5 Implementation of the Proposed Action

Dave Menke/USFWS

Northern Pintail

Once a management alternative has been selected and finalized, the CCP has been approved, and the Service has notified the public of its decision, the implementation phase of the CCP process begins.

During the next 15 years, the objectives and strategies presented below would be realized. The final CCP will serve as the primary management document for the Souris River basin refuges until it is formally revised. The Service will carry out the final CCP with assistance from existing and new partner agencies and organizations, and the public.

Although a number of needs were identified during the planning process, there are no assurances that projects identified in this draft CCP will be fully or even partially funded. However, within every planning effort, there are opportunities to examine current funding and resources and to determine the best available uses based on a comprehensive evaluation of critical needs. If this were never completed, issues could go unresolved due to a lack of public and administrative understanding and support.

Determination of the Proposed Action (draft CCPs)

The planning team for the Souris River basin refuges developed four unique management alternatives based on the issues, concerns, and opportunities expressed during the scoping process (see chapter 1). The issues discussed throughout this EA and draft CCP were derived from the collective input of local citizens and communities, cooperating agencies, conservation organizations, and refuge staff.

In identifying the alternative for proposed action, the team determined probable effects of each alternative on five program areas: (1) habitats and wildlife populations; (2) cultural resources; (3) visitor services; (4) research and science; and (5) refuge operations. Effects on habitats and wildlife populations received stronger consideration than effects projected for other program areas. Below is a brief discussion of the determination of the proposed action alternative, as well as the other three alternatives, in ranked order of desirability.

1. Alternative B—Proposed Action, Draft CCP

Alternative B is ranked first of four alternatives as the proposed action (draft CCP) for best addressing the vision and goals for the Souris River basin refuges. The proposed action is fully developed under "Draft CCP" for each refuge, later in this chapter.

This alternative would emphasize restoration of ecological processes important in the evolution and maintenance of native plant communities and wildlife populations in the northern Great Plains. This ecological triage theme would require assessment of biological, economic, and political feasibilities associated with habitat restoration.

Specific criteria and objectives identify areas for restoration, with high-priority areas more likely restored than those more degraded. In recognition of inadequate resources to manage all wildlife habitats and populations occurring at the Souris River basin refuges, triage would require careful and deliberate consideration of management priorities (especially allocation of funding and staffing) relative to expected ecological resource benefits. The ecological triage theme would allow adjustments to management effort equal to changes in staff and funding.

Cultural resources would be protected when found. Some visitor services would likely decrease as some staff and funding shift to habitat restoration, while others would remain at current levels. Research and science would support habitat restoration.

2. Alternative D

Alternative D ranked second of four alternatives as the proposed action. This alternative ranked below the proposed action, alternative B, because (1) many habitats would likely decline; and (2) required funding would not likely be available.

This alternative would emphasize restoration of ecological processes important in the evolution and maintenance of native plant communities and wildlife populations in the northern Great Plains. Unlike alternative B, this alternative would require that all habitats be restored, regardless of biological, economic, or political feasibilities for restoration. Given current or modest increases in funding, many or all habitats would likely decline because limited resources would be too diluted to recover or restore any habitats.

Cultural resource, interpretation, environmental education, and research and science programs would be expanded in support of ecological restoration.

This alternative would require significant increases in staff and operational funding. Based on past and current budgets, such increases are unlikely.

3. Alternative C

Alternative C ranked third of four alternatives for desirability as the proposed action. This alternative ranked below the proposed action, alternative B, because (1) native plant communities and associated native wildlife other than waterfowl would be negatively affected; and (2) the variety of visitor services would be reduced.

From 1965 to 1995, management at the Souris River basin refuges emphasized waterfowl production over other programs, giving the team a good basis for evaluating potential effects associated with alternative B.

Past history suggests that management to maximize habitat use and nest survival for a narrow group of species, such as waterfowl, would have unforeseen negative consequences for plant and wildlife community ecology, health, and integrity.

Past waterfowl management emphasized tall and dense vegetation structure, with little regard to long-term changes in native plant communities. This resulted in unintended expansions of introduced cool-season grasses (for example, smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, and reed canarygrass) and tall woody plants (for example, aspen and willow). Ironically, despite short-term (20 years) increases in waterfowl production, long-term (50 years) waterfowl production would be expected to decline as biological integrity of native plant communities declined.

