

# Chapter 2: Public Involvement and Decision Process

## Introduction

Scoping of issues began in September of 2002 with a public meeting in Centerville, Wisconsin to identify issues. Key issues identified at the meeting and by Refuge staff, were summarized in 12 “fact sheets” that provided the basis for discussion groups at an all-day workshop in March of 2003. Workshop participants were “managers for a day” making tough decisions about how to balance often conflicting Refuge uses. A website was maintained with up-to-date news about the process. Follow-up meetings with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and briefings with various commissions, associations, and Congressional offices occurred throughout the process.

## Issues Identified in Scoping

Issues, which are often synonymous with concerns and opportunities, were identified through the scoping and public involvement process. The issues below represent input from the public, other agencies and organizations, and Refuge managers and staff as well as the mandates and guidance.

Also, while these issues do not represent every challenge facing the Refuge, they do represent a reasonable and comprehensive set of issues. When converted to measurable objectives in Chapter 4, they create a meaningful plan of action to help meet the mission of the Refuge System and the purposes and goals of the Refuge.



*Tundra Swan. USFWS*

### Goal 1: Landscape

#### **Land Acquisition**

Acquisition of land remains a key conservation tool for the well being of fish and wildlife resources, for providing public use opportunities, and for maintaining the wild and scenic character of the Refuge. Only 340 acres within the acquisition boundary approved in the 1983 Refuge Master Plan remain to be acquired. An additional 12 acres outside of the current approved boundary would be added under the Regional Director’s authority. Most of these lands are adjacent to the Trempealeau River and include important examples of historic bottomland forests. Present land use includes hunting, fishing, and some farming. All of these lands are subject to frequent flooding. The entrance road to the Refuge is also subject to flooding where it crosses the Trempealeau River. Construction of a bridge at the crossing may alter flows on adjacent properties, and if so, purchase of flood easements would be required.

Acquiring these lands would alleviate issues with the entrance road, and allow the Refuge to restore and protect bottomland forest and emergent marshes. Additionally, the Trempealeau River could move freely within its floodplain regardless of land use issues.

### **Refuge Boundary**

Maintaining an accurate and clearly marked Refuge boundary is a critical basic need of resource protection. Brush cutting, dumping, mowing, illegal hunting and fishing, and vehicle trespass all occur along areas of the boundary, often intruding onto Refuge lands. The north boundary along highway 35 is viewed by thousands of travelers daily, but its scenic beauty is sometimes compromised by illegal activities. While a good portion of the Refuge boundary is clearly delineated by dikes, other sections are less obvious and have missing, faded, or incorrectly placed signs. In addition, private landowners have complained about Refuge visitors crossing the boundary and trespassing on their lands. A clearly marked and maintained boundary would be a deterrent to encroachment and other illegal activities and would help to maintain positive relations with neighboring landowners.

### **Flood Protection**

The Burlington Northern Sante Fe Railroad (BNSFR) dike separates the Refuge from the main channel of the Mississippi River. The dike, owned and maintained by the railroad, has been breached and overtopped by the Mississippi River only once in the 1965 flood. During the near-record flood in 2001, floodwaters rose to the bottom of the rails putting severe pressure against the Mississippi River side of the dike. The BNSFR requested that the Service reduce the pressure by allowing floodwater to enter Trempealeau NWR through several water control structures. However, the amount of water that could be diverted into Refuge pools was insufficient to offer protection for the railroad dike, but damage to Refuge infrastructure and habitats occurred. The Refuge has no official policy for dealing with water management issues during major flood events, making it vulnerable to impacts from “emergency” actions.

### **Natural Areas and Special Designations**

In 1986, Black Oak Island (*see* Figure 8 on page 38) was designated a Public Use Natural Area as an example of undisturbed, mature, eastern deciduous forest. However, some of the biological characteristics on which the designation was based are threatened by invasive plants, especially European

buckthorn. The site also contains important archeological resources that are not inventoried and are subject to shoreline erosion and potential theft. A management plan is needed to ensure the future integrity of the area.

Refuge roads from the main entrance to the Marshland access are a designated part of the Great River State Trail. The popular bike trail traverses old railroad grades from La Crosse to Marshland, Wisconsin. Future plans are to continue the trail along the north boundary of the Refuge into Winona, Minnesota. Although more accurate counts are needed, an estimated 18,000 to 20,000 cyclists annually use the section of the trail that crosses the Refuge. However, little interpretation of the Refuge or its resources is available to this segment of the visiting public. In addition, cyclists are often confused due to lack of directional signing. Also, flooding at the main entrance road blocks the route for weeks each year, forcing cyclist to detour around the Refuge.

