

Appendix M



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Public meeting for the draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan/Environmental Assessment release held at the University of New England, Biddeford, ME

Summary and Response to Public Comments

- Introduction
- Land Protection
- Management of Refuge Lands
- Public Use
- Support For a Specific Alternative

Introduction

We reviewed and considered all letters received during the public comment period for the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (CCP/EA). We originally released the draft CCP/EA for 30 days of public review from August 17 to September 18, 2006. Based on the analysis in the draft CCP/EA and our review of public comments, the Service has selected a preferred alternative. It basically includes all of alternative B, the Service-Proposed action in the draft CCP/EA, with a few modifications described in the discussion below. We will also issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). The FONSI establishes that our decision will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment and does not require preparation of an environmental impact statement.

We received numerous responses as oral testimony at public hearings or in written or electronic documents from local towns, conservation and recreational organizations, and local residents.

Seventeen people attended our public meeting on August 29, 2006 at the University of New England, Biddeford, Maine. Seventeen people attended the public meeting on September 7, 2006 at the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve in Wells, Maine.

The following discussion summarizes the substantive issues raised and our responses to them. Many of our responses refer to the full text copy of our draft CCP/EA, and indicate how the final CCP reflects our proposed changes. If you would like to view or download copies of the draft CCP/EA or final CCP, they are available online at <http://library.fws.gov/ccps.htm> or <http://rachelcarsonrefuge.fws.gov>. You may also request them on CD-ROM or in print by contacting the refuge headquarters.

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Land Protection

Comment: Several people wanted to know more about conservation easements: how they are structured, how they work, and what the Service buys.

Response: Conservation easements are among several essential tools for protecting the integrity of natural resources. Easements by nature must be flexible, and must be designed to fit the needs of both the landowner and the Service. We purchase conservation easements when that limited interest in the land will accomplish our management goals. Because our interest is the protection of wildlife habitat, the Service always purchases development rights as part of any conservation easement. There are no set ‘rules’ to conservation easements. Other rights are subject to landowner needs, and are usually negotiated.

Comment: If a landowner does not want trapping to occur, would that be a deal-breaker?

Response: No. We do plan to implement a furbearer management program to continue that use where it traditionally has been occurring. Although the proposed action is to continue furbearer trapping as we acquire lands in the expansion area, if the landowner was not allowing trapping before the sale, it would not be a traditional use, and the land would not be open to trapping when the Service acquired it, although we may permit fur management on those areas later, if we found it a compatible use.

Comment: Why grant a conservation easement to the Service versus a local land trust?

Response: That decision by landowners is personal, and is subject to their needs and desires. Conservation easements differ because of the circumstances of the landowners, e.g. their tax status. Our overarching interest in conservation easements is wildlife habitat protection. We will also have some land management requirements: the most common one is when fields are mowed. Because of our responsibilities for grassland nesting birds, we do not mow fields until about August 1. A land trust may have the same or different priorities on which they focus. The Service would not enter into a conservation easement without acquiring the development rights on that property.

Comment: Describe the research you have done to identify certain parcels for acquisition.

Response: Appendix B describes the process that we used in identifying priority resources of concern and developing habitat goals, objectives, and strategies to benefit those resources. We consider the 5,558 acres in our proposed land acquisition boundary nationally significant, under a set of biologically based criteria for identifying and mapping habitat for Service trust resources. Those biologically based criteria were developed by using the Gulf of Maine Habitat Suitability Model described on page A-6 of the draft CCP/EA.

Comment: What if a portion of my land is in the acquisition boundary?

Response: The Service listens to landowners. Let us say that a landowner has 75 percent of his land within the acquisition boundary and 25 percent outside, and wishes to sell all or nothing; the Service has the flexibility to purchase all the land even though some of it is outside the acquisition boundary. By regulation, the Service can add 10 percent of the approved acquisition boundary to the refuge, so this 5,558 acre expansion allows the flexibility of adding up to 556 acres.

Generally speaking, larger tracts are better for wildlife than smaller ones, just as intact systems are more beneficial than fragmented ones. Connectivity to conserved land and our partners' conservation efforts are strong motivating factors in our habitat protection plans.