Cultural resources would be protected when found. Visitor services not oriented toward waterfowl-related activities would be reduced. Research and science would be specific to waterfowl population and habitat management.

4. Alternative A—Current Management

Alternative A ranked last of four alternatives because management issues would not be adequately addressed.

The CCP process offers an opportunity for the Souris River basin refuges to assess effects of past and current management. This timely and introspective analysis encouraged development, consideration, and selection of alternatives to current management that better address old and emerging management issues.

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

The planning team developed objectives in support of goals identified in chapter 2 to carry out the proposed action (alternative B) for management of the Souris River basin refuges, North Dakota. Strategies to achieve objectives are suggested. Rationale is included that supports goals, objectives, and strategies. Assumptions are discussed.

Biological goals and objectives emphasize management of plant communities as habitat for wildlife, especially migratory birds, and are organized by major habitat types represented at the three refuges. Goals and objectives are habitat-based rather than wildlife-based, because wildlife often respond to factors beyond control of local refuge management (for example, disease outbreaks or habitat conditions on important staging or wintering sites can affect populations of migratory birds). Furthermore, management practices (for example, fire, grazing, haying, and water level manipulation) are usually to plant communities rather than to wildlife populations. Habitat-based objectives emphasize monitoring of important vegetation attributes such as community composition and vegetation structure over time. In most cases, wildlife population responses to habitat changes are not monitored. Rather, site-specific inventories, applied research, and literature reviews allow for reasonable predictions of wildlife response to habitat management.

Management practices such as grazing, haying, and farming are compatible with the mission of the Service as applied on the Souris River basin refuges (approved compatibility determinations are found in appendixes L–N). In addition, appendix O describes the fire management program for the refuges.

Additional goals, objectives, and strategies are developed for visitor services, cultural resources, research and science, and refuge operations.

Management direction to achieve the vision for the Souris River basin refuges is presented separately for each refuge:

- Des Lacs NWR (pages 129–146)
- J. Clark Salyer NWR (pages 146–168)
- Upper Souris NWR (pages 168–189)

Tim Bowman/USFWS

Horned Lark

DRAFT CCP—*DES LACS NWR*

The following goals, objectives, and strategies for Des Lacs NWR outline the actions needed to achieve the vision of the Souris River basin refuges.

Drift Prairie Goal

Restore and maintain extensive examples of plant communities dominated by native flora characteristic of the mid-1800s drift prairie. Create the temporally and spatially dynamic habitat conditions that will attract most breeding bird species and other vertebrate fauna characteristic of that era.

Objective 1

By 1 year after CCP approval, use current vegetation inventory data and landscape considerations to characterize each habitat management unit with ≥40 acres of drift prairie as either high or low management priority. Reevaluate prioritization 15 years after CCP approval.

Strategy

— Apply multiple selection criteria.

CRITERIA FOR HIGH-PRIORITY UNITS

Floristic Composition. Vegetation is characterized by ≥20% mean frequency (percentage occurrence) of pristine, native herbaceous types (plant groups 41–43 and 46–48 [Grant et al. 2004b]; see appendix E) plus native herbaceous-dominated vegetation with Kentucky bluegrass as the main subdominant (plant group 53).

Floristic Potential. Vegetation is characterized by <20% mean frequency of smooth brome-dominated types (plant groups 61 and 62).

Landscape Context. The unit is contiguous with the best examples of prairie slope habitat (largest slopes with the most intact native plant composition or greatest availability to the public, or both)

or

is adjacent to other high-priority, drift prairie units and/or tracts of native prairie adjacent to the refuge under non-Service ownership (especially important if the unit has relatively little drift prairie area, that is, <40 acres).

CRITERIA FOR LOW-PRIORITY UNITS

Floristic Composition. Vegetation is characterized by <20% mean frequency of pristine, native herbaceous types (plant groups 41–43 and 46–48 [Grant et al. 2004b]) plus native herbaceous-dominated vegetation with Kentucky bluegrass as the main subdominant (plant group 53).