

# Chapter 2: The Planning Process



*Least Bittern chick. Brad Dokken*

The CCP for Agassiz NWR has been written with input and assistance from citizens, non-governmental conservation organizations (NGOs), and employees of tribal, state, and local agencies. The participation of these stakeholders is vital and all of their ideas have been valuable in determining the future direction of the Refuge and its Management District. Refuge and regional staff – indeed, the entire U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – are grateful to all of those who have contributed time, expertise and ideas throughout the comprehensive conservation planning process. We appreciated the enthusiasm and commitment expressed by many for the lands and living resources administered by Agassiz NWR.

## Internal Agency Scoping

Agassiz NWR's CCP planning process began in early October 2002 with a kickoff meeting involving Refuge staff, a regional planner from the USFWS Region 3 office in the Twin Cities, and a consultant under contract to assist in preparation of the CCP. The 12 participants in this "internal scoping" exercise reviewed the Agassiz NWR vision statement and goals, existing baseline resource data, planning documents and other Refuge information. In addition, the group identified a preliminary list of issues, concerns and opportunities facing the Refuge and RMD that would need to be addressed in the CCP.

A list of required CCP elements such as maps, photos, and GIS data layers was also developed at this meeting and during subsequent e-mail and telephone communications. Concurrently, the group studied federal and state mandates plus applicable local ordinances, regulations, and plans for their relevance to this planning effort. Finally, the group agreed to a process and sequence for obtaining public input and a tentative schedule for completion of the Agassiz NWR and Management District CCP. Public input was encouraged and obtained using several methods, including an open house, written comments during a public scoping period, a questionnaire, an issue-based focus group, and personal contacts. The local news media attended the open house, conducted interviews with study team members, and published articles about the CCP planning process in the local Thief River Falls, Minnesota, newspaper.

Internal scoping continued with a meeting at the Regional Office in Fort Snelling, Minnesota in early December 2002. Ten staffers from Region 3, including supervisors, planners, and biologists covering wildlife/habitat and migratory birds joined Agassiz NWR's Refuge Manager for a discussion on the open house held in Thief River Falls on December 5, 2002, and a number of considerations related to the CCP.

# Open House

On the evening of December 5, 2002, Agassiz NWR staff and Service planners welcomed the public to an open house and CCP/EA scoping meeting at the Heritage Center in Thief River Falls. About 30 individuals attended the meeting, most of whom were from Marshall County and all of whom were Minnesota residents. Attendees heard an overview of the CCP and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes and then were given the chance to address the gathering. Many speakers shared information about the area, issues they wanted to see addressed in the CCP, concerns, and their ideas as to how Agassiz NWR should be managed in the future. The following comments were made during the open house:

- # Refuge should allow bow-hunting.
- # Refuge should give flood control higher priority.
- # Refuge should carry out better weed control (e.g., Canadian thistle).
- # Refuge allows for adequate public use – it's open to a sufficient extent to see and appreciate resources.
- # Refuge should open more areas to public visitation.
- # Refuge should strive for better appearance around headquarters; mow more acres.
- # Refuge should have more food plots for game like ducks, geese and deer.
- # Refuge should improve maintenance of legal drainage ditches, which are clogged with weeds and/or vegetation on banks.
- # Refuge should lower pool level elevations; there should be less water and more upland habitat to benefit upland game in general.
- # Refuge should seek better cooperation with neighbors and work with surrounding landowners (e.g., road maintenance, water release, infrastructure).
- # Refuge should seek better cooperation and coordination with local governments, including counties, townships, and ditching authorities, in such matters as repair and works in legal drainage ditches.
- # Refuge should construct more control structures on upper reaches of the Refuge and diversion ditches upstream of the Refuge to the south side in the WMA, so as to reduce summer flooding.
- # Refuge should manage wildlife using biology/science instead of politics, to the maximum extent feasible.
- # Refuge should allow for cross-country skiing trails.
- # Refuge should increase payment in lieu of taxes to local government(s).
- # Refuge should allow fishing.
- # Refuge should modify dams or other water control structures to facilitate fish migration.
- # Bookstore in visitor center is asset for the Refuge.
- # Refuge should conduct more prescribed burning to enhance wildlife habitat.

