

**Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

For

**La Crosse District Headquarters/Visitor and Maintenance Facilities
Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge
La Crosse District**

Regional Director

Region 3, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building

Twin Cities, MN 55111

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1. Purpose and Need for Action

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this environmental assessment is to evaluate alternative locations for the headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities for the La Crosse District of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Refuge). The Refuge is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

The current La Crosse District Office has adequate leased office/garage space, but the facility is located in a commercial business district some distance from the Refuge and options for expansion are limited. The Service owns two buildings in the La Crosse District currently used for operations. Both are located in Houston County, MN (Pool 8). A 1,568 square foot warehouse, constructed in the 1960s, is located in the floodplain of the Mississippi River along the West Channel. The contents of this building must be moved when the Mississippi River reaches flood stage in La Crosse. The second building, a 1,728 square foot pole shed, was included in a tract of land acquired by the Service in 2009. This building was built in 2001 and sits atop a levee along the Root River.

In August 2008, the Service acquired from Mathy Construction Company (Mathy) a 75.4-acre tract of upland located on Brice Prairie in Section 24, Town of Onalaska, La Crosse County, Wisconsin (Figure 1). This tract was acquired for the primary purpose as an administrative site for the La Crosse District's office and shop facilities.

This environmental assessment will evaluate two alternatives, convey information to the public, and provide a basis for public review and comment.

1.2 Need

Many river visitors do not know their experience is enhanced by a national wildlife refuge, and the public as a whole is not aware of the ecological and social significance of the Refuge. Some of this lack of understanding, at least in the La Crosse area, may be attributed to the fact the La Crosse District Office has been moved often in the recent past, been co-located in other facilities, is difficult to find, offered few opportunities for environmental education, and usually located some distance from the Refuge land base. Details of office locations over the past 25+ years follow:

- In the early 1980s, the office was located in the National Fisheries Research Lab (Fish Lab) on French Island. The Fish Lab at this time was part of the Service. The warehouse on the West Channel served as the base for field operations. In January 1987, the office was displaced to make room for staff involved in implementing the Long Term Resource Monitoring Program, a new program funded through the Environmental Management Program (EMP).
- From January through June 1987, the office was in a temporary location while a new permanent office was readied in the U.S. Post Office building in downtown La Crosse.

- The move into the Post Office building occurred in June 1987 and the office remained on the second floor through December 1994. The West Channel warehouse continued to serve as the base for field operations.
- In January 1995, the office was moved to the current location at 555 Lester Avenue in Onalaska, WI. This building, known as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Resource Center, was constructed to meet the needs of the six Service offices currently co-located in this leased facility. Most field operations are now based from this facility.

There is a need to locate the headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities in a suitable location in order to efficiently carry-out the purpose, vision, goals, and objectives of the Refuge as directed in the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006). For the La Crosse District, a suitable location is one that:

- Is located on a tract of land large enough (40-acre minimum) to facilitate administrative and management activities with enough space to accommodate future growth, i.e., walking trails, environmental education shelter, or additional buildings.
- Lies adjacent to Refuge land and provides access to a diversity of habitats and supports opportunities to interpret those habitats and their management.
- Is easy to find, and has safe, accessible vehicle, pedestrian, and bicyclist access for the public and staff.
- Is welcomed by neighbors and the community.
- Avoids environmentally sensitive locations. For example, no excavation into hillsides, filling wetlands, impacting viewscapes, or building in floodplains.
- Provides opportunities for environmental education activities and other group outreach events and activities.
- Accommodates green building technology.

1.3 Decisions that Need to be Made

The Refuge Manager will review the analysis of the two alternatives described in this assessment and the comments received during the 30 day public-comment period. Based on this review, the Refuge Manager will select an alternative to be implemented. The Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 3, will review the Refuge Manager's selection of one of two alternatives analyzed in detail and will determine, based on the facts and recommendations contained herein, whether this Environmental Assessment (EA) is adequate to support a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) decision, or whether an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will need to be prepared

1.4 Background

The Refuge:

Congress passed the Upper Mississippi River Wild Life and Fish Refuge Act on June 7, 1924. The act authorized the acquisition of land for a Refuge between Rock Island, Illinois and Wabasha, Minnesota. The 1924 act set forth the purposes of the Refuge as follows:

- “...as a refuge and breeding place for migratory birds included in the terms of the convention between the United States and Great Britain for the protection of migratory birds, concluded August 16, 1916, and
- to such extent as the Secretary of Agriculture¹ may by regulations prescribe, as a refuge and breeding place for other wild birds, game animals, fur-bearing animals, and for the conservation of wild flowers and aquatic plants, and
- to such extent as the Secretary of Commerce¹ may by regulations prescribe as a refuge and breeding place for fish and other aquatic animal life.”

¹Changed to Secretary of the Interior pursuant to reorganization and transfer of functions in 1939 (16 USC 721-723).

