

Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge

Conservation Planning Update

Vision for the Future

On the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge, birds will raise their young in native habitats of field, forest, and marsh. They will find rest and nourishment during migration and a haven in winter. We will manage refuge lands and waters with an emphasis on species whose populations have declined, assisting them on the road to recovery.

In partnership with others, we will contribute to the communities where we exist, helping renew the health and vitality of the Rappahannock River and the Chesapeake Bay. We will complement the rich traditions of hunting, fishing, forestry and agriculture on Virginia's Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula.

The refuge will serve as an outdoor classroom, where students of all ages will study nature's complexity, contributing to our understanding and appreciation of the natural world and the National Wildlife Refuge System. All those who visit will find enjoyment in the presence of healthy and abundant fish, wildlife, and plants, and will leave with a renewed personal commitment to land conservation and stewardship.

Status of Our Conservation Plan

Although we have not given you an update for a while, we assure you we are fully engaged in drafting a comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge, and expect to publish the draft for public review and comment this September. The draft will describe three management alternatives in detail, and identify the one Service-preferred alternative our planning team recommends.



White-eyed vireo

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Forest on the Wilna Tract

The final plan, which we hope to publish in December, will provide strategic management direction for all refuge programs over the next 15 years, explain our priorities for managing wildlife and habitat, visitor services, and staffing and facilities, and ensure long-term continuity in managing the refuge.

Our planning team consists of refuge staff, two members from our Regional Office, one from our Ecological Services Office in Gloucester, Virginia, and four from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

Description of the Alternatives

We based our three alternatives on the purposes for establishing the refuge, its vision and goals, and the issues and concerns the public, state agencies, and the Service identified during the planning process. Among those are the amount of grasslands to manage, other priority habitats to conserve, and ways to improve opportunities for public use while ensuring priority resource restoration and additional land protection.

Pages 3 and 4 highlight some actions that distinguish our proposed management alternatives from each other. They also share some actions that are required by law, policy, recent decisions that have garnered public review and our Regional Director's approval, or others we believe crucial for achieving the purpose, vision and goals of the refuge:

- controlling invasive plant species and wildlife diseases
- encouraging research that benefits our resource decisions
- distributing refuge revenue sharing payments to county governments
- protecting cultural resources
- acquiring land within our current, approved refuge boundary

Refuge Goals

Goal 1. Contribute to the biological diversity of the mid-Atlantic region by protecting, enhancing, and restoring the refuge's upland habitats, with an emphasis on breeding, migrating, and wintering birds.

Goal 2. Maintain the long-term biological integrity of riparian habitats along the Rappahannock River and its tributaries for bald eagles and other migratory birds and resident wildlife.

Goal 3. Maintain and enhance the biological diversity and environmental health of tidal and non-tidal wetlands to benefit federal-listed species, waterfowl and other migratory birds, fish and shellfish, reptiles, and amphibians.

Goal 4. Promote enjoyment and stewardship of our Nation's natural resources by providing high-quality, wildlife-dependent recreational and educational opportunities on refuge lands and waters.

Goal 5. Communicate and collaborate with local communities, Federal and state agencies, and conservation organizations throughout the lower Rappahannock River watershed to promote natural resource conservation and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Next Steps

We hope to publish the draft plan in September for a 30-day period of public review and comment, and will also post it on our regional planning website (see below). Another newsletter and public notices will announce the dates and locations of two public meetings during that period. We hope to complete a final plan for our Regional Director's approval this December, after we have reviewed and addressed those public comments.

Public Involvement

Your continued involvement is very important to us. We encourage your comments on this newsletter, and look forward to your comments on the draft plan (see contact information below).

Community Survey Update

Last year, we sponsored a survey of 1,200 residents randomly selected from the 8-county refuge area. Our partners from the U.S. Geological Survey Fort Collins Science Center in Colorado have almost completed their analysis of our survey to better understand public sentiment about the refuge and its management.

We asked those residents specific questions about their recreation on the Rappahannock River; their preferences for future wildlife-dependent recreation on the refuge, and questions to determine their understanding of the refuge purpose



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Child fishing on Wilna Pond

and the recreational activities we allow there. One question posed six potential management scenarios and asked people how acceptable they found each one, considering both ecological and economic tradeoffs.

Thirty-five percent of the residents we contacted responded to the survey. Its preliminary results confirm our perceptions about what activities people consider desirable for the refuge. We also learned a great deal about their level of interest in natural resource issues, and where they get information they trust about river issues.

We were surprised that so many claimed to know "very little" or "nothing at all" about the refuge. Others, who claimed some knowledge of the refuge, answered incorrectly when asked whether camping and dogs off-leash are allowed. They are not. Clearly, we need to enhance our outreach.

The residents we surveyed seem to find most acceptable the land management scenarios that involve a decrease in development opportunities and an increase in Service acquisition of lands for the refuge.