Meeting attendees were also provided with a comment form and encouraged to fill it out and submit it that evening or mail at a later date. The comment form contained the following questions:

- # What do you think are the most important issues facing the Refuge?
- # How do you think these issues can be resolved?
- # Should Refuge habitats be managed any differently than they are today?

- # Are the types of use and visitation permitted and encouraged by the Refuge appropriate?
- # Any other comments you would like to make?

Those interested in making comments had until January 18, 2003, to submit this form. Any member of the public who wished to comment in writing also had until that date to send a letter. Comments could be sent by U.S. mail, e-mail, or via the Agassiz NWR planning website on the Internet. Approximately 40 comment forms and other written comments were submitted to the Refuge during the scoping process. These comments, concerns, and suggestions are summarized in Appendix J of this document.

## Focus Group Meeting



*Aerial view of Agassiz NWR across its Wilderness Area. Gary Tischer, USFWS*

On Saturday, January 18, 2003, a 1-day focus group or “technical working group” meeting was held at Northland Community and Technical College in Thief River Falls. The approximately 30 participants in this all-day event had the opportunity to discuss and explore in greater depth the various Refuge issues, goals, and opportunities in a relaxed, congenial setting. Refuge staff sent invitations to a number of stakeholders in the area. Individuals who signed up at the scoping meeting on their own, and all members of the public were welcome, provided they were willing to commit an entire Saturday to helping plan the future of the Refuge.

Some participants signed up at the December 2002 open house and others notified Refuge management afterwards of their desire to participate. Representatives of the Red Lake Band of the Chippewa Tribe and the Minnesota DNR – both of which own large tracts of adjacent and nearby land on which they manage wildlife and habitat – participated in the meeting. A contractor for the Service facilitated the discussion. The following list of issues generated by the open house session and internal refuge and regional office scoping was used as a point of departure for discussion:

### **Habitat Management:**

- # Loss of sedge meadow to cattail marsh
- # Drawdown frequency to provide shorebird habitat
- # Prairie restoration on old cropfields
- # Invasive plant species (weed control)
- # Croplands (food plots)
- # Possible loss to wilderness habitat due to managed impoundments
- # Prescribed burning
- # Forest habitats
- # Commitment to wildlife/natural resources
- # Off-refuge involvement (e.g., corridor habitat along ditches and rivers, acquire easements/land acquisition related to flooding issues)

**Water Management:**

- # For waterfowl vs. non-game water species (e.g., shorebirds, colonial nesting waterbirds)
- # Flood control (inflows – outflows, pool levels, no flood control)
- # Retention of spring and summer flood waters by the Refuge.
- # Maintenance of drainage ditches

**Wildlife Management:**

- # Nuisance wildlife control
- # Non-game species
- # Threatened and endangered species

**Public Use:**

- # Deer hunting (e.g., bow, muzzle, take-a-kid)
- # Waterfowl hunting
- # Fishing
- # More trapping opportunities
- # Wildlife observation; fire tower and other viewing platforms
- # Miscellaneous forms of motorized and non-motorized recreation (e.g., hiking, bicycling, cross country skiing, canoeing)
- # Road network, auto tour route, parking
- # Visitor Center
- # Visitor access (increase, current level adequate, no access)
- # Other facilities
- # Appearance (well groomed vs. natural)
- # Better outreach (e.g., biological benefits and eco-tourism benefits of Refuge)
- # More environmental education with schools and local communities

**Cultural Resources:**

- # Interpretation of Mud Lake homesteads and CCC buildings
- # Tribal rights

At the outset of the meeting, there was a consensus within the group that due to the intractability of the political impasse over water management and water rights, which has lasted decades and which shows no sign of resolution in the foreseeable future, the focus group should not squander its limited time in debating this question extensively. Suggestions received by certain individuals during scoping that Agassiz NWR should be managed primarily as a flood control facility for the benefit of surrounding and downstream landowners contradicts the founding purpose of the Refuge and the spirit and mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. For the interests of wildlife to be relegated to a secondary purpose of a national wildlife refuge or merely an incidental benefit of its presence would require Congressional or Presidential action.

