

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

*Bamforth National Wildlife Refuge
Hutton Lake National Wildlife Refuge
Mortenson Lake National Wildlife Refuge*

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

Administration Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966
ABC	American Bird Conservancy
BBS	breeding bird survey
BCR	Bird Conservation Regions
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CCP	comprehensive conservation plan
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
cfs	cubic feet per second
CRP	conservation reserve program
CWCS	comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy
DNC	dense nesting cover
DU	Ducks Unlimited
EA	environmental assessment
EO	executive order
EPA	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
FMP	fire management plan
FONSI	finding of no significant impact
FTE	full-time equivalent
GIS	geographic information system
GPS	global positioning system
GS	general schedule (employment)
HAPET	Habitat and Population Evaluation Team
HMP	habitat management plan
IMPROVE	interagency monitoring of protected visual environments
Improvement Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
LWCF	Land and Water Conservation Fund
LPP	land protection plan
NABCI	North American Bird Conservation Initiative
NAWCA	North American Wetlands Conservation Act
NAWMP	North American Waterfowl Management Plan
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NOI	notice of intent

NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
NWI	national wetland inventory
NWR	national wildlife refuge
NWRS	National Wildlife Refuge System
PFW	Partners for Fish and Wildlife
PL	public law
PPJV	Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
PPR	prairie pothole region
Refuge System	National Wildlife Refuge System
region 6	Mountain–Prairie Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
RONs	Refuge Operating Needs System
SAMMS	Service Asset Maintenance Management System
Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
SUP	special use permit
SWG	state wildlife grant
TMDL	total maximum daily load
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
UGHEP	upland gamebird habitat enhancement program
USACE	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
WG	wage grade (employment)
WHIP	wildlife habitat incentive program
WPA	waterfowl production area
WMD	wetland management district
WUI	wildland–urban interface

Summary

This is a summary of the comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the Laramie Plains refuges in Albany County, Wyoming. The Laramie Plains refuges include Bamforth National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Hutton Lake NWR, and Mortenson Lake NWR. This plan, approved in 2007, will guide management of the refuges for the next 15 years.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to develop a comprehensive conservation plan by 2012 for each national wildlife refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System).

THE REFUGES

The Laramie Plains refuges are managed by Service staff headquartered at the Arapaho NWR near Walden, Colorado. All three refuges are located within 15 miles of the town of Laramie, Wyoming.

Laramie is positioned in a high plains basin ecosystem known as the Laramie Basin. The shallow depressions of the basin, within the relatively flat topography of the region, support wetland complexes that are unique to the area. These wetland complexes provide resting, nesting, and breeding areas for migratory birds in the semiarid environment.

In the early 1930s, J. Clark Salyer III was charged with identifying areas to protect as national wildlife refuges for migratory birds. He surveyed the area around Laramie and selected two locations as national wildlife refuges for migratory birds. Bamforth NWR and Hutton Lake NWR were established by Executive Orders in 1932, within one day of each other.

Bamforth NWR comprises three separate parcels with private or state lands between them. The 1,166-acre refuge contains Bamforth Lake, but most of the lake falls outside the refuge boundary. No public use is allowed on Bamforth NWR.

Hutton Lake NWR consists of 1,928 acres and supports approximately 2,000 visits over the course of a year, mostly from March through October. Wildlife viewing opportunities and refuge access are limited from November through February due to frozen ponds and cold, snowy weather.

Mortenson Lake NWR was established in 1993 to protect the Wyoming toad's last known population.

The Wyoming toad was listed as an endangered species in 1984. Physical features of 1,968-acre refuge include Mortenson Lake, Soda Lake, and Gibbs Pond. Habitat types include open water, wetlands, wet meadow, grassland, sagebrush, and greasewood communities. No public use is currently allowed on the refuge to prevent potential adverse impact on the Wyoming toad.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The CCP process consisted of a series of steps including environmental analysis. Public and partner involvement were encouraged and valued throughout the process. Management alternatives were developed to meet the purposes, vision, and goals of the refuges. Implementation of this CCP will be monitored throughout its 15-year effective period.



Refuge habitats include wet meadows and grasslands.

ISSUES

Public scoping for the Laramie Plains refuges initiated in 2006, along with refuge information, identified 10 major areas of concern regarding management of the refuges.

Refuge Uses

Refuge uses (grazing, recreation, transmission lines) need to be evaluated to ensure existing and proposed uses are compatible with the purpose of the refuges and mission of the Refuge System. Over time, with minimal staff presence, refuge uses have not been actively evaluated. Through the development of this CCP, refuge uses and management activities will be evaluated to ensure the best, most informed decisions are made for proper management of refuge lands.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Water Resources

Water and water availability are vital in semiarid regions. The limited water rights for these refuges can result in dry spring conditions and poor wildlife habitat for trust species. Acquiring additional water rights would enable the Service to consistently provide high-quality spring migration and nesting habitat for trust species. The Service needs to research the availability and feasibility of obtaining additional water rights for the refuges.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Invasive Species

Invasive species are a threat to quality habitat. If not contained early, they can also drain resources. Though the refuges do not have significant invasive species issues, vigilance is required. Tamarisk has been identified and managed at Hutton Lake NWR, but an increase in monitoring, management, and control of it and other invasive species is needed.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Research and Science

The Service needs to obtain good baseline biological information for the refuges. Monitoring programs need to be implemented for species that use the refuges. The University of Wyoming, located within 15 miles of the refuges, could be a partner in gathering quality research data on the refuges.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Land Protection

Areas of concern center on the small size of the individual refuges and a lack of buffer zones. Each refuge is less than 2,000 acres in size, and the refuges' proximity to Laramie and urban growth in

the area pose a potential threat. (Mortenson Lake NWR may already be affected by septic systems from a home site overlooking the lake.) Refuge advocates want to increase protections through conservation easements or expansions through willing seller acquisitions to ensure the refuges are large enough to preserve wildlife qualities.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Partnerships

Cooperation with other agencies is needed to address issues of common concern. Opportunities for the public to assist in protection and management of the refuges should be identified and provided.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Staffing

The refuges should be actively managed by Service staff stationed in Wyoming. This issue was raised frequently in public meetings. The managing staff is headquartered at Arapaho NWR in Walden, Colorado, an hour's drive south of Laramie.