Look for a final report on the survey in September. We will post it on our regional planning website (see below).

For additional information or to submit comments on this newsletter, contact

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Regional planning website: <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/Rappahannock/ccphome.html>

Federal Relay Service for deaf and hard-of-hearing: 1 800/877 8339



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Cat Point Creek

Highlights of Management Alternatives

Alternative A. Current Management

This alternative describes our current refuge programs on 7,711 acres (6,352 owned in full fee title; 1,359 in conservation easement) for managing habitat, inventorying and monitoring fish and wildlife, staffing and administrative infrastructure, and providing visitor services. Although we intend alternative A as a snapshot in time of current management actions, it also includes activities we have put in motion that may not be complete.

Habitat Management

We would continue our strategy of adaptive habitat management. That is, we would continuously monitor and evaluate our management and use the results to update our knowledge and adjust our actions.

We would continue to manage intensively up to 700 acres of grassland/old field on the lands we own in full fee title, and would use prescribed burning, mowing, applying herbicides, and disking to keep those areas in an early stage of succession and increase plant diversity. We would allow any open lands that we may acquire in fee to revert to shrub and forest, or replace existing fields that are less suited for grassland management. We would monitor tracts of planted or reverting mixed hardwood forest for invasive species and disease, and treat them as funding and staffing permit, as well as about 2,000 acres of older mixed forest and 1,000 acres of planted pine forest.

We would continue to manage 217 acres of existing cropland through a cooperative farming agreement, as long as it remains compatible with refuge purposes.

We would continue to monitor tidal marshes for the presence of phragmites and other invasive plants, and treat them as funding and staffing permit. Wet meadows and small impoundments, now composing only 56 acres, would be managed to provide habitat for waterfowl and other aquatic species.

We have conducted breeding bird surveys, frog and toad call counts, secretive marsh bird surveys, winter and summer bald eagle surveys, winter grassland bird surveys, wintering waterfowl surveys, a rare species and community inventory, and habitat monitoring. We would continue that

level of monitoring and inventory, modifying existing protocols, adding new ones and dropping old ones as necessary to gain information for decisions on adaptive management.

Visitor Services

Our present visitor services programs would continue. Wildlife observation and photography, white-tailed deer hunting, and fishing are the most popular. Only the Wilna tract is open for all six priority public uses: fishing, hunting, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. The Tayloe, Port Royal, and Hutchinson tracts are open by reservation for wildlife observation, photography, and interpretation. Initiatives already underway would improve visitor access at the Wilna, Hutchinson, and Laurel Grove tracts, but would establish no new facilities or uses beyond those now available or underway. White-tailed deer hunting on multiple tracts would continue, and would be adjusted annually to meet management and visitor services objectives.

Each year, we would continue to conduct at least 3 environmental education programs and 37 interpretive and outreach programs: 30 offsite and 7 onsite.

Refuge Administration

Staffing would remain at seven positions for the refuge complex: six stationed at the Rappahannock River Valley refuge headquarters in Warsaw, Virginia, and one stationed in Charles City, Virginia. As part of a 2007 Regional National Wildlife Refuge System Strategic Workforce Plan, the position at the Charles City sub-office would assist in visitor services for the entire refuge complex, and would manage day-to-day operations at the James River, Plum Tree Island, and Presquile refuges. The staff stationed in Warsaw would continue to share visitor services responsibilities for the entire refuge complex as well.

The headquarters office would remain at the Wilna House, and necessary safety, accessibility, and utility upgrades would be accomplished as funding permits. Old barns on the Wilna tract, renovated in 2003, would continue to function as maintenance facilities for equipment storage and repair. We would maintain the existing

visitor service facilities as funds and staffing permit, but would construct no new facilities. The travel trailers used for interns, researchers, volunteers and temporary employees would be maintained as long as they remain safe, sanitary, and economical. We would also continue to provide office space for Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries staff.

Alternative B. Enhanced Habitat Diversity (Service-preferred Alternative)

This alternative describes an expansion of current management over the next 15 years, and assumes we would complete the acquisition of up to 20,000 acres, as funding and staffing levels allow. Alternative B would continue our adaptive management approach of modifying actions based on new information by constantly collecting more and better data for management decisions.

Habitat Management

Although we strive to encourage more easement acquisitions, we do not know how successful we can be. We project that, of the 20,000 acres we hope to protect over the next 15 years, we would acquire 12,000 acres in fee title and 8,000 acres in easements. Obviously, this alternative assumes that congressional appropriations for land acquisition resemble those of the first 10 years after refuge establishment.

Cooperative farming as it exists today would be phased out within 5 years of CCP approval. However, we would continue to evaluate the role of cooperative farming in our habitat management program. If we determine that it could provide substantial benefits that we otherwise would not obtain, we may keep some fields in agricultural production. Also within 5 years of CCP approval, we would evaluate the potential of incorporating farming into our interpretation program. We would consider using up to 150 acres of the croplands on the Tayloe tract to demonstrate and interpret best management farming practices that protect water quality and benefit wildlife habitat.

