

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Introduction

The St. Croix Wetland Management District, established in 1992, manages over 7,500 acres of Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) in eight west-central Wisconsin counties (Figure 1). The heart of the District in the central portion of St. Croix County is known as the Star Prairie Pothole Grasslands. These grasslands are ranked sixth out of 26 priority grassland landscapes in Wisconsin. The District also administers 15 conservation easements. WPAs consist of wetland habitat surrounded by grassland and woodland communities. While WPAs are managed primarily for ducks and geese, they also provide habitat for a variety of other wildlife species such as non-game grassland birds, shorebirds, wading birds, mink, muskrat, Wild Turkey, and deer.

Because the District is located on the eastern edge of the tallgrass prairie and forest transition zone, it includes a variety of habitats not typically found on a wetland management district.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The St. Croix Wetland Management District (WMD) is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS or Service). The USFWS is the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the nation's fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. It oversees the enforcement of federal wildlife laws, management and protection of migratory bird populations, restoration of nationally significant fisheries, administration of the Endangered Species Act, and the restoration of wildlife habitat such as wetlands. The Service also manages the National Wildlife Refuge System.



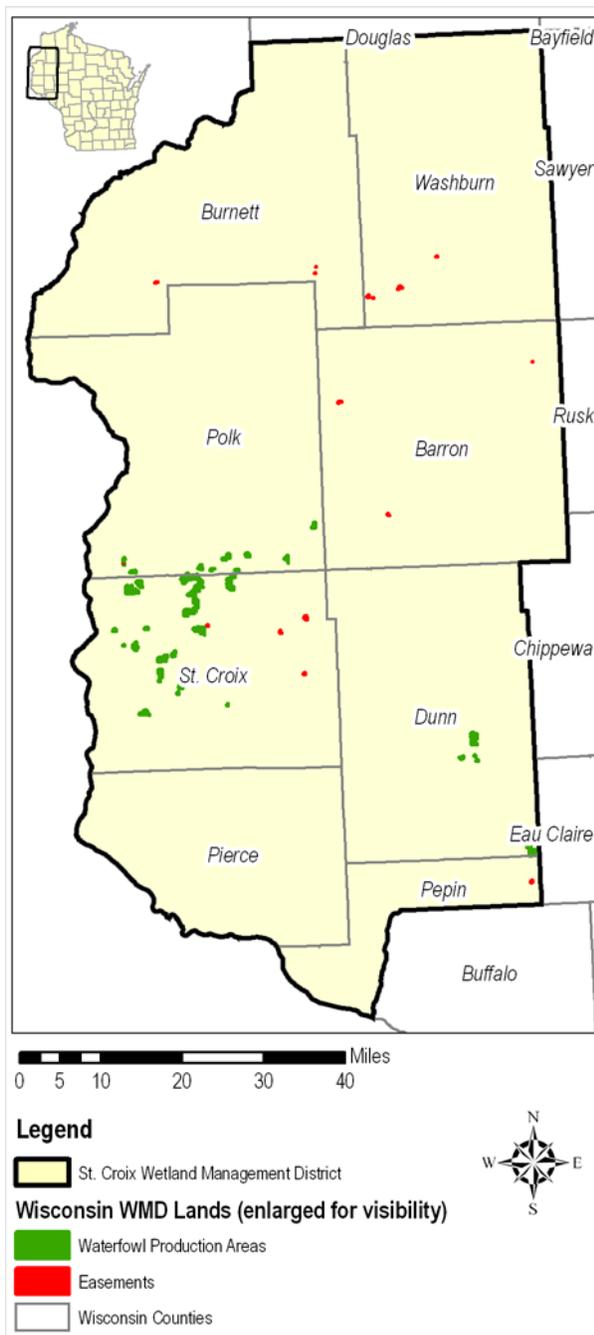
Oak Ridge Waterfowl Production Area, part of St. Croix Wetland Management District. USFWS photo.

The National Wildlife Refuge System

District lands are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which was founded in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt designated Pelican Island in Florida as a sanctuary for Brown Pelicans. Today, the system is a network of about 545 refuges and wetland management districts covering about 95 million acres of public lands and waters. Most of these lands (82 percent) are in Alaska, with approximately 16 million acres located in the lower 48 states and several island territories.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest collection of lands specifically managed for fish and wildlife. Overall, it provides habitat for more than 5,000 species of birds, mammals, fish, amphibians, reptiles, and insects. As a result of international treaties for migratory bird conservation and other legislation, such as the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, many refuges have been established to protect migratory waterfowl and their migratory flyways. Horicon National Wildlife Refuge serves a dual purpose both as a crit-

Figure 1: Location of St. Croix Wetland Management District



ical nesting ground and as an important link in the Mississippi Flyway network of refuges that serve as rest stops and feeding stations for migrating ducks and geese.

