



St. Croix

Wetland Management District

Summary

Draft

Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

July 2008

Introduction

The St. Croix Wetland Management District (WMD) has completed a Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) that describes management goals and objectives for the next 15 years.

The purpose of the Draft CCP is to give everyone interested in the District’s future – neighbors, sports people, local government officials, American Indian Tribes, the State of Wisconsin, and non-government organizations – an opportunity to review what the District is proposing and to comment on the plan. Public involvement in the planning process is vital to making the CCP a meaningful document that addresses the needs of wildlife as well as the concerns of people who care about the St. Croix WMD.

Written comments can be sent via e-mail or mail; addresses are provided on page 6 of this summary.

The comprehensive conservation plan is intended to outline how the District will fulfill its legal purpose and contribute to the National Wildlife



Oak Ridge Waterfowl Production Area, St. Croix Wetland Management District. Photo credit: USFWS

Refuge System’s wildlife, habitat and public use goals. The plan will articulate management goals for the next 15 years and specify the objectives and strategies needed to accomplish these goals.

While comprehensive conservation plans outline management direction, they do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

Where to Find the Draft CCP

The Draft CCP is available in a variety of formats and places.

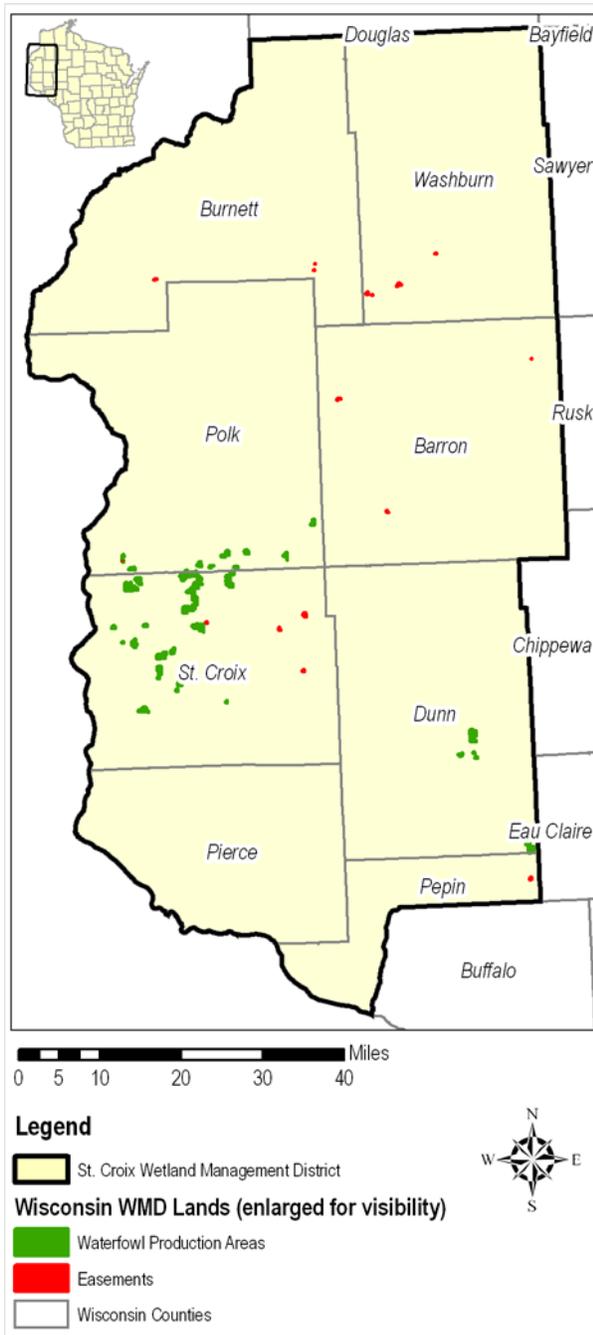
If you have access to a computer, you can see the plan in portable document format (pdf) at the Refuge’s planning website:

<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/stcroix>

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Location, St. Croix Wetland Management District



Paper copies and an electronic version of the plan are available at libraries throughout the area, including:

- Friday Memorial Library, New Richmond, Wisconsin.

- Menomonie Public Library, Menomonie, Wisconsin.

Limited numbers of paper copies are also available for individuals who want one. The Draft CCP is also available as a pdf document on compact disk. To request a copy, please call the District Headquarters at 715/246-7784.