### **Archeological Resources**

Federal laws, executive orders, and regulations, as well as policies and procedures of the Department of Interior and the Service protect cultural resources on federal lands. The Service has a responsibility to protect the many known and unknown cultural resources located on the Refuge. Trempealeau NWR has been described as one of the most important archeological sites in the Midwest. Human use of the area dates back 12,000 years. Dozens of sites and more than 6,000 artifacts have been cataloged from various locations. However, most surveys have been conducted in a few areas on the east side of the Refuge. The majority of the lands have not had even baseline surveys conducted and the locations and extent of archeological resources are unknown. Habitat management activities that create any soil disturbance are delayed until archeological assessments can be completed. Additionally, protection of sites is difficult because of a lack of information about what resources are present. Trempealeau NWR has a history of looting and collectors are active in the area. While law enforcement efforts have been stepped-up over the years, problems persist. Opportunities to interpret the Refuge’s cultural resources must be integrated with the need to protect them.



*A volunteer pulling buckthorn. Trempealeau NWR*

## Goal 2: Wildlife and Habitat Issues

### **Forest Management**

Forests are classified into either upland or bottomland on the Refuge. Over 85 percent of the upland forests are dominated by non-native tree species, planted decades ago in an attempt to provide additional wildlife habitat. However, these plantings encroach on and fragment rarer prairie habitats, and prevent growth of native, mast-producing hardwoods. Over the past years, nearly all upland forests have been invaded by a dense understory of European buckthorn, limiting growth of native hardwoods, shrubs, and wildflowers. Black locust trees, extremely invasive in sandy soils, are dominant in forest stands and would quickly take over most of the prairie areas if left uncontrolled. Efforts to control invasive or non-native forest plants are limited by current funding and staffing levels. In addition, clearing large areas of pine plantings would impact species which use the groves, such as owls. Some citizens have also voiced concern over removing pine plantations from the Refuge.

Bottomland forests lined most of the old river channels before impoundment. These forests, once abundant, were either cleared for farming or

destroyed by prolonged flooding when Lock and Dam 6 went into operation. Much of the existing bottomland forest is degraded by reed canary grass or even-aged silver maple stands. Little of the bottomland forest is regenerating and large, old trees suitable for Bald Eagle nesting, Great Blue Heron rookeries, or Wood Duck nesting cavities are becoming less abundant. Some previously cleared and farmed fields could be restored by tree planting and aggressive weed control, but funding and staff would need to be redirected from other activities.

Some areas of the Refuge are littered with dead and downed trees, especially oaks that died of oak wilt. Down timber presents a fuel hazard and creates difficulty in some burn units. Other standing, dead trees present safety hazards. There is a demand for firewood from local people and the Refuge allows some fire wood removal under special use permit. However, for safety, staff cut the trees down and move them to an area that is accessible with a pickup. Staff time limits the amount of wood that can be removed. Commercial harvest of black locust for fence posts and non-native pines from pine plantations is a viable management tool for restoring prairies. However, cutting trees and skidding them to a road for transport disturbs the soil and possible archeological artifacts. In the past, tree harvest activities have been restricted to times when the ground was frozen. Archeological surveys of the prairies and adjacent forests need to be completed so that habitat management can proceed. Also, potential stands for commercial harvest need to be identified in an updated forest management plan.

### **Forest Bird Management**

The Mississippi River Valley is an important travel corridor for migrant songbirds. Little is known about the importance of protected stopover sites like Trempealeau NWR for migrating songbirds. How these birds are using the various habitats and the timing of different species groups moving through is a mystery. Likewise, management that alters habitats, like removal of invasive shrubs or conversion of forest to prairie, may have unintended impacts to some of these species. Some of these species may be slipping through the cracks simply because they are not being monitored or considered when management decisions are made. Much could be learned from long-term studies that focus on migrant forest birds.

### **Wetland Management**

Stable, deep water, and poor water clarity have led to a general declining trend in productivity in

impounded wetlands on the Refuge. Wind, waves and rough fish suspend bottom sediments, resulting in poor aquatic plant growth. Stands of emergent plants have declined dramatically over time. Invertebrate populations are especially poor, a consequence of poor plant growth. Invasive plants such as Eurasian milfoil and purple loosestrife are increasing. Cross dikes to break units into more manageable sizes, better water control and rough fish management would benefit most wetland areas.

### **Water Quality**

The Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 called upon the Secretary of the Interior to administer the Refuge System in a way that will “ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the System are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations” and “assist in the maintenance of adequate water quantity and quality to fulfill the mission of the System and the purposes of each Refuge.” Water quality is a key to the overall health of the food chain that drives and sustains the multitude of fish, wildlife, and plant species that rely on the Refuge for critical parts, or all, of their life cycle requirements. Some areas of the Refuge, particularly areas directly fed by the Trempealeau River, are impacted by high sediment loads transported from upstream agricultural lands. Likewise, the habitats of the Mississippi River are degraded by sediments transported by the Trempealeau and Buffalo rivers (see Figure 3). The Service has programs to help restore eroding streams on private lands in Trempealeau and Buffalo Counties. Repairing these streams at the top of the watershed is critical to keeping sediments on the land rather than flowing into the Mississippi River. Staff and funding shortages preclude implementing a private lands program to fully address watershed concerns and potential benefits.

