

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

Meetings and Involvement

The planning process for this CCP began in March 2007. Initially, members of the regional planning staff and Muscatatuck NWR staff identified a list of issues and concerns that were associated with the management of the Refuge. These preliminary issues and concerns were based on staff knowledge of the area and contacts with citizens in the community.

Refuge staff and Service planners then asked Refuge neighbors, organizations, local government units, and interested citizens to share their thoughts in an open house and through written comments. In May 2007, people were invited to an open house at the Refuge's visitor center through local papers and a project update sent to the Refuge's mailing list of 1,067. Twenty-five people attended the open house. Comments were received from approximately 35 individuals during the comment period, which ended June 30, 2007. Following the public comment period, an additional meeting was held in the Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Office to review the public comments and identify concerns from subject specialists.

A Biological Program Review, which is an evaluation of the relevance and direction of the biological program through the collective inputs of professionals among the various fields of ecology and wildlife sciences, began with a 2-day meeting on June 20 and 21 of 2007. The Regional Refuge Biologist facilitated the event, which was attended by 17 individuals with various state, federal, and academic affiliations. Information was presented on the Refuge, the general ecology of the region, establishing legislation and policy directives, current issues facing the Refuge, prior program accomplishments, a report on the current biological inventory and monitoring program, and a draft vision for the future. The meeting was punctuated with field trips to specific sites to stimulate discussion and demonstrate issues of concern. The group discussed management alternatives and



Muscatatuck NWR. Photo Credit: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

potential strategies, identified potential biological program priorities, discussed the draft goals and objectives for the various program components and other ideas for the future of the program.

The planning team also considered the recommendations of a Visitors Services Review that was conducted June 19-22, 2006. The review evaluated the services of the Refuge against the minimum visitor services requirements in policy.

Issues

Issues play an important role in planning. Issues focus the planning effort on the most important topics and provide a base for considering alternative approaches to management and evaluating the

consequences of managing under these alternative approaches. The issues, concerns, and opportunities expressed during the first phase of planning have been organized under the following headings.

■ Habitat and Wildlife

There is a need to prioritize wildlife species of management concern and their habitats and, within budget constraints and other limitations, manage according to those priorities. A strategic management direction is needed for wetlands, grasslands, forests, croplands, and the conversion of open lands to forests. Visitors see the current diversity of habitat as valuable, because it provides an opportunity to see a large number of bird and resident wildlife species.

■ Visitor Services

Visitors and staff recognize a tremendous potential in wildlife-dependent recreation, a popular and valued use of the Refuge. There is a need to weigh the delivery of visitor services within the wildlife mission of the Refuge and seek creative means for expanding wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities, outreach, and education.

■ Refuge Roads

The public recognizes the value of Refuge roads for access. There is a wide spectrum of opinion on how the roads should be maintained. Some like the roads as they are now; others would like to see improvements in the roads and associated facilities such as parking lots and wildlife overlooks.

■ Recreational Issues

Some individuals would like to see recreational opportunities expand on the Refuge to include dog training, an archery range, and horseback riding. These activities typically do not occur on refuges and many are not wildlife-dependent in nature. The planning process presents an opportunity to evaluate the requests and reach a decision on their appropriateness and compatibility.

■ Threats and Conflicts

The public and staff recognize the challenges increasing development around the perimeter of the Refuge will create for Refuge management and wildlife conservation in the area. There is also recognition of the need for aggressive management of invasive species.

■ Support

There is wide support for the Refuge and its management among visitors. They note the value of the Friends Group, volunteer, and intern programs.

Wilderness Review

As part of the CCP process, lands within Muscatatuck NWR were reviewed for wilderness suitability. No lands were considered suitable for Congressional designation as wilderness as defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964. Muscatatuck NWR does not contain 5,000 contiguous acres of roadless, natural lands. Nor does the Refuge possess any units of sufficient size to make their preservation practicable as wilderness. Refuge lands and waters have been substantially altered by humans, especially by agriculture, drain construction, and road-building. Extensive modification of natural habitats and manipulation of natural processes has occurred. Adopting a “hands-off” approach to management at the Refuge would not facilitate the restoration of a pristine or pre-settlement condition, which is the goal of wilderness designation.