Vital Statistics

The St. Croix WMD, established in 1992, manages over 7,500 acres of Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) in eight west-central Wisconsin counties. 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.

Who We Are and What We Do

The District is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the nation's fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. The Service 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, which was founded in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt designated Pelican Island in Florida as a sanctuary for Brown Pelicans.

Today, the Refuge System is a network of over 545 refuges and 7,000 waterfowl production areas covering more than 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.

Overall, the Refuge System provides habitat for more than 5,000 species of birds, mammals, fish, and insects. Refuges also provide unique opportunities for people. When it is 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.

District Vision Statement

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.

District Management Goals

The goals are designed to meet the purposes of the District and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The following goals were established for St. Croix WMD and will form the direction for the District over the next 15 years.

1. Preserve, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity of wetlands, grasslands, and native flora of District lands to support the conservation of breeding habitat for waterfowl, grassland birds, and other wildlife.



American Wigeon. Photo credit: USFWS

2. Preserve, restore, and enhance the diversity and abundance of migratory birds and other native wildlife with emphasis on waterfowl, grassland and wetland-dependent birds.
3. A broad cross section of the public enjoys and appreciates District lands.
4. Protect the integrity of biological resources within the District and the cultural resources and health and safety of visitors and Service staff on WPAs.

The Planning Process

The planning process for the CCP began in July 2006. The Wisconsin Wetland Management Districts, which include St. Croix WMD and Leopold WMD, shared a planning process that included similar timelines and 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 personnel from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife 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.



Aster, St. Croix Wetland Management District. Photo credit: USFWS

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.

Issues Addressed in Planning

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.

The following list of issues and concerns was compiled from internal Refuge scoping, public open house sessions and program reviews:

Habitat Management: With more than 7,500 acres spread over several counties, managing and administering the WMD is a big undertaking. 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: Residential development is occurring around existing WPAs, which may be reducing their value for waterfowl production. Habitat loss and fragmentation are best dealt with at a landscape level, where there is an opportunity for improved coordination among responsible entities.

Land Acquisition: Residential development in rural Wisconsin is contributing to loss of habitat and a rapid rise in property values. In this rapidly changing and uncertain condition care must be used to judge where land should be purchased, if the public's limited resources are to be spent wisely.

Public Use: Higher quality experiences and greater satisfaction among visitors may be possible with improved visitor facilities. Better habitat conditions and less wildlife disturbance would result from a reduction in unauthorized uses.

Service Identity: An opportunity exists to increase public awareness and, ultimately, well-being of WPAs by increasing the public understanding of the purpose and mission of the WPAs.

What's Proposed

Four management alternatives are considered in the Environmental Assessment that accompanies the Draft CCP. One alternative, Alternative 4, has been identified as the preferred alternative and developed more fully into the draft comprehensive conservation plan. The four alternatives that were considered are described in the following paragraphs.

Alternative 1, Waterfowl Emphasis – Current Management Direction

Under Alternative 1 the activities of the District would continue as in the past with current staffing and resources. The target for St. Croix WMD would be to restore 150 acres of grassland per year. The 15-year target for wetland restoration would be 75 percent of the drained wetlands. Up to 20 percent of the woodlands and oak savannah would be inventoried with the objective of restoring approximately 25 percent of the identified potential savannah. Invasive species would be inventoried and treated with the recognition that only a small

portion of the affected acres would be dealt with. Land acquisition would continue as funds were available with the intent of establishing larger complexes of wetlands and grasslands. An objective would be to raise the quality of the visitor services programs over time, reaching a higher level of rating within 5 years. Two WPAs would be more fully developed with visitor services facilities. The volunteer and partnership programs would continue at 2008 levels.

Alternative 2, Waterfowl Emphasis with Increased Consideration for Other “Priority” Species and Low/Moderate Consideration for Visitor Services

Under Alternative 2, the types of habitat management activities of the District would continue, but with more acres affected. Monitoring of habitat and wildlife would increase compared to the current direction. Visitor services would improve about at the rate and extent of the current direction. The target for the District would be to restore 200 acres of grassland per year. The 15-year target for wetland restoration would be 90 percent of the drained wetlands. Up to 90 percent of the woodlands and oak savannah would be inventoried with the objective of restoring approximately 80 percent of the identified potential savannah. Invasive species would be inventoried on 100 percent of the Districts and control applied to 50 percent of District lands. Land acquisition would continue as funds were available with the intent of establishing larger complexes of wetlands and grasslands. An objective would be to raise the quality of the visitor services programs over time, reaching a higher level of rating within 5 years. Two WPAs would be more fully developed with visitor services facilities. The volunteer and partnership programs would increase. Full implementation of this alternative would require the addition of 2.5 full-time equivalents to the current staff.

