

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

Meetings and Involvement

The planning process for this CCP began in July 2006. Planning for the Wisconsin Wetland Management Districts, the St. Croix WMD and Leopold WMD, occurred along the same timeline with key meetings held jointly. The planning was conducted jointly because the Districts face the same issues, and it makes sense to address the issues consistently and share knowledge and experience between Districts.

Initially, members of the regional planning staff and District staff identified a list of issues and concerns that were associated with the management of the Districts. These preliminary issues and concerns were based on staff knowledge of the area and contacts with citizens in the community.

District staff and Service planners then asked District neighbors, organizations, local government units, and interested citizens to share their thoughts at open houses and through written comments. In September 2006, people were invited through local papers and individual letters to open houses in New Richmond, Portage, and Waukau. Total attendance for the three open houses was 30 people. Three written comments were received by the St. Croix District during the 30-day comment period.

In January 2007 a biological review of the Districts' biological programs provided technical comments and recommendations. In addition to Fish and Wildlife Service Refuges and District personnel, the review team consisted of a panel of experts and partners from the U.S. Geological Survey, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan Science Support Team, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The review team considered the programs of both Districts.



Emerald Lands, a private lands project. St. Croix Wetland Management District. USFWS photo.

A visitor services review was independently conducted for each District. A visitor services review report of the District dated June 2006 helped clarify visitor services issues and provided potential actions to consider in formulating alternatives. The visitor services review team included regional and refuge visitor services specialists and District staff.

Publication of the Draft CCP

A Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment were released to the public on July 25, 2008. The availability of the document was announced in the Federal Register and through an Update mailing to all parties on the planning mailing list. A press release was sent to media outlets throughout the District, as well. The draft document as either a compact disc or hard copy was sent to approximately 50 persons or organizations with special interests in the District. In addition, the draft document was distributed to approximately 50 persons or organizations that had requested all documents produced by the Region's Conservation Planning Division. The document was also available as an Adobe pdf file on the Region's



Wood frog. USFWS photo.

planning website. A public open house was held on August 12, 2008, at District Headquarters to receive any comments on the draft document. Eight people attended. A 30-day comment period closed on August 25, 2008. Comments received and responses to them are included in an appendix to this document.

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 and concerns expressed during the first phase of planning have been organized under the following headings.

Habitat Management

Background: Managing habitat is at the heart of providing for wildlife. The presence of high quality habitat is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for abundant wildlife use. For example, a WPA may contain very high quality habitat for puddle ducks, but they may not occur on the WPA at the usual time because of poor conditions on wintering grounds or extreme weather during migration. When the forces external to the WPA weaken, however, the habitat base is there to provide for the ducks. On the other hand, low quality habitat will

cause wildlife to be absent or less abundant. If a WPA has inadequate habitat, ducks will be absent or occur at very low levels, regardless of the timing or duration of other factors such as weather or conditions on wintering grounds. Recognizing that external factors may limit wildlife use on a WPA, it is reasonable to focus on the things that we can control and provide habitat conditions that offer the greatest potential for the species of concern to us (Schroeder et al. 1998).

Main Concerns:

1. The WMD has identified management strategies that would improve habitat conditions, but the strategies can not be applied as needed. The needs exceed the existing capability of staff hours and budgets. The result is that habitat conditions offer less than their potential for species of concern.
2. Invasive species are a particular challenge within habitat management as they degrade native habitats and reduce biological diversity. Control techniques for invasive species place further demands on the staff and budget of a WMD, and effective control techniques have not been identified for all invasive species.
3. To be most effective, habitat management should be based on good data and sound science. Basic biological information is required to understand the habitat needs of species of concern. Biological data is also needed to evaluate the effectiveness of management strategies within an adaptive management framework. Faced with pressing day-to-day demands, WMD staff find it difficult to allocate the time and resources to develop and discover the desirable biological information. Activities to answer this concern would include literature searches, expert technical workshops, and on-the-ground studies.
4. Management actions sometimes draw negative reaction from neighbors to WPAs. For example, a neighbor may complain about the appearance of a blackened field and the smoke that was generated during a burn. Or, a citizen may complain about the cutting of trees as part of a prairie restoration. There is concern that this negative reaction will lead to opposition to the management activity and an inability to apply the desired treatment. If we are not able to apply particular strategies at the

appropriate time, habitat on the WPA will change and there will be less benefit to wildlife.

- Habitat management, control of invasive species, biological monitoring, and community outreach require staff and funding for programs, facilities, and equipment. Plans and planning need to articulate these needs and ensure they are represented in databases and other documents used in budget decision-making.