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 amended the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 and became a true organic act for the System by providing a mission, policy direction, and management standards. Among other provisions, the Act directed the Secretary of Interior to plan and direct the continued growth of the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) and recognized compatible wildlife-dependant recreational uses as the priority general public uses of the System, ensured that opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependant recreation are provided, and ensured that wildlife-dependant recreation received enhanced consideration over other uses. The Act also provided compatibility of uses standards and procedures and required that each unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System complete a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) by 2012.

The Mathy Tract:

The 75.4-acre Mathy Tract was acquired for the primary purpose as an administrative site for the Refuge’s La Crosse District headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities. The need to construct this facility was identified in the Refuge’s CCP in Objective 6.1, Office and Shop Facilities.

The tract is also suitable for the following secondary uses, also addressed in the CCP:

- Sand prairie restoration to benefit grassland nesting birds (Objective 3.10, Grassland Management, Strategy #2).
- Develop opportunities for wildlife observation and photography (Objective 4.10) and interpretation and environmental education (Objective 4.11). Enhancing opportunities for these activities meets a number of strategies listed under each of these objectives.
- Hunting (Objective 4.1) and furbearer trapping (Objective 3.5) on the Mathy Tract were addressed in a separate Environmental Assessment finalized in March 2009. The public was provided the opportunity to review and comment on the draft environmental assessment for 30 days; 14 comments were received. After review,

the decision was made by the Service not to permit hunting or furbearer trapping due to the tract's relatively small size, surrounding development, limited game potential, and use as an administrative site. The final rule for this closure was published in the *Federal Register* on August 17, 2009.

Beginning in fall 2009, restoration of about 51 acres of the tract to sand prairie will begin. Sand prairie is a dry native grassland community dominated by grasses such as little bluestem and panic grasses, several sedges, and forbs, including western ragweed, round-headed bush-clover, western sunflower, stiff goldenrod, and spiderwort.

Walking trails, wildlife observation areas, an environmental education shelter, interpretative signing, and an outdoor restroom are also planned.

The use of this tract for a headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities site is also identified in the Town of Onalaska Comprehensive Plan (Schreiber/Anderson Associates, Inc. 2005) and Brice Prairie Master Plan (Schreiber/Anderson Associates, Inc. 2006). In the future, this tract may be connected to the Great River State Trail (bike trail) and the Lake Onalaska shoreline by a trail system.

2. Alternatives, Including the Proposed Action

2.1 Alternatives not Considered for Detailed Analysis

Co-locate with the U.S. Geological Survey at the Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center:

The Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center (UMESC), formerly the Fish Lab, is a research facility administered by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), another Department of Interior agency. Prior to being transferred to the Biological Resources Discipline of USGS in the 1990s, the Fish Lab was administered by the Service. Refuge staff work closely with USGS staff on many research/monitoring projects involving the Refuge and river.

The La Crosse District Office was once located in the Fish Lab, but was displaced in January 1987 to make room for staff involved with implementing the newly authorized Long Term Resource Monitoring Program.

Plans were developed several years ago by USGS staff to increase the amount of office space available at UMESC. USGS and Refuge discussed moving the La Crosse District Office into UMESC. These discussions led Refuge staff to realize that the security requirements for UMESC facilities would prove to be incompatible with Refuge visitor facility and activity requirements. Additionally, the Refuge's desire to locate the La Crosse District office and maintenance facilities at the same site would be difficult to accomplish at the UMESC campus. There was also concern that an office located at UMESC could be displaced again if some future program created a need for increased space for USGS staff. Therefore, consideration of the UMESC site for the La Crosse District's headquarters and maintenance facilities was dropped.

Construction of the new UMESC office wing is anticipated to begin in June 2010 with funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Develop a Facility on Land Already Managed by the Refuge:

One of the objectives in locating a suitable site was to avoid constructing this facility in environmentally sensitive locations. Sensitive locations are defined as hillsides requiring excavation, filling wetlands, impacting views, or locating in floodplains. With this objective in mind, there are few upland sites in the La Crosse District owned by the Service that would be suitable for constructing headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities meeting this and the other objectives found in Section 1.2.

Other Off-Refuge Locations:

In 2003, La Crosse District staff developed a list of 14 potential sites scattered around Pools 7 and 8 that met at least some of the objectives identified for the headquarters/visitor facility. After reviewing all 14 locations, three sites were selected for additional investigation, including two on Brice Prairie. A number of the locations listed during the 2003 exercise have since been developed.

2.2 Alternatives Carried Forward and Analyzed

2.2.1 Alternative A (No Action)

The existing La Crosse District Office has been located in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Resource Center at 555 Lester Avenue in Onalaska, WI since January 1995. Six Service offices currently are co-located in the Resource Center, representing the Divisions of Refuges, Fisheries, Ecological Services, and Office of Law Enforcement. The Resource Center meets the La Crosse District's current administrative needs, but is difficult for the public to find and is situated in a commercial area far removed from the river and Refuge. Moreover, this location does not provide visitors with many opportunities for environmental education, wildlife interpretation, wildlife observation, and wildlife photography.

This is a privately-owned facility leased to the Service. The lease, renewed in February 2007, expires in 10 years (2017). The annual cost for space used by the La Crosse District in the Resource Center is about \$100,000.

