

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

Overview of the Planning Process

Our planning process followed eight basic steps described in the Service's planning policy. The steps are:

- # Preplanning: Planning the Plan
- # Initiate Public Involvement and Scoping
- # Review Vision Statement and Goals and Determine Significant Issues
- # Develop and Analyze Alternatives, Including the Proposed Action
- # Prepare Draft Plan and NEPA Document
- # Prepare and Adopt Final Plan
- # Implement Plan, Monitor, and Evaluate
- # Review and Revise Plan

The Refuge began pre-planning for the CCP in 1999. There were initial discussions among the staff on issues to be addressed and data that would be necessary during planning. A planning team was formed that consisted of Refuge staff, regional office planning staff, representatives from other programs within the Fish and Wildlife Service, and representatives from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Geographic Information System (GIS) data were assembled and organized.

The Service first began soliciting public comment regarding the Comprehensive Conservation Plan in October 2000. Three public meetings were held using the "open house" format. The Service invited people to drop in at their convenience to talk informally with Refuge staff, view exhibits, and fill out comment forms. The dates, times and locations of the meetings were announced in local papers and special mailings. The first meeting was held Thurs-



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

day, October 19, 2000, at Southwestern Illinois College, Redbud, Illinois. Twenty-two members of the public and two news media representatives attended. The second meeting was held Friday, October 20, 2000, at the Marion Hotel & Conference Center, Marion, Illinois. One-hundred and thirty five members of the public plus seven members of the media attended. The third meeting was held Saturday, October 21, 2000, at the Crab Orchard Refuge Visitor Center. One-hundred and fifty-nine people attended.

At the open houses, on the Service's Region 3 website, and via the media, people were encouraged to provide written comments on how they wanted the Refuge to be managed. Hundreds of letters and comments were received. Some letters covered one specific interest, others spoke to several interests (Mangi Environmental Group, 2001).

Three focus group meetings were held at the Refuge Visitor Center on January 24 and 25, 2001. Invitations were extended to about 60 stakeholders that had demonstrated a long-standing interest in the Refuge. Additionally, some people were contacted by the invited participants and attended the meetings. In all, 39 people attended the focus group meetings. Each focus group generated and prioritized a list of issues (Mangi Environmental Group, 2001).

In early 2001, the planning team formed special topic work groups to deal with the Refuge purposes. The groups included members of the planning team and subject area experts from within the Service and State. The groups reviewed the existing vision and goals for the Refuge and drafted new goals for the next 15 years.

In April 2001, using all of the comments received, considering the goals and all of the rules and regulations that must be followed and considering the given needs, the planning team developed four alternative management concepts. The four concepts were: Existing Management; Land Exchange; Open Land Management; and Forest Land Management. These management concepts were presented to the public in a project update, which was mailed to everyone on the planning mailing list, and people were invited to comment on the concepts. Based on the comments received and land cover data analysis, the alternatives were refined and made more specific.

A Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and Comprehensive Conservation Plan was written and released to the public in October 2005. A 90-day period was provided for public comments on the DEIS. The DEIS was distributed in hard copy and compact disk formats. The document was also available for viewing or downloading from the planning web site. We received 1,983 comments via letters, emails, public meeting comment forms, petition, and oral comments. We responded to all comments in the Final Environmental Impact Statement and made changes to the document based on comments received. The changes included modification to the alternatives, including the pro-

posed action, and typographical and factual corrections. The edited document was issued as a Final Environmental Impact Statement and Comprehensive Conservation Plan in August 2006. After a 30 day waiting period, the Regional Director signed the Record of Decision (Appendix A) on October 27, 2006.

Planning Issues

During scoping, many issues or concerns were identified by the public. The issues and concerns ranged from general concerns, the economic effect of the Refuge on the community, for example, to very specific concerns, such as ruts in a gravel road leading to a particular boat ramp. The issues and concerns were classified under major headings. The following paragraphs summarize the issues that were addressed in the Environmental Impact Statement.

