

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM ADMINISTRATION ACT OF 1966¹

[Public Law 89–669, Approved Oct. 15, 1966, 80 Stat. 927]

[As Amended Through P.L. 117–286, Enacted December 27, 2022]

【Currency: This publication is a compilation of the text of Public Law 89–669. It was last amended by the public law listed in the As Amended Through note above and below at the bottom of each page of the pdf version and reflects current law through the date of the enactment of the public law listed at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/comps/>】

【Note: While this publication does not represent an official version of any Federal statute, substantial efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of its contents. The official version of Federal law is found in the United States Statutes at Large and in the United States Code. The legal effect to be given to the Statutes at Large and the United States Code is established by statute (1 U.S.C. 112, 204).】

AN ACT To provide for the conservation, protection, and propagation of native species of fish and wildlife, including migratory birds, that are threatened with extinction; to consolidate the authorities relating to the administration by the Secretary of the Interior of the National Wildlife Refuge System; and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

【Sections 1 through 3. Repealed by section 14 of P.L. 93–205, 87 Stat. 903】

SEC. 4. 【16 U.S.C. 668dd】 (a)(1) For the purpose of consolidating the authorities relating to the various categories of areas that are administered by the Secretary for the conservation of fish and wildlife, including species that are threatened with extinction, all lands, waters, and interests therein administered by the Secretary as wildlife refuges, areas for the protection and conservation of fish and wildlife that are threatened with extinction, wildlife ranges, game ranges, wildlife management areas, or waterfowl production areas are hereby designated as the “National Wildlife Refuge System” (referred to herein as the “System”), which shall be subject to the provisions of this section, and shall be administered by the Secretary through the United States Fish and Wildlife Serv-

¹Sec. 12(f) of P.L. 91–135 (16 U.S.C. 668dd note) provided that: “The provisions of sections 4 and 5 of the Act of October 15, 1966 (80 Stat. 929; 16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee), as amended, shall hereinafter be cited as the ‘National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966’.” Sections 3 through 8 of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105–57) made amendments to this Act. Section 9 of the 1997 Act provides as follows:

“SEC. 9. 【16 U.S.C. 668dd note】 STATUTORY CONSTRUCTION WITH RESPECT TO ALASKA.

“(a) IN GENERAL.—Nothing in this Act is intended to affect—

“(b) CONFLICTS OF LAWS.—If any conflict arises between any provision of this Act and any provision of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, then the provision in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act shall prevail.”

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ice. With respect to refuge lands in the State of Alaska, those programs relating to the management of resources for which any other agency of the Federal Government exercises administrative responsibility through cooperative agreement shall remain in effect, subject to the direct supervision of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, as long as such agency agrees to exercise such responsibility.

(2) The mission of the System is 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.

(3) With respect to the System, it is the policy of the United States that—

(A) each refuge shall be managed to fulfill the mission of the System, as well as the specific purposes for which that refuge was established;

(B) compatible wildlife-dependent recreation is a legitimate and appropriate general public use of the System, directly related to the mission of the System and the purposes of many refuges, and which generally fosters refuge management and through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife;

(C) compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are the priority general public uses of the System and shall receive priority consideration in refuge planning and management; and

(D) when the Secretary determines that a proposed wildlife-dependent recreational use is a compatible use within a refuge, that activity should be facilitated, subject to such restrictions or regulations as may be necessary, reasonable, and appropriate.