Refuges also play a crucial role in preserving endangered and threatened species. Among the most notable is Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, which provides winter habitat for the highly endangered Whooping Crane. Likewise, the Florida Panther NWR protects one of the nation’s most endangered predators. Refuges also provide unique recreational and educational opportunities for people. When human activities are compatible with wildlife and habitat conservation, they are places where people can enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation. Many refuges have visitor centers, wildlife trails, automobile tours, and environmental education programs. Nationwide, approximately 30 million people visited national wildlife refuges in 2004.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 established several important mandates aimed at making the management of national wildlife refuges more cohesive. The preparation of Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) is one of those mandates. The legislation directs the Secretary of the Interior to ensure that the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and purposes of the individual refuges are carried out. It also requires the Secretary to maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System are to:

- Fulfill our statutory duty to achieve refuge purpose(s) and further the System mission.
- Conserve, restore where appropriate, and enhance all species of fish, wildlife, and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- Perpetuate migratory bird, inter-jurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations.
- Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants.
- Conserve and restore, where appropriate, representative ecosystems of the United States, including ecological processes characteristic of those ecosystems.
- Foster understanding and instill appreciation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their conservation, by providing the public with safe,

high-quality, and compatible wildlife-dependent public use. Such use includes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

District Purposes

The purposes for the District are based upon its land acquisition authorities. Lands are acquired under the authority of the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act, and since 1958, under Public Law 85-585 as “Waterfowl Production Areas.” The purpose of lands acquired under the Migratory Bird Hunting Conservation Stamp Act is “...as Waterfowl Production Areas” subject to “...all the provisions of such act (the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, 16 U.S.C. 715d) ...except the inviolate sanctuary provisions...,” and “...for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.”

District Vision

The planning team considered past vision statements and emerging issues and drafted the following vision statement as the desired future state of the District:

Waterfowl and other migratory birds find District lands isles of refuge in a landscape of increasing residential development. Native plants and animals, amazing in their diversity, flourish on District and private lands from the efforts of many active partners. Neighbors and visitors enjoy and value District land and work to conserve the region’s natural heritage.

Purpose and Need for Plan

This CCP articulates the management direction for the St. Croix Wetland Management District for the next 15 years. Through goals, objectives, and strategies, this CCP describes how the District intends to fulfill its purpose and contribute to the overall mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Several legislative mandates within the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 have guided the development of this plan. These mandates include:



Willow River, Betterly Waterfowl Production Area at St. Croix Wetland Management District. USFWS photo

- Wildlife has first priority in the management of refuges.
- Wildlife-dependent recreation activities, namely hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation are priority public uses of refuges. We will facilitate these activities when they do not interfere with our ability to fulfill the refuges’ purpose or the mission of the Refuge System.
- Other uses of the Refuge will only be allowed when determined appropriate and compatible with Refuge purposes and mission of the Refuge System.

The plan will guide the management of St. Croix WMD by:

- Providing a clear statement of direction for the future management.
- Making a strong connection between District activities and conservation activities that occur in the surrounding area.
- Providing neighbors, visitors, and the general public with an understanding of the Service’s land acquisition and management actions in the District.
- Ensuring District actions and programs are consistent with the mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Ensuring that District management considers federal, state, and county plans.



Volunteers collect native prairie seeds at St. Croix Wetland Management District. USFWS photo.

- Establishing long-term continuity in District management.
- Providing a basis for the development of budget requests on the District's operational, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

History and Establishment

The WMD has its roots in a 1974 interagency agreement based on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) Director Lynn Greenwalt's authorization for federal purchase of land and waters in Wisconsin. These lands would be managed by mutual agreement between the Service and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WIDNR) under a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

Management of the WPAs was accomplished according to the MOU signed in 1974 and several addenda after that. In general, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources personnel were responsible for on-the-ground management activities, and Service personnel were responsible for administration. Federal management authority was under the guidelines of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act with the day-to-day activities spelled out in the Wisconsin Wetland Management Guidelines.

As WPA acreage increased, so did the time and commitment of management personnel. A WIDNR "Workload Analysis" in the late 1980s documented a staff shortage for management activities on the WPAs. The WIDNR Director of the Bureau of Wildlife Management and the Service's Regional Director began meeting in early 1990 to discuss transferring management of the WPAs to the Service. The date selected for the transfer was September 30, 1995.

The transition date was later moved forward when the Service received funding for District Managers and summer temporaries to work with the Wisconsin DNR in the summer and fall of 1992. The final transition and establishment of the St. Croix and the Leopold WMDs took place July 1, 1993.

The advent of the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife and conservation easement responsibilities in the late 1980s further defined the WMD's role. Private land habitat restoration projects, and protection and management of wetlands, flood plains, and other important habitats on conservation easements added greatly to the workload and habitat diversity of the District.

Legal Context

In addition to the acquisition authorities of the District, and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, several federal laws, executive orders, and regulations govern its administration. Appendix E contains a partial list of the legal mandates that guided the preparation of this plan and those that pertain to District management.