U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update 2, April 2009

Vegetation in Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge's upland habitat is important for native species, such as the sage grouse pictured above, big horn sheep, mule deer, and songbirds. (USFWS)

Thank You for Participating

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The CCP will guide refuge management for 15 years. This planning update provides information on the status of the planning process and the issues identified in public comments.

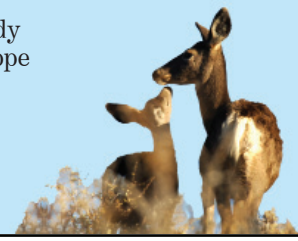
In May 2008, we distributed copies of Planning Update 1 to Refuge visitors and partners, scoping meeting attendees, interest groups, conservation and research organizations, local, tribal, state and federal government agencies, and organizations. It was also available on the Service's website (http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/), and a notification message was emailed to interested parties. The update included background information on the Refuge, described the CCP planning process, and provided preliminary wildlife, habitat, and public use goals, and issues to be considered in the CCP. We also invited the public to attend five open house meetings and comment on Refuge management issues. Comments were received from 4,874 contributors describing concerns and suggestions for managing the Refuge.

A summary of the comments we received is on pages 3 and 4. The summary identifies the primary management issues we will analyze as we develop goals, objectives, strategies, and management alternatives. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas with us, your continued participation will be critical to the success of this planning effort.

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge

Draft Vision Statement

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge will foster a strong land stewardship ethic and provide scientific leadership by collaborating with a diverse network of partners and upholding the highest principles of conservation. The Refuge will provide opportunities for visitors to actively seek and discover natural and cultural treasures in the vast and rugged high desert environment comprised of solitude, abundant wildlife, and sweeping wildlands. Management activities will enhance the Refuge's wild character, biological integrity, and contribution to the larger Great Basin landscape driven by natural ecological processes. As a result, the Refuge will perpetuate its unique cultural history and critical role in the preservation and study of the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem and the diverse and vital native species it supports.



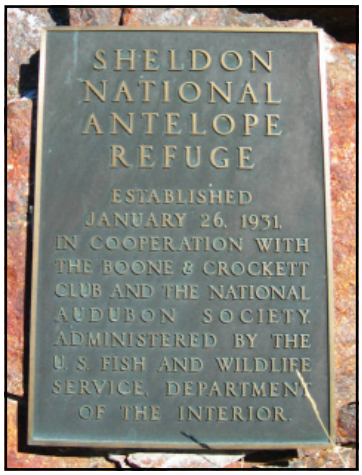
What We Gained from Public Comments

We received a total of 17,863 comments from 4,874 individuals or organizations. Some comments were about broad or long-range issues, while others suggested very specific or detailed strategies that could be used to achieve biological or public use objectives.

The CCP planning team reviewed and categorized the comments under major planning issues described on pages 3 and 4. A detailed description of the comments we received (Scoping Report) is posted on our website at http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning (see Sheldon NWR).

Many Refuge visitors provided comments suggesting changes in the management of campgrounds, cultural resources, fishing, hunting, livestock grazing, horses and burros, mining, public access and roads, predators, wilderness study areas, wildlife, and habitat. We also received suggestions for improving and expanding visitor services, reducing threats to refuge resources, and acquiring in-holdings.

We are currently considering all of these isssues as we develop preliminary management alternatives and refine draft goals and objectives. Many of your comments will also be helpful in developing strategies to meet the Refuge's biological and public use goals and objectives as the CCP process continues.