(4) In administering the System, the Secretary shall—

(A) provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats within the System;

(B) ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the System are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans;

(C) plan and direct the continued growth of the System in a manner that is best designed to accomplish the mission of the System, to contribute to the conservation of the ecosystems of the United States, to complement efforts of States and other Federal agencies to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats, and to increase support for the System and participation from conservation partners and the public;

(D) ensure that the mission of the System described in paragraph (2) and the purposes of each refuge are carried out, except that if a conflict exists between the purposes of a refuge and the mission of the System, the conflict shall be resolved in a manner that first protects the purposes of the refuge, and, to the extent practicable, that also achieves the mission of the System;

(E) ensure effective coordination, interaction, and cooperation with owners of land adjoining refuges and the fish and

wildlife agency of the States in which the units of the System are located;

(F) assist in the maintenance of adequate water quantity and water quality to fulfill the mission of the System and the purposes of each refuge;

(G) acquire, under State law, water rights that are needed for refuge purposes;

(H) recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority general public uses of the System through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife;

(I) ensure that opportunities are provided within the System for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses;

(J) ensure that priority general public uses of the System receive enhanced consideration over other general public uses in planning and management within the System;

(K) provide increased opportunities for families to experience compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, particularly opportunities for parents and their children to safely engage in traditional outdoor activities, such as fishing and hunting;

(L) continue, consistent with existing laws and interagency agreements, authorized or permitted uses of units of the System by other Federal agencies, including those necessary to facilitate military preparedness;

(M) ensure timely and effective cooperation and collaboration with Federal agencies and State fish and wildlife agencies during the course of acquiring and managing refuges; and

(N) monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

(5) No acquired lands which are or become a part of the System may be transferred or otherwise disposed of under any provision of law (except by exchange pursuant to subsection (b)(3) of this section) unless—

(A) the Secretary determines with the approval of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission that such lands are no longer needed for the purposes for which the System was established; and

(B) such lands are transferred or otherwise disposed of for an amount not less than—

(i) the acquisition costs of such lands, in the case of lands of the system which were purchased by the United States with funds from the migratory bird conservation fund, or fair market value, whichever is greater; or

(ii) the fair market value of such lands (as determined by the Secretary as of the date of the transfer or disposal), in the case of lands of the System which were donated to the System.

The Secretary shall pay into the migratory bird conservation fund the aggregate amount of the proceeds of any transfer or disposal referred to in the preceding sentence.

(6) Each area which is included within the System on January 1, 1975, or thereafter, and which was or is—

(A) designated as an area within such System by law, Executive order, or secretarial order; or

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(B) so included by public land withdrawal, donation, purchase, exchange, or pursuant to a cooperative agreement with any State or local government, any Federal department or agency, or any other governmental entity, shall continue to be a part of the System until otherwise specified by Act of Congress, except that nothing in this paragraph shall be construed as precluding—

- (i) the transfer or disposal of acquired lands within any such area pursuant to paragraph (5) of this subsection;
 - (ii) the exchange of lands within any such area pursuant to subsection (b)(3) of this section; or
 - (iii) the disposal of any lands within any such area pursuant to the terms of any cooperative agreement referred to in subparagraph (B) of this paragraph.
- (b) In administering the System, the Secretary is authorized to take the following actions:

(1) Enter into contracts with any person or public or private agency through negotiation for the provision of public accommodations when, and in such locations, and to the extent that the Secretary determines will not be inconsistent with the primary purpose for which the affected area was established.

(2) Accept donations of funds and to use such funds to acquire or manage lands or interests therein.

(3) Acquire lands or interests therein by exchange (A) for acquired lands or public lands, or for interests in acquired or public lands, under his jurisdiction which he finds to be suitable for disposition, or (B) for the right to remove, in accordance with such terms and conditions as he may prescribe, products from the acquired or public lands within the System. The values of the properties so exchanged either shall be approximately equal, or if they are not approximately equal the values shall be equalized by the payment of cash to the grantor or to the Secretary as the circumstances require.

(4) Subject to standards established by and the overall management oversight of the Director, and consistent with standards established by this Act, to enter into cooperative agreements with State fish and wildlife agencies for the management of programs on a refuge.

(5) Issue regulations to carry out this Act.