The remote location and the small number of staff assigned to Arapaho NWR prevent active, consistent oversight of the Laramie Plains refuges.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Lack of Information

Bamforth NWR has not been actively managed since its establishment in 1932. The refuge is not properly posted, fenced, or signed to indicate its status as a national wildlife refuge. The planning team struggled with a lack of information regarding the refuge's wildlife and habitat resources. The planning team discussed whether Bamforth NWR should maintain its national wildlife refuge status. The Service's region 6 divestiture model was used to evaluate the refuge. The evaluation indicated the refuge should remain in the Refuge System, mainly due to insufficient information. The Service needs to obtain a good understanding of the refuge resources before advocating divestiture or promoting public use. With the possibility of recommending divestiture of the refuge in the future, it would not be prudent to fund the development of the infrastructure needed to provide public use opportunities at this time. This plan strives to identify the resources and potential of the refuge to determine its appropriate role in the Refuge System.

(Applies only to Bamforth NWR.)

Public Use

The public would like Hutton Lake NWR to provide wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities when compatible with the purpose of the refuge and mission of the Refuge System. The low-key, quiet, undeveloped nature of the refuge should be maintained. Consideration should be given to

nonconsumptive public uses (wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, interpretation), as other nearby public lands provide for consumptive uses. A visitor services management plan needs to be developed to address issues such as access, circulation, and signage. Public awareness of the benefits of protecting breeding and nesting areas for birds should be raised.

(Applies only to Hutton Lake NWR.)

Endangered Species

Mortenson Lake NWR was established for the endangered Wyoming toad. Although the refuge staff participates on the Wyoming Toad Recovery Team, not having a staff member specifically assigned to the refuges has hindered management decisions and active, planned oversight of these lands for the Wyoming toad.

(Applies only to Mortenson Lake NWR.)

THE FUTURE OF THE REFUGES

The issues, along with resource conditions, were important considerations during the development of the vision and goals for the Laramie Plains refuges.

The Vision of the Refuges

The wetland complexes and uplands of the Laramie Plains refuges are important resource components of this semiarid region that provide key habitat for the Wyoming toad, migratory birds, and resident wildlife.

The refuges will be evaluated to direct management decisions to provide natural and enhanced habitat, thereby maximizing the unique potential of each refuge. Wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities will be evaluated for each refuge to determine potential, appropriate public use opportunities.

Goals

The following goals were developed to meet the vision of the Laramie Plains refuges.

Research and Science Goal

Conduct natural resource management using sound science and applied research to advance the understanding of refuge resources and natural resource function.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Partnerships Goal

Work with partners to determine the wildlife and habitat resources on the refuges, to maximize

wildlife habitat protection, and to increase understanding of wildlife needs, as well as the benefits wildlife offer to individuals and communities, on and off the refuges.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Cultural Resources Goal

Identify and protect cultural resources on the refuges.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Refuge Operations Goal

Secure and demonstrate the effective use of funding, staffing, and partnerships for the benefit of all resources in support of the refuges and the Refuge System.

(Applies to all three Laramie Plains refuges.)

Natural Resources Goal

Conduct baseline surveys to identify refuge resources and the role these resources serve in the Laramie Basin ecosystem and the Refuge System.

(Applies only to Bamforth NWR.)

Wetlands Goal

Manage refuge impoundments and other wetlands to create diverse habitat for wetland-dependent wildlife.

(Applies only to Hutton Lake NWR and Mortenson Lake NWR.)

Uplands Goal

Evaluate and manage shrub and/or grass dominated uplands for benefits to migratory birds (willet, horned lark), white-tailed prairie dogs, pronghorn, and other wildlife.

(Applies only to Hutton Lake NWR and Mortenson Lake NWR.)

Visitor Services Goal

Provide wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities to a diverse audience when the administration of these programs does not adversely affect habitat management objectives.

(Applies only to Hutton Lake NWR.)

Wyoming Toad Goal

In conjunction with the Wyoming Toad Recovery Team, manage refuge lands around Mortenson Lake and other areas on the refuge as necessary to protect, create, and manage habitat suitable for Wyoming toad recovery from endangered status.

(Applies only to Mortenson Lake NWR.)

Alternatives

The planning team developed the following three alternatives as management options for addressing the key issues.

Alternative A—Current Management (*No Action*)

This no-action alternative reflects the current management of the Laramie Plains refuges. It provides the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives.

Refuge habitats would continue to be minimally managed on an opportunistic schedule that may maintain—or most likely would result in further decline in—the diversity of vegetation and wildlife species. Only limited research and monitoring of refuge habitats and wildlife species would occur on the refuges.

Outreach, partnerships, and public uses (wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation) would continue at present minimal levels.

Alternative B—Enhanced Refuge Management (*Proposed Action*)

Alternative B is the Service's proposed action and basis for the draft comprehensive conservation plan.