Water clarity during the growing season is essential for the germination of aquatic plants. Wind and wave action often suspend the sediments in the large open pools, keeping the water muddy. In addition, rough fish (carp and buffalo) are abundant in the slow moving, warm waters of the impoundments. These fish grub for roots, disturbing aquatic plants and churning up sediments. Aquatic plants have virtually disappeared from hundreds of acres. In addition, the Refuge has a history of fish kills during the winter when dissolved oxygen becomes critically low.

### **Water Level Management**

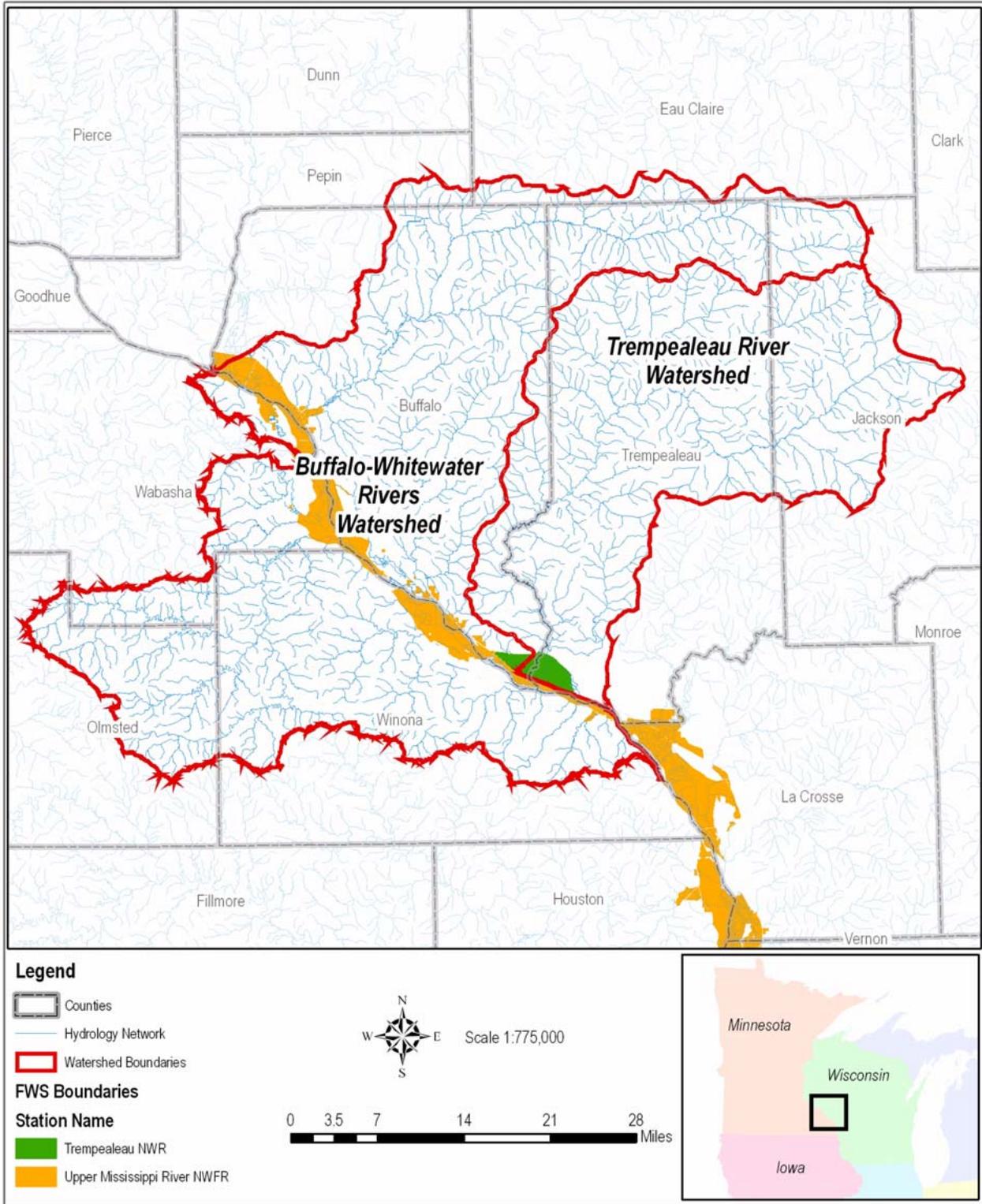
The Refuge was once a backwater of the Mississippi River, but was essentially isolated in the early 1900s by the construction of the Burlington Northern Sante Fe Railroad dike and the diversion of the Trempealeau River. The hydrology was further altered in the 1930s by the construction of Lock and Dam 6 on the Mississippi River. The result is a deeper, relatively stabilized water system. Over time, stable water levels have adversely affected aquatic plant abundance, diversity and distribution. Fish and wildlife dependent on these plant communities have also declined. Shorebirds are particularly dependent on mudflats and sandbars during migration, but these habitats have been mostly eliminated by higher water levels. Recently, a series of dikes and pumps were installed that permit water level management on about 1,500 acres of the Refuge. The remaining 4,000 acres of wetland are essentially unmanageable, subject to the effects of wind, waves, and rough fish that keep the water too cloudy to be fully productive.

