

Oil Spill Leads FWS to Social Media Use

For the last decade, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has explored and tested a variety of emerging media tools to stay relevant and engaged with the public. The most accessible new media tool for agency employees during this time has been Flickr to link photos from news releases and provide the media with easy access to high resolution images. Plans are underway within fire management to build photo collections depicting successional effects of fire, and the co-existence of fire and wildlife.

In October 2005, FWS public affairs specialists across the country formed a New Media workgroup to pilot several small projects, determine appropriate uses of new media tools and technology, and develop a blog policy that is now part of the agency manual. The group is recognized as a standing subcommittee of the agency's Web Council.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, like other agencies, also recognized the value of using Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, though access to these sites was blocked on DOI computers. Though FWS applied to DOI for a waiver to this restriction, efforts to reconfigure the security filters were moving slowly when the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill occurred in April 2010. As one of the lead agencies responding to the incident, FWS could not keep pace with the public need for information without use of social media; it was then granted a temporary waiver to use these sites, with the stipulation they only be used to communicate about the oil spill.

After demonstrating its commitment to use its access to these tools responsibly, FWS was then granted a permanent waiver for public communication via these sites starting Sept. 28, 2010. ***Since then, all Service employees have been encouraged by the agency's Director to use these tools, as well as Flickr, in accordance with official guidance and management plans developed by FWS External Affairs.***

FWS social media accounts are managed nationally and by 8 regions, with one official YouTube channel, one national and 8 regional Flickr accounts, as well as dozens of Facebook pages and Twitter accounts (for national, regional, and special programs). ***In keeping with its strategic goal of integration with other Service programs, and due to staffing limitations, the FWS Fire Management Program is striving to post its public outreach materials on these various existing venues, rather than establish and maintain independent accounts.***

The New Media workgroup's current efforts are focused on testing the next era of new technologies -- mobile devices -- with content tailored to mobile users. The Service's newly developed stand-alone website on the Mobile Webpage can be quickly downloaded and easily viewed on any mobile phone with internet access. Not only does this platform provide text and images, it also has the ability to provide short snippets of video, photo slideshows, and customized text message alerts, such as the oil spill alert system.

For more information, see www.fws.gov/home/socialmedia/.