# Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

*North Dakota Wetland Management Districts*

**August 2008**

**Prepared by**

*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Arrowwood Wetland Management District
Audubon Wetland Management District
Chase Lake Wetland Management District
Crosby Wetland Management District
Devils Lake Wetland Management District
J. Clark Salyer Wetland Management District
Kulm Wetland Management District
Lostwood Wetland Management District
Valley City Wetland Management District

*and*

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **Administration Act** | National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 |
| **APHIS** | Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service |
| **CCP** | comprehensive conservation plan |
| **CFR** | *Code of Federal Regulations* |
| **cfs** | cubic feet per second |
| **CWCS** | comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy |
| **CWD** | chronic wasting disease |
| **district** | wetland management district |
| **DNC** | dense nesting cover |
| **DOI** | U.S. Department of the Interior |
| **EA** | environmental assessment |
| **EO** | executive order |
| **FmHA** | Farmers Home Administration |
| **FMP** | fire management plan |
| **FTE** | full-time equivalent |
| **GIS** | geographic information system |
| **gpm** | gallons per minute |
| **GPS** | global positioning system |
| **GS** | general schedule (employment) |
| **HAPET** | Habitat and Population Evaluation Team |
| **HPAI** | highly pathogenic avian influenza |
| **Improvement Act** | National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 |
| **IPM** | integrated pest management |
| **ISST** | invasive species strike team |
| **NABCI** | North American Bird Conservation Initiative |
| **NAWCA** | North American Wetlands Conservation Act |
| **ND** | North Dakota |
| **NDGF** | North Dakota Game and Fish Department |
| **NEPA** | National Environmental Policy Act |
| **NHPA** | National Historic Preservation Act |
| **NRCS** | Natural Resources Conservation Service |
| **PIF** | Partners in Flight program |
| **PL** | public law |
| **PPJV** | Prairie Pothole Joint Venture |
| **RAPP** | Refuge Annual Performance Plan |
| **Reclamation** | Bureau of Reclamation |
| **Refuge System** | National Wildlife Refuge System |
| **region 6** | Mountain-Prairie Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service |
| **RLGIS** | refuge lands geographic information system |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Service** | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service |
| **SWG** | State Wildlife Grant |
| **USC** | United States Code |
| **USDA** | U.S. Department of Agriculture |
| **USFWS** | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service |
| **USGS** | U.S. Geological Survey |
| **VOR** | visual obstruction reading |
| **WDA** | wildlife development area |
| **WG** | wage grade (employment) |
| **WMD** | wetland management district |
| **WPA** | waterfowl production area |
| **WUI** | wildland–urban interface |

# Summary

USFWS

*Blue-winged teal nest within the uplands in district lands.*

This is a summary of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment for nine of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's wetland management districts in North Dakota: Arrowwood, Audubon, Chase Lake, Crosby, Devils Lake, J. Clark Salyer, Kulm, Lostwood, and Valley City.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a comprehensive conservation plan by 2012 for each wetland management district. Chapter 6 contains the draft plan for the nine districts; the final plan is scheduled for completion in 2008 and will guide management of the districts for the next 15 years.

The prairies of North Dakota have become an ecological treasure of biological importance for waterfowl and other migratory birds. The prairie potholes of North Dakota support a wide diversity of wildlife, but they are most famous for their role in waterfowl production. Complexes of wetlands scattered throughout the nine wetland management districts attract breeding duck pairs.

## The Districts

A wetland management district provides oversight for all of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's small land tracts in a multicounty area. These nine wetland management districts in North Dakota manage 1,208 waterfowl production areas, tens of thousands of conservation easements, and 37 wildlife development areas in 34 counties. These district lands, totaling 1,125,084 acres, are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, a network of lands set aside to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitat.

(Note: Management of the limited-interest refuge is covered by a separate plan—"Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the North Dakota Limited-interest Refuges.")

## The Planning Process

The planning process for a comprehensive conservation plan consists of a series of steps including environmental analysis. Public and partner involvement are encouraged and valued throughout the process. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's planning team developed management alternatives to meet the purposes, vision, and goals of the districts.

### Issues

Public scoping for the wetland management districts that the Service started in 2007, along with district information, identified five major areas of concern about management of the districts.

### *Wetland and Upland Habitats*

Aggressive management of wetland and upland habitats must be conducted to achieve goals and objectives. Habitat protection needs to be evaluated through a priority system so that different means of protection, through either fee title or conservation easement, can be evaluated.

### *Invasive Plants*

Previously farmed uplands have since been restored, the bulk of which have the native vegetation character but are compromised by invading species such as leafy spurge, Canada thistle, absinth wormwood, Kentucky bluegrass, and smooth brome. These invasive plants substantially diminish the suitability of upland habitat for many native wildlife species. Western snowberry and silverberry are native shrubs that have greatly expanded their coverage in some areas where natural regimes of fire and grazing have been altered.

### *Energy Development*

The physical structure of wind power turbines has unknown effects on birds. In addition, it is unknown if wind power would affect the potential for future habitat protection through conservation easements. Effects on waterfowl production areas—including salt-water contamination, filling of wetlands, and road development—have been increasing as additional oil and gas exploration takes place in North Dakota.

### *Prairie Conversion*

The loss of native prairie is occurring at an alarming rate. Prairie is being converted for corn production to produce ethanol, which also has additional needs for irrigation water. An active role by the agricultural community, in partnership with conservation groups, would need to be taken to protect the federal Farm Bill and its conservation provisions.

### *Wildlife Management*

Threatened and endangered species, predators, and wildlife disease are issues for the districts.

Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

*The whooping crane is an endangered species.*

#### Threatened and Endangered Species

The piping plover is a threatened shorebird that occurs in small numbers on alkali wetlands in the Audubon, Crosby, and Lostwood wetland management districts. Endangered whooping cranes can be observed in the marshes across the districts. The primary issues related to threatened and endangered species are as follows: (1) monitoring populations and habitat use; and (2) providing essential habitat and developing conditions that promote increased recruitment or population protection.

#### Predator Management

Several species including red fox, striped skunk, and raccoon are found at higher than historical levels due to modifications of habitat. These species can adversely affect migratory bird populations. Woody vegetation provides habitat for predators and attracts forest-edge bird species that may displace grassland species.

#### Wildlife Disease

Wetland management districts in North Dakota have a history of botulism outbreaks. Success in combating botulism occurs at the expense of other resources.

### *Visitor Services*

Hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation are uses currently authorized on lands administered by the districts. Some of the commenting public would like to see more opportunities to participate in not only the six priority uses, but also in trapping.

### *Operations*

Funding and staff are not sufficient to fulfill the purposes and meet the goals of the districts. The Service's staff needs to identify and describe unfunded needs to be able to compete effectively for additional money from within the Service and from partners and other sources. District facilities need to be evaluated and upgraded.

### *Monitoring and Research*

Basic data about recruitment, mortality, and habitat use for a representative group of species must be collected and analyzed on a regular basis to make appropriate decisions that affect the habitats these species depend on. The use of the districts as a research field station could make valuable strides in development of new directions in management and expansion of the knowledge of field biologists.

## The Future of the Districts

The issues, along with resource conditions, were important considerations during the development of the vision and goals for the nine wetland management districts.

## Vision

*Wetland management districts conserve an important network of public and private wetland and upland habitat in North Dakota. This network preserves the integrity of the historical and vital resting and breeding grounds of North America's migratory waterfowl.*

*As part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, these lands benefit ducks, other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and resident wildlife.*

*The responsible management and protection of this expanding network requires adequate funding, dedicated personnel, and successful partnerships.*

*District communities and visitors value grasslands and marshes as a beneficial and important component of a diverse, healthy, and productive prairie landscape.*

*Current and future generations enjoy wildlife-dependent uses of these lands and partners, especially waterfowl hunters, actively support and encourage the districts' habitat conservation programs.*

## Goals

The following goals were developed to meet the vision for the districts.

### *Habitat and Wildlife Goal*

Protect, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity of grasslands and wetlands of the North Dakota Prairie Pothole Region. Contribute to the production and growth of continental waterfowl populations to meet the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Also, support healthy populations of other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other wildlife.

### *Monitoring and Research Goal*

Use science, monitoring, and applied research to advance the understanding of the Prairie Pothole Region and management within the North Dakota wetland management districts.

### *Cultural Resources Goal*

Identify and evaluate cultural resources in the North Dakota wetland management districts that are on Service-owned lands or are affected by Service undertakings. Protect resources determined to be significant and, when appropriate, interpret resources to connect staff, visitors, and communities to the area's past.

### *Visitor Services Goal*

Provide visitors with quality opportunities to enjoy hunting, fishing, trapping, and other compatible wildlife-dependent recreation on Service-owned lands and expand their knowledge and appreciation of the prairie landscape and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

### *Partnerships Goal*

A diverse network of partners joins with the North Dakota wetland management districts to support research; protect, restore, and enhance habitat; and foster awareness and appreciation of the prairie landscape.

### *Operations Goal*

Effectively employ staff, partnerships, and volunteers and secure adequate funding in support of the National Wildlife Refuge System's mission.

# Alternatives

The planning team developed the following three alternatives as management options to address the key issues.

## Alternative A—Current Management (No Action)

Under alternative A, funding, staff levels, and management activities at the districts would not change. Programs would follow the same direction, emphasis, and intensity as they do at present:

- The Service prioritizes management of wildlife habitat and associated species at the districts' WPAs into high, medium, and low areas. Only high-priority WPAs receive consistent management.
- District staffs conduct limited, issue-driven research and limited monitoring and inventory of birds and vegetation.
- The district staffs monitor all conservation easements; however, only the high-priority easement violations are consistently enforced.
- On a multiyear rotation among districts, the staffs conduct public use events and workshops with such groups as school districts, youth groups, and conservation groups.

## Alternative B—Moderately Enhanced Management (Proposed Action)

Under alternative B, wildlife habitat management would enhance wetlands and uplands, where warranted, on district lands:

- Management objectives for habitat types would be based on the habitat preferences of groups of target species such as waterfowl, migratory shorebirds, grassland birds, and threatened and endangered species.
- The district staffs would focus on high-priority tracts and medium-priority tracts. District staffs would carry out compatible techniques to enhance production of targeted migratory bird populations.
- The district staffs would expand existing environmental education and visitor services programs, with additional waterfowl emphases.
- The Service proposes, at a future date, (1) one new administration and visitor center facility each for Audubon and Kulm wetland management districts, and (2) one new visitor contact station each for Arrowwood, Devils Lake, Lostwood, and Valley City wetland management districts.

## Alternative C—Enhanced Management

Under alternative C, management by the district staffs would be more intensive and widespread, targeting native prairie and wetland habitat:

- As a priority, district staffs would seek out restoration projects that expand and return native grasslands to quality native prairie.
- This alternative would have potential for additional management options that address habitat requirements and needs of specific groups of water-dependent birds such as waterfowl and shorebirds.
- The staffs would develop new environmental education and visitor services programs.
- The Service proposes, at a future date, (1) one new administration and visitor center facility each for Audubon and Kulm wetland management districts, and (2) one new visitor contact station each for Arrowwood, Devils Lake, Lostwood, and Valley City wetland management districts.