Comment: How do you engage the local communities in the land acquisition process?

Response: The Service is developing its land acquisition plans in open view of the public and refuge neighbors. We sent copies of the proposed land protection plan to every landowner in the proposed expansion area, and sent copies of our comprehensive conservation plan to each of the eleven municipalities in the approved refuge boundary. We sent out hundreds of fact sheets and summaries of the plan, and sent notices to all the local media outlets. We met with the municipalities and discussed our proposed acquisitions. Our partners have been continuously involved in our habitat protection efforts for years. In the draft CCP/EA, chapter 3, goal 6, objective 6.1 commits the Service to working with landscape- or watershed-scale projects to benefit this area.

Comment: Are the areas of the new boundary expansion more populated than the areas you now take care of?

Response: No. The populations are the same, because the proposed boundary expansion area and our current existing refuge lands are all within the same towns. The only exception to that is the new proposed York Division, which is in the towns of York and Eliot, and those two towns have populations similar to the other towns in the refuge. This proposal will expand the number of municipalities with refuge ownership to 12.

Comment: On page 2–29 (Mousam River Division Map), is the proposed expansion (red highlighted area) a higher priority than the approved acquisition (larger black boundary)?

Response: No, they are both high priority. In fact, when the proposed expansion areas are approved, they will be part of the black areas.

Comment: Is the refuge also expanding its land acquisition priorities into the vernal pool area in Biddeford?

Response: Yes. That area is included in the proposed expansion areas in the Biddeford Pool Division.

Comment: I commend the refuge and Service staff who have created this comprehensive detailed management document and strongly urge wholehearted support of alternatives B and C. Among the most important is objective 6.1, "Landscape-Scale Conservation."

Response: Because natural resources do not organize themselves according to political boundaries, we agree that a larger landscape perspective is important. Therefore, the Service will continue to participate with conservation organizations such as the Mount A to the Sea Initiative, Saco Bay Partners, and the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve to achieve conservation goals. In addition, we will partner with other conservation organizations, such as land trusts and NGOs, in conserving land.

■ Management of Refuge Lands

Comment: Downsizing – how will this effect the land acquisition and management of the refuge?

Response: First, the land acquisition program is funded separately. We secure Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, Land and Water Conservation Fund and North American Wetland Conservation Act funds for purchasing land and conservation easements.

Currently, the budget is flat, and there is a great deal of competition for operational budgets in the federal government. Although we have planned for that, we will not accomplish the same things with fewer people. We have a work planning process that highlights specific priorities that the refuge will accomplish. This is a 15-year plan; just as conditions have changed during the 10 years we have been developing this plan, they will also change again before the year 2021. This plan represents the way we think the wildlife resources and public opportunities on the Rachel Carson refuge should be managed.

Comment: Do you have a volunteer program?

Response: Yes. Volunteers help with monitoring, surveys, and managing invasive species, and will help out again this year in planting cover for the New England cottontail.

Comment: What is the refuge doing about erosion on the Mousam River? The paths that fishermen use have tripled within this last year, and jet skis are running up and down the river. How is the refuge planning to study wetland dieback?

Response: Those are separate issues. The refuge is concerned about the condition of the marsh. The proposed alternative states the refuge will restore all refuge saltmarsh. The Mousam River is a state waterway. The regulations of the Maine Department of Conservation state that boaters (watercraft) are responsible for their wake. If a boater's wake is causing erosion along the river banks, he is in violation. The refuge works with the Maine Marine Patrol, and we will pass along your observations to the Marine Patrol.

Wetland dieback is a new phenomenon, and a mystery. The refuge salt marsh ecologist, Dr. Susan Adamowicz, has convened two workshops for salt marsh experts and the public to investigate that phenomenon. The fact is that no one knows what causes areas of salt marsh plants to die quickly—within one or two growing seasons. Currently, the refuge is surveying marshes between Newburyport, Massachusetts, and the Canadian border to determine the extent of the dieback, and will continue to participate in research to better understand its nature.

Comment: We do not feel that the Rachel Carson refuge should take on the responsibility of more property, as it is already unable to maintain its existing properties. The refuge owns Starbird Road in Scarborough, and it is in appalling condition.

