

Appendix J: Public Scoping Process

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Open House

On the evening of December 5, 2002, the USFWS and Agassiz staff welcomed the public to an open house and CCP/EA scoping meeting at the Heritage Center in Thief River Falls. About 30 individuals attended the meeting, most of whom were from Marshall County and all of whom were Minnesota residents. Attendees listened to an overview of the CCP and NEPA processes and then were given the chance to address the gathering. Rather than provide information, cite concerns, or list issues they would like to be addressed in the CCP and NEPA documents, most of the speakers took the opportunity to acquaint fellow stakeholders and the USFWS with their own ideas as to how Agassiz should be managed in the future. The following comments were made in the order shown:

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

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

*What do you think are the most important issues facing the refuge?
How do you think these issues can be resolved?
Should refuge habitats be managed any differently than they are today?
Are the types of use and visitation permitted and encouraged by the refuge appropriate?
Any other comments you would like to make?*

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

Comments, concerns, and suggestions received from the public and stakeholders during scoping included the following (the number in parentheses is the number of comments making essentially the same point):

What do you think are the most important issues facing the refuge?

- # Water management, hydrology, flood control and water rights (15)
- # Too much water held in pools, interfering with deer hunting
- # Too much water held in pools, reducing their flood control value
- # Local pressure to use Agassiz as a reservoir
- # Managing refuge water resources for wildlife while surrounded by private agricultural lands
- # Need for larger outlets on impoundments to make drawdown faster and reduce downstream flooding Off-site waters problematic
- # Work with ditch authority to keep ditches clean and in repair
- # Invasive species and weed control (2)
- # Public outreach resources
- # Resource utilization
- # Refuge expansion
- # Public use/involvement
- # Loss of moose population (2)
- # Management of deer, moose, and other brushland wildlife populations
- # Pressures to graze or farm the refuge
- # Perceived conflicts between some wildlife species given sanctuary on the refuge and surrounding agricultural communities
- # Public access is too restrictive
- # Mistrust between the USFWS and local government authorities and taxpayers (2)
- # To function more as a natural ecosystem
- # Determine if the refuge is managing people or resources
- # Lack of exposure to or awareness of refuge on the part of the public
- # Agassiz should be more accountable to the people of Minnesota, especially neighbors who are directly affected by its operations
- # Too much "upstream ditching" east and southeast of refuge
- # Public use and proper management

- # Keeping “wildlife first” on a national wildlife refuge
- # Diversion ditch would offer more flexibility for water management
- # Managing for wildlife areas, with emphasis on threatened and endangered species and habitats/species unique to Agassiz and region
- # Funding
- # Management of healthy wolf/moose populations
- # Showing the public that the USFWS is not anti-sportsman
- # Maintaining and restoring native plant and animal communities
- # Balancing needs of surrounding landowners with wildlife conservation on refuge
- # Opening up part of refuge for duck hunting
- # Conflicts between different uses – managing people while maintaining commitment to wildlife and other resources
- # Allowing knowledgeable, experienced staff to manage refuge without interference
- # Declining quality of refuge wetlands from silt and sedimentation, agricultural runoff, and excessive winter drawdowns for purpose of spring runoff storage that does not meet refuge objectives
- # Loss of forest openings and grasslands due to undesirable vegetative encroachment

How do you think these issues can be resolved?

- # Stand firmly behind the original mission of the NWR system and preserve remaining natural environments for future generations
- # Increase research funding and funding and programs for public outreach
- # Long-range studies of hydrology
- # Draw water down earlier
- # Local and nationwide education to increase support for NWR system (2)
- # Work with local interests, perhaps through a board or cooperative
- # Manage brushlands with mechanical treatment, prescribed fire, and, when compatible with waterfowl habitat goals, water level management
- # Employing local young people, students, and teachers in wildlife monitoring and management projects on refuge
- # Assist local residents to initiate wildlife watching tours that could be a source of local income while putting residents in touch with visitors
- # Open some mowed roads to foot traffic and cross-country skiing in winter
- # Better communication between all people involved
- # Achieve trust by keeping public involved as at present and with new ways
- # Make progress on water issues by upper basin storage, flood easements, buyouts, diversion, etc.
- # Close refuge to the public
- # Allow no hunting or harvesting of refuge resources
- # Restrict runoff water from agricultural lands from entering refuge
- # Enforce current county and state regulations
- # Open more of refuge to hunting, especially south of Rte. 7 to duck hunting