The Resource Center is about 22,135 square feet in size. Of that total square footage, the La Crosse District uses the following:

- Seven individual offices and an open office, totaling about 1,180 square feet
- Visitor contact area with a counter, displays, exhibits, and a bookstore, 700 square feet
- General storage, 500 square feet
- A shared lab, 740 square feet
- A conference room, 1,000 square feet
- A woodworking shop, 660 square feet

- An attached warehouse, 3,400 square feet
- Fenced, secured wareyard, shared with all offices, totals about 42,000 square feet
- Public parking lot shared by all offices with 68 spaces

While the Resource Center serves as the base of operations, the West Channel warehouse and pole shed on the recently acquired tract are also used for some field operations.

2.2.2 Alternative B (Proposed Action - Construct the La Crosse District Headquarters/Visitor and Maintenance Facilities on the Mathy Tract)

A site plan would be prepared for the entire 75.4-acre Mathy Tract. The headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities would be constructed within a 23.8-acre site located on the eastern side of the tract, complete with an access road and staff and visitor parking lots (Figure 2). The headquarters/visitor facility would be about 11,800 square feet in size. Twelve individual offices are planned in the administrative wing of the building, plus a work room for students and volunteers, a conference room, and storage space. In the visitor center wing of the building, visitors will have access to an exhibit/display area, multi-purpose room, video alcove, and bookstore.

A 50' x 100' shop and 50' x 125' equipment storage building comprise the maintenance facilities. On the 51 acres planned for sand prairie restoration beginning in fall 2009, walking trails, wildlife observation areas, and environmental education shelter are proposed.

The two on-site wells currently on the tract are being evaluated for possible future use in the facilities and as a potential water supply for fire protection. Wastewater treatment and stormwater management facilities are required and would be constructed on-site.

These facilities would accommodate green technology. Minimum requirements for the headquarters/visitor center are LEED Silver certification. Minimum requirements for the maintenance and equipment storage buildings are that they be designed to LEED Silver standards, but a formal certification is not required. Further, utilizing such items as sustainable materials, geothermal HVAC system, energy efficient light fixtures, high performance low-E windows, rainwater harvesting systems for flushing toilets, and recycled and recyclable materials would be encouraged during the design/construction.

In FY2009, the Service received \$6.1 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to design and construct this facility.

3. Affected Environment

3.1 Physical Characteristics

The Refuge encompasses one of the largest blocks of floodplain habitat in the lower 48 states. Bordered by steep wooded bluffs that rise 100 to 600 feet above the river valley, the Mississippi River corridor and Refuge offer scenic beauty, a wild character, and productive fish and wildlife habitat unmatched in mid-America. The Refuge covers approximately 240,000 acres and

extends 261 river miles from north to south at the confluence of the Chippewa River in Wisconsin to near Rock Island, Illinois.

More than 300 species of birds, 51 species of mammals, 42 species of freshwater mussels, 119 species of fish, 31 species of reptiles, and 14 species of amphibians have been recorded on the Refuge.

The 75.4-acre Mathy Tract has a recent history of agriculture use, including pasture for bison. A high woven-wire “bison” fence currently encloses three sides of the tract. For the past four years, most acres have been planted to alfalfa and harvested for hay. The tract is surrounded by a mixture of open space currently in agriculture, a well-used county highway (Z), and nearby residential/industrial development. Future residential development along the boundaries is likely.

3.2 Biological Environment

3.2.1 Habitat/Vegetation

Nearly 47,440 acres of the Refuge total are located in the La Crosse District and include about 28,245 acres of open water, 18,775 acres of wetlands, and 420 acres of upland.

For the past four years, most of the Mathy Tract has been planted to alfalfa, with the hay harvested up to four times each growing season. As a result, the tract currently provides minimal habitat for wildlife. The preferred alternative is to construct the headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities on this tract and restore the remaining acres to sand prairie.

Sand prairie is a dry native grassland community dominated by grasses such as little bluestem and panic grasses, several sedges, and forbs, including western ragweed, round-headed bush-clover, western sunflower, stiff goldenrod, and spiderwort. In western Wisconsin, extensive acreages of sand prairie occurred historically on broad sand terraces bordering the Mississippi and Black Rivers (Wisconsin DNR 2005). Brice Prairie is located on such a terrace.

Restoring sand prairie on the Mathy Tract will benefit some grassland nesting birds. However, grassland restorations targeted toward supporting populations of the most area-sensitive grassland birds should be at least 125 acres or larger (Kost 2004). Among the species requiring large acreages of grassland (>100 acres) include bobolink, grasshopper sparrow, and eastern and western meadowlarks. Grasslands less than 50 acres will benefit the least area-sensitive grassland birds such as northern bobwhite quail, Vesper sparrow, song sparrow, dickcissel, and common yellowthroat. Nesting blue-winged teal are also “significantly associated” with sand prairies (Wisconsin DNR 2005).

3.2.2 Listed, Proposed, and Candidate Species

No federally listed threatened or endangered species, or candidate species, are known to use the Mathy Tract. Bald eagles, delisted in 2007, occasionally use the tract. The nearest active bald eagle nest is located about two miles away.