Management activities under alternative B would be increased. Upland habitats would be evaluated and managed for the benefit of migratory bird

species. Refuge staff would research the availability of additional water rights for the refuges, and consider obtaining additional water rights, where appropriate, for the benefit of wetland-dependent wildlife. Monitoring and management of invasive species on the refuges would be increased. Wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities would be provided and enhanced at Hutton Lake NWR where compatible with refuge purposes.

With additional staffing, the Service would collect baseline biological information for wildlife and habitats. Efforts would be increased in the operations and maintenance of natural resources on the refuges and to maintain and develop partnerships that promote wildlife and habitat research and management.

Alternative C—Partnerships

Under Alternative C, refuge staff would rely on partnerships to achieve refuge goals and objectives. Refuge management activities would be increased and enhanced through the use of partnerships. Refuge staff would strive to accomplish refuge work through partnerships with others. An emphasis on adaptive management, including monitoring the effects of habitat management practices and using research results to direct ongoing management, would be a priority.

1 Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service, USFWS) has developed this draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) to provide a foundation for the management and use of the Laramie Plains refuges located in south east Wyoming near Laramie, Wyoming. The Laramie Plains refuges include Bamforth National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Hutton Lake NWR, and Mortenson Lake NWR (figure 1). When finalized, the CCP will serve as a working guide for management programs and actions over the next 15 years.

This draft CCP was developed in compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) and Part 602 (National Wildlife Refuge System Planning) of “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.” The actions described within this draft CCP and environmental assessment (EA) meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Compliance with the NEPA is being achieved through the involvement of the public.

The final CCP will specify the necessary actions to achieve the vision and purposes of the Laramie Plains refuges. Wildlife is the first priority in refuge management, and public use (wildlife-dependent recreation) is allowed and encouraged as long as it is compatible with the refuges’ purposes.

The draft CCP and the EA have been prepared by a planning team comprised of representatives from various Service programs (division of refuge planning, education and visitor services, ecological services), refuge staff, the Wyoming Toad Recovery Team, and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. In addition, the planning team incorporated public input. Public involvement and the planning process are described in section 1.6 below.

After reviewing a wide range of public comments and management needs, the planning team developed alternatives for management of the refuges. The team recommended one alternative to be the Service’s proposed action. This action addresses all substantive issues while determining how best to achieve the purpose of the refuges. The proposed action is the Service’s recommended course of action for management of the refuges. The proposed action is summarized in chapter 3, with its predicted effects described in chapter 5. The details of the proposed action compose the draft CCP (chapter 6).

1.1 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PLAN

The purpose of this draft CCP is to identify the role that the refuges will play in support of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), and to provide long-term guidance for management of refuge programs and activities. The CCP is needed

- to communicate with the public and other partners in efforts to carry out the mission of the Refuge System;
- to provide a clear statement of direction for management of the refuges;
- to provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of the Service’s management actions on and around the refuges;
- to ensure that the Service’s management actions are consistent with the mandates of the Improvement Act;
- to ensure that management of the refuges is consistent with federal, state, and county plans;
- to provide a basis for development of budget requests for the refuges’ operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

1.2 THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

The Service is the principal federal agency responsible for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation. The Refuge System is one of the Service’s major programs.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working with others, is to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Over a century ago, America’s fish and wildlife resources were declining at an alarming rate. Concerned citizens, scientists, and hunting and angling groups joined together to restore and

