

Planning Update

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve



The forest-wetland edge provides diverse cover for wildlife at the refuge.

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This planning update describes the progress the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has made in development of a comprehensive conservation plan for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve (refuge). The update includes information about how to comments on the draft plan.

The Refuge

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is a 1,675-acre national wildlife refuge located about 10 miles south of the city of Devils Lake, North Dakota, in Benson County.

The Service manages the refuge as part of the Devils Lake Wetland Management District. This refuge is one of only a few national game preserves that the Service administers as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is the most visited refuge in North Dakota with more than 60,000 visitors annually.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement

Act. This legislation provided clear guidance for the management of the Refuge System. To implement this guidance, the act also requires that, by 2012, the Service will have developed a comprehensive conservation plan for each national wildlife refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

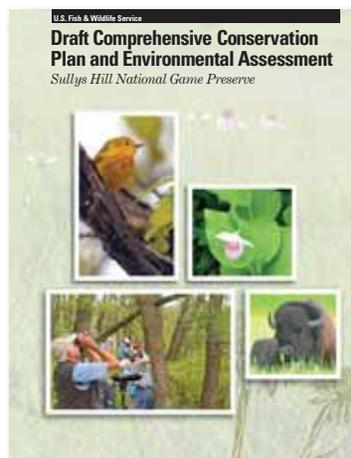
To meet this requirement, the Service has been preparing a comprehensive conservation plan for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve. The plan will guide management for all refuge programs. This is a “living” document that will be updated every 15 years.

An environmental assessment, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, accompanies the draft plan. This assessment describes three management alternatives considered for the refuge and their effects on the environment.

Draft Plan Available for Public Review

The Service has completed a draft plan for public review. The draft plan has a draft vision statement and six supporting goals.

To achieve the vision and goals, the Service considered three alternatives and the environmental consequences of each. The Service selected a proposed action, for which objectives and strategies were written—these represent the draft plan.



Draft Vision Statement

Overlooking North Dakota's largest natural lake and riding the tops of a glacial thrust block formation, Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is dressed in undulating native woodlands and prairie. Teddy Roosevelt's vision and broad community support are largely responsible for the successful conservation of these habitats, ensuring the preservation of the refuge's plains bison and Rocky Mountain elk while supporting migrating waves of warblers and other native bird species.

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is renowned as a regional conservation learning center—greeting families, students, and outdoor enthusiasts of all abilities. Children are able to learn about their natural world using all their senses, which fosters their own environmental ethics. Each visitor's experience not only enriches their personal lives, but instills a unique understanding and appreciation for preserving native prairie and wetland habitats, the natural resources of the Devils Lake Basin, and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System to preserve America's wildlife heritage.

Draft Goals and Alternatives



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The public can view informative displays at the education and visitor center.

Draft Goals

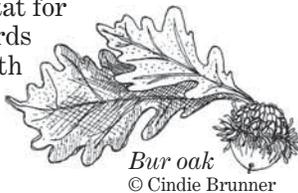
The Service developed the following goals to achieve the vision for the refuge.

Prairie Habitat Goal

Maintain prairie plant communities representative of the historical mixed-grass prairie that support healthy populations of grassland-dependent migratory birds in balance with bison, elk, and other indigenous wildlife.

Woodland Habitat Goal

Manage for healthy native woodlands of various age classes and structure to provide habitat for migratory birds in balance with bison, elk, and other indigenous wildlife.



Bur oak
© Cindie Brunner

Wildlife Population Management Goal

Carry out management practices that ensure healthy populations of Rocky Mountain elk, plains bison, and other indigenous wildlife species that exemplify the genetic integrity of historic prairie wildlife.

Environmental Education and Outreach Goal

Deliver quality, interactive, environmental education programming to regional schools, communities, organizations, and local governments to garner support and appreciation for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve, North Dakota's wetland and grassland resources, and the conservation role of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Visitor Services and Interpretation Goal

Provide captivating visitor services facilities and activities for visitors of all abilities—as well as community groups, youth groups, and the members of Spirit Lake Nation—that result in a greater understanding and support for the preservation of native habitats and landscapes of North Dakota's Prairie Pothole Region and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Protection and Maintenance Goal

Provide for the safety of staff, volunteers, and the visiting public while ensuring the protection and maintenance of refuge facilities, lands, and cultural resources.

Alternatives Considered

Alternatives A, B, and C present different ways to achieve the draft vision and goals for the refuge.

Alternative A (No Action)

Funding, staff levels, and management activities at the refuge would not change under alternative A.

Habitat and Wildlife

The Service would maintain the captive ungulates at historical levels: 25–35 bison, 20–30 elk, and 30–50 white-tailed deer. Refuge staff would continue to collect ungulate herd health information and share it with state and federal agencies.

Season-long grazing with infrequent prescribed fire would continue,

limiting forest regeneration and resulting in continued decline of native prairie. There would be limited habitat available for forest-interior breeding birds.

Visitor Services and Cultural Resources

The environmental education and interpretation program would continue to offer, on request, on-site conservation programs led by teachers and Service staff. Visitor use would be limited to the seasonal auto tour route, nature trails, and the education and visitor center, depending primarily on volunteer availability.

The Service would do cultural resource evaluations to comply with historic preservation laws.