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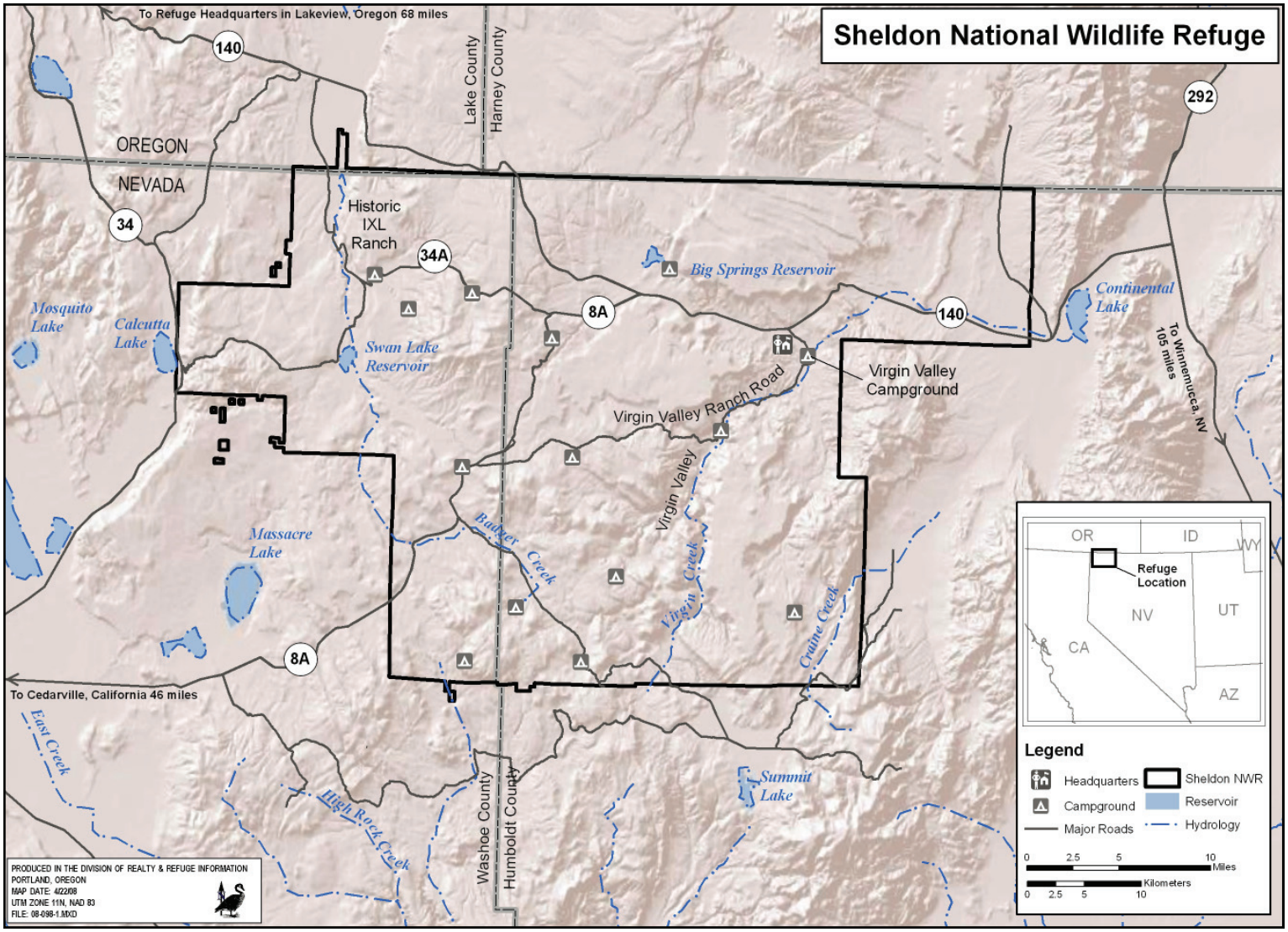


Outside the above exclosure fence that refuge staff built to protect habitat essential to the survival of native wildlife species, including Pronghorn antelope (above right), the Refuge's feral horse and burro populations trample and over graze fragile vegetation, including wildflowers such as the Larkspur bloom pictured above (center). (USFWS)

Your Comments Covered Many Issues

A summary of the comments we received follows

Wildlife and Habitat Management. The Refuge manages habitat for pronghorn antelope and other native species that contribute to the Great Basin ecosystem's biodiversity. Key issues include invasive species causing deterioration of natural habitats; and degraded riparian habitats caused by past livestock grazing and current feral horse and burro grazing. The suggestions we received for managing wildlife and habitat follow.

- Remove obsolete interior fences and complete the boundary fence.
- Fire management comments included: prevent wilderness designation because it will limit access for fire management; use horse and livestock grazing as a fire suppression tool, do not use prescribed burning; and conduct species specific management according to fire regimes.
- Invasive plant and animal species management should include monitoring, suppression, and/or removal of species.
- Manage the Refuge for antelope as originally intended.
- Reduce the impact that predators and feral horses and burros are having on native species and their habitat.
- Use species specific management approaches for pronghorn antelope, big horn sheep, greater sage grouse, Alvord and Lahontan cutthroat trout, and mule deer.
- Stop disturbance of sage grouse leks for any reason.
- Initiate research and monitoring within the Refuge as well as inventories of various resources.
- Develop an ecosystem restoration program.
- Stop human interference and allow natural ecological processes to take their course, including restoring damaged areas.
- Manage the Refuge for the sake of native wildlife, including no hunting.
- Develop a predator management program.