Habitat Loss and Fragmentation

Background: The loss and degradation of habitat has been identified as an important factor in the decline of many species worldwide and at many scales. Development is considered the most lasting form of habitat loss, since the presence of pavement and buildings hinders the return to natural conditions. Development can result in habitat fragmentation where remaining patches of habitat not only support less wildlife, but also may isolate populations vulnerable to a lack of genetic diversity and in an increased “edge” effect, which may increase the effect of predators and parasites (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2002). Wisconsin, along with other Midwest states, is forecast to have continued housing growth in rural areas through 2030 (Radeloff et al. 2006). In its Wildlife Action Plan, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources identified habitat loss and fragmentation as a major issue faced by land managers (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources 2005). The Wisconsin WMD counties are experiencing and are expected to continue to experience housing development and its accompanying effects over the next 25 years.

Main Concerns:

- Development is occurring around some existing waterfowl production areas. The development may be reducing the value of the WPAs to wildlife – the effect is not known with certainty. If the value of the WPA for wildlife is reduced, we need to think of how, or if, we should continue to manage the land.
- The effect of habitat loss and fragmentation is best dealt with at a broad landscape level in which several entities (federal, state, local, non-governmental organizations, private landowners) have responsibilities. There is an opportunity for improved coordination among responsible entities.
- How the forecasted development in the WMDs should affect land acquisition decisions is not clear. The criteria for land acquisition used in landscapes dominated by agriculture or other conservation lands may not be appropriate in counties with forecasted high levels of development.

Land Acquisition

Background: Managers of a WMD, in addition to managing existing WPAs, are responsible for identifying tracts that would be worthwhile to acquire for inclusion in the WMD. The primary goal of the acquisition program is to acquire a complex of wetlands and uplands that provide habitat in which waterfowl can successfully reproduce. Identifying lands for purchase as waterfowl production habitat requires weighing a number of biological factors related to breeding waterfowl within an often rapidly changing social and economic context – all the while keeping an eye on cost and efficiency.

Main Concerns:

- Expanding housing development and changing land use in the Wisconsin WMDs offers particular challenges to the land acquisition program. The challenges are both direct and indirect. Directly, development causes the loss of opportunities through conversion of land to uses that would be difficult to reclaim or restore. And, areas near development are less desirable as waterfowl production habitat. Indirectly, the demand for development is causing a rapid rise in property values with the result that less habitat can be purchased with the funds available.
- With the current and forecasted continued development, there is a concern that the possible loss of habitat will cause more acquisitions to emphasize the opportunity considerations (“buy while we can”) in comparison to the biological considerations and value to waterfowl.
- How to proceed with land acquisition for the WMDs has increased uncertainty given the above concerns and the lack of biological information on waterfowl production in areas of residential development. The criteria that

guide acquisition in western Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Montana are likely not applicable to Wisconsin without modification.

Visitor Services

Background: The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 established six priority uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, interpretation) for the Refuge System, which includes Waterfowl Production Areas. The Service is to facilitate these uses when compatible with the purpose of the WPA and the Mission of the System. WPAs differ from national wildlife refuges in that they are open to hunting, fishing, and trapping by specific regulation and open to the other wildlife-dependent activities by notification in general brochures available at the District office. New and existing WPAs are thus “open until closed” in contrast to national wildlife refuges, which are “closed until opened.” Hunting has long been associated with WPAs. The other wildlife-dependent activities are increasingly being encouraged by developing interpretive signs, kiosks, and wildlife trails. Identification signs and small parking areas are usually placed at each WPA to facilitate its use by the public.

Main Concerns:

1. Some visitor facilities are sub-standard. Higher quality experiences and greater satisfaction among visitors may be possible with improved visitor facilities.
2. Unauthorized uses (horseback riding, ATVs, dogs off leash, for example) occur on WPAs. The uses lead to habitat degradation and disturbance to wildlife that ultimately reduce wildlife numbers and health. Better habitat conditions and less wildlife disturbance would result from a reduction in unauthorized uses.
3. The public sometimes requests use of WPAs for other than the six priority uses. In order for the public to understand our purpose and mission and its relation to public uses, the compatibility analyses should be consistent within Wisconsin and, ideally, within the Region.

Service Identity

Background: People often approach and interact with staff of the WMD as if they work for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and administer state areas. Because the missions of the two agencies are different, the misperception can lead to misunderstanding. When WMD employees interact with people directly, the misperception can be cleared up through conversation. Over the last several years the Service has acted to develop an improved “corporate identity” through unified standards for publications, uniforms, signs, and vehicles. The experiences of WI WMD personnel suggest that much work still remains in developing the Service identity.

Main Concern:

1. If people do not understand the purpose and mission of the WPAs and the Service, they are not likely to understand our management. The lack of understanding may lead to a lack of support, and, ultimately, to indifference or opposition to our management. If the public had a clear perception of the Service, the public would be able to differentiate between the federal and state missions and understand the actions of the WMD staff. With that understanding the public would make more informed decisions about fish and wildlife issues in general and, particularly relevant to a WPA management, more informed reactions to on-the-ground management activities.

Wilderness Review

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