Staff

The Service would assign one employee to the refuge.

Alternative B

There would be fewer white-tailed deer, and on-site education programs would increase.

Habitat and Wildlife

Habitat management would begin to address reduced forest regeneration by managing the uncontrolled browsing of bison, elk, and white-tailed deer within the “Big Game Forest” unit. The Service would maintain these ungulates per the “Fenced Animal Management Plan”: 25–40 bison, 15–25 elk, and 10–30 white-tailed deer.



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Bison calf.

The refuge would establish woodland restoration units totaling 80 acres using management tools such as exclusion fences. Refuge staff would also use other appropriate chemical,

biological, and mechanical techniques, such as prescribed fire, to enhance habitats for grassland and forest-interior breeding birds.

In addition, the Service would use fuels treatments, including prescribed fire and other mechanical means, to reduce hazardous fuels to minimize the threat to life and property. Refuge staff would treat invasive species and restore areas.

Visitor Services and Cultural Resources

The Service would provide visitors seasonal opportunities to view wildlife and learn about the refuge. There would be an increase in on-site educational programs for adults and children. These and other special events would be designed to garner support and appreciation for the refuge, North Dakota's wetland and grassland resources, and the conservation role of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuge's limited fishery would be used for educational programs only.

There would be an increased law enforcement presence, particularly during peak visitor-use days. The Service would complete cultural resource surveys in high-probability areas.

Staff

The Service would assign three full-time employees (including one law enforcement officer shared with Devils Lake Wetland Management District), along with one permanent-seasonal employee, to develop and conduct the refuge's biological, visitor service, law enforcement, and maintenance programs.

Alternative C (Proposed Action)

There would be fewer captive animals (bison, elk, and deer), and both on-site and off-site education programs would increase.

Habitat and Wildlife

Habitat management would address enhancement and restoration of native prairie and promotion of forest regeneration. The Service would maintain ungulate populations at levels lower than at present (≤ 20 bison, ≤ 18 elk, and ≤ 18 white-tailed deer)

to control the overgrazing and overbrowsing that has negatively affected refuge habitats. The ungulate herd health program would take a more active approach to disease surveillance and treatment than at present, including timely introduction of ungulates to maintain genetic health, particularly for the refuge's plains bison.

The Service would use management tools—exclusion fences and other appropriate methods such as chemical, biological, and mechanical techniques including prescribed fire—to restore and enhance habitat for forest-interior breeding birds and grassland-nesting birds. Selected hayland acres would be restored to native vegetation.



Refuge staff use prescribed fire as an important management tool at the refuge.

In addition, the Service would use fuels treatments, including prescribed fire or other mechanical means, to reduce hazardous fuels to minimize the threat to life and property. Refuge staff would treat invasive species and restore areas.

Visitor Services and Cultural Resources

There would be an increase in delivery of both on-site and off-site programming of environmental education programs for youth. In cooperation with local



A refuge trail provides a scenic opportunity for this photographer.

teachers, refuge staff would design a formal wetland and grassland conservation curriculum that targets grade levels and meets local and state standards. The refuge's limited fishery would be used for educational programs only. Emphasis would be placed on developing education partnerships with Spirit Lake Nation schools and agencies and recruiting students for careers in refuge management. Year-round patrols would improve the safety of visitors, staff, facilities, and wildlife at the refuge.

The Service, in partnership with other agencies and organizations, would complete a comprehensive cultural resource survey of the refuge.

Staff

The Service would assign four full-time employees to the refuge to expand, develop, and conduct biological, visitor service, law enforcement, and maintenance programs.



Bluestem.

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Public Participation

How to Provide Comments

We invite you to share your comments about the draft plan (proposed action) We will accept letters, faxes, and emails.

To be considered, all written comments must be emailed or postmarked by July 25, 2008.

Email: sullyshill@fws.gov

Postal Mail:

Laura King, Planning Team Leader
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
9754 143 ½ Avenue SE
Cayuga, ND 58013

Fax: 701/724 3683

Attn: Laura King, Planning Team Leader



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Golden eagle presentation.

Public Meeting

You may also wish to participate in our public meeting. There will be a short presentation on the draft plan, and then we will record any comments you would like to provide.

July 22, 2008
Sullys Hill Education and Visitor Center
Sullys Hill National Game Preserve
Fort Totten, ND
6:30–8:30 p.m.

For directions, please call 701/662 8611.

How to Request a Draft Plan

You may request a hard copy of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment from the Devils Lake Wetland Management District.

Telephone: 701/662 8611
Email: sullyshill@fws.gov

You may also view the draft plan online at www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/ccp.htm.

Next Steps

Final Steps in the Planning Process

1. There is a 30-day public review of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment, including a public meeting.
2. The Service revises the draft plan as needed based on public comments, and the regional director selects the preferred alternative, which guides development of the final plan.
3. A “notice of availability” published in the *Federal Register* lets the public know that the Service has completed and approved the final comprehensive conservation plan. The Service makes copies of the final plan available.
4. The Service begins implementation of the approved, final plan.

Contact Information

To learn more about the Sullys Hill National Game Preserve, please visit our website at www.fws.gov/sullyshill.

You may reach refuge staff by telephone at 701/662 8611.

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve
221 2nd Street West
Devils Lake, ND 58301

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

June 2008

