

[EXTERNAL] Reply to FWS - OMB Control Number "1018-Friends" from Friends of John Heinz Refuge

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Fri 1/8/2021 7:40 PM

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1 attachments (4 MB)

FOHR reply 01-08-2021.pdf;

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Hello – Please find our response to the proposed info request.  
Thank you for the opportunity to share our thought and feelings.  
Sincerely  
The Board of the Friends of John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge

**Subject: OMB Control Number "1018-Friends"/Document # 2020-24802**

January 8, 2021

Dear U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,

Thank you for providing the Friends of Heinz Refuge (FOHR), a member of the Coalition of Refuge Friends and Advocates (CORFA) this opportunity to comment on the Federal Register notice about the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) desire to collect documentation from Friends organizations. FOHR is incredibly proud to be an advocate for the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge and its programs. We have many unpaid volunteers, including the entire Board, that give their time and money and many members that provide funds to promote our refuge and work to conserve the natural and community resources associated with the site.

We understand the results of the OIG audit. We understand the need of the FWS to comply with the spirit of the audit and exercise more oversight of the various Friends programs. Our first comment is that we would request that the revised FWS Policy regarding the relationship with Friends be completed, including review by the Friends groups, before requesting feedback on what info is necessary to comply with the revised Policy. For the FWS to seek info, as with the Federal Register posting, is “putting the cart before the horse”. That said, we are where we are and so our comments on the Federal Register info request, may not be our final comments once we see the revised Policy.

At this stage of the process we share with you that our comments are in broadly line with the comments provided by CORFA. Moreover, we believe sharing organizational documents and tax returns along with an annual financial report would not create an unreasonable administrative burden on our unpaid volunteer Friends Board members. We do not believe sharing undefined “assurance documents” is something we can agree to at this time because it is impossible to react to a request that has not been defined. We would need to have the FWS explain how quarterly, rather than annual reports add value to an oversight process before we could agree to that extra administrative burden on volunteers.

Below are the specific comments of CORFA that we agree with.

*(1) FWS wants to know, “whether the collection of information is necessary for the proper performance of the functions of the agency, including whether the information will have practical utility;”*

Documentation to collect once and update as needed:

- Friends Partnership Agreement (FPA) with attachments:
  - Articles of Incorporation
  - IRS Determination letter
  - Insurance policies relating to the Agreement
- Supplemental FPA with:
  - Description of Service Property
- Basic Friends organizational documentation

- Form 1023 or 1023EZ
- Documents submitted with Form 1023
- Documents the IRS required the organization to submit in support of their application
- Bylaws

Documentation to collect annually:

- Modifications to the FPA
- Modifications to the Supplemental Agreement
- Information return (990 series tax return)
- Annual report of aid provided to FWS and a short narrative as it relates to the FPA. The annual report will be one means of demonstrating at the regional and national level the value of the Friends partnering with FWS.
  - Aid to the FWS site
    - Direct financial aid with narrative
    - Programmed services with narrative
  - Membership
    - Number
    - Events

Documentation not necessary for the proper performance of the functions of FWS:

- Internal financial documentation:
  - Nonprofits need to implement financial controls to protect their assets and reputation. This is the responsibility of the board and can not be transferred to anyone else.
  - According to the Friends Policy and FPA, FWS can not direct Friends to implement these management practices nor assess the Friends internal financial controls.
    - The Friends policy states that “Friends are required to independently manage the legal, financial, personnel and administrative activities and responsibilities of the organization.” (633 FW 1.16 b)
    - The Friends Partnership Agreement states each party will, “Take steps to avoid the appearance that either party … directs the management or decision making process of the other. The Service and the Friends will maintain an evident and distinct separation between their organizational management activities.” (V.A. (7))
  - A nonprofit’s staff, board, and occasionally partners may be involved with the formulation of these controls. It is ultimately the fiduciary responsibility of the board to develop, approve and ensure adherence.
- Resumes of potential Friends group staff selected to work in visitor centers.
  - Mandating that the Friends must share the resumes of potential staff gives the appearance that FWS is interfering in the decision-making process of the Friends and therefore violates the policy and FPA.
  - Friends have agreed to comply with Homeland Security Presidential Directives and realize that Friends representatives may need to obtain federal security clearances. (FPA III.E.)
- Supplemental Documentation Requirements: Quarterly Review. We see no value in this.
- Supplemental Documentation Requirements: Annual Review:

- FPA already stipulates that the partners will meet annually to assess the effectiveness of the partnership as it relates to the FPA.

(2) FWS wants to know “*The accuracy of our estimate of the burden for this collection of information, including the validity of the methodology and assumptions used;*”

At this time, we have no basis to disagree with the COFRA edits to the FWS estimates as below.