3.2.3 Other Wildlife Species

With most acres seeded to alfalfa and harvested through the growing season for hay, use of the tract by migratory birds is limited to a few species, such as Canada geese, sandhill cranes, and mourning doves for feeding. Some duck nesting also occurs, but cutting the alfalfa every 3-4 weeks likely limits their nesting success and that of other ground nesting birds. Small mammals, such as mice and voles, and reptiles, such as garter snakes, are likely to occur here.

Lake Onalaska is located less than 0.5-mile from the Mathy Tract. This major backwater includes open water, interior islands, barrier island complexes with associated marsh, and flowing channels that convey water from the main channel into the lake. The arrangement of habitat types supports large concentrations of waterfowl, including diving and puddle ducks, swans, and geese, and a variety of other birds, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals such as otter, beaver, mink, and muskrats. Lake Onalaska also supports one of the premier panfish fisheries on the Upper Mississippi River.

Halfway Creek Marsh and the Upper Halfway Creek Marsh Project are located about 0.75-mile east of the tract and also provide habitat for a wide variety of species including raptors, migrating and nesting waterbirds and Neotropical migrants, reptiles and amphibians, and mammals.

3.3 Land Use

Brice Prairie is characterized by agricultural land use and residential development, surrounded by wetlands privately-owned or part of the Refuge. Agriculture consists largely of corn, soybean, and alfalfa production, with some livestock pasture. Brice Prairie, along with the rest of the Town of Onalaska, experienced significant growth and development over the past 50 years, with accelerated growth rates occurring between 1960-1980 (Schreiber/Anderson Associates, Inc. 2005). Residential growth is expected to continue.

3.4 Cultural Resources

The Brice Prairie region contains numerous cultural resources indicating continual human occupation extending over approximately the past 12,000 years. Cultural resources are located across Brice Prairie, a Holocene-age low terrace formed by glacial outwash, and on islands and other elevated areas (e.g., natural levees) within the Mississippi River floodplain.

3.5 Local Socioeconomic Conditions

Brice Prairie is located in the Town of Onalaska. The Town is located next to two of the fastest growing municipalities in the region, the City of Onalaska and the Village of Holmen. As a

result, the Town is also experiencing considerable development pressure and population growth (Schreiber/Anderson Associates, Inc. 2005).

Lake Onalaska is a popular destination for sport anglers, hunters, sailors and boaters, and for observing wildlife. Mosey's Landing and the Upper Brice Prairie Boat Landing provide access from Brice Prairie to the popular Lake Onalaska. The landings receive nearly year-round use. The 24-mile long Great River State Trail (bike trail) passes through Onalaska and Trempealeau, Wisconsin and is located in proximity to Brice Prairie.

The financial impact of the Mississippi River and Refuge is substantial. The Upper Mississippi River System annually contributes an estimated \$1 billion in recreational benefits to the region. Refuge visitation generates nearly \$90 million per year in economic output. Further, visitation to the Refuge plus visits to adjacent counties generates \$255 million (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006).

Restoring sand prairie on the Mathy Tract and developing a trail system through the prairie, complete with an environmental education shelter, observation areas, and interpretative signs, is expected to draw visitors to observe and photograph wildlife. Other visitors may be attracted to the solitude offered by the trail system. After facilities are developed, this site is expected to receive considerable use by local school groups and others for organized environmental education events.

The Refuge receives about 3.7 million annual visits for the six priority wildlife-dependant public uses as well as other recreational uses such as camping, recreational boating, picnicking, swimming, and other uses not dependant on the presence of fish and wildlife. In FY2009 (October 1, 2008 through September 30, 2009), the La Crosse District received an estimated 868,000 visits for the following activities:

- 350,000 visits for non-wildlife dependant recreation
- 245,250 visits for wildlife observation
- 195,000 visits for fishing
- 34,000 visits for interpretation
- 23,250 visits for hunting
- 20,000 visits for wildlife photography
- 500 visits for environmental education

4. Environmental Consequences

This chapter describes the foreseeable environmental consequences of implementing the two management alternatives identified in Chapter 2.

4.1 Effects Common to All Alternatives

4.1.1 Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898, “Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations,” was signed by President Bill Clinton on February 11, 1994.

This executive order focuses federal attention on the environmental and human health conditions of minority and low-income populations with the goal of achieving environmental protection for all communities. The executive order directs federal agencies to develop environmental justice strategies to aid in identifying and addressing disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income populations. The executive order is also intended to promote non-discrimination in federal programs substantially affecting human health and the environment, and to provide minority and low-income communities access to public information and participation in matters relating to human health or the environment.

This environmental assessment has not identified any adverse or beneficial effects for either alternative unique to minority or low-income populations in the affected area. Neither alternative will disproportionately place any adverse environmental, economic, social, nor health impacts on minority or low-income populations.

4.1.2 Listed, Proposed, and Candidate Species

No current federally listed threatened/endangered/candidate species are known to use the commercial business area where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Resource Center is located, or the Mathy Tract. As a result, neither alternative will directly or indirectly affect (neither negatively nor beneficially) individuals of listed/proposed/candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat of such species.