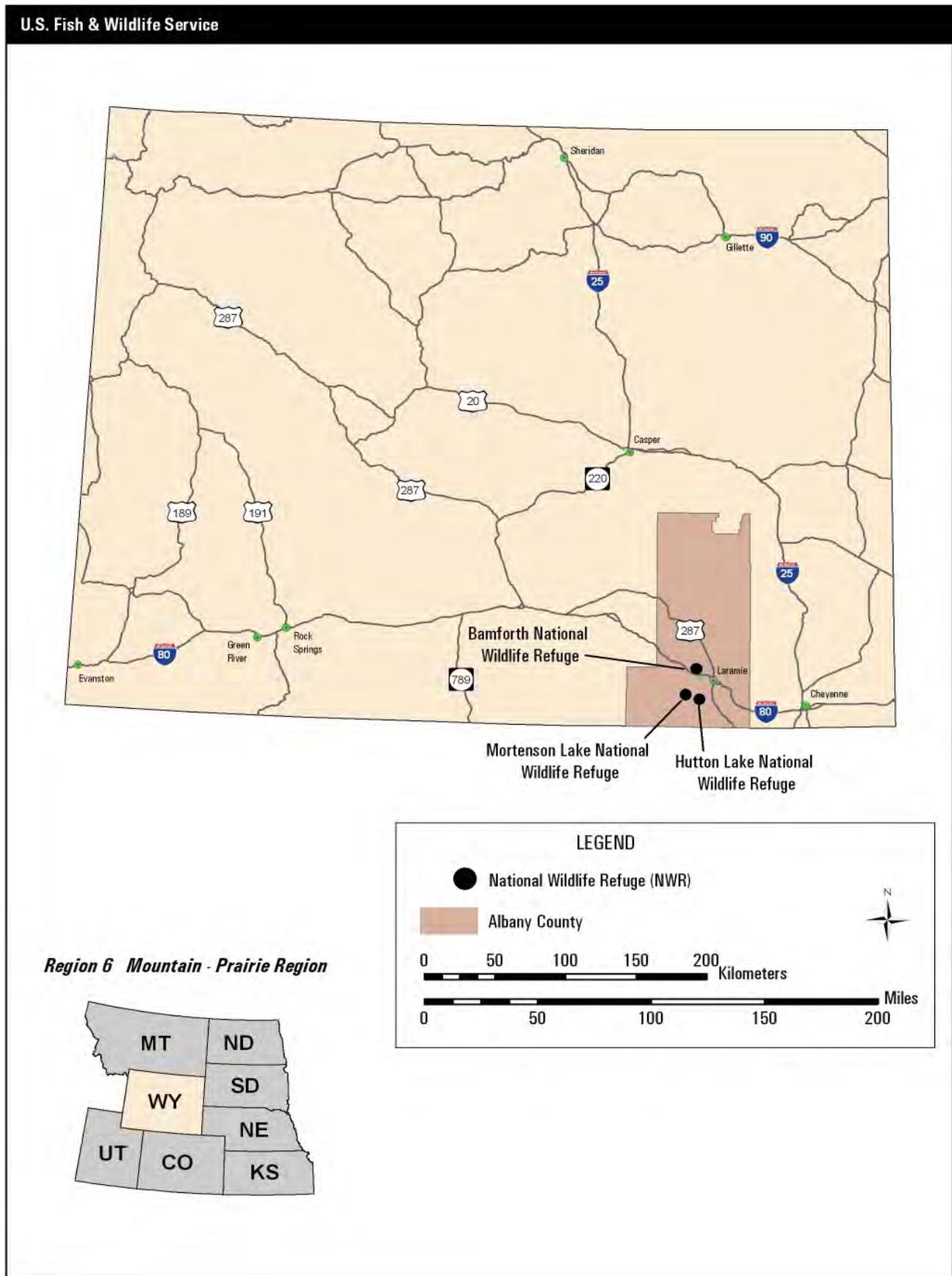


Figure 1. Vicinity map for Laramie Plains refuges, Wyoming.

sustain America's national wildlife heritage. This was the genesis of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Today, the Service enforces federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores vital wildlife habitat, protects and recovers endangered species, and helps other governments with conservation efforts. In addition, the Service administers a federal aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars to states for fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, and related programs across America.

National Wildlife Refuge System

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt designated the 5.5-acre Pelican Island in Florida as the nation's first wildlife refuge for the protection of brown pelicans and other native, nesting birds. This small but significant designation was the beginning of the Refuge System.

One hundred years later, the Refuge System has become the largest network of lands in the world specifically managed for wildlife, encompassing over 96 million acres within 546 refuges and over 3,000 small areas for waterfowl breeding and nesting. Today, there is at least one refuge in every state as well as Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In 1997, the Improvement Act established a clear mission for the Refuge System.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

The Improvement Act states that each national wildlife refuge (that is, each unit of the Refuge System) shall be managed

- to fulfill the mission of the Refuge System;
- to fulfill the individual purposes of each refuge;
- to consider the needs of fish and wildlife first;
- to fulfill the requirement of developing a CCP for each unit of the Refuge System and fully involve the public in the preparation of these plans;

- to maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System;
- to recognize that wildlife-dependent recreation activities including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation, are legitimate and priority public uses;
- to retain the authority of refuge managers to determine compatible public uses.

In addition to the mission for the Refuge System, the wildlife and habitat vision for each unit of the Refuge System stresses the following principles:

- Wildlife comes first.
- Ecosystems, biodiversity, and wilderness are vital concepts in refuge and district management.
- Habitats must be healthy.
- Growth of refuges and wetland management districts must be strategic.
- The Refuge System serves as a model for habitat management with broad participation from others.

Following passage of the Improvement Act, the Service immediately began to carry out the direction of the new legislation, including preparation of CCPs for all national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts. Consistent with the Improvement Act, the Service prepares all CCPs in conjunction with public involvement. Each refuge and each district is required to complete its CCP within the 15-year schedule (by 2012).

People and the Refuge System

The nation's fish and wildlife heritage contributes to the quality of American lives. Wildlife and wild places provide special opportunities to recreate, relax, and enjoy the natural world.

Whether through bird watching, fishing, hunting, photography, or other wildlife pursuits, wildlife recreation contributes millions of dollars to local economies. In 2002, approximately 35.5 million people visited the Refuge System, mostly to observe wildlife in their natural habitats. Visitors are most often accommodated through nature trails, auto tours, interpretive programs, and hunting and fishing opportunities. Significant economic benefits are being generated to the local communities that surround refuges and wetland management districts. Economists report that Refuge System visitors contribute more than \$792 million annually to local economies.

1.3 NATIONAL AND REGIONAL MANDATES

Refuge System units are managed to achieve the mission and goals of the Refuge System, along with the designated purpose of the refuges and districts (as described in establishing legislation, executive orders, or other establishing documents). Key concepts and guidance of the Refuge System are in the Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Administration Act), Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFRs), “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual,” and the Improvement Act.

The Improvement Act amends the Administration Act by providing a unifying mission for the Refuge System, a new process for determining compatible public uses on refuges and districts, and a requirement that each refuge and district be managed under a CCP. The Improvement Act states that wildlife conservation is the priority of Refuge System lands and that the Secretary of the Interior will ensure the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of refuge lands are maintained. Each refuge and district must be managed to fulfill the Refuge System’s mission and the specific purposes for which it was established. The Improvement Act requires the Service to monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge and district.

A detailed description of these and other laws and executive orders that may affect the CCP or the Service’s implementation of the CCP is in appendix A. Service policies on planning and day-to-day management of refuges and districts are in the “Refuge System Manual” and “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.”

1.4 REFUGE CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PLANS

The Laramie Plains refuges contribute to the conservation efforts described here.

