will help them navigate life in an urban environment.

Perhaps most critical, though, places like Hackmatack and Millennium Reserve offer opportunities for the region’s people to connect to nature through wildlife viewing and other recreational activities.

“Together, Chicago Wilderness members are ensuring that future generations have even greater access to our wilderness than we enjoy today,” said Pruett-Jones. “And that is something to be very proud of.”

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Chicago Wilderness is a regional alliance that connects people and nature. We are more than 260 organizations that work together to restore local nature and improve the quality of life for all who live here, by protecting the lands and waters on which we all depend.

www.chicagowilderness.org

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