4.1.3 Irretrievable and Irreversible Commitment of Resources

While no headquarters/visitor or maintenance facilities would be constructed on the Mathy Tract under Alternative A, there would still be a commitment of additional resources to fund sand prairie restoration and develop a scaled-back visitor services plan. Alternative B requires construction of headquarters/visitor facility, shop, and equipment storage building, along with supporting infrastructure, including a trail system. The cost to design and construct these facilities is estimated at \$6.1 million and is considered irretrievable once spent. Habitat loss through site development would accrue from placement of buildings and supporting infrastructure. An estimated 5-7 acres may be permanently impacted.

4.1.4 Short-term Uses and Long-term Productivity

As proposed in Alternative B, construction of hiking trails, the headquarters/visitor facility, shop, equipment storage building, and supporting infrastructure will entail disturbance to wildlife and plants. These facilities y permanently cover about 5-7 acres of the tract. Disturbance from construction activities, while temporary, may involve another 10-15 acres. However, the impacts during construction are site-specific and of short duration and more than offset by increasing the long-term productivity of the entire tract through habitat restoration. After the facilities are constructed, localized disturbance may result from visitor use on the trails/wildlife observation areas and organized events focused on environmental education activities. This disturbance should be localized and is not expected to measurably affect the long-term productivity of habitat on much of the tract.

4.1.5 Unavoidable Adverse Effects

Because Alternative B features full development of facilities within 23.8 acres of the 75.4-acre tract, there will be unavoidable short-term impacts to both habitat and wildlife during construction activities, and long-term habitat change covering an estimated 5-7 acres from the footprint of buildings and other infrastructure. These effects are mitigated to some extent by the use of best management practices and precautions that safeguard surrounding habitat and the control of the timing and means of use (i.e., no motorized vehicles), and are more than offset by habitat restoration on the entire tract.

Both alternatives, to varying degree, will have adverse impacts to a certain segment of the public that does not favor one or either of the alternatives and will thus be disappointed with the decision. This social impact is unavoidable given the diversity of public desires, the La Crosse District facility needs, and the availability of suitable land in a developed landscape.

4.2 Alternative A (No Action)

4.2.1 Habitat and Biological Impacts

No new facility development would occur on the Mathy Tract. As a result, the impact on vegetation and wildlife would not change, nor would there be any additional impacts to soil or water.

Without facility development on the Mathy Tract, more of the 75.4 acres would be restored to sand prairie, increasing the amount of habitat available to wildlife.

4.2.2 Cultural Resources

There would be no impacts since no new development would occur. Additional protection of cultural resources would occur through sand prairie restoration because restoration and follow-up management activities should not involve disturbing the soil.

4.2.3 Visitor Use

Refuge visitation would be expected to show a slight increase with sand prairie restoration on the Mathy Tract combined with trail and limited facility development. However, without full development of facilities, the goal of increasing public awareness of the Refuge and its significance by expanding opportunities for environmental education and providing better access to the public may not be met.

4.2.4 Refuge Operations

By remaining in the Resource Center, operations would not change appreciably in the near term. The current lease expires in 2017. A number of scenarios exist that could result in the lease not being renegotiated and extended, thereby resulting in the need to once again find another location for the La Crosse District office.

The La Crosse District staffing chart identifies several new positions to meet new or expanded responsibilities. These include a maintenance worker, private lands biologist, and a second Refuge law enforcement officer. All offices in the Resource Center currently are filled. Filling any of the positions identified on the staffing chart would require finding or developing additional office space, including converting space in the existing warehouse, conference room, or workshop.

In the past 20 years, the amount of infrastructure on the La Crosse District has increased significantly and land acquisition has added new acres to restore/manage. Maintaining this infrastructure, which includes islands, impoundments, signs, kiosks, overlooks, and water control structures, requires personnel and a variety of equipment. Secure equipment storage space, while currently adequate, is scattered in three separate locations. Consolidating this equipment in one location, with additional space as equipment is added, is a goal that will not be met under the current arrangement.

4.2.5 Viewscape

There would be no additional impacts since no new development would occur.

4.2.6 Socioeconomic Impacts

The number of visits to the La Crosse District, and consequently economic impact, would likely remain about the same if the La Crosse District Office remains in the Resource Center. On a local scale, businesses in the vicinity of the Lester Avenue location would continue to benefit from the use of the conference room and classroom for training, conferences, and meetings. These gatherings can be of a local, regional, or even national scope.

4.2.7 Cumulative Impacts

Under this alternative, sand prairie restoration would occur on additional acres of the Mathy Tract and limited facilities would be developed. However, construction of headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities would not occur, resulting in lost opportunities. Some of the lost opportunities are specific to the Mathy Tract; others are broader in scope and impact. Lost opportunities could include:

- Providing adequate space for additional staff, volunteers, and equipment.
- Developing a visitor center, complete with displays and exhibits, that is widely used by the public and serves to increase awareness of the significance of the Refuge.
- Establishing an effective environmental education program and increased opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependant recreation (wildlife observation, photography, and interpretation). Use of the tract for these pursuits would add another opportunity for the public to experience the outdoors, and when combined with other Refuge, school, and non-profit organization efforts, will help promote conservation awareness and appreciation.
- Developing the headquarters/visitor facility into a destination that benefits a variety of local and regional businesses.