Fulfilling the Promise

A 1999 report, “Fulfilling the Promise, The National Wildlife Refuge System” (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS] 1999), is the culmination of a yearlong process by teams of Service employees to evaluate the Refuge System nationwide. This report was the focus of the first national Refuge System conference in 1998 attended by refuge managers, other Service employees, and representatives from leading conservation organizations.

The report contains 42 recommendations packaged with three vision statements dealing with wildlife and habitat, people, and leadership. This CCP deals with all three of these major topics. The

planning team looked to the recommendations in the document for guidance during CCP planning.

Partners in Flight

The Partners in Flight program began in 1990 with the recognition of declining population levels of many migratory bird species. The challenge, according to the program, is managing human population growth while maintaining functional natural ecosystems. To meet this challenge, Partners in Flight worked to establish priorities for conservation efforts and identify land bird species and habitat types. Partners in Flight activity has resulted in 52 bird conservation plans covering the continental United States.

The primary goal of Partners in Flight is to provide for the long-term health of the bird life of North America. The first priority is to prevent the rarest species from going extinct, the second is to prevent uncommon species from descending into threatened status, and the third is to “keep common birds common.”

There are 58 physiographic areas, defined by similar physical geographic features, wholly or partially contained within the contiguous United States and several others wholly or partially in Alaska. The Laramie Plains refuges fall within physiographic area 86, the Wyoming Basin (see figure 2).

The Wyoming Basin is primarily in Wyoming but also extends into northern Colorado, southern Montana, and very small parts of northeast Utah and southeast Idaho. The area consists of broad intermountain basins interrupted by isolated hills and low mountains that merge to the south into a dissected plateau. The Wyoming Basin is primarily shrub–steppe habitat, dominated by sagebrush and shadscale, interspersed with areas of short-grass prairie. Higher elevations are in mountain shrub vegetation, with coniferous forest atop the highest areas. Priority bird populations and habitats of the Wyoming Basin include:

Shrub–Steppe

- Ferruginous hawk
- Prairie falcon
- Greater sage-grouse
- Cassin’s kingbird
- Sage thrasher
- Brewer’s sparrow
- Sage sparrow

Sagebrush Grasslands

- Swainson’s hawk
- Mountain plover
- McCowan’s longspur

Montane Shrub

Lewis's woodpecker
Virginia's warbler

Wetlands

American white pelican
Wilson's phalarope

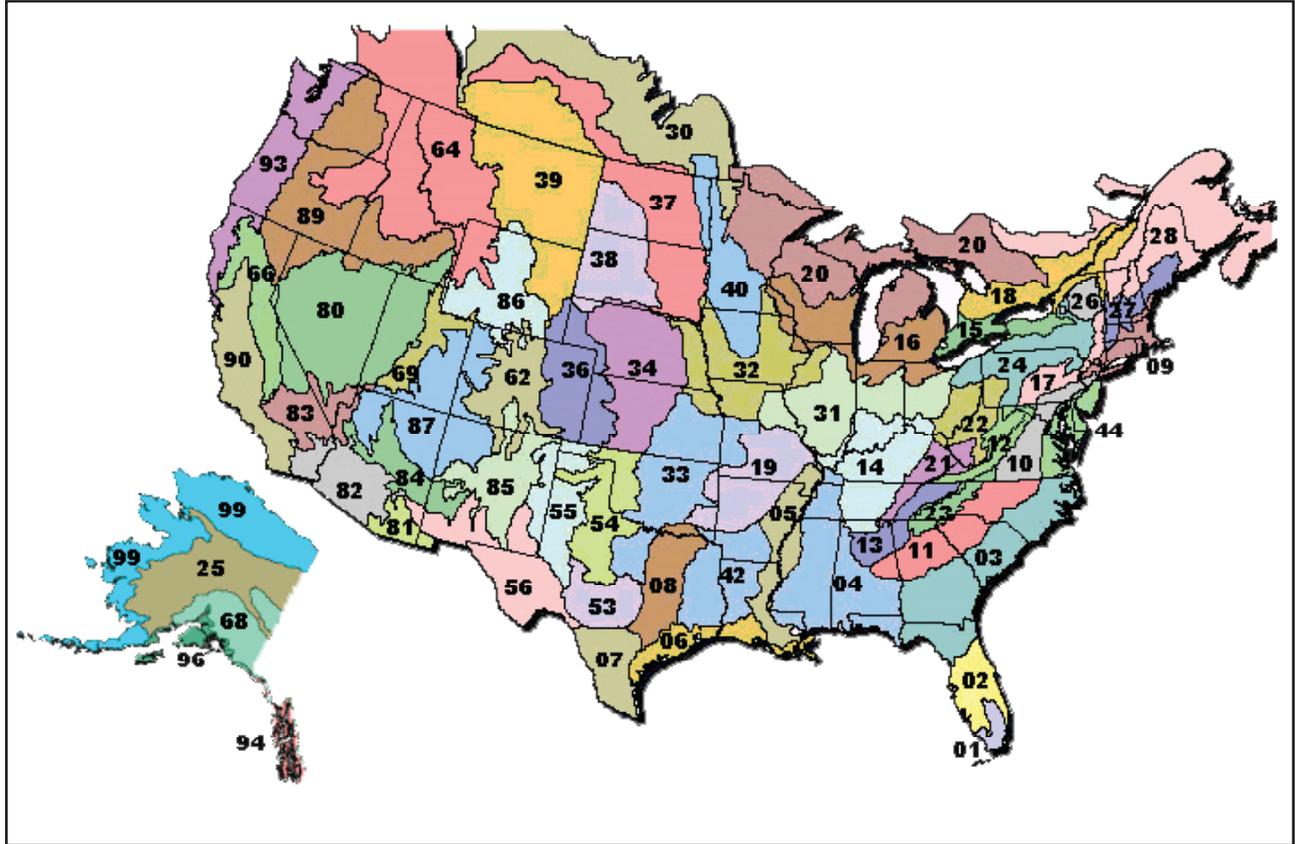


Figure 2. The Laramie Plains refuges are located in the Wyoming Basin, physiographic area 86.

