

June 8, 2026

Honorable Brian Nesvik
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Sent via electronic mail: Brian.Nesvik@fws.gov

RE: Keep Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge under U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service administration and management

Director Nesvik,

The undersigned conservation and environmental organizations oppose any changes to the status of Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge as an operating national wildlife refuge and urge the Service to continue its administration and management of Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge.

Big Oaks NWR is a treasured Indiana natural resource, with broad support from a wide variety of outdoors users and from neighbors of the refuge. At 50,000 acres, it is Indiana's largest national wildlife refuge (of the state's three NWRs), and second in public lands acreage in Indiana to the Hoosier National Forest. The Indiana Department of Natural Resources states that Big Oaks is "indeed a natural treasure that contains a full array of the region's natural communities and species assemblages."

Big Oaks NWR contains a variety of diverse wildlife habitats, including mature hardwood forest, wetlands, caves, streams, and grasslands. The grassland habitat, covering 8,500 acres, is home to one of the world's largest populations of state endangered Henslow's sparrows. Over 200 bird species have been identified at Big Oaks, including another state-endangered bird, the cerulean warbler. Wild turkey are abundant at the refuge. Because of its bird diversity, Big Oaks has been designated a Globally Important Bird Area.

Upland forests covering 27,000 acres provide habitat for a wide diversity of wildlife. 5,000 acres of wetlands provide habitat for wildlife species including the state-endangered crawfish frog. 24 species of amphibians and 17 species of reptiles have been identified at Big Oaks. The refuge habitats also include 6,000 acres of shrubland interspersed through the refuge, and a small lake (Old Timbers Lake). 46 state-listed plant species have been found on the Refuge.

River otters, bobcats, whitetail deer, fox and coyote are among the 46 mammal species found at Big Oaks NWR. Federally listed bats roam the Refuge's forestlands, including the Indiana bat which breeds at the site.

These large habitat blocks of forests, shrublands, grasslands, forested wetlands, and occasional emergent marsh contribute to the increased biodiversity of the natural communities found at the refuge.

Public access is allowed on certain areas of Big Oaks, while other areas are closed or limited due to the possible presence of unexploded ordnance. Public uses include hunting, fishing and birdwatching. The undersigned support continued public access at Big Oaks as provided under the existing access program. Turkey and deer hunting at Big Oaks is highly coveted by Indiana hunters.

In 2021, the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force extended the Fish and Wildlife Service's permit to operate Big Oaks NWR for an additional 99 years, indicating the Department of Defense's (now Department of War) continuing support for the Big Oaks NWR.

Given that Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge protects a great diversity of wildlife and fish habitats, supporting hundreds of species of plants and animals, which furthers the mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to "administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans," we strongly urge the Service to continue operating and managing the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge for the benefit of Hoosiers and our fellow Americans.

Sincerely,

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Note: All information in this letter on the fish and wildlife resources at Big Oaks NWR was obtained from the Big Oaks website and Big Oaks NWR documents.

cc: Representative Erin Houchin
Senator Todd Young
Senator Jim Banks
Governor Mike Braun
Director Alan Morrison, Indiana DNR