4.3 Alternative B (Proposed Action - Construct the La Crosse District Headquarters/Visitor and Maintenance Facilities on the Mathy Tract)

4.3.1 Habitat and Biological Impacts

With the exception of about three acres located in the extreme southeastern corner of the tract, the remainder of the 75.4-acre tract is currently in alfalfa. The headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities, along with ancillary infrastructure, would be constructed within a 23.8-acre located on the eastern side of the tract. These acres will remain in alfalfa during the construction period, which is likely to begin in late winter/spring 2010 and be completed in spring, 2011. After the facilities are constructed, undeveloped acres within the 23.8-acre area would also be restored to sand prairie. The area around each building will be landscaped using native plants.

The remaining 51+ acres will be converted from alfalfa to sand prairie beginning in fall 2009. Successfully restoring this tract may require several years of active management, including mowing/haying, herbicide application, and prescribed burning. After restoration, these same management actions would be required on a periodic basis.

After sand prairie restoration, nesting habitat for grassland nesting birds, including song sparrow, dickcissel, and northern bobwhite quail, should increase. Mourning dove abundance may increase, at least temporarily, particularly if mowing is used as a post-seeding management tool. As the restoration matures, use by cottontail rabbits, white-tailed deer, and furbearing animals should increase. Wildlife use of the tract will ultimately be influenced by what happens on neighboring land. The expectation is that

much of the land currently in agriculture will be converted to residential use in the future. Due to the relatively small size of the tract, wildlife populations are expected to remain modest.

No hunting will be permitted on the tract, but enhancing opportunities for wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and environmental education is planned. Disturbance to wildlife, such as the flushing of feeding, resting, or nesting birds, can occur with these activities. However, the disturbance is generally temporary and localized. Increased visitation would cause displacement of habitat and increase some disturbance to wildlife. Motorized vehicles would be limited to designated roads and parking lots. Maintenance of visitor service facilities is also required and the frequency of specific actions would range from routine (trail mowing) to annual (inspecting signs). Disturbance associated with these maintenance activities is expected to be temporary and localized.

Building and infrastructure development would permanently remove about 5-7 acres of habitat on the tract. Another 8-10 acres within the 23.8-acre area may be disturbed during construction. Any impacts to these acres should be temporary. An erosion and sediment control plan will be completed, including scheduling of temporary and permanent measures and construction. Erosion control measures will be implemented in accordance with “Best Management Practices” and methods prescribed by federal, state, and local agencies’ regulations.

Impacts to water quality should also be minor and short term since precautions such as the use of silt fences or curtains would be used to minimize the potential for erosion during all activities. Permanent measures will be incorporated into the project.

4.3.2 Cultural Resources

Archaeological surveys within the 75.4 acre Mathy Tract, the most recent having been conducted by the Midwest Archaeological Center (MAC) on approximately 20.4 acres of land slated for construction of staff, visitor, and maintenance facilities, have identified one prehistoric archaeological site, the Sarazin Site (47LC742).

Between June 16th and 18th, 2009, the MAC investigated the remaining unsurveyed portion of the Mathy Tract (12 acres) and also resurveyed a portion (approximately 8 acres) of the Mathy Tract originally surveyed in 2002. The resurvey was requested by the Service’s Region 3 Historic Preservation Officer due to the possibility of the Service locating a maintenance facility and access road in this area. At the time of this investigation, the “Area of Potential Effect” (APE) was an alfalfa field which reduced ground visibility to between five and ten percent. Shovel testing the APE was not cost effective as it would require approximately 300 shovel tests to complete the survey. For this reason, the Service decided to have a local farmer plow a series of transects at 15 meter intervals throughout the project area in order to facilitate a pedestrian survey. A moldboard plow was used as this 1.) provided a wide transect of exposed soil in which to

search for artifacts, 2.) only disturbed the plow zone, and 3.) provided a quick and effective way to survey the parcel.

The completed survey resulted in the identification of a moderate scatter of lithic, bone, and historic artifacts in both the unsurveyed and resurveyed portions of the project area. This site is likely a continuation of the Sarazin Site (47LC742) as the artifact scatter is continuous throughout the area and is located on the same land form. The MAC has recommended that mechanical stripping of the building and facility locations be conducted prior to construction and that a professional archaeologist be present to identify and recover any archaeological remains.

Based on the previous research in the area, the type of undertaking proposed, and the results of the Phase I survey performed by the MAC, the Service considers this project as having the potential for disturbing intact cultural deposits. For this reason, the Service has determined that this portion of Site 47LC742 may be a contributing part to the site's potential National Register eligibility. In order to evaluate this potential, the Service agrees with the MAC's recommendation of mechanically stripping those areas where construction activities will go below the existing plow zone and monitoring for archaeological features.

