

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

Meetings and Involvement

The planning process for this CCP began in December 2004. Initially, members of the regional planning staff and Rice Lake NWR staff identified a list of issues and concerns that were associated with the management of the Refuge. These preliminary issues and concerns were based on staff knowledge of the area and contacts with citizens in the community. Refuge staff and Service planners then asked Refuge neighbors, organizations, local government units, and interested citizens to share their thoughts in three open houses.

In April 2005, the public was invited to open houses conducted at the Refuge Visitor Center, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe District 2 East Lake Community Center, which is located one-quarter mile north of the Refuge Headquarters, and at the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Tribal Government Center in Onamia. People were invited through articles in the local papers and individual letters to the members of the East Lake Community. Seventeen people attended the open house at the Visitor Center. Three people attended in Onamia, and seven people came to the East Lake Community Center. People were asked to provide written comments within 30 days. Twenty-six written comments were received during the comment period.

Following the public comment period, an additional meeting was held in the Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Office to review the public comments and identify concerns from subject specialists.



Entrance Sign, Rice Lake NWR. USFWS

Issues

Issues play an important role in planning. Issues focus the planning effort on the most important topics and provide a base for considering alternative approaches to management and evaluating the consequences of managing under these alternative approaches. The issues and concerns expressed during the first phase of planning have been organized under the following headings.

Rice Lake NWR

Management of Rice Lake

Rice Lake is an important area for migrating waterfowl in the fall. Ojibwe Indians have a long tradition of harvesting rice on the lake and will continue harvesting wild rice into the future, as is established by way of an official agreement. There is less rice than in the past and pickerelweed beds are expanding. Since the water control structure was

put on the lake, water levels do not vary as much as in the past. We do not have a good understanding of cause and effect of rice management in the lake.

Management of Former Crop Field and Hay Field Areas

There are numerous old field areas on the Refuge that in general are remnants of the pre-refuge farming era. These grassland/brushland areas have been maintained by past management practices of grazing and haying and currently are maintained through prescribed burning. Historically these areas were forested. The largest of these areas is referred to as the old crop fields, located on the southwest end of the Wildlife Drive. The crop fields were cleared and planted to legumes and oats between 1958 and 1962 as part of the Canada Goose reintroduction program. This area was converted to grassland and maintained with haying in the late 1990s through 2002. This grassland area has been maintained with prescribed burning since 2003. Grasslands, and grassland-dependent birds, are greatly diminished within their historic range. However, the Refuge grassland/brushland areas are only minimally successful for high priority breeding grassland birds due to their small acreages and negative edge effects (mammalian predators prefer to hunt along the edges and increased nest parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds). Maintaining the fields as open grassland sites provides wildlife viewing opportunities popular with visitors. Converting all of the old fields to forest would contribute to a large block of unfragmented forest and benefit high priority forest bird species.

Management of Forests

The Refuge lands were forest historically. A large block of diverse forest will benefit bird species that are a high priority for the Service. However, details of how to manage forest to meet biological goals have not been specified.

Wilderness Recommendation

In 1973, a 1,400-acre unit and the 6.27-acre island in Rice Lake were recommended for further consideration by the Secretary of Interior for Wilderness designation. The recommended areas have been managed as de facto wilderness. The Service and the Department have taken no action on the recommendation. The proposed Wilderness does not meet minimum wilderness standards for size (at least 5,000 acres of land or of sufficient size as to make



Fox Sparrow. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition). The Wilderness recommendation precludes some management activities.

Indian Community Activities

Ojibwe Indians have a long history of use on the land and harvesting wild rice is important to the Indian community. An easement permits an Indian cemetery on the Refuge. Indian ceremonies are held on the Refuge under special use permit. Some members of the local Indian community desire more facilities and ceremonial opportunities and agreements in perpetuity. Some members also desire unrestricted/unlicensed use of Refuge resources. There are long-term concerns about the cultural impacts caused by Refuge buildings on Indian Point.

Cultural Resources

The Refuge includes pre-historic and historic resources of recognized importance. One view is that interpreting these resources will bring understanding, appreciation, and improved protection of them. Another view is that interpreting resources will make them more broadly known and vulnerable to destruction. In addition, some people would like the recent Indian history of the area interpreted. As a pre-eminent conservation agency, the Service has

a responsibility for the protection of the many known and unknown cultural resources located on Refuge lands. Members of the Ojibwe Tribe have requested that the Service remove all buildings from Indian Point, which includes two residences and all of the Refuge maintenance facilities. Indian Point contains the most significant cultural resources known to occur on the Refuge.

Wildlife-dependent Recreation

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 directs refuges to facilitate wildlife-dependent recreation. There may be the opportunity to increase hunting opportunities, although the demand has not been great. Visitors want to see more wildlife on the Refuge and want more wildlife observation opportunities. The public has requested educational programs both on and off the Refuge, and they would like staff available on weekends, or at least Saturdays. There is an unrealized potential in interpretation and environmental education. There is no law enforcement presence on Rice Lake NWR, which raises a concern for visitor safety. The support for wildlife-dependent recreation is presently maximized under current staff and budget.

Sandstone Unit

Operation

Monitoring activities on the Unit are difficult because of its distance from the office. Access within the Unit is difficult because of damage to roads and bisection of the Unit by the Kettle River. Habitat management and law enforcement on the Unit are below Service standards.

Mille Lacs NWR

Common Tern Management

The emphasis of management on Hennepin Island is for the nesting colony of Common Terns, a State-listed threatened species. The nesting substrate of gravel is not reliably present because of changing water levels and erosion by waves. Gulls compete for nesting space on the island and reduce tern nesting success. For that reason, a gull deterrent program that was first implemented in 1993 is in place and includes destruction of gull eggs and placement of an aboveground string grid over the southern one-third of the island to prevent gulls from landing/nesting. This strategy has had positive results.

Preparation of the CCP

The CCP for Rice Lake and Mille Lacs NWRs was prepared by a team consisting of Refuge and Regional Office staff. The CCP was published in two phases and in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Draft Environmental Assessment, published as Appendix A in the Draft CCP, presented two alternatives for future management and identified a preferred alternative.

The Draft CCP/EA was released for public review and comment on June 25, 2007. A Draft CCP/EA or a summary of the document was sent to more than 250 individuals, organizations, and local, state, and federal agencies and elected officials. An open house was held on July 10, 2007, at the Rice Lake NWR Headquarters following release of the draft document. Five people attended the open house. We received a total of 15 comment letters and e-mails during the 30-day review period. Appendix K of the CCP summarizes these comments and our responses.

The preferred alternative was selected and has become the basis of the Final CCP, which will guide management over the next 15 years. It will guide the development of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas and it will underpin the annual budgeting process through submissions to the Refuge Operating Needs System (RONS) and Maintenance Management System (MMS). Most importantly, the CCP lays out the general approach to managing habitat, wildlife, and people at Rice Lake and Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuges that will direct day-to-day decision-making and actions.