### **Waterbird Management**

The Mississippi River is critical to the life history of many species of waterbirds including waterfowl, herons, rails, terns, pelicans, and egrets. Many of these species are sensitive to disturbance during the breeding season and require large marsh areas to nest. Others stage in large flocks in the fall, feeding to build up fuel reserves for migration. Trempealeau NWR plays an important role in providing relatively undisturbed resting and breeding space along Pool 6 of the Mississippi River. The Refuge is becoming increasingly important to migrating Tundra Swans as staging and feeding areas up river become silted in. However, some of the public would like to see more backwater marsh areas including the Refuge open to public hunting. In addition, non-motorized, electric motor-powered recreational boating is allowed during fall migration and sometimes disturbs large flocks of birds. Public use activities need to be reviewed in consideration of the larger role the Refuge plays as a part of the Mississippi River Flyway.

Black Terns are a species of special interest because of declines in some parts of the country. Populations are expanding at the Refuge and habitat conditions are generally good at this time. However, monitoring is difficult and the Refuge relies on volunteers to do it. While annual monitoring may not be warranted at this time, the wildlife inventory

**Figure 3: Watershed of the Trempealeau and Buffalo Rivers**



plan needs to be updated to include protocols that sufficiently monitor this species.

Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers were once more abundant on the Refuge and may be declining because of limited breeding habitat. These species need mature or over-mature trees near good brood habitats to successfully produce young. Mature forests are becoming less abundant on the Mississippi River as forests age and are replaced with invasive plants or silver maple. Many of the older forests on the Refuge are remnants from before the locks and dams were constructed and replacing them may not be possible with current hydrologic conditions.

### **Furbearer Management**

Trapping was implemented on the Refuge in 1981 to help control damage to dikes and water control structures from muskrats and beavers. The area has a long tradition of furbearer harvest dating to the time when the land was owned by the Delta Fish and Fur Farm. The existing trapping program is regulated by issuing special use permits to individuals who purchase trapping rights to specified units through an auction. The program is conducted within the framework of the Wisconsin State trapping regulations and according to special Refuge regulations. Occasionally, raccoons and skunks must be removed to safeguard ducks at banding sites. While the Trapping Plan is relatively current (1999) it needs review and updating to reflect recent national policy and regulation changes governing compatibility of commercial uses on Refuges, current furbearer population estimates, habitat changes, and new management needs.

### **Emergency Response to Spills**

Mishaps with chemicals on adjacent lands could cause severe damage to Refuge resources, especially sensitive wetlands. The Refuge is bounded on three sides by train tracks and a state highway. Train derailments or tanker accidents involving chemical spills could have catastrophic impacts to Refuge habitats and wildlife. Emergency response would require specialized equipment (airboats, helicopters), trained personnel, and the coordination of many agencies. The Refuge needs to have a system for responding to spills and needs to ensure specialized and ongoing training for staff.

### **Grassland Management**

Historical records indicate that the upland areas of the Refuge were once dominated by prairie and oak savanna habitats. Much of the uplands were converted to agriculture before the Refuge pur-

chased the property in 1936. Under Refuge management in the 1940s through the 1960s, various pine species, black locust, Siberian pea, and honeysuckle were planted to reduce soil erosion and provide wildlife habitat in tune with the management practices of the time. In the 1970s, many of the oaks in the savanna were removed because of oak wilt disease. Today, forests on some uplands consist mostly of non-native pine trees, black locust, and shrubs. Grasslands are fragmented into small units surrounded by forest edge that support populations of species that prey on or parasitize grassland and forest birds. In addition, black locust saplings march across the prairies each year at an alarming rate. Control of invasive plants, especially black locust is limited by available staff, equipment, and restrictions on chemical use. Only remnant prairies still exist outside of the Refuge and these are likely to disappear as more private land is developed.

Prescribed fire is an important component of maintaining grassland vigor and health, and has been used at Trempealeau NWR for many years. About 335 acres are burned on a rotational system under prescriptions described in a Fire Management Plan (USFWS, 2008).

### **Invasive Plants and Animals**

Invasive plants continue to pose a major threat to native plant communities and the wildlife that depends on them. All habitats types on the Refuge have invasive plants of one variety or another. Biological control is available for some species, but mechanical removal is the mainstay of the control program. While volunteers, school groups and staff have made some headway, labor is a limiting factor. In addition, control has been hampered by funding for basic inventory, direct control, and research into species-specific biological control.



*Prescribed burning, Trempealeau NWR. USFWS*

Years of impoundment and stable water conditions have contributed to a fishery dominated by carp and other non-desirable rough fish. Invasion by other species of Asian carp may be imminent. These species are destructive to aquatic vegetation and generally keep impounded pools turbid and unproductive for plants or other wildlife. Removal of rough fish is difficult because water management facilities are insufficient to lower water levels enough to cause wide spread mortality. Some years, particularly with heavy snowfall, low dissolved oxygen levels do result in large fish kills. Local commercial fishermen have an interest in harvesting rough fish and in the past have been instrumental in rough fish control. However, commercial fishing is closely tied to market price and often the management needs of the Refuge and the economic needs of the fisherman do not coincide. The Fishery Management Plan (USFWS 1980) needs to be updated in consultation with fishery biologists from the La Crosse Fishery Resource Office.