4.3.3 Visitor Use

Refuge visitation will increase with the development of facilities on the Mathy Tract. Completion of this project would complement the ongoing efforts of the City of Onalaska to develop their riverfront project, and provide another destination for the travelling public as well as local residents.

While an increase in the number of visits for wildlife observation, photography, and interpretation is expected, organized environmental education activities will likely show the largest percentage increase after the facilities are constructed and a curriculum developed. With its current facilities, the La Crosse District is limited in providing on-Refuge environmental education opportunities. This alternative offers the potential for developing an excellent site for environmental education programs.

4.3.4 Refuge Operations

The goal is to make this facility carbon neutral or a net exporter of energy to the local energy cooperative by incorporating the use of photovoltaic and solar hot water technology. If this site has wind-energy potential, the use of wind turbines will be explored as an additional energy source.

Co-locating the headquarters/visitor facility, shop, and equipment storage building on one site should result in more efficient day-to-day management activities. About \$100,000 in annual leasing fees would no longer be required by moving from a leased facility into Service-owned buildings. Constructing shop and equipment storage buildings sized to meet expanded operational responsibilities would enable the Service to explore

eliminating the West Channel warehouse and a pole shed, leading to additional management efficiencies and a reduced administrative footprint on the floodplain.

Twelve offices are planned in the headquarters along with additional space for volunteers and students, which should meet office space needs well into the future. The shop and equipment storage buildings also are sized to meet future needs.

4.3.5 Viewscape

The construction of the headquarters/visitor, shop, and equipment storage buildings would occur within the viewshed of the Mississippi River and Brice Prairie. Final design plans have not been completed. However, the goal is for all buildings to have consistent visual elements and complement the site and each other. The goal is to incorporate natural looking stone, indigenous to the area, into the headquarters/visitor facility. Depending on the final site plan, the shop and equipment storage building may be hidden from view from the headquarters/visitor facility.

Low maintenance landscaping with native plants would be used around the buildings.

4.3.6 Socioeconomic Impacts

After full development, the Mathy Tract is expected to become a destination for both local residents and those traveling through the Upper Mississippi River Valley. Achieving this goal will take time and will be done incrementally. Tasks required before this happens include: Sand prairie restoration, facility and infrastructure construction, and linking the tract to the Great River State Trail (bike trail) and to an overlook along the Lake Onalaska shoreline. The completion of each task is expected to increase the number of visitors using the Refuge and the total number of visits. This site will appeal to organized events for interpretation and environmental education. The local and regional economy is expected to benefit from this increased visitation.

4.3.7 Cumulative Impacts

Depending in the final site plan, approximately 5-7 acres of this 75.4-acre tract will be permanently altered with the footprint of buildings and ancillary infrastructure, including hiking trails. Another 8-10 acres are likely to be temporarily disturbed during construction, but most of these acres will be restored to sand prairie after construction has been completed. After full development, an estimated 68-70 acres of the tract should be restored to sand prairie. Restoration should complement other grassland restorations in the region and have a small, but positive impact on overall grassland bird populations.

Following the recommendations of the Midwest Archaeology Center should adequately address cultural resource concerns in the area of the tract targeted for development.

Given the relatively flat terrain, sedimentation resulting from construction activities is not expected to have any long-term cumulative impacts.

The intent is to minimize visual impacts by requiring all buildings have consistent visual elements and complement the site and each other.

Use of the tract for recreation will add another opportunity for the public to experience the outdoors, and when combined with other Refuge, school, and non-profit organization efforts, will help promote conservation awareness and appreciation.

4.4 Summary of Site Objectives by Alternative

A summary table providing a listing of how each of the two alternatives meets the objectives for the headquarters/visitor and maintenance facilities for the La Crosse District is provided below. The preferred alternative meets all the objectives listed for a suitable location.

Consequences	Alternative A (No Action)	Alternative B (Proposed)
Combines Administrative and Management Activities With Growth Opportunity; 40-Acre Tract Minimum	Leased facility with little growth opportunity; warehouse and pole shed used in addition to leased facility	Combines administration and management activities in one complex; tract is 75.4 acres in size
Located On/Adjacent to Refuge and Provides Access	Leased facility located some distance from Refuge	Located on Service-owned tract in proximity to other Refuge land
Easy to Find and has Safe, Accessible Access	Located in commercial area; difficult to find	Located on Brice Prairie along county highway
Facilities Welcomed by Neighbors and Community	Neutral	Yes. Identified Town of Onalaska Comprehensive Plan
Facility Avoids Environmentally Sensitive Sites	Yes	Yes
Provides Opportunities for Environmental Education Activities	Minimally	Yes. Facilities are developed for organized environmental education activities
Accommodates “Green Building” Technologies	Would have to be retrofitted	Yes. All facilities are designed using “green building” technology

5. List of Preparers

This Environmental Assessment was prepared by staff of the La Crosse District of the Refuge and reviewed by Acting Manager Rick Frietsche.

6. Consultation and Coordination with the Public and Others

The general public will be made aware of the document along with an invitation to provide comments through a news release. Comments will be accepted for 30 days.