Requirement	Average number of annual respondents	Average number of responses each	Average number of annual responses	Average completion time per response (hours)	Estimated annual burden hours
<i>Partnership Agreement:</i>					
Private Sector	50	1	50	40 50	2,000 2,500
<i>Renewal of Partnership Agreement:</i>					
Private Sector	150	1	150	8 20	1,200 3,000
<i>Supplemental Agreement:</i>					
Private Sector	50	1	50	4 10	200 500
<i>Renewal of Supplemental Agreement:</i>					
Private Sector	150	1	150	2 7	300 1,050
<i>Basic Program Documentation:</i>					
Private Sector	200	1	200	8	1,600
<i>Internal Financial Control Documentation:</i>					
Private Sector	200	1	200	40 0	800 0
<i>Donation and Expenditure Recordkeeping</i>					

<i>Requirements:</i>					
Private Sector	200	1	200	20 40	4,000 8,000
<i>Assurance Documentation:</i>					
Private Sector	200	1	200	40 20	8,000 4,000
<i>Friends Group Staff Resumes:</i>					
Private Sector	25 0	4 0	25 0	8 00	200 0
<i>Annual Performance Reports:</i>					
Private Sector	200	1	200	20 30	4,000 6,000
<i>Supplemental Documentation Requirements: Quarterly Review:</i>					
Private Sector	200 0	4 0	800 0	2 0	1,600 0
<i>Supplemental Documentation Requirements: Annual Review:*</i>					
Private Sector	40 150	1 1	40 150	20 10	200 1,500
<i>Totals</i>	<del>1,635</del> 1,550		<del>2,235</del> 1,550		31,300 28,150

\* Annual review and potential modification of FPA and supplemental agreement.

FWS' estimate indicates that a Friends group would spend 184 hours/year or 15 hours/month to meet these requirements.

(3) FWS wants to know “Ways to enhance the quality, utility, and clarity of the information to be collected”;

- Identify and share how each document FWS requires from Friends will be used prior to its collection.
- Modify the Friends Policy, FPA, and the Supplemental Agreement so they address the needs of Friends as independent nonprofit organizations.
- Collect documentation that relates only to the FPA and Supplemental Agreements.
- Collaborate on procedures to demonstrate that net revenues generated on Service-managed property are used to benefit the site and Friends activities and programs that benefit the site. (212 FW 8.18 B.)
- Develop procedures to ensure that requests from FWS for any expenditures by the Friends of the net revenues generated on Service-managed property meet FWS ethics guidance and that Friends are provided assurance documentation. It is the responsibility of FWS to ensure their requests meet their ethics rules.
- Encourage Friends to work with organizations such as NWRA, CORFA, Public Lands Alliance and nonprofit state associations to implement best practices for their governance.
- Friends currently produce quarterly or even monthly financial statements for their boards that are shared with the FWS’ Friends liaison.
- Limit requirement to collect information to annual and eliminate quarterly.
- Like the NPS, FWS needs to recognize that Friends organizations have different revenue levels; therefore the complexity of their financial information varies and size limits their ability to pay for costly audits (\$10,000) by an independent CPA.
  - The majority of Friends organizations have gross annual revenues of less than \$50,000/year. Many donors and funders rely on the Form 990 to assess the financial health of small nonprofits.
  - NPS threshold for an audit for their philanthropic partners is tiered:
    - “In any given year where a Partner raises between \$500,000 and \$1 million for the benefit of the NPS, they will undertake an annual financial review and provide a copy to the NPS.”
    - ...”where a Partner raises \$1 million or more for the benefit of the NPS, they will undertake a financial audit and furnish a copy to the NPS.”
    - NPS sites also meet with their partners annually to discuss how the park expended funds donated by the partner.
  - Any modification to the FPA that includes a threshold for an audit needs to be tiered for different revenue levels similar to the NPS Philanthropic Partnership Agreement.
- The FPA stipulates that FWS and Friends will meet annually to assess the effectiveness of the partnership. Ideally, any annual performance report would be discussed at this time.
- If reasonably requested by one Party, the other Party shall execute and deliver such other documents and take such other action as may be necessary to effect the terms of this Agreement.

*(4) FWS wants to know, “How might the agency minimize the burden of the collection of information on those who are to respond, including through the use of appropriate automated, electronic, mechanical, or other technological collection techniques or other forms of information technology, e.g., permitting electronic submission of response.”*

- Create a checklist to assure the collection of FPA, Supplemental FPA, and Basic Friends organizational documentation.
- Digitize executed FPAs and the Supplemental Agreement to make them accessible.
- Establish a system to track all monetary and in-kind requests FWS makes of Friends.
- Create a portal for Friends to download metrics similar to what NPS is creating.
- Review the NPS Cooperating Associations Form 10-40 and annual reports of the NPS's philanthropic partners to gleam ideas.