(c) No person shall disturb, injure, cut, burn, remove, destroy, or possess any real or personal property of the United States, including natural growth, in any area of the System; or take or possess any fish, bird, mammal, or other wild vertebrate or invertebrate animals or part or nest or egg thereof within any such area; or enter, use, or otherwise occupy any such area for any purpose; unless such activities are performed by persons authorized to manage such area, or unless such activities are permitted either under subsection (d) of this section or by express provision of the law, proclamation, Executive order, or public land order establishing the area, or amendment thereof: *Provided*, That the United States mining and mineral leasing laws shall continue to apply to any lands within the System to the same extent they apply prior to the effec-

tive date of this Act unless subsequently withdrawn under other authority of law. With the exception of endangered species and threatened species listed by the Secretary pursuant to section 4 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 in States wherein a cooperative agreement does not exist pursuant to section 6(c) of that Act, nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize the Secretary to control or regulate hunting or fishing of resident fish and wildlife on lands not within the system². The regulations permitting hunting and fishing of resident fish and wildlife within the System shall be, to the extent practicable, consistent with State fish and wildlife laws and regulations.

(d)(1) The Secretary is authorized, under such regulations as he may prescribe, to—

(A) permit the use of any area within the System for any purpose, including but not limited to hunting, fishing, public recreation and accommodations, and access whenever he determines that such uses are compatible with the major purposes for which such areas were established: *Provided*, That not to exceed 40 per centum at any one time of any area that has been, or hereafter may be acquired, reserved, or set apart as an inviolate sanctuary for migratory birds, under any law, proclamation, Executive order, or public land order may be administered by the Secretary as an area within which the taking of migratory game birds may be permitted under such regulations as he may prescribe unless the Secretary finds that the taking of any species of migratory game birds in more than 40 percent of such area would be beneficial to the species; and

(B) permit the use of, or grant easements in, over, across, upon, through, or under any areas within the System for purposes such as but not necessarily limited to, powerlines, telephone lines, canals, ditches, pipelines, and roads, including the construction, operation, and maintenance thereof, whenever he determines that such uses are compatible with the purposes for which these areas are established.

(2) Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the Secretary may not grant to any Federal, State, or local agency or to any private individual or organization any right-of-way, easement, or reservation in, over, across, through, or under any area within the system² in connection with any use permitted by him under paragraph (1)(B) of this subsection unless the grantee pays to the Secretary, at the option of the Secretary, either (A) in lump sum the fair market value (determined by the Secretary as of the date of conveyance to the grantee) of the right-of-way, easement, or reservation; or (B) annually in advance the fair market rental value (determined by the Secretary) of the right-of-way, easement, or reservation. If any Federal, State, or local agency is exempted from such payment by any other provision of Federal law, such agency shall otherwise compensate the Secretary by any other means agreeable to the Secretary, including, but not limited to, making other land available or the loan of equipment or personnel; except that (A) any such compensation shall relate to, and be consistent with, the objectives of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and (B)

²So in law. Probably should be capitalized.

the Secretary may waive such requirement for compensation if he finds such requirement impracticable or unnecessary. All sums received by the Secretary pursuant to this paragraph shall, after payment of any necessary expenses incurred by him in administering this paragraph, be deposited into the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and shall be available to carry out the provisions for land acquisition of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 715 et seq.) and the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act (16 U.S.C. 718 et seq.).

(3)(A)(i) Except as provided in clause (iv), the Secretary shall not initiate or permit a new use of a refuge or expand, renew, or extend an existing use of a refuge, unless the Secretary has determined that the use is a compatible use and that the use is not inconsistent with public safety. The Secretary may make the determinations referred to in this paragraph for a refuge concurrently with development of a conservation plan under subsection (e).

(ii) On lands added to the System after March 25, 1996, the Secretary shall identify, prior to acquisition, withdrawal, transfer, reclassification, or donation of any such lands, existing compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses that the Secretary determines shall be permitted to continue on an interim basis pending completion of the comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge.