Copies of this draft Environmental Assessment are being made available for public review at the Town of Onalaska in Midway, WI, at the La Crosse District Office, and on the Refuge's website at: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/UpperMississippiRiver/>

All comments received from individuals become part of the official public record. All requests for such comments will be handled in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act and the Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA regulations in 40 CFR 1506.6(f). Our practice is to make comments, including names and home addresses of respondents, available for public review during regular business hours.

Individual respondents may request that we withhold their home address from the record, which we will honor to the extent allowable by law. If you wish us to withhold your name and/or address, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comments.

7. Public Comment on the Draft Environmental Assessment and Service Response

This section will be completed as part of the final environmental assessment.

References

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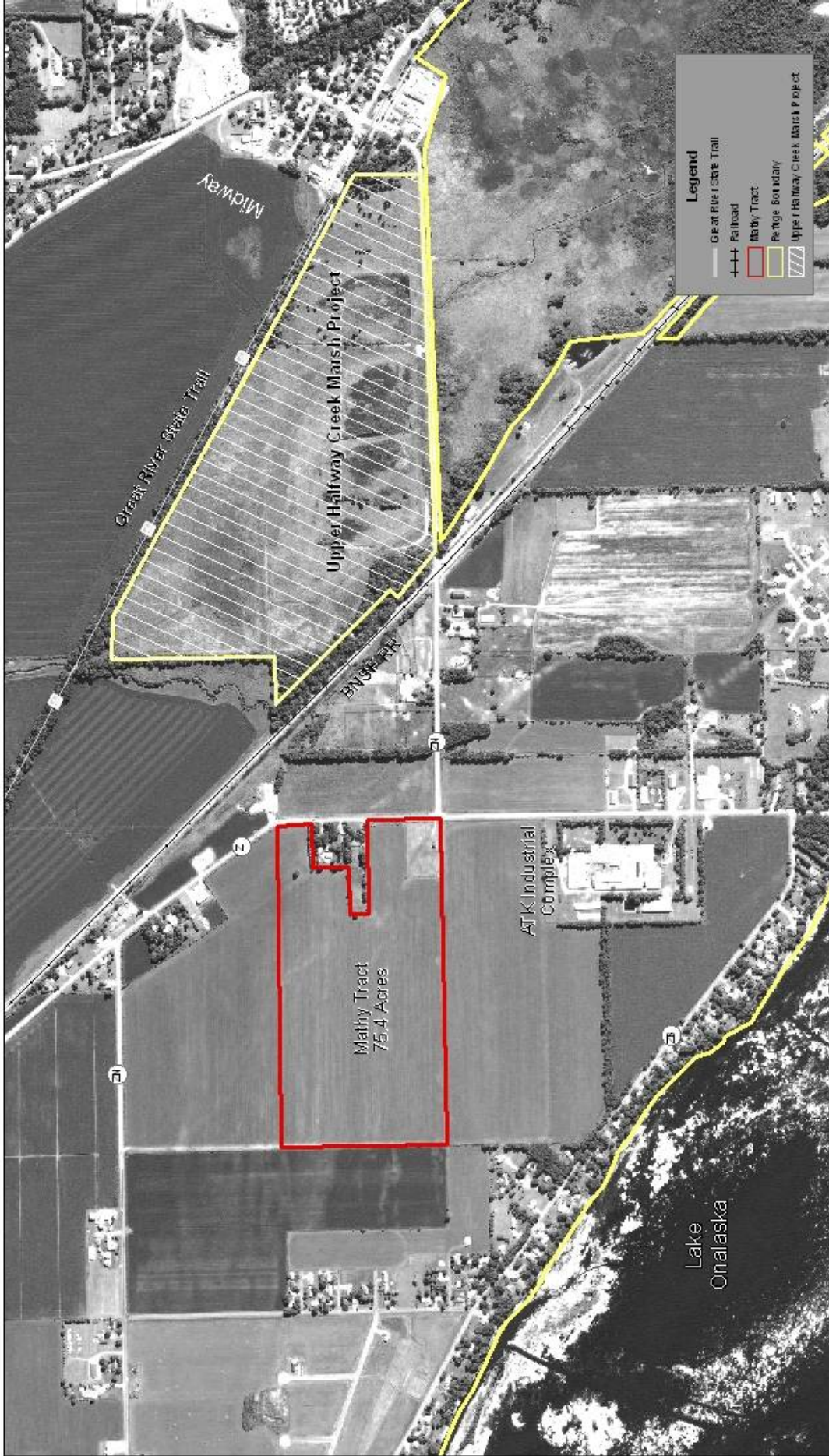


U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife & Fish Refuge

La Crosse County, Wisconsin

Figure 1. Mathy Construction Co. Tract (L456b) and Surrounding Area



Map Created 12/29/08
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 Base Map is 2008 Aerial Photography



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife & Fish Refuge

La Crosse County, Wisconsin

Figure 2. Proposed Office/Maintenance Facility Location on Mathy Tract



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Base Map is 2008 Aerial P photography