
Record of Decision

for

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Upper Mississippi River

National Wildlife and Fish Refuge



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Division of Conservation Planning
Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building
Room 530
1 Federal Drive
Ft. Snelling, Minnesota 55111

Introduction

This Record of Decision (ROD) signifies the end of the planning process for the development of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) to guide the management and administration of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Refuge) for the next 15 years. This ROD documents the decision of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) based on information contained in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released to the public on July 11, 2006.

The Decision

The Service has selected Alternative E, the preferred alternative, as described in the Final EIS, as the CCP for the Refuge, with one modification.

The modification involves an area west of the Rieck's Lake area of Pool 4 in the area between Highway 35 and the railroad tracks. A major portion of this area is currently a Waterfowl Hunting Closed Area (215 acres) and it will remain closed with no change to the existing boundary. However, this 215 acres will be designated a No Hunting Zone to avoid impacts to persons using the Buffalo River Access, access to the main river, and anglers desiring to fish in the area. This modification will be reflected in the maps and tables that will accompany the CCP when printed.

Alternatives Considered

Four alternatives and their consequences were developed for the Draft EIS and CCP released May 1, 2005 for a 120-day comment period. A fifth alternative, Alternative E, was developed based on extensive public input and comment and released as a Supplement to the Draft EIS on December 5, 2005 for a 90-day comment period.

Several elements were common to all alternatives and included interagency coordination, agency access to restricted areas, National Environmental Policy Act compliance

for projects, protection of threatened and endangered species and cultural resources, fire management, a continuation of general water-based recreation, mosquito management in the event of a health emergency, fish and wildlife disease control, and the fostering of volunteers and friends groups.

A brief summary of the alternatives considered follows. A longer summary and complete description is included in the Final EIS, Chapter 2.

Alternative A. No Action or Current Direction

Continue current level of effort on fish and wildlife and habitat management. Public use programs would remain virtually unchanged.

Alternative B. Wildlife Focus

Increase level of effort on fish and wildlife and habitat management. Some public use opportunities and programs would remain the same, others reduced in favor of wildlife and habitat protection.

Alternative C. Public Use Focus

Increase level of effort on public use opportunities and programs. Continue current level of effort on many fish and wildlife and habitat management activities, and decrease effort on others in favor of public use.

Alternative D. Wildlife and Integrated Public Use Focus

Increase level of effort on fish and wildlife and habitat management. Take a more proactive approach to public use management to ensure a diversity of opportunities for a broad spectrum of users, both for wildlife-dependent uses and traditional and appropriate non-wildlife-dependent uses.

Alternative E: Modified Wildlife and Integrated Public Use Focus (Preferred Alternative)

Increase level of effort on fish and wildlife and habitat management. Take a proactive but balanced approach to public use management to ensure a diversity of opportunities for a broad

spectrum of users, both for wildlife-dependent uses and traditional and appropriate non-wildlife-dependent uses.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

Based on a review of the environmental consequences of each alternative (Chapter 4, Final EIS), Alternative E is judged to be the environmentally preferable alternative. All alternatives have positive physical and biological environmental consequences since all contain similar emphasis on improving water quality and increasing habitat quantity and quality. However, Alternatives D and E also address a variety of social, economic, and cultural issues in balancing the needs of fish and wildlife and the needs of people on a refuge located on an important navigation and recreational corridor. Alternative E is most positive in terms of addressing these human environmental issues since it reflects input received during scores of public meetings and workshops, and through several thousand written comments.

Basis for Decision

Alternative E meets identified needs.

Chapter 1 of the Final EIS identified three broad needs: a. contribute to the Refuge System mission, b. fulfill the purposes of the Refuge, and c. achieve Refuge goals for landscape conservation, environmental health, wildlife and habitat health, and recreation. Alternative E meets these needs through the most balanced and integrated approach compared to the other alternatives.

Alternative E best reflects agency and public comment.

Alternative E reflects substantive changes to earlier preferred alternatives, Alternative D and draft Alternative E. These changes were in response to agency review and comment, 30 public meetings and workshops on the draft documents, and more than 3,000 written comments. Alternative E in the Final EIS is thus the alternative most responsive to agency and public comment and suggestion.

Alternative E has long-term benefits to the natural and human environment.

Alternative E identifies objectives and strategies for completing land acquisition, habitat improvements, water quality improvements, invasive species control, fish and wildlife monitoring, forest management, and providing targeted resting and feeding areas for waterfowl and other wildlife. These measures will help ensure the biological health of the Refuge beyond the 15-year scope of the CCP. Alternative E also strikes a balance between the needs of fish and wildlife and needs of people for recreation through reasonable restrictions on a portion of the Refuge. This approach may prove more sustainable, both in terms of resource values and economic values, than the status quo, and help sustain the greatest diversity of opportunity for the greatest number of people.

Alternative E is based on best available science.

Alternative E reflects a large body of scientific and management knowledge and experience on the river environment and the needs of the system to improve and thrive. It reflects numerous studies and reports from the U.S. Geological Survey, states, interagency teams, and Refuge-specific monitoring and studies. Changes in public use programs reflect numerous studies on wildlife and human interaction and disturbance, and the latest thinking in recreation management.

Alternative E ensures compatibility of uses.

The Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 requires that all uses on a national wildlife refuge must be compatible with the purposes of the refuge and the mission of the Refuge System. Alternative E, with its various stipulations for certain uses, ensures that these uses remain compatible.

Alternative E ensures abundant opportunity for all users.

All current recreational uses (e.g. hunting, fishing, observation and photography, interpretation and environmental education) and wildlife-dependent economic uses (e.g. commercial fishing, guiding, fishing

tournaments, and trapping) will continue and opportunities will remain abundant in terms of amount of land and water available and seasons of use. Adjustments in time, space and period of use will help ensure the highest quality experience for the greatest number of users, and ensure each use remains compatible.

Alternative E will have a positive economic impact.

Recreation is the main economic driver on the Refuge and Alternative E will continue to have a positive economic impact since all current public use opportunities will continue, and are expected to grow, even though means, timing, and location of recreation will change in some areas to protect wildlife, habitat, and the recreation experience. In the long-term, providing for a greater diversity of recreational opportunities should strengthen local and regional economies.

Alternative E will increase the capacity of the Refuge to meet its purposes and mission of the Refuge System.

Alternative E identifies staffing needs tied to objectives and strategies to increase the capacity of the Refuge to meet its purpose and the Refuge System mission. Alternative E also addresses infrastructure needs for effective and efficient administration and management of the Refuge while serving the needs of the visiting public.

Alternative E will enhance partnerships and coordination.

Although differences of opinion will remain, Alternative E is the strongest alternative in terms of fostering cooperative conservation. Virtually every objective and associated strategy in Alternative E stresses a cooperative approach with the states, Corps of Engineers, and the public.

Public Comments on Final EIS

The Final EIS and CCP was released to the public on July 11, 2006. The Environmental Protection Agency published its notice of receipt on July 21, 2006 and established August 21, 2006 as the end of the 30-day waiting period.

During the waiting period, 50 written comments were received. These comments were from individuals (37), conservation organizations (8), agencies (1 – Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources), and elected officials (4 with 1 letter signed by 9 Wisconsin legislators). Most comments were generally opposed to Alternative E in some manner by raising specific issues or concerns, including concerns with the planning process or future implementation. Of the 15 comments stating a preference for an alternative, 11 preferred Alternative E and 4 preferred Alternative A.

With one exception, the comments did not raise any issues not addressed in the Final EIS, and the comments did not result in changes to the analysis of environmental consequences or affect the Service's response to similar comments in the Final EIS.

The exception was a comment requesting retention of the Waterfowl Hunting Closed Area near Rieck's Lake, Pool 4, due to its proximity to residences, school bus stop locations, and a marina. This comment provided new information and resulted in a change to Alternative E as reflected in the decision section.

All written comments received during the waiting period were assigned a log number, summarized and recorded on a master electronic file, and then placed in a three-ring binder. These comments or the summary are available for review at the Refuge headquarters in Winona, Minnesota.

Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm

Public concerns, potential impacts, and measures and stipulations to mitigate impacts are addressed in various sections of the Final EIS. Alternative E contains many changes from other and/or earlier alternatives to address public concerns. A total of 17 major changes were made to Alternative E in the Final EIS to mitigate public and agency concerns. Examples include changes to Waterfowl Hunting Closed Area boundaries, changes in effective dates to

minimize impact to certain users, changes to boundaries of Slow, No Wake Areas based on comment, and delayed implementation to mitigate public concerns and/or allow additional time for public input.

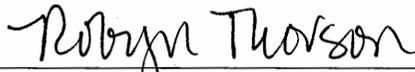
Since the focus of the CCP is the improvement of the Refuge environment, there is little mitigation for physical environmental impacts. Also, many objectives in the CCP are programmatic in nature and local impacts unknown. Thus, mitigation for any project-specific impacts will be identified during detailed project planning and design. This process was outlined in Chapter 2, Elements Common to All Alternatives, in the Final EIS. In addition, a Biological Assessment was prepared to address any impacts to federally-listed threatened or endangered species. This assessment calls for a tiered approach, whereby impacts and mitigation will be handled on a project-specific basis when project scope and design is articulated. The biological assessment concluded that implementation of Alternative E is not likely to appreciably reduce the survival and recovery of listed species, and on the contrary, the intent is to perpetuate viable populations of these species.

Compatibility determinations were prepared for all uses identified in Alternative E, and these determinations (Appendix H of Draft EIS/CCP and updated versions on the planning website) contain stipulations to avoid, minimize, or mitigate any environmental impacts from these uses and associated facilities.

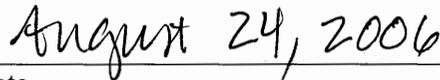
The Refuge Manager and District Managers will be responsible for ensuring that monitoring and stipulations identified in the CCP are completed or followed. The implementation section of the CCP (Appendix L of Final EIS) contains additional information on monitoring and periodic plan review.

For more information

The Final EIS/CCP is on the web at <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/uppermiss>; or available at 58 libraries in communities along the Refuge; at Refuge Headquarters, 51 East Fourth Street, Winona, Minnesota 55987; and at Refuge District Offices in Winona, Minnesota; La Crosse, Wisconsin; McGregor, Iowa; and Savanna, Illinois. A copy of this Record of Decision will be made available on the website and at offices above. For additional information, call the Refuge at (507) 452-4232.



Robyn Thorson
Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Date