# Preparation, Publishing, Finalization and Implementation of the CCP

The Agassiz NWR CCP was prepared by a contractor with a great deal of input, review, and support from Refuge staff and the Service's Regional Office. The CCP was published in two phases and in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Draft Environmental Assessment (Appendix A) presented a range of alternatives for future management and identified the preferred alternative, which is also the Draft CCP. The alternative that was selected has become the basis of the Final CCP. This document then, becomes the basis for guiding management on the Refuge and its Management District over the coming 15-year period. 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 Refuge Operating Needs System (RONS) and Maintenance Management System (MMS). Most importantly, it lays out the general approach to managing habitat, wildlife, and people at Agassiz NWR and its Management District that will direct day-to-day decision-making and actions.

The Draft CCP/EA was released for public review and comment on March 3, 2005. A Draft CCP/EA or a summary of the document was sent to more than 200 individuals, organizations, and local, state, and federal agencies and elected officials. An open house event was held on April 6 in Thief River Falls following release of the draft document. We received a total of 20 comment letters and e-mails during the 45-day review period. Appendix K of the CCP summarizes these comments and our responses. Several of the comments resulted in changes in the CCP.

## Summary of Issues, Concerns and Opportunities

### Habitat Management

We asked a wide range of people for their views on the issues, concerns and opportunities confronting Agassiz NWR. Citizens, non-governmental conservation organizations (NGOs), and employees of tribal, state, and local agencies all offered ideas. Refuge staff and staff from the Service's Regional Office in the Twin Cities were also asked to identify the issues and opportunities that they see for the Refuge. The following paragraphs summarize what we heard.

#### Loss of Sedge Meadow

Sedge meadow is a rare habitat type in Minnesota. Some people said that invasion by willow, reed canary grass, and cattail is a problem for the sustainability of this resource on the Refuge. Individuals noted that prolonged high water contributes to invasion of the sedge zone by cattails. Present management is to lower water levels prior to fall burning of sedge meadow, as well as cutting 200-300 acres of willows in the winter. Some individuals believe that these practices are proving insufficient and net losses will continue to mount under the present approach.

While some said that a solution might be to spray with chemicals, it was suggested that it would be difficult if not impossible to find an herbicide with specificity for just willows and cattails. It was suggested that a longer dry period for each pool might reduce invasive plant species. Some people said that further monitoring and research are needed to determine whether continuing to expend scarce staff and budgetary resources on efforts to curb cattail and willow encroachment is worthwhile or whether it is ultimately a costly and futile fight against natural succession.

Individuals said that the timing or frequency of prescribed burns is important. It was suggested that multiple burns over a short time period might improve success.

The focus group identified three possible alternatives for dealing with this phenomenon:

- # Let it go;
- # Continue with present control measures;
- # Intensify actions (consider private contracts for cutting willow).

### **Drawdown Frequency to Provide Shorebird Habitat**

Some people said that the Refuge is on the right track with its recent effort to experiment with the timing of the drawdowns as a way to provide shorebird habitat. On the other hand, some people said that the Refuge is already providing enough shorebird habitat. Others said that wet years assure that surrounding agricultural land is also providing habitat.

### **Prairie Restoration on Old Cropfields**

In some cases, comments about prairie restoration on old cropfields took the form of questions. For example, some people wonder about the lack of naturally occurring big bluestem on Agassiz NWR and question whether it is related to soil pH or a high water table. Others question whether the area once included oak savanna habitat.

It was suggested that Refuge management prepare a cost/benefit analysis of prairie restoration on wet sites. While some people said that grasslands are beneficial for wildlife observation, particularly birding, others noted that native plant restoration on a wet site is more costly than restoration on upland prairie.

The kinds of prairie plants used in restoration also generated comments. Some people said that waterfowl nesting on cool-season grass fields could result in low nesting success because of higher predation rates.

Some people said that restoration should be “hands-off, gradual, and intense”. One strategy suggested was to leave old fields in crops for a few years and then plant in prairie, especially if the seed source is limited.

### **Invasive Plant Species**

People cited leafy spurge and Canada thistle as invasive plants that are causing problems on the Refuge. It was noted that the Refuge is currently combatting both leafy spurge and Canada thistle with chemical and biological control agents. In the case of leafy spurge, the use of beetles is having limited success.

Other invasive, exotic or weedy species that were noted as concerns for the Refuge and that are not being controlled are hybrid cattail, reed canary grass, quackgrass, and cocklebur. Eurasian buckthorn has not been observed on the Refuge to date, but could become a problem in aspen uplands in the future. Some people said that purple loosestrife and spotted knotweed prevention is important for the Refuge. Other said that reed canary grass is expanding within the region.