Zebra mussels have not been found in Trempealeau waters, but are common in the adjacent rivers. Trempealeau has little defense against these invaders once they become abundant in the river systems.

#### **Monitoring Fish, Wildlife, and Plant Populations**

One of the directives in the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 was to monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants on national wildlife refuges. Although monitoring has been a part of managing the Refuge for many years, gaps remain in baseline population data for many species. A Wildlife Inventory Plan was completed in 1987, but needs updating to reflect changes in habitat, the status of many species, and new policies, procedures, and technologies for monitoring. In addition, management in a changing environment must be adaptive, which requires ongoing monitoring and thoughtful investigation as issues arise and change. Meeting these needs has been hampered by biological staffing and funding levels.

#### **Threatened and Endangered Species**

Threatened or endangered species are issues due to their often precarious population status, and need for special management consideration or protection. The Bald Eagle was removed from the threatened list in 2007. However, they will continue to be monitored on the Refuge. One candidate species, the eastern Massasaugua rattlesnake, occurred as recently as the late 1970s, but is now found only at sites north and south of the Refuge. Suitable habitat may still be present for reintroduction. The State of

Wisconsin lists 21 species of birds, one plant, two butterflies, and two turtles that occur on the Refuge as threatened, endangered or warranting special concern (see Table 1 on page 36).

#### **Deer Herd Management**

The landscape of southwestern Wisconsin supports very abundant populations of white-tailed deer, in some areas exceeding 75 deer per square mile. Recently, chronic wasting disease has been detected within 70 miles of the Refuge, and efforts are under way by the State to reduce overabundant deer. Trempealeau NWR is bordered by agricultural lands along the length of its north boundary. Deer undoubtedly feed on these lands, then find shelter and safety from hunting pressure on the Refuge. The number of deer on the Refuge at any one time is unknown, and staff and funding shortfalls preclude intensive surveys. However, history has shown that when deer populations were estimated to be between 130-150 animals (1974), wintering populations depleted food resources on the Refuge. A clear browse line was visible and understory shrubs were absent in many areas. The Refuge gained the reputation of being a good place to see deer and even today there is some public interest in increasing deer to "viewable" numbers.

Presently, deer numbers are low and browse surveys indicate that deer are not adversely impacting vegetation. However, some questions exist as to whether low deer numbers have allowed invasive shrubs to become prolific in the forest under story. Grazing pressure may be one method of controlling invasive shrubs. Deer herd surveys using the most current methods and technologies should be included in an updated wildlife inventory plan. Accurate population numbers are needed to determine appropriate harvest and browse levels.

#### **Deer Hunting**

Deer hunting is an important form of wildlife-dependent recreation and is also used to manage over-browsing or disease. Deer numbers are controlled using special gun and archery hunts. A set number of permits are available for the gun hunt and over-the-counter permits are available for late season archery. The hunt is an important management tool for managing deer numbers. However, without better deer population data, the staff has difficulty determining the appropriate level of harvest. Historically, gun permits have been capped at 60, with 10 to 20 deer harvested each year. Recently, with the popularity of birding on the increase, conflicts have arisen over the use of the Refuge by

hunters and non-hunters at the same time. Both activities occur in the same areas and visitor safety is a concern. The gun hunt occurs over the Thanksgiving holiday (regulated by State law), the time when many visitors from outside the local area are coming to the Refuge to view wildlife. The Refuge hunt plan is out of date and should include options for addressing time and space concerns among various user groups.

Finally, because of the proximity of chronic wasting disease (CWD), close coordination with the State of Wisconsin and the creation of a CWD plan are warranted. Staff also need additional training and specialized equipment to deal with any outbreaks.

### **Wildlife Disease Management**

A wide range of issues are currently in the public eye regarding wildlife disease and potential impacts to human populations. Wild animals play a role in the spread of west Nile virus, Lyme disease, meningitis, chronic wasting disease and avian influenza to name a few. The role wildlife plays in the transmission of these diseases to humans is not always clear. Even more unclear are the long-term impacts of diseases on wildlife populations. Recently waterfowl mortality from ingestion of an introduced faucet snail is of grave concern to managers of the Upper Mississippi River NW&FR. The public desires information about how they may be impacted by these emerging diseases. In addition, staff needs to be trained in the most current and best management practices for handling not only diseased animals, but also banding birds or participating in other hands-on wildlife management operations. A disease contingency plan needs to be developed in conjunction with other land management agencies.

The management of mosquito populations may emerge as a future concern given the increased incidence of mosquito-borne illnesses in parts of the Midwest. The Service has a national policy on mosquito abatement on national wildlife refuges that allows control only in cases of documented human health emergencies. Mosquito control must be species specific, based on population sampling and identified population thresholds, and use the least intrusive means possible (USFWS 2005).

