

# **2012 Public Lands Transportation Scholar Program**

## **Refuge and Contact Information**

Land Management Site Name

**Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge**

Type of Unit

**USFWS – National Wildlife Refuge**

### **Project Information**

**Project Title**

**Wichita Mountains Alternative Transportation Planning Project**

**Project Abstract**

The Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge (WMWR) receives over 1.6 million visitors per year, making it one of the most heavily visited refuges in the National Refuge System. The vast majority of these visitors arrive at and tour the Refuge via private automobile. There is a need to improve the quality, capacity, and safety of the Refuge driving experience, by encouraging visitors to decrease their use of fossil fuels and increase their physical activity and fitness through use of alternative modes of transportation such as bicycle and foot travel. This project will create a multi-use transportation network that encourages visitors to travel to and within the Refuge using alternative modes of transportation. The scholar requested in this proposal will move a suite of proposed transportation projects from the conceptual stage to a well-defined scope of work and NEPA ready project.

**Project Description (250 word limit)**

The WMWR has been working to build partner support and acquire funds for transportation improvements. The Refuge is completing the final phase of a cooperative project with the Federal Highway Administration, the Comanche County Board of Commissioners, and the Oklahoma Department of Transportation to improve highway safety and non-motorized access thru the Refuge by widening highway shoulders along

State Highways 115 and 49. To date, the partnership has leveraged over \$5 million to improve access along 13 miles of existing roadway. In 2009 the Refuge requested a Transportation Assistance Group site visit and assessment led by the Volpe National Transportation Center and the Federal Highway Administration. The findings of the site visit led to an Alternative Transportation Study conducted by the Volpe Center. Nine transportation projects were proposed in the study, and are included in the Preferred Alternative of the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). Three of the projects include improving the surfaces, shoulders, linkages, and signage along 4 miles of existing developments (refuge roads, hiking trails, old CCC access roads, and a water diversion structure) to create a network of alternative transportation routes between Refuge and community points of interest. These 3 projects (Meer's roadway shoulder expansion, Jed Johnson Tower, trail and road restoration, and the Lake Elmer Thomas Recreation Area (LETRA) connection) are still in the conceptual stage. A Sarbanes TRIP grant was requested to complete a Refuge-wide transportation study and to complete the NEPA for these 3 multi-use routes.

The transportation scholar would act as the Alternative Transportation Project Team Leader, and work with the USFWS Staff and transportation partners' group to determine trail locations, complete the initial engineering survey, produce site and profile views of the project, and identify social and resource issues. The final project would be a site-specific project proposal adequate for conducting NEPA and requesting construction funding.

### Project Products and Benefits

It is difficult for a visitor – especially a family with children - to access or explore the Refuge except in a private auto. The lack of alternative transportation options coupled with heavy visitation exacerbates a variety of Refuge issues such as vehicle crowding, speeding, animal-car collisions, high road maintenance costs, a large carbon footprint, and a public that is disconnected from their public lands. This alternative transportation project will encourage people to leave their automobiles after arriving at the Refuge, and experience the Refuge on foot or bike, which address many visitation and transportation issues. It also addresses many of the broader social issues facing Oklahoma such as obesity, smoking, and inactivity.

The Alternative Transportation Project enjoys strong partner support from the gateway communities as they will gain multi-use transportation links to the Refuge, by the Scenic Byway communities that hope increased Refuge visitation will have a positive economic impact, and by the many educational and health care entities that comprise the Fit Kids Coalition

### Project Contributions

The transportation scholar will act as a dedicated project manager. The responsibility for transportation related projects is currently spread among 3 departments and supervisors at the Refuge. Time-sensitive, transportation related opportunities such as grants are frequently missed due to a lack of transportation program focus and leadership. The multi-use, alternative network proposed in this project is proposed in the CCP and address several of transportation and visitor service issues identified in the CCP such as animal-car collisions, roadway crowding, the need for improved bicycle safety and access, increasing visitation, air pollution, and Kids in the Outdoors. A transportation scholar can bring the focus and expertise needed to coordinate a complex network of access routes with a variety of partner and agency regulations and objectives. A dedicated project team leader will expedite the planning process by 3 to 5 years sooner than it will be accomplished by existing Refuge Staff.

### Project Partners

The WMWR works with a transportation partnership group of over 15 state, regional, county, tribal, and military partners. The Refuge also works in frequent partnership with the Fit Kid's Coalition of Southwestern Oklahoma, the Comanche County Commissioners, Ft. Sill's Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Department, the Wichita Mountains Scenic Byway Committee member communities, and the Association of the Friends of the Wichitas to improve transportation and environmental education on the Refuge with special emphasis on alternative modes of transportation and physical fitness.

### Project Requirements

The WMWR has adequate housing, office, and transportation facilities and staff available to host a transportation scholar in compliance with the program requirements.