Issue 1: Recreation

Recreation was the most frequently mentioned issue by the public. The public was concerned with all facets of recreation, such as concern for loss of recreation; desire to maintain existing recreational facilities; support/maintain/enhance all forms of recreation; and to expand, improve, re-open and/or add new facilities or activities to the Refuge. Comments were made about the poor or inadequate conditions of some of the facilities, including marinas, boat ramps, restrooms, and campgrounds. Comments made to expand, improve, re-open and/or add new facilities or activities to the Refuge covered a wide range of topics. Some people wanted to see the Refuge expand and improve by adding restaurants, marinas, hotels, restrooms, bike trails, hiking trails, disposal containers, roads, shooting range, dog training areas, horse trails, or gas stations. Many others wanted to see the Refuge re-open swimming areas, picnic areas, and sailing facilities. Others wanted to see additional nature walks, environmental education programs, and water quality monitoring.

Issue 2: Wildlife Conservation

Another issue identified by the public was wildlife conservation. The public recognized the need to conserve and protect wildlife populations as well as their habitat. People felt that game and non-game species should be protected, threatened and endangered species should be protected, habitats should be preserved, and restoration efforts should be



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

properly employed. The public felt that this is a very important aspect to maintaining the Refuge environment which reflects on how the public uses the Refuge.

Issue 3: Refuge Purposes

A third issue, support for the intended purposes for Refuge management/concern for compatibility of Refuge purposes, was identified as critical to the Refuge. People who wrote or spoke to this concern tended to feel that for some years Refuge management has not properly emphasized or supported the four original purposes for which the Refuge was established. Indeed, some expressed concern that these very purposes may now be considered incompatible with the overall mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, due to recent legislation and changing policies of the Service.

Issue: Recreational Boating

A fourth issue, support for boating and its proper regulation, was also addressed. There was broad, strong support for the continuation and encouragement of boating at the Refuge. At the same time, the commenting public recognized actual and potential conflicts among boaters and between boaters and other recreational users of the lakes. Comments on regulation of boating included installing speed limits, removing “no wake” signs, and restricting motorized vessels. Many people expressed opposition to jet-skis, or at least expressed the need for more restrictive regulations for their use.

Issue 5: Role in Regional Economy

One issue identified as important in the focus group meetings but not in the letters was the benefits the Refuge provides to the local economy. Focus

group participants recognized that the Refuge not only provides tourism dollars, but also agricultural and industrial dollars to the local economy.

Issue 6: Communication between Refuge and Community

Another issue identified as important in the focus group meetings, but not in the letters, was the need for better communication between the Refuge and the community. Some focus group attendees felt that the Refuge could do a better job of informing the local community of current issues facing the Refuge.

Issues Eliminated from Detailed Study

The public identified some additional issues and concerns during scoping. The Service determined that the following issues did not merit detailed study in the EIS.

ATV Use on the Refuge

Some people opposed the use of ATVs on the Refuge.

Rationale: The Refuge was not proposing to expand the public's use of ATVs. The Refuge issues a very limited number of special use permits to people with disabilities authorizing them to use specific roads for specific activities.

Oil and Gas Production, Mining, Road Building, and Quarries

Some people opposed these activities.

Rationale: The Refuge was not proposing to engage in any of these activities, except for possibly building a minor amount of new road (Heron Flats overlook). In fact, the amount of roads likely will decrease as some industrial facilities become obsolete. The federal government owns and controls all but a very small fraction of the mineral rights on Refuge lands. Furthermore, the economics of extracting any minerals appear to be extremely prohibitive for the foreseeable future.

Need for a CCP

Some people opposed the preparation of a CCP.

Rationale: Service policy, which is based on federal law, requires every national wildlife refuge to have a CCP.

Privatization of Refuge Management

Some people supported a privately run Refuge.

Rationale: Public Law 80-361, the legislation that established the Refuge, states: "...all lands herein transferred shall be administered by the Secretary of the Interior through the Fish and Wildlife Service.." As part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Service is mandated to administer the Refuge.

Concession Operations

Some people oppose any concessions on the Refuge.

Rationale: Concession contracts are functional tools the Refuge has used for many years to provide certain services to the public that it otherwise could not offer because of budget and personnel constraints.

Changing the Name of the Refuge

Some people would like to see the Refuge name changed from "Refuge" to "Federal Wildlife Management Area."

Rationale: As part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the name "Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge" is appropriate.