### **Goal 3: Public Use Issues**

#### **Wildlife Observation and Photography**

Wildlife observation and photography are very popular activities for visitors, and a source of economic growth for local communities. As priority

public uses of the Refuge System, these uses are to be encouraged when compatible with the purposes of the Refuge. The Refuge provides outstanding wildlife viewing opportunities year round from many miles of trails and roads. The Great River Road and the Great River State Trail pass by the Refuge, making it highly visible and accessible to the public. However, access is generally restricted to able-bodied individuals. Some trails and observation points need to be improved to accommodate people with disabilities including those with hearing or vision impairments. While most of the Refuge habitats are easily accessible, emergent marsh presents a challenge. Access to an area of emergent marsh would provide opportunities to view wildlife in all representative habitat types. Also, winter is a unique opportunity to observe wildlife, but access to most of the refuge is limited by snowfall for 4 to 5 months each year. The public and communities desire more opportunities for wildlife observation, while managers must balance opportunities with the need to limit disturbance to wildlife and archeological resources, and ensure safety of visitors.

Wildlife photography opportunities are abundant along roads, trails and observation points without special facilities. In the past the staff has had little formal communication with area photography organizations. The needs of this user group are not known and efforts to develop facilities or programs should be predicated on consultation and partnering with area photographers. The Refuge needs to update the visitor services plan to establish clear guidelines for these programs.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (HR 4818) passed Dec. 8, 2004, and became effective in 2006. It authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to collect entrance fees, and requires that the funds be spent on visitor services and facilities. With one entrance point, the Refuge is situated to collect fees. While the legislation does not mandate fee collection it does encourage the agency to review potential sites. Service guidance will be forthcoming.

#### **Interpretation**

Many signs and kiosks currently in place are outdated, not up to current Service standards, and do not interpret the mission of the Refuge System. Interpretive signs do not clearly communicate Refuge regulations to the public. There are no facilities for formal interpretive programming such as staff led talks or other special events. The visitor contact station has limited restroom facilities open only during business hours. A rented portable toilet must be

used after hours, on weekends or for special events. Vehicle pull-outs and boat launches are in need of upgrading and maintenance. Funding is generally not available to purchase interpretive supplies like binoculars, field guides or media equipment. An overall visitor services plan is needed to establish detailed guidelines for interpretive programming.

Biking is a popular activity because the Refuge connects with the Great River State Trail. Thousands of bicyclists pass through every year. Generally this activity is not disruptive and is a low impact way of observing plants and animals. The State has secured funding to extend the trail to Winona. The Refuge will become a stop along the trail, rather than an endpoint. This may change the way cyclists use the Refuge, with increased traffic and demand for more bike-friendly facilities. In addition, requests may arise for motorized use of the trail by ATVs or snowmobiles. The visitor services plan needs to address the needs of this user group and the potential for increased bike traffic.

### ***Environmental Education***

Trempealeau NWR is ideally situated to provide curriculum based programming. The demand for formal environmental education has been increasing and staff has few resources to accommodate the requests. Current programs are funded through partnerships and grants, but are difficult to continue year after year. Wisconsin has inclement weather many months of the year and the Refuge has no all-weather group facilities for teaching. Additionally, there are no restroom facilities that can accommodate groups. Although the staff has worked with many area educators, more outreach and networking is needed to formally develop Refuge-specific programs tailored to state and national curriculum standards. Training for teachers and volunteers, as well as teaching materials that could be used at the schools, would expand opportunities for environmental education.

### ***Hunting***

Waterfowl hunting is one of the priority public uses of the Refuge System and remains a vital part of the cultural, social, and economic fabric of the communities around the Refuge. As habitats and wildlife decline and hunting pressure increases on surrounding lands, potential hunting opportunities within the Refuge become more valued. Within the context of a larger river system, the Refuge provides important sanctuary for migratory birds. Navigation Pool 6 on the adjacent Mississippi River has no areas closed to hunting where birds may find

respite. With the exception of a limited hunt for people with disabilities, the Refuge has been closed to waterfowl hunting. The public desires more hunting opportunities, particularly in high quality habitats like those found on the Refuge. However, managers must balance hunting opportunities with the need to limit disturbance to wildlife and accommodate other visitor interests such as wildlife observation or photography.

Opportunities to hunt other species may be available. Small game (rabbits and squirrels), upland game birds (grouse, pheasant, partridge, crow), migratory game birds (Snipe, Sora, Mourning Doves, Woodcock, Virginia Rail) Turkey, coyote, raccoon and red fox have legal hunting seasons in Wisconsin and occur on the Refuge. Information on population size, habitat use and life requirements of most of these species is not known specifically for the Refuge. While hunting some of these animals may be feasible, there may be little management need to control these populations. More information needs to be collected, and some of these species may warrant an addition to the wildlife inventory plan. Likewise, if areas are to be open to new hunting programs the hunt plan and visitor services plan should include detailed review of the program's benefits.