Recovery Plans for Federally Listed Threatened or Endangered Species

Where federally listed threatened or endangered species occur at the Laramie Plains refuges, management goals and strategies in their respective recovery plans will be followed. The list of threatened or endangered species that occur at the refuges will change as species are listed or delisted, or as listed species are discovered on refuge lands.

The Wyoming Toad Recovery Plan (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS] 1991) is in effect at Mortenson Lake NWR, the only refuge covered by this CCP that provides habitat for the endangered Wyoming toad. Reports of Preble's meadow jumping mouse have been documented but not confirmed at Hutton Lake NWR, and no recent surveys have been conducted.

State Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy

Over the past several decades, documented declines of wildlife populations have occurred nationwide. Congress created the State Wildlife Grant (SWG) program in 2001. This program provides states and territories with federal dollars to support conservation aimed at preventing wildlife from becoming endangered and in need of protection under the Endangered Species Act. The SWG program represents an ambitious endeavor to take a proactive role in keeping species from becoming threatened or endangered in the future.

According to the SWG program, each state or territory and the District of Columbia must have been completed a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy (CWCS) by October 1, 2005, to receive future funding.

These strategies will help define an integrated approach to the stewardship of all wildlife species, with additional emphasis on species of concern and habitats at risk. The goal is to shift focus from single-species management and highly specialized individual efforts to a geographically based, landscape-oriented, fish and wildlife conservation effort. The Service approves CWCSs and administers SWG program funding.

The CWCS for the state of Wyoming was reviewed and information therein was used during the development of the CCP. Implementation of CCP habitat goals and objectives will support the goals and objectives of the CWCS.

1.5 ECOSYSTEM DESCRIPTION AND THREATS

The Laramie Plains refuges are located within the Platte–Kansas Rivers ecosystem, which includes almost all of Nebraska, southeast Wyoming, northeast Colorado, and northern Kansas (figure 3). The ecosystem is home to the Nebraska Sandhills, the largest sand dune complex in the western hemisphere. This area and many others provide vital habitat for numerous threatened and endangered wildlife and plant species.

The ecosystem spans from snow-capped, barren mountain peaks in Colorado to lowland riparian cottonwood forests along the Missouri River in eastern Nebraska and Kansas. The mountainous regions are predominately a mixture of coniferous forests comprised of Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, and subalpine fir. Pinyon pine, juniper woodlands, and aspen communities are also common throughout. At high elevation, alpine meadows and lakes, willow shrublands, and barren, rocky areas are frequently found. Forests generally transition into shrub communities dominated by sagebrush with short grasses and forbs in eastern Wyoming and western Nebraska. Farther to the east, trees give way to short-grass prairie dominated by buffalo grass, blue gramma, hairy gramma, and western wheatgrass. The short-grass prairie turns into mixed-grass prairie in central Nebraska and Kansas, due primarily to greater annual rainfall. Many federally listed endangered and threatened species including the bald eagle, piping plover, whooping crane, and Eskimo curlew are found within this ecosystem. Threats to the Platte Kansas Rivers ecosystem that require attention include overgrazing of land, invasive plants in the area, population growth and housing development, and groundwater and surface water depletion. To overcome these threats, the priorities for the ecosystem will be to ensure that natural, healthy ecological processes dominate and that economic development complements environmental protection.

Refuge Relationship

The Laramie Plains refuges lie within the Laramie Basin. The Laramie Basin is at an elevation of between 7,200 and 7,500 feet above sea level; it is a semiarid, intermountain basin characterized by a predominant vegetation of short grasses and sagebrush.

1.6 THE PLANNING PROCESS

This draft CCP and the EA for the Laramie Plains refuges are intended to comply with the Improvement Act and the NEPA as well as the implementing regulations of the acts. The Service issued its Refuge System planning policy in 2000, which established requirements and guidance for refuge and district plans—including CCPs and step-down management plans—to ensure that planning efforts comply with the Improvement Act. The planning policy identified several steps of the CCP and environmental analysis process (see figure 4).

Table 1 displays the planning process to date for this draft CCP and EA. The Service began the preplanning process in January 2006. The planning team consists of Service personnel from various divisions including refuges, planning, education and visitor services, ecological services, and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (see appendix B). During preplanning, the team developed a mailing list, internal issues, and a special qualities list. The planning team identified current refuge program status, compiled and analyzed relevant data, and determined the purpose of the refuges. Over the course of preplanning and scoping (the process of obtaining information from the public for input into the planning process), the planning team collected available information about the resources of the refuges and the surrounding areas. Chapter 4 summarizes this information.

The draft CCP (chapter 6) outlines long-term guidance for management decisions; sets forth proposed objectives and strategies to accomplish refuge purposes and meet goals; and identifies the Service's best estimate of future needs.

The draft CCP details program levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and, as such, are primarily for Service strategic planning purposes.

A notice of intent (NOI) to prepare the draft CCP and EA was published in the "Federal Register" on June 16, 2006. Public scoping began in May 2006 with public meetings in Casper and Laramie, Wyoming.