(iii) Wildlife-dependent recreational uses may be authorized on a refuge when they are compatible and not inconsistent with public safety. Except for consideration of consistency with State laws and regulations as provided for in subsection (m), no other determinations or findings are required to be made by the refuge official under this Act or the Refuge Recreation Act for wildlife-dependent recreation to occur.

(iv) Compatibility determinations in existence on the date of enactment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 shall remain in effect until and unless modified.

(B) Not later than 24 months after the date of the enactment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, the Secretary shall issue final regulations establishing the process for determining under subparagraph (A) whether a use of a refuge is a compatible use. These regulations shall—

(i) designate the refuge official responsible for making initial compatibility determinations;

(ii) require an estimate of the timeframe, location, manner, and purpose of each use;

(iii) identify the effects of each use on refuge resources and purposes of each refuge;

(iv) require that compatibility determinations be made in writing;

(v) provide for the expedited consideration of uses that will likely have no detrimental effect on the fulfillment of the purposes of a refuge or the mission of the System;

(vi) provide for the elimination or modification of any use as expeditiously as practicable after a determination is made that the use is not a compatible use;

(vii) require, after an opportunity for public comment, re-evaluation of each existing use, other than those uses specified in clause (viii), if conditions under which the use is

permitted change significantly or if there is significant new information regarding the effects of the use, but not less frequently than once every 10 years, to ensure that the use remains a compatible use, except that, in the case of any use authorized for a period longer than 10 years (such as an electric utility right-of-way), the reevaluation required by this clause shall examine compliance with the terms and conditions of the authorization, not examine the authorization itself;

(viii) require, after an opportunity for public comment, reevaluation of each compatible wildlife-dependent recreational use when conditions under which the use is permitted change significantly or if there is significant new information regarding the effects of the use, but not less frequently than in conjunction with each preparation or revision of a conservation plan under subsection (e) or at least every 15 years, whichever is earlier; and

(ix) provide an opportunity for public review and comment on each evaluation of a use, unless an opportunity for public review and comment on the evaluation of the use has already been provided during the development or revision of a conservation plan for the refuge under subsection (e) or has otherwise been provided during routine, periodic determinations of compatibility for wildlife-dependent recreational uses.

(4) The provisions of this Act relating to determinations of the compatibility of a use shall not apply to—

(A) overflights above a refuge; and

(B) activities authorized, funded, or conducted by a Federal agency (other than the United States Fish and Wildlife Service) which has primary jurisdiction over a refuge or a portion of a refuge, if the management of those activities is in accordance with a memorandum of understanding between the Secretary or the Director and the head of the Federal agency with primary jurisdiction over the refuge governing the use of the refuge.

(e)(1)(A) Except with respect to refuge lands in Alaska (which shall be governed by the refuge planning provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 3101 et seq.)), the Secretary shall—

(i) propose a comprehensive conservation plan for each refuge or related complex of refuges (referred to in this subsection as a “planning unit”) in the System;

(ii) publish a notice of opportunity for public comment in the Federal Register on each proposed conservation plan;

(iii) issue a final conservation plan for each planning unit consistent with the provisions of this Act and, to the extent practicable, consistent with fish and wildlife conservation plans of the State in which the refuge is located; and

(iv) not less frequently than 15 years after the date of issuance of a conservation plan under clause (iii) and every 15 years thereafter, revise the conservation plan as may be necessary.

(B) The Secretary shall prepare a comprehensive conservation plan under this subsection for each refuge within 15 years after the

date of enactment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.

(C) The Secretary shall manage each refuge or planning unit under plans in effect on the date of enactment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, to the extent such plans are consistent with this Act, until such plans are revised or superseded by new comprehensive conservation plans issued under this subsection.

(D) Uses or activities consistent with this Act may occur on any refuge or planning unit before existing plans are revised or new comprehensive conservation plans are issued under this subsection.