### ***Fishing***

Over the years, the quality of the fishery has declined. Northern pike and yellow perch, popular sport fish, are no longer present in numbers that support recreational fishing. The sport fishery could be improved, however there may be conflicts with water drawdowns to promote growth of aquatic plants. Also, sediments have likely filled many overwintering holes needed by sport fish. Rough fish (carp and buffalo) and bullheads dominate the fishery and are not popular sport fish. The demand for fishing in the Refuge pools is relatively low. There is one fishing platform in Pool A, but the area around the platform is relatively poor fish habitat. The platform does not meet accessibility guidelines. The Trempealeau River may be more popular for fishing, but access can be difficult because of the steepness of the bordering dike and downed trees. Bow fishing for carp is allowed in Wisconsin, but not on the Refuge. Bow fishermen want to access the Trempealeau River from the Refuge and a conflict arises over allowing people with projectile weapons on the Refuge. Policy has been inconsistent in the past. The staff needs to update the fishing plan and investigate potential options for improving fishing access along the Trempealeau River.

### **Harvesting Fruit, Nuts, and Other Plant Parts**

Some plants growing on the Refuge produce edible products such as fruit and nuts. In the past the Refuge has allowed the harvest of berries, nuts, mushrooms, and asparagus for personal consumption. Harvest is typically light. Recently, requests have been received for other plants like wild rice, sage and cone flower. Some of these requests are for personal consumption, others are for ceremonial or medicinal purposes. Other requests have been made to collect native grass and wildflower seeds. The Refuge needs to develop a clear policy on what the harvest policy is and what levels of harvest can be sustained without jeopardizing habitats or wildlife.

### **Horseback Riding**

As more and more hobby farms become established in the vicinity, interest in the use of the Refuge for horseback riding has increased. Horseback riding is considered a non-wildlife dependent activity and is subject to more scrutiny than other wildlife-dependent uses. Conflicts with other Refuge visitors, the need for larger parking facilities for trailers, maintenance of trails, and introduction of invasive plants are potential drawbacks that need careful consideration.

### **Domestic Pets**

Unless specifically authorized, national wildlife refuges are closed to dogs, cats, livestock, and other domestic animals per federal regulations (50 CFR 26). Domestic animals can harass and kill wildlife, and at times become a direct threat to people



Northern pike. USFWS

engaged in recreation. Dogs on a leash are permitted on the Refuge. Requests for opening areas to unleashed pets during the winter and for dog field trials necessitate careful consideration.

### **Non-Refuge Sponsored Events**

Boy Scout jamborees, over night camping by school groups, weddings, family reunions, and fundraising walks or runs by charities are examples of non-refuge sponsored events that are considered non-wildlife dependent activities. Requests for hosting these events come in a few times each year. Each of these activities must be considered individually to determine if they are likely to impact Refuge resources and can be adapted to include some aspect of resource interpretation. Staff availability and scheduling are likely to limit these activities.

### **Non-Refuge Sponsored Research**

Refuges are interesting places and have many resources that are worthy of investigation. Requests for research projects by universities, other agencies, or individuals need to be considered. At times research projects, although interesting, do not further the management objectives of the Refuge and sometimes are disturbing to habitats and wildlife. Staff time is required to permit and monitor these activities. Clear guidelines need to be developed as to what research is in the best interest of the Refuge and how much staff resources should be committed.

### **General Public Use Regulations**

General public use regulations include things like hours of operation, vehicle restrictions, use of fires, parking and other administrative or safety rules. The current public use regulations were last reviewed and updated in 1992. Regulations need to be reviewed to address new laws and policy and to help correct problems not specifically covered in current regulations governing the National Wildlife Refuge System (50CFR, subchapter C part 26). Refuge Officers and the public need to clearly understand what is and is not allowed on the Refuge.

### **Goal 4: Neighboring Landowner and Community Issues**

#### **Community Outreach**

There is a general lack of awareness of the goals of the Refuge and the mission of the Refuge System. Citizen support is critical to a successful resource management program. Rebuilding society's connection with its environment is an important component of long-term resource protection. Numerous opportunities exist to build connections between the Ref-

uge and the community. However, staff shortages and other priorities have limited efforts to work within the community. Refuge planning must include a strong component of community outreach and participation by Refuge staff.

### **Friends Groups**

Friends groups play a critical role in helping the public understand the importance of protecting and preserving refuges. They provide critical support by volunteering, raising funds, and educating the public. Trempealeau NWR has not had its own Friends group, but instead has been a part of the Bob Pohl Chapter of the Friends of the Upper Mississippi River Refuge based in Winona, Minnesota. Trempealeau NWR does not have a presence in the local community and needs to establish its own Friends group that will provide an independent citizen voice for the protection, conservation, and enhancement of Refuge resources.

### **Volunteers**

Volunteers are a valuable asset providing thousands of hours of labor, completing tasks that otherwise would not be accomplished. Volunteers conduct biological surveys, lead interpretive programs, maintain equipment and facilities, and assist with special events. The Refuge has a core of dedicated volunteers who are committed to protecting the beauty of the Refuge. Staffing is unlikely to increase in the future and volunteers may be called upon to perform more of the surveys or maintenance tasks that go undone. Refuge staff must find ways to foster a sense of pride and ownership in the volunteers, while continuing to recruit new people.