The focus group suggested two alternatives for approaching the problem of invasive plants:

- # The present strategy, which is only partially stemming the tide of encroachment by invasive plant species;
- # A combination of intensified control, prevention, monitoring and education.

### **Croplands (Food Plots)**

Agassiz NWR farms 170 acres (winter wheat, barley, oats, etc.) as lure crops and for wildlife observation. Six farm units provide two to three fields each. Some people said that these food plots are good bear and deer viewing areas. Others noted that farm units also serve as rendezvous areas for wolf pups. While the original justification for establishing food plots was to help control crop

depredations by wildlife (especially waterfowl) on surrounding farmland, some people said that the effectiveness of food plots is unknown. Other people said that Refuge croplands do hold some local birds, especially prior to migrant birds arriving in the fall.

Some alternatives for croplands were suggested:

- # Maintain the existing configuration and acreage of croplands;
- # Discontinue croplands;
- # Expand the acreage of croplands;
- # Use cooperative farming.

### **Alteration of Wilderness Habitat Due to Managed Impoundments**

Some people expressed concern that a die-off of spruce in the designated Wilderness area may be related to high-water conditions. Others suggested that the die-off could also be due to a rise in pH (salts). People suggested that ongoing research into the cause or causes of this die-off and monitoring throughout future high water periods needs to continue.

### **Prescribed Fire**

Concern was expressed about some degree of controversy in the region about the appropriateness of using prescribed fire on the Refuge. Others said that in general, the surrounding community seems to understand the value of burning. Up to 25 percent of the Refuge has been burned annually, split between seasons in the spring and fall. Some people said that a higher burn frequency may not set back succession due to lower fuel loads. Alternatives suggested included:

- # Burn more acres;
- # Increase fall burns
- # Summer burn cattails;
- # Higher frequency of prescribed burning;
- # Less frequency of prescribed burning.

### **Forest Habitats**

Agassiz NWR now has approximately 9,900 acres in aspen, spruce, oak, and ash. Some people suggested that, in general, the region had a more open landscape in the 1940-50s. Others question whether brushlands should be recognized as a desirable habitat type. Some people questioned whether wildlife and habitat diversity would benefit from more woodland or less woodland. Some people said that open grasslands and old fields would be lost if woodland acreage were to expand. It was suggested that Agassiz NWR designate some old-growth aspen for cavity-nesting birds and nesting Bald Eagles. It was noted that harvesting aspens during the early years of the Refuge virtually eliminated habitat for cavity-nesting birds.

Some people questioned whether the Refuge should reduce the area in water impoundments. It was noted that abandoning water impoundments in favor of forest would actually necessitate dike removal.

Some people said that one of the forest management issues facing Agassiz NWR is how much emphasis should be placed on restoring oak savanna at the expense of aspen woodlands.

### **Commitment to Wildlife/Natural Resources**

Some individuals noted that the Refuge should not forget the wildlife-first mandate of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

## **Off-Refuge Involvement in Providing Habitat**

Some people said that Agassiz NWR should coordinate efforts and communicate with local governments. Others said that potential road upgrades on the Refuge involve right-of-way issues. People said that the Refuge needs to continue dialog with county road authorities.

## **Water Management**

### **Waterfowl Versus Non-game Water Species**

Recent high water has had an impact on furbearers. However, some people suggested that there is no need to change water management on behalf of non-game water species.

### **Flood Control**

Some people said that farmers on the west side of Agassiz NWR could benefit from small changes in water management. In the opinion of some people, a diversion ditch or a better (or repaired) outlet for the Refuge could prove to be a positive move. Analysis by flood control engineers has shown there would be little impact on downstream flooding from a diversion ditch or improved outlet. Some people said that Agassiz NWR staff should continue to participate in a comprehensive watershed management plan that brings together many diverse and sometimes conflicting parties and interests.

### **Maintenance of Drainage Ditches**

Some individuals said that communication among Refuge management, local officials and neighbors is vital. Others suggested that the Refuge send a letter to local townships when the Refuge approves its annual water management plan. People also suggested that the Refuge work with Marshall County and Red Lake Watershed District.

## **Wildlife Management**

### **Nuisance Wildlife Control**

People noted that beaver do cause problems at culverts or ditches and that response time for beaver removal could be improved. The current procedure is for the Refuge to call upon trapping permit holders to concentrate in certain areas. Off-refuge, a bounty is paid by the county in problem ditches (which goes to half-price during trapping season) throughout the Refuge Management District.