(E) Upon completion of a comprehensive conservation plan under this subsection for a refuge or planning unit, the Secretary shall manage the refuge or planning unit in a manner consistent with the plan and shall revise the plan at any time if the Secretary determines that conditions that affect the refuge or planning unit have changed significantly.

(2) In developing each comprehensive conservation plan under this subsection for a planning unit, the Secretary, acting through the Director, shall identify and describe—

(A) the purposes of each refuge comprising the planning unit;

(B) the distribution, migration patterns, and abundance of fish, wildlife, and plant populations and related habitats within the planning unit;

(C) the archaeological and cultural values of the planning unit;

(D) such areas within the planning unit that are suitable for use as administrative sites or visitor facilities;

(E) significant problems that may adversely affect the populations and habitats of fish, wildlife, and plants within the planning unit and the actions necessary to correct or mitigate such problems; and

(F) opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses.

(3) In preparing each comprehensive conservation plan under this subsection, and any revision to such a plan, the Secretary, acting through the Director, shall, to the maximum extent practicable and consistent with this Act—

(A) consult with adjoining Federal, State, local, and private landowners and affected State conservation agencies; and

(B) coordinate the development of the conservation plan or revision with relevant State conservation plans for fish and wildlife and their habitats.

(4)(A) In accordance with subparagraph (B), the Secretary shall develop and implement a process to ensure an opportunity for active public involvement in the preparation and revision of comprehensive conservation plans under this subsection. At a minimum, the Secretary shall require that publication of any final plan shall include a summary of the comments made by States, owners of adjacent or potentially affected land, local governments, and any other affected persons, and a statement of the disposition of concerns expressed in those comments.

(B) Prior to the adoption of each comprehensive conservation plan under this subsection, the Secretary shall issue public notice of the draft proposed plan, make copies of the plan available at the affected field and regional offices of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and provide opportunity for public comment.

(f) PENALTIES.—

(1) KNOWING VIOLATIONS.—Any person who knowingly violates or fails to comply with any of the provisions of this Act or any regulations issued thereunder shall be fined under title 18, United States Code, or imprisoned for not more than 1 year, or both.

(2) OTHER VIOLATIONS.—Any person who otherwise violates or fails to comply with any of the provisions of this Act (including a regulation issued under this Act) shall be fined under title 18, United States Code, or imprisoned not more than 180 days, or both.

(g) Any person authorized by the Secretary to enforce the provisions of this Act or any regulations issued thereunder, may, without a warrant, arrest any person violating this Act or regulations in his presence or view, and may execute any warrant or other process issued by an officer or court of competent jurisdiction to enforce the provisions of this Act or regulations, and may with a search warrant search for and seize any property, fish, bird, mammal, or other wild vertebrate or invertebrate animals or part or nest or egg thereof, taken or possessed in violation of this Act or the regulations issued thereunder. Any property, fish, bird, mammal, or other wild vertebrate or invertebrate animals or part or egg thereof seized with or without a search warrant shall be held by such person or by a United States marshal, and upon conviction, shall be forfeited to the United States and disposed of by the Secretary, in accordance with law. The Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is authorized to utilize by agreement, with or without reimbursement, the personnel and services of any other Federal or State agency for purposes of enhancing the enforcement of this Act.

(h) Regulations applicable to areas of the System that are in effect on the date of enactment of this Act shall continue in effect until modified or rescinded.

(i) Nothing in this section shall be construed to amend, repeal, or otherwise modify the provision of the Act of September 28, 1962 (76 Stat. 653; 16 U.S.C. 460K—460K-4) which authorizes the Secretary to administer the areas within the System for public recreation. The provisions of this section relating to recreation shall be administered in accordance with the provisions of said Act.

(j) Nothing in this Act shall constitute an express or implied claim or denial on the part of the Federal Government as to exemption from State water laws.

(k) Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act, the Secretary may temporarily suspend, allow, or initiate any activity in a refuge in the System if the Secretary determines it is necessary to protect the health and safety of the public or any fish or wildlife population.