- # Off-site management is essential
- # Drain holding ponds in fall when ditches are empty
- # Avoid excessive water in Ditch 83 and associated flooding by supporting diversion (2)
- # Protect critical habitat
- # Study and research plants and wildlife
- # Greater lobbying and grant-writing for donations to secure more funds
- # Mow and spray weeds along township boundaries
- # Involve township or county in fall water level reduction and opening of gates in spring
- # Obtain space or building where public can view videotape of what USFWS does
- # Open refuge south of County Rte. 7, Northwest Pool and Pool 8.
- # Replicate natural water systems as closely as possible
- # Keep restoring private land wetlands in vicinity and acquire land to expand refuge
- # You can't please everybody (2)
- # Public input, agency coordination, and hard decisions
- # With water control structures already in place, it would be feasible for Agassiz to become a designated flood control facility
- # Maximize winter habitat manipulations like mowing, selective logging of aged aspen; also manipulate cattail and phragmites-dominated habitats with follow-up prescribed burning

Should refuge habitats be managed any differently than they are today?

- # No (3)
- # No, management is perfect, right on target (2)
- # No, focus of refuge should remain on providing high quality wetland and associated upland habitats for migratory birds (particularly waterfowl), but also for non-game species (2)
- # Not necessarily; remain flexible, but why change a program that many feel is successful?
- # Staff is doing a great job managing the refuge; especially noteworthy are the efforts to provide shorebird habitat
- # Lower summer pool elevations and emptying all pools in the fall for the benefit of upland game, infrastructure on and off the refuge, and neighboring farmland
- # Most of Agassiz uplands could be managed in brush landscapes
- # Increase prescribed burning and allow for "let-burn" wildfires (i.e. wildland fire use for resource benefits) (2)
- # Controlled burns are effective in maintaining current habitat
- # Allow the natural ecosystem to function on its own, in which wildlife populations would be self-regulating
- # Incoming water should be let in more slowly to allow for agricultural and industrial contaminants to be filtered out
- # No; perhaps open trapping on a limited basis for fisher, bobcat, marten and weasel (2)
- # Aspen woodlots should be left to grow old and not be burned; some ridges should be mowed and kept as prairie
- # Conduct more prescribed burning to improve habitats, but not in the spring
- # Very aggressive habitat treatments, particularly prescribed burning, recognizing limitations like funding, manpower and weather

- # More food plots should be planted (2)
- # Maintain food plots for farmer and the birds
- # More grain fields – ducks, geese, and cranes need to eat
- # Continue prescribed burns to maintain prairies and keep fuel loads low in forests
- # Keep pool water levels more constant to establish more wetland than open water
- # More native plant gardens

Are the types of use and visitation permitted and encouraged by the refuge appropriate?

- # Yes (13)
- # There is a strong pressure to expand uses, but remember that it is a “wildlife” refuge
- # Expand all kinds of appropriate public use; conduct economic study laying out benefits of refuge
- # Uses are entirely appropriate but public waterfowl hunting opportunities can be expanded (2)
- # Logging, bow and arrow hunting, waterfowl hunting, and cross-country skiing should all be permitted
- # Gates on roads should be opened to allow public to view and enjoy more wildlife
- # There is interest in visitation to the wilderness area
- # Consider allowing small game/upland gamebird hunting
- # Incorporate more local history (e.g. homesteading, Civilian Conservation Corps, University of Minnesota Experiment Station) into visitation program, such as with a video
- # Provide for a true wilderness camping experience via canoe
- # The opportunity for wildlife and natural resource-related research on the refuge is important and should continue, as should birding, deer hunting, and moose observation opportunities
- # It is pleasing that refuge is managed for non-game as well as game species
- # Major portion of refuge is inaccessible; thus, there is greater traffic on portion that is open; experience of viewing birds from car is diminished by other passing cars
- # Limited hours of visitor center on weekends restrict opportunity for locals to ever get inside
- # Existing facilities and activities like tower, visitor center, viewing ducks and public involvement are very good but bicycling, cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing areas should be promoted (2)
- # A true refuge would be closed to the public, and some places, even to refuge personnel; public could use nearby state parks that are now underused and in danger of being closed
- # Motorized off-road vehicles should not have increased access
- # Given declining numbers of deer hunters, new concepts for future herd management may be required
- # Spend less money on research and more on refuge appearance
- # Refuge is not a park and public use of refuge should be compatible with wildlife
- # Keep visitor restrictions in place; public has adequate access to all areas
- # Some refuges are open more and others are almost in a lockdown status
- # Need to open gates to allow motor vehicles access to more of refuge; one road is not enough
- # Native flowers and grasses would attract more people; wildflower/ native plants landscaping around headquarters is good demonstration to public (2)

Any other comments you would like to make?