*Bald Eagle chicks. USFWS*

### **Trapping Program**

Currently the Refuge is divided into eight trapping units. Targeted species include beaver and muskrat that damage infrastructure, and predatory species like skunk and mink. Some people expressed a desire for more trapping opportunities, saying that trapping could possibly be expanded to include fisher and bobcat. Some people also suggested that extra incentives could be provided for trappers to bid on trapping units.

### **Threatened and Endangered Species**

People enjoy seeing Bald Eagles, which are the most conspicuous and spectacular listed species that occurs at Agassiz NWR. Many expressed a desire for the continued protection of nesting eagles. Gray wolves, a controversial species for some people, appear to match their deer prey base. Two packs use the Refuge and adjacent lands. Some people encouraged the Refuge to continue monitoring the wolves.

### **Wildlife Diseases**

Some people said that the CCP should address how Agassiz NWR will approach Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) and West Nile Virus, two new, foreign wildlife diseases with implications for humans.

It was noted that Agassiz NWR will work with an interagency team on a foreign wildlife disease outbreak contingency plan.



*Hunter on Agassiz NWR. USFWS*

## **Wildlife-dependent Recreation**

### **Deer Hunting**

The Refuge has one disabled-hunter blind. It received good use the first year but less use more recently. Some people said that a potential problem with hunting is that non-hunting visitors may not feel safe during hunting season, and thus stay away from the Refuge. People suggested alternative for deer hunting such as:

#Expansion beyond the 9-day deer season to include archery and muzzleloader hunts

#No deer hunting at all.

### **Upland Game**

Some people suggested that a ruffed grouse season and a rabbit season could also be held. While the Refuge does not contain large populations of upland game species, some people also suggested opening hunting to all upland game.

### **Waterfowl Hunting**

At present, no waterfowl hunting is allowed on the Refuge. Some people said that if certain areas are opened for hunting, a “no motors allowed” policy would limit the number of hunters. People also said that a majority of the Refuge should remain closed because there are plenty of waterfowl hunting opportunities nearby. Others suggested that some areas could be opened on the Refuge perimeter, noting the Farmes pool as a possibility. People also said that a retrieval zone around the Farmes “firing line” could be expanded. On the other hand, others felt strongly that the Refuge should not be open to waterfowl hunting because it currently holds waterfowl and promotes waterfowl hunting in the surrounding area.

### **Fishing**

Everyone agreed that the Refuge contains little or no gamefish habitat. One individual described Ditch 200 as an opportunity for fishing on the Refuge because it has a run of northern pike once in awhile. Others suggested that the Refuge consider allowing white sucker spearing during high water events.

### **Wildlife Observation: Fire Tower and Other Viewing Platforms**

At present, the wildlife observation tower is closed due to liability concerns. The Refuge will try to keep the tower open, although safety rules may restrict access. Some people said that the Refuge should consider placing a new platform on the auto tour route. Others suggested building a marsh boardwalk. On the other hand, some people said that prescribed burning and flooding complicate placement of such a facility because it would be vulnerable to damage or destruction by fire and flood. Some people suggested that a dike or peninsula may be a better, more damage-resistant option. Some people questioned whether or not the Refuge should limit new visitor facilities to one region of the Refuge.

### **Miscellaneous Forms of Motorized and Non-motorized Recreation**

People questioned whether or not the Refuge should allow visitors to canoe and camp at the Wilderness area. It was noted that no substantial changes are proposed for the existing Agassiz NWR road network, auto tour route, and parking locations.

Some people suggested that the Refuge consider allowing cross-country skiing and snowshoeing as recreational uses on the Refuge.

### **Visitor Access**

Some people suggested that the Refuge keep its northern boundary road open throughout the year. It is currently closed during hunting seasons.

### **Facilities, Appearance of Facilities**

Some people said that the outdoor toilet facility near the visitor center should be made more visible. Others questioned whether landscaping around the visitor center should be natural or manicured.

### **Outreach, Environmental Education with Schools, etc.**

Individuals said that outreach could be increased with the addition of a new staff member.

### **Environmental Education**

It was suggested that the Refuge could improve on-site environmental education by updating the field lab to incorporate a wet lab and environmental education classroom.