Response: We do not own Starbird Road; it is a private road. We have a right-of-way on Starbird Road to access refuge lands. In addition to the refuge lands, there are many private homes on Starbird Road. Along with the other neighbors on the road, we will assist in its maintenance; however, we are under no obligation to maintain it by ourselves.

Comment: Is the decline of the New England Cottontail being caused by habitat loss or predation?

Response: The biggest problem is a decline in their preferred early successional habitat, including thickets, brush, and brambles. Those habitats have been fragmented by development in York and Cumberland counties. Another problem is predators that include fox, coyotes, fishers and raptors. To overcome those problems on the refuge, the CCP will facilitate the management of 1,715 acres of early successional habitat to help sustain Maine's population of New England cottontails.

Public Use

Comment: What is the cost to maintain trails?

Response: Volunteers and the Youth Conservation Corps built the 1-mile Carson Trail in 1989. It is a universally accessible, 4-foot-wide, compacted stone dust trail, resurfaced by the Maine Conservation Corps about 5 years ago at a cost of about \$12,000, with an additional cost of \$4,000 for re-landscaping and additional plantings. By agreement, the Saco Bay Trails association maintains the Ted Wells trail on the refuge in Old Orchard Beach. We work with the Town of Kennebunk on the Bridle Path. Other refuge trails are maintained by staff or the Youth Conservation Corps.

Comment: What plans do you have for ATVs?

Response: ATVs are not allowed on the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge.

Comment: Why are you starting a fee program?

Response: Recreational uses also require the maintenance, replacement, or repair of trails, observation platforms, parking areas, directional and interpretive or other signs, and the printing of brochures, trail guides, and maps. Visitation is expected to grow beyond its present level of 300,000 and, concurrently, the requests it brings for recreational services. Fee revenue supports public use activities. The specifics of the fee program are discussed in the draft CCP/EA, chapter 2, goal 5, page 2–61.

Comment: I do not like the fee plan. The Rachel Carson refuge depends heavily on community partnerships. It is vitally important to continue to develop the refuge as a place that belongs to the people.

Response: We are proposing to institute a pilot program to charge a user fee for refuge trails. At least 80 percent of the funds raised from user fees on a particular refuge in this region stay on that refuge. That money is reinvested back into the refuge to enhance visitor services and reduce the backlog of maintenance needs for recreation facilities such as trail maintenance, toilet facilities, boat ramps, hunting blinds, and interpretive signs and programs. The other 20 percent is sent to the region to be distributed to other refuges. In previous years, the refuge has received money from those regional funds for public use facilities.

We realize that the new fee program will require an adjustment period. Our plan for instituting the fee includes an educational period, a warning period and, finally, a transition to full enforcement. We will post a notice at the collection site informing the public of the use or anticipated use of recreation fees collected during the previous year. We may adjust fees periodically to reflect changes in administrative costs or management goals.

Comment: I am wondering if the Rachel Carson refuge would consider having as a goal the establishment of one interpretative trail in each of the towns in which it has lands.

Response: The refuge now has some form of access on almost every division/town: for example, Kittery—trail; Ogunquit—interpretive sign; Wells—trail; Kennebunk—overlook off town trail; Biddeford—interpretive sign; Saco—trails and overlook; Old Orchard Beach—trail and overlook; Scarborough—observation platform. Our comprehensive conservation plan proposes additional public uses as well: Kittery—trail; York—trail; Kennebunkport—overlook; Biddeford—trail; Scarborough—trail and observation platform. That will provide the public an opportunity to get out onto every unit in almost every town within the refuge for wildlife observation or photography. Additional public uses are also provided on many other units for hunting and fishing.

Comment: In appendix D, (e) “Availability of Resources,” why do you list “preparation of hunting maps/info for cost of \$630,” two times in the same cost analysis?

Response: That was a typo, the change has been made.

Support For a Specific Alternative

Most people who commented indicated their support for or concern about a particular activity or specific aspects of our preferred alternative B. However, we found it noteworthy that some people either prefaced their comments or summarized them by stating their preference for a particular alternative. Their totals follow.

- Support Alternative A: 0
- Support Alternative B: 18
- Support Alternative C: 5