- # As a landowner in the area, I am interested in the process and hope to participate in it
- # Some refuges are open more and others are almost in a lockdown status
- # Less water equals earlier ice equals thicker ice equals safer ice equals more deer hunting area
- # How much longer will the refuge allow hunting?
- # Agassiz is unique and needs to be preserved and managed; due to its remote location, it will never have a lot of visitors compared to other refuges
- # The working relationship between Agassiz NWR and Minnesota DNR's Division of Wildlife is highly treasured; MNDNR looks forward to continuing this cooperative relationship
- # We appreciate the large wild landscapes that Agassiz NWR contains and it is one of the most important features that attracted us to buy and maintain property in this part of the country
- # Are there any volunteer programs available? Perhaps visitor center could have more weekend programs in the summer thereby allowing for more access by locals
- # Would like to see better cooperation between USFWS and local government authorities
- # During times of devastating floods, Agassiz NWR worked cooperatively with the Red Lake Water District (RLWD) to provide floodwater retention; every effort was made to reduce downstream flooding and still be able to maintain the refuge's infrastructure
- # The refuge should not be expected to be the holding reservoir to prevent flooding on farmland and in towns; government should pay each landowner to set aside a number of acres on their land to act as a sponge to hold excess water
- # In conversations with other people, most would like to see more foot access to more areas, i.e. walking trails and cross-country skiing
- # Allow use of electric trolling motors for duck hunting
- # As a public taxpayer I feel the refuge is paying their share of taxes
- # A township supervisor from each surrounding township should be on an advisory committee to help with public relations but not control refuge management
- # For sake of public safety, the policy of checking in and off the refuge should be continued
- # Another motorized trail should be established to Elm Lake or to the west
- # Weed control around headquarters would make it more attractive
- # Past and present managers and biologists dictate local programs in each federal refuge better than a "high priced" consulting firm located out of the refuge area
- # The 12-sq. mile block of habitat including Eckvoll and Elm Lake WMA is extremely diverse and valuable, providing benefits to the area, particularly flood control, wildlife viewing, waterfowl production and overall wildlife diversity
- # More area needs to be used for the sportsman
- # Agassiz is a wonderful paradise for wildlife and should continue being managed for maximum wildlife use
- # Allow a limited amount of hunting for ducks and geese; also blow hunting and black powder hunting for deer; allow county and township officials on CCP process to be on the committee
- # Agassiz should start buying up more marginal land that is being federally supported now by such programs as the CRP (Conservation Reserve Program)
- # Keep up the good work (2)
- # Environmental education is important for people to support and understand what the refuge does; inviting school and community groups to the refuge for tours is a good way to provide this

- # Stay with primary goal of wildlife enhancement; all other goals are secondary
- # One or two pools should be stocked with fish to benefit neighbors who would like to fish refuge
- # Image would be improved if refuge told public all the things it is doing, like helping save certain species; it would also be good to have a native flower garden open to the public to encourage them to plant wildflowers; this year I planted 50 kinds of wildflowers and have many kinds of butterflies and semi-rare birds;
- # I think you are doing a great job
- # Refuge staff should be active in environmental issues surrounding the refuge such as flood management issues
- # It would be useful to have a table and a portable toilet at each of the kiosks; many visitors stop for leaflets along the road; perhaps a notebook for sightings should be placed there to record birds seen when the refuge office is closed
- # The Red Lake Department of Natural Resources has had an excellent working relationship with Agassiz Refuge and looks forward to continued to continued cooperative projects; refuge personnel have always gone out of their way to involve the Red Lake DNR in state-of-the-art education and research efforts, and their outreach efforts have contribute to the growth and development of Red Lake's Wildlife Program; Red Lake DNR is confident the refuge is in good hands
- # Keep up the good work!

Other General Written Comments Received During Scoping:

- # There needs to be a way for more access to the refuge.
- # There should be an outdoor toilet available when the visitor center is locked. (Note: A portable toilet has been available on-site for several years.)
- # Please ban hunting and trapping on your National Wildlife Refuge
- # Minnesota law requires control of noxious weeds and Agassiz should do its share
- # The Thief River Falls Chamber of Commerce & Visitor's Bureau is supportive of the various amenities at the refuge, especially additional interpretive programming for visitors to the community; the refuge is a primary attraction for visitors to the Thief River Falls area.