We would expand our intensive management of grassland/old field habitat, up to a maximum of 1,200 acres. As well the techniques in alternative A, we may consider grazing.

These management acres would include most of the 217 acres now in cooperative farming, and would permit us to include in this management regime an additional 200 to 250 acres of open land of an appropriate size and shape.

We would monitor existing or planted mixed forest habitat types and tidal marshes for invasive species and diseases, and treat them as funding and staffing permit. We would manage planted pine forest through pre-commercial and commercial thinning, then leave it to mature and, eventually, convert to mixed pine and hardwoods. If we encounter additional opportunities to restore previously drained wetlands, we may add to the 56 acres of wet meadows to benefit waterfowl and other wetland-dependent species.

As in alternative A, we would continue inventorying and monitoring as long as they continue to provide useful information and we have sufficient resources. We would configure any alterations or additions to those ongoing surveys to help us better understand the implications of our management actions and ways to improve their effectiveness.

Visitor Services

We would expand the opportunities for all six priority public uses and emphasize two of them: hunting and interpretation. We would seek partnerships to help us achieve new, expanded programs, including new observation trails, interpretive water trails (in conjunction with the Chesapeake Gateways Network), and waterfowl and spring turkey hunting. Although we would not emphasize the other four priority uses to the same degree, we would look for partnership opportunities to continue our modest interpretation and teacher-led environmental education programs and provide additional access for freshwater fishing.

One of the interpretive messages that we would like to expand upon, if resources are available, is the traditional role of farming in wildlife conservation over the past century, and why refuges have evolved from planting non-native crops to reestablishing native habitats as the best way to benefit fish and wildlife.

We plan to decentralize our visitor contact areas, because the refuge is geographically dispersed. We would take advantage of that geographic spread to attract visitors from a wide area by establishing several strategic points of contact, using informational signs.

The Northern Neck of Virginia is becoming an important tourist destination. Also, most of the refuge lands lie there, including two sites on the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail. Our Laurel Grove tract is conveniently near the expanding populace of the Kilmarnock/White Stone area. Small investments in self-service facilities at those strategic locations would offer exceptional opportunities to reach many thousands of visitors and residents over the 15-year horizon of this plan.

Refuge Administration

We propose to achieve a level of staffing that meets the minimum requirements for a refuge complex of this size and significance. If we can secure permanent funding, we would fill up to four new positions: Visitor Services Specialist, Bio Tech, Maintenance Worker, and Private Lands Biologist.

We would seek to construct a small new refuge headquarters, using regional design standards, instead of the 19th-century Wilna House. We would keep the Wilna House occupied, as that is the best way to ensure its continued maintenance. Our first option for maintaining the Wilna House would be to seek a partner to help interpret and protect the historic aspects of that nationally significant structure, while also educating visitors about the Refuge System and natural resource conservation. The Hutchinson tract offers the best location for a new headquarters. If the refuge were selected as the site of a cross-program Service office, we would expand the design of our headquarters building accordingly.

We propose to create several smaller visitor contact and welcome areas at strategic locations, including Port Royal, Tappahannock, Farnham, and the vicinity of Warsaw. We would seek partnerships to accomplish this; for example, sharing a facility or staffing. If sited on the Hutchinson tract, a new headquarters could serve a dual function as a visitor welcome area.

Over the 15-year horizon of this plan, old barns now serving as maintenance and equipment storage should be replaced with more modern structures. The continued use of the travel trailers for interns, researchers, volunteers and temporary employees, and the mobile home office used by the VDGIF, would be identical to that in alternative A.

Alternative C. Forest Management Emphasis

The refuge administration and visitor services in alternative B are the same in this alternative. Where it differs significantly is in its habitat management programs for areas now in grasslands and old field, croplands, and planted, overstocked pine stands.

Habitat Management

We would allow grasslands to revert to shrub and forest, supplementing that process with plantings when necessary to achieve desired results. Cooperative farming would be phased out, and those lands would also be allowed to revert or be planted in trees and shrubs.

As in the other alternatives, we would monitor planted or existing mixed forest habitat types and tidal marshes for invasive species, and treat them as funding and staffing permit. We would not seek to restore previously drained wetlands that required active management (moist soil units), but may still continue to plug ditches or use other, less intensive techniques that do not require long-term management.

We would redirect some of the staff time saved in doing less intensive management to other priority tasks, including more in-depth assessments of habitat quality, increased monitoring and evaluation of habitats and fish and wildlife populations, and more control of invasive species.

Monitoring and inventories would specifically aim at documenting the transition of old field habitat to shrub and young forest, then would be eliminated as that type of habitat is phased out.

Visitor Services

Same as alternative B.

Refuge Administration

Same as alternative B.

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