Alternative 3, Waterfowl Emphasis with Low Increase in Management for Other Wildlife and Increased Consideration for Visitor Services

Under Alternative 3, the types and amounts of habitat management activities undertaken by the Districts would be similar to Alternative 1. Visitor services would expand and improve in quality compared with Alternative 1. Outreach activities

would also be greater. An objective would be to raise the quality of the visitor services programs over time, reaching two higher levels of rating within 5 years. Four WPAs would be more fully developed with visitor services facilities. The volunteer and partnership programs would increase. Full implementation of this alternative would require the addition of 2.5 full-time equivalents to the current staff.

Alternative 4, Waterfowl Emphasis with Increased and Balanced Consideration for Other “Priority” Species, Their Habitats, Visitor Services and Neighborhood Relationships (Preferred Alternative)

Alternative 4 incorporates components of Alternatives 2 and 3. Under this alternative the types of habitat management activities of the District would continue, but with more acres affected. Monitoring of habitat and wildlife would increase compared to the current direction. Visitor services would expand and improve in quality compared to the current direction. Outreach activities would also be greater. The target for the District would be to restore 200 acres of grassland per year. The 15-year target for wetland restoration would be 90 percent of the drained wetlands. Up to 90 percent of the woodlands and oak savannah would be inventoried with the objective of restoring approximately 80 percent of the identified potential savannah. Invasive species would be inventoried on 100 percent of the Districts and control applied to 50 percent of District lands. The Districts would develop a monitoring program to determine



Bierbrauer prairie planting, St. Croix Wetland Management District. Photo credit: USFWS



Volunteers collecting native prairie plant seeds, St. Croix Wetland Management District. Photo credit: USFWS

waterfowl recruitment. Land acquisition would continue as funds were available with the intent of establishing larger complexes of wetlands and grasslands. Four WPAs would be more fully developed with visitor services facilities. The volunteer and partnership programs would increase. Full implementation of this alternative would require the addition of 3.5 full-time equivalents to the current staff.

Other Management Alternatives Evaluated

As the planning team thought about possible management alternatives, ideas were freely exchanged and evaluated. Two alternatives were considered, discussed, and evaluated but were not developed in detail.

One alternative we discussed was the possibility of devoting resources to intensive management for waterfowl. The possibility of providing nest structures, planting crops, constructing moist soil units, and intensive predator control were discussed as options that have been used in the past in an attempt to optimize waterfowl production. This alternative was not pursued because the resource demands for this kind of management have less probability of long-term, sustainable success than an approach that increases the size and quality of habitat. It is thought that long-term success will more likely be achieved when management supports the historical functioning of the land than attempts to force the land and its processes in a different direction.

Another alternative that was considered centered on the idea of what would be possible with a lot more resources. In this alternative the team thought about all that management could do for waterfowl, other wildlife, and visitors with unlimited resources. This “pie-in-the-sky” alternative was interesting to talk about, but ultimately judged unrealistic. The team could not imagine a scenario in which considerable staff and budget increases would occur in the next 15 years.

Tell Us What You Think

St. Croix WMD and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service want the District’s comprehensive conservation plan to be a visionary and practical document that improves habitat for wildlife and connection to the environment for its visitors.

Your thoughts are an essential part of accomplishing this. Have we missed an issue? Have we overlooked an opportunity? Let us know during the 30-day public review period. In order for your comments to be considered during preparation of the Final CCP, we need to receive your comment by August 25, 2008.

You have a variety of opportunities to communicate your thoughts on the Draft CCP. First, you are welcome to write us a letter. Address written comments to:

St. Croix Wetland Management District
Attention: CCP Comment
1764 95th Street
New Richmond, WI 54017

Comments are also welcome via e-mail: r3planning@fws.gov (please specify “St. Croix WMD Comment” in the subject line).

Open House Slated August 12

The District will host an open house at the District Headquarters from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesday, August 12. Headquarters is located at 1764 95th Street in New Richmond, Wisconsin. District Staff will be available during the open house to visit with you about management issues.

Written comments are preferred, but staff will record any oral comments that are provided during the open house.