### **Partnerships**

The Refuge administers the Partners for Wildlife Program for Trempealeau and Buffalo Counties. Opportunities for upper watershed improvement abound in the northern portions of these counties. These projects are immensely important to reducing sediments flowing to the Mississippi River. Expertise is available to assist landowners with control of invasive plants, and to restore and enhance wetlands and grasslands. Unfortunately, limited funding and staffing allow only a few of these projects to be completed each year. Projects are on a waiting list and landowners are continuing to request more assistance.

The Refuge shares its east boundary with Perrot State Park. The Refuge and the Park occasionally coordinate activities, but a stronger partnership would support both public facilities. Coordinating



*Canada Goose banding program at Trempealeau NWR. USFWS*

interpretive programming and recreational activities would benefit visitors that use both areas. There may also be opportunities to share staff and equipment for habitat management projects.

### **Private Property Rights**

Adjacent landowners have a variety of concerns about how their lands or their farming operations may be impacted by Refuge habitat, wildlife and recreation management. Crop damage by deer and waterfowl, flooding, trespass by hunters, and access across the Refuge to private land are issues that are frequently contentious.

### **Easement and Right-of-Way Management**

Two major dikes that are owned by the railroads cross the Refuge. Several power lines cross or border Refuge land, and State Highway 35/54 borders the Refuge on the north. All of these easements or right-of-ways present management challenges. Work crews and equipment need to cross Refuge lands for access to repair facilities, unknown numbers of wildlife collisions and bird strikes occur, accidental contaminant spills are a threat, and the need for road or power line expansion is imminent. The Refuge needs to develop a management plan for easement and rights-of-way that is consistent with current policies and management recommendations.

## **Goal 5: Administration and Operations Issues**

### **Entrance Road Flooding**

The main Refuge entrance road, which is also part of the Great River State Trail, is a low-lying gravel road in the floodplain of the Trempealeau River. The entrance road floods frequently and is closed for 5-6 weeks each year, usually during the spring when songbird viewing is at its best. Ice-jams

close the road for months during some winters. An alternate, unimproved access for staff is available through the Marshland gate. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation has requested that this access not be promoted to the public because of safety concerns with its location on a curve, adjacent to a train crossing. The Refuge needs to develop a year-round access road for staff and visitors.

### **Facilities**

Office facilities are too small to meet the needs of full staffing and especially summer hires and volunteers. Maintenance facilities that were constructed in 1936 are scheduled for replacement. Visitors need to have year-round access to restrooms, and there are no facilities to conduct formal interpretation or education programs.

### **Staffing**

Current staffing levels are below essential staffing needs and reflect gaps between what should be done and what can be done. The Refuge is fortunate to have a cadre of talented and giving volunteers who fill in some of the gaps in staffing. However, long-term programs are difficult to manage with short-term volunteer resources. Adequate staffing becomes more critical as public demand for recreation programs, biological information, and resource protection increases.

### **Operations and Maintenance Need**

Plans and planning need to articulate the needs for staff and funding to manage and administer programs, facilities, and equipment. These needs must be represented in databases and other documents that are used in budget decision-making at the national and regional level.

## **Review of the Draft EIS/CCP**

The Draft EIS/CCP was released for public review in June 2007 with a 60-day comment period. Summaries were mailed to 250 people, and full copies were provided to 52 people, agencies, and non-government organizations. Paper copies were also distributed to eight libraries in the area surrounding the Refuge.

The full EIS/CCP was posted on the Refuge's planning website.

Twenty-six people participated in a public meeting hosted by the Refuge on June 28, 2007, in Trempealeau, Wisconsin. The purpose of the meeting was to give people an opportunity to comment in person

on the Draft EIS/CCP. Comments were also accepted through the mail and via e-mail. Topics discussed included:

- The history of Trempealeau NWR management and current land conditions.
- The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and the purpose of Trempealeau NWR.
- The comprehensive conservation planning process and development of alternatives.
- Objectives and strategies of the preferred alternative, Alternative C .

In addition, on July 10, 2007, the Refuge hosted a workshop focused on the waterfowl hunting objective (Objective 3.5) in the preferred alternative. Two people not associated with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service attended the workshop.

## **Final EIS/CCP and Record of Decision**

Following the publication of the Final EIS/CCP in May 2008, the Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Twin Cities, Minnesota, determined which alternative evaluated in the Final EIS would become the Final CCP. This decision has been recorded in a formal Record of Decision (Appendix A). Substantive comments from the public, agencies, and other groups that were received on the Draft EIS/CCP were included in the Final EIS, along with a Service response.

The Final EIS/CCP was distributed to local libraries and persons who requested the full document. The document was also posted on the Region's planning website. A Notice of Availability of the Final EIS/CCP was published in the Federal Register by the Environmental Protection Agency on April 25, 2008.

One comment, which restated concerns that had been expressed in the Draft EIS comment period and had been responded to in the Final EIS, was received during the 30 days following publication of the Notice of Availability in the Federal Register.

The Regional Director signed a Record of Decision on June 17, 2008.