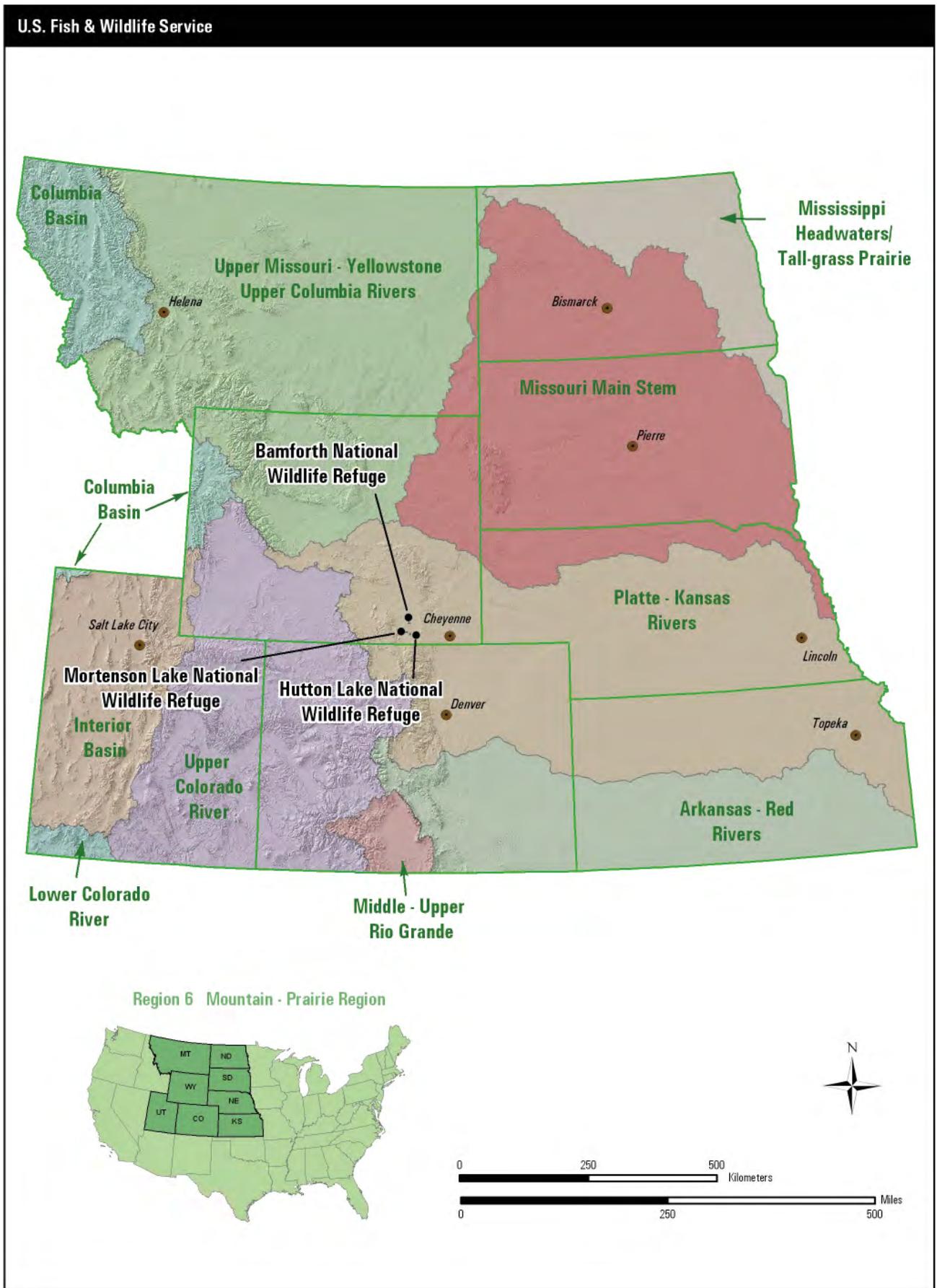


Figure 3. Platte–Kansas Rivers ecosystem.

