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**FIRST YEAR RESTORATION EFFORTS AT BLACKWATER
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE DECLARED A
SUCCESS DURING CENTENNIAL
Aquarium, Community Celebrate**

Baltimore, Md. (Oct. 10, 2003) - The National Aquarium in Baltimore, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Maryland Department of Natural Resources and many other partners have worked with the Dorchester County community for the past year testing a large-scale wetlands restoration project at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. On October 17, 2003, partners will celebrate the end of the restored wetlands' first growing season, as well as the National Wildlife Refuge System's centennial anniversary.

Blackwater's estimated 26,000 acres of forests, open fields and wetlands provide important habitats for birds migrating along the Atlantic Flyway. Hundreds of animal species, including several that are endangered, live at Blackwater.

Wetlands not only provide vital habitats, but also contribute to a healthier environment and improved water quality in the Bay by preventing erosion, controlling floods and absorbing excess nutrients.

Between 150 and 400 acres of Blackwater's wetlands are lost each year due to rising Bay water levels, human changes in the landscape and introduced species. Nutria, for example, are muskrat-sized rodents introduced to the area in the 1940's with hopes that they would be popular in the fur industry. Instead, this species – which has few predators in the United States – has become very prolific feeding on, and in turn destroying, the wetland plants making up its habitat.

Working to overcome these challenges, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers restored the site through thin-layer spraying – a technique that strategically uses dredged materials to raise marsh elevations high enough to plant vegetation. Over six days in May 2003, Aquarium staff and more than 125 volunteers installed 70,000 plants creating 15 acres of new wetlands.

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Some of the young, tender grasses barely stood six inches tall at planting. Today, just five months later, they have reached a towering five feet in height.

“We are thrilled to help ensure that refuges, and their healthy environments, are around for the next hundred years,” said Glenn Page, director of the Aquarium’s conservation program. “This project also allows public involvement, helping the Aquarium to reach well beyond our walls and serve the community as a whole.”

Efforts will continue in the next few years as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers continues the thin-layer spraying process to fully restore Blackwater’s wetlands. Plantings are expected to resume in 2005.

Other partners include: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Friends of Blackwater, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Chesapeake Bay Trust.

The National Aquarium in Baltimore, Maryland’s leading attraction, is a non-profit organization and world-class aquatic institute dedicated to education and conservation.

President Roosevelt designated the first National Wildlife Refuge at Florida’s Pelican Island in 1903; Blackwater joined the system 30 years later. Today, 540 National Wildlife Refuges comprise more than 94 million acres around the nation.