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(l) Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize the Secretary to control or regulate hunting or fishing of fish and resident wildlife on lands or waters that are not within the System.

(m) Nothing in this Act shall be construed as affecting the authority, jurisdiction, or responsibility of the several States to manage, control, or regulate fish and resident wildlife under State law or regulations in any area within the System. Regulations permitting hunting or fishing of fish and resident wildlife within the System shall be, to the extent practicable, consistent with State fish and wildlife laws, regulations, and management plans.

(n)(1) Nothing in this Act shall—

(A) create a reserved water right, express or implied, in the United States for any purpose;

(B) affect any water right in existence on the date of enactment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997; or

(C) affect any Federal or State law in existence on the date of the enactment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 regarding water quality or water quantity.

(2) Nothing in this Act shall diminish or affect the ability to join the United States in the adjudication of rights to the use of water pursuant to the McCarran Act (43 U.S.C. 666).

(o) Coordination with State fish and wildlife agency personnel or with personnel of other affected State agencies pursuant to this Act shall not be subject to chapter 10 of title 5, United States Code.

SEC. 5. [16 U.S.C. 668ee] DEFINITIONS.

For purposes of this Act:

(1) The term “compatible use” means a wildlife-dependent recreational use or any other use of a refuge that, in the sound professional judgment of the Director, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the System or the purposes of the refuge.

(2) The terms “wildlife-dependent recreation” and “wildlife-dependent recreational use” mean a use of a refuge involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, or environmental education and interpretation.

(3) The term “sound professional judgment” means a finding, determination, or decision that is consistent with principles of sound fish and wildlife management and administration, available science and resources, and adherence to the requirements of this Act and other applicable laws.

(4) The terms “conserving”, “conservation”, “manage”, “managing”, and “management”, mean to sustain and, where appropriate, restore and enhance, healthy populations of fish, wildlife, and plants utilizing, in accordance with applicable Federal and State laws, methods and procedures associated with modern scientific resource programs. Such methods and procedures include, consistent with the provisions of this Act, protection, research, census, law enforcement, habitat management, propagation, live trapping and transplantation, and regulated taking.

(5) The term “Coordination Area” means a wildlife management area that is made available to a State—

(A) by cooperative agreement between the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and a State agency having control over wildlife resources pursuant to section 4 of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (16 U.S.C. 664); or

(B) by long-term leases or agreements pursuant to title III of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act (50 Stat. 525; 7 U.S.C. 1010 et seq.).

(6) The term “Director” means the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service or a designee of that Director.

(7) The terms “fish”, “wildlife”, and “fish and wildlife” mean any wild member of the animal kingdom whether alive or dead, and regardless of whether the member was bred, hatched, or born in captivity, including a part, product, egg, or offspring of the member.

(8) The term “person” means any individual, partnership, corporation, or association.

(9) The term “plant” means any member of the plant kingdom in a wild, unconfined state, including any plant community, seed, root, or other part of a plant.

(10) The terms “purposes of the refuge” and “purposes of each refuge” mean the purposes specified in or derived from the law, proclamation, executive order, agreement, public land order, donation document, or administrative memorandum establishing, authorizing, or expanding a refuge, refuge unit, or refuge subunit.

(11) The term “refuge” means a designated area of land, water, or an interest in land or water within the System, but does not include Coordination Areas.

(12) The term “Secretary” means the Secretary of the Interior.

(13) The terms “State” and “United States” mean the several States of the United States, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the Virgin Islands, Guam, and the territories and possessions of the United States.

(14) The term “System” means the National Wildlife Refuge System designated under section 4(a)(1).

(15) The terms “take”, “taking”, and “taken” mean to pursue, hunt, shoot, capture, collect, or kill, or to attempt to pursue, hunt, shoot, capture, collect, or kill.

【Section 6 through 10 of this Act made amendments to other laws.】