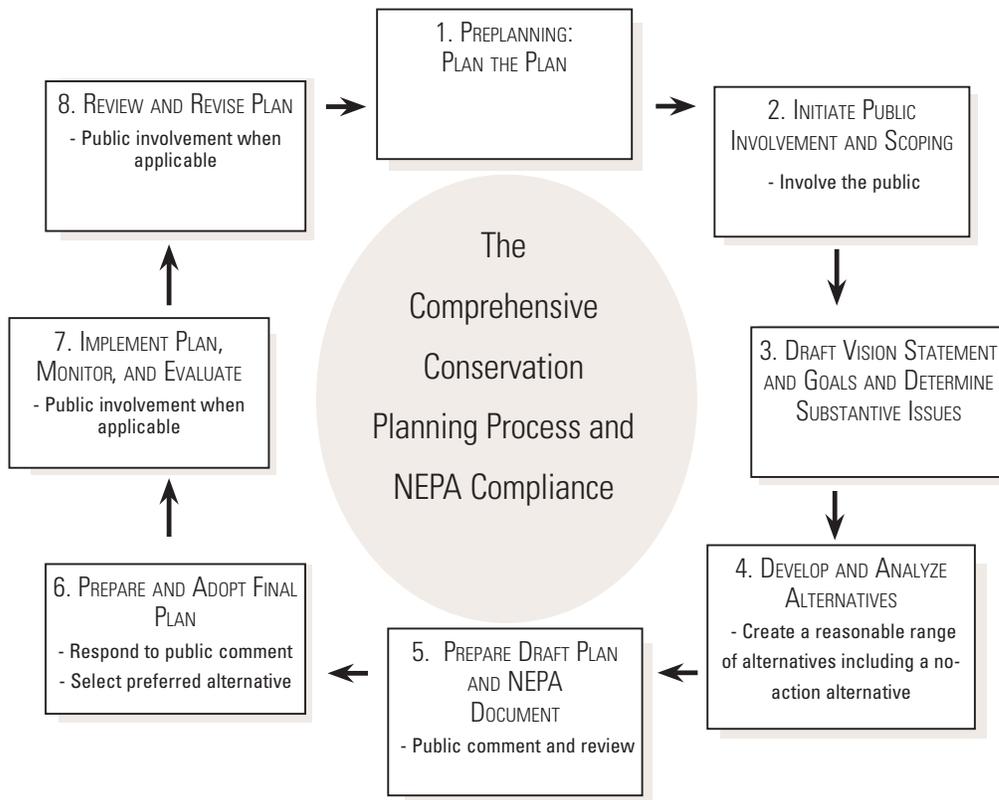


Figure 4. The planning process.

Table 1. Planning process summary for the Laramie Plains refuges, Wyoming.

Date	Event	Outcome
January–March 2006	Preplanning	CCP overview; established planning team; identified purpose of the refuges, history, and establishing authority; developed planning schedule and CCP mailing list.
March 23, 2006	Kickoff meeting	Toured refuges; conducted internal scoping by developing issues and qualities list for the refuges; identified biological and mapping needs; developed a vision statement for the refuges.
May 8, 2006	News release for public meeting sent to Wyoming media contacts	Notified public of opportunities for involvement in the CCP process.
May 24, 2006	Public meeting in Casper, WY	Opportunity for the public to learn about the CCP and offer suggestions on the scope of issues to be considered in the planning process.
May 25, 2006	Public meeting in Laramie, WY	Opportunity for the public to learn about the CCP and offer suggestions on the scope of issues to be considered in the planning process.
June 16, 2006	NOI (to prepare the CCP) published in the “Federal Register”	Notified the public of the intention to prepare a CCP and EA for the Laramie Plains refuges.
July 27, 2006	Goals and alternatives workshop	Goals developed; alternatives discussed.
September 2006	Planning update distributed to CCP mailing list	Planning update (describing CCP process and providing opportunity for public suggestions on the scope of issues to be considered in the planning process).
September 26, 2006	Environmental consequences workshop and identification of the proposed action	Reviewed the anticipated environmental consequences; identified alternative B as the proposed action.
October 20, 2006	Objectives workshop	Reviewed the proposed objectives, strategies, and rationale for implementation of the proposed action (draft CCP).
June 2007	Internal review of the draft CCP and EA	Received comments on the draft CCP and EA.
Summer 2007	Release of draft CCP and EA for public review	Draft CCP and EA presented to the public; received comments on the revised draft CCP and EA.
Summer 2007	Public meeting in Laramie, WY	Increased public understanding of the draft CCP and EA; received public comments about the draft CCP and EA.

Coordination with the Public

The Service held two public scoping meetings in May 2006 (see table 1 for details) announced by the local media. During the public meetings, a description of the CCP and NEPA process was provided. Participants were asked to provide suggestions on the scope of issues to be considered in the planning process, and comments were recorded and entered in the planning record. Attendees were encouraged to ask questions and offer comments; each attendee was given a comment form to submit additional thoughts or questions in writing.

Approximately 51 people attended the public meetings. Attendees included local citizens and members of Laramie Audubon Society, Wyoming Outdoor Council, and Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.

Written comments were due July 17, 2006. A total of 70 written comments were received throughout the scoping process. Input obtained from meetings and correspondence including email was considered in development of this draft CCP and EA.

A mailing list of more than 148 contacts includes private citizens; local, regional, and state government representatives and legislators; other federal agencies; and interested organizations (see appendix C).

In September 2006, the first planning update was sent to everyone on the mailing list. Information was provided on the history of the refuges and the CCP process, along with an invitation to share ideas regarding refuge management with the planning team. Each planning update included a comment form and postage-paid envelope to give the public an opportunity to provide written comments.

State Coordination

On January 27, 2006, an invitation letter to participate in the CCP process was sent by the Service's region 6 director to the director of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGF). Two representatives from the WGF are part of the CCP planning team. Local WGF wildlife biologists and the refuge staff had established excellent and ongoing working relations before starting the CCP process.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department is charged with providing "an adequate and flexible system for the control, management, protection, and regulation of all Wyoming wildlife." The WGF maintains 36 Wildlife Habitat Management Areas and 96 Public Access Areas, encompassing 410,000 acres of managed lands for wildlife habitat and public recreation opportunity. These lands contain 121 miles of stream easements and about 21,014 surface acres of lakes and reservoirs for public access.

Tribal Coordination

On October 17, 2006, five Native American tribal governments (Arapaho, Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Oglala Sioux, and Shoshone) were contacted through a letter signed by Service's region 6 director. With information about the upcoming CCP, the letter invited tribal recipients to serve on the planning team. Although Native American tribal governments did not express interest in participating on the planning team, the tribal governments remain on the CCP mailing list and will continue to receive CCP correspondence (planning updates, draft CCP and EA, final CCP) and will be given an opportunity to comment on the draft CCP and EA documents.

Results of Scoping

Table 1 summarizes all scoping activities. Comments collected from scoping meetings and correspondence, including comment forms, were used in the development of a final list of issues to be addressed in this draft CCP and EA.

The Service determined which alternatives could best address these issues. The planning process ensures that issues with the greatest effect on the refuges are resolved or given priority over the life of the final CCP. Identified issues, along with a discussion of effects on resources, are summarized in chapter 2.

In addition, the Service considered suggested changes to current refuge management presented by the public and other groups.