Feral Horse and Burro Management. The current feral horse and burro populations are negatively affecting water and plant resources on the Refuge, especially in riparian habitats near springs, playa lakes, and streams. These impacts are directly affecting the Refuge's capacity to support native plants and wildlife, and restore the native ecosystem. Horses and burros also pose health and safety risks to motorists on Highway 140, with 5 to 15 collisions involving feral horses or burros occurring annually.

A vast majority of the comments we received addressed feral horse and burro management. The comments represent very diverse views. Numerous commenters acknowledged that feral horses and burros negatively impact Refuge habitats; many others stated that feral horses and burros have either no effect or positive impacts to habitat. Three distinct action alerts comprised most of the comments. Some contributors modified the alert to emphasize personal concerns and question the validity of any actions we may propose to manage feral horse and burro populations. Some of the suggestions we received for managing feral horse and burro populations included:

- Using humane, non-lethal, immuno-contraception for population control.
- Allowing horses and burros to live free and wild at the Refuge, opposing any roundups.
- Using only the most humane gathering techniques, excluding helicopters, and using only experienced contractors who have successfully passed criminal background clearance.
- Valuing the horses and burros as iconic images of the west and integral parts of the Refuge.
- Implementing strategies to guarantee horses and burros are adopted to good homes, ensuring they are not sent to slaughter.
- Removing feral horses and burros from the Refuge and manage them as invasive species rather than wildlife or native species.

continued →

Refuge fishing success. (USFWS)

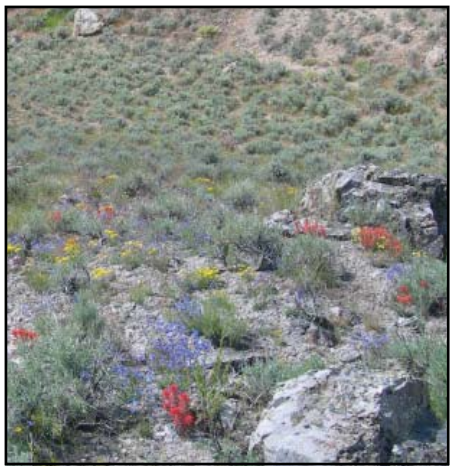
Fishing Program Management. Fishing is a popular activity and a priority public use on the Refuge. Many Refuge ponds and reservoirs are stocked with native and non-native fish. The current practice of stocking non-native fish is in conflict with Service policy. Fishing comments follow.

- Maintain a public fishing opportunity on the Refuge.
- Continue to stock reservoirs with native fish species only.
- Improve Gooch Ditch to direct flow to Big Springs.

Camping Program Management. Currently, there are 13 semi-primitive campgrounds and one developed campground available to Refuge visitors (see map). The majority of the semi-primitive campgrounds are located at or near springs and riparian areas, and are primarily used during the hunting season. The proximity of these campgrounds to water could potentially contaminate water sources, and disturb and displace wildlife from critical habitats.

The Virgin Valley Campground is the only developed campground on the Refuge. During peak seasons, there is the potential for overcrowding, user conflicts, and overflow camping expanding into the undeveloped uplands surrounding Virgin Valley campground. The most common comments associated with camping follow.

- Move camping areas away from springs, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize impacts to those resources.
- A campground host and discrete, designated campsites are needed at the Virgin Valley Campground.
- Several individual campground-specific management suggestions and ideas for improvements were also provided.



Spring blooms in the Refuge's high desert. (USFWS)

Wilderness Study Area Management. In the early 1970s the Service determined, with public input, that 341,500 acres of the Refuge met the minimum criteria required for proposing wilderness designation.

The proposal, made to the U.S. Congress, qualified the areas as Wilderness Study Areas (WSA). The WSAs are to be managed in a manner that avoids adversely affecting their wilderness character until Congress finishes reviewing the proposal, and if appropriate, designating the WSAs as wilderness.

Management issues include: (1) examine whether the WSAs remain suitable for wilderness proposals; (2)determine whether Refuge lands outside the WSAs meet the minimum criteria for wilderness proposals; and (3) identify WSA management programs and tools needed to maintain wilderness character and achieve Refuge purposes. The public provided the following recommendations for wilderness management with numerous comments in support of or opposed to designation.

- Do not pursue wilderness designation, it would limit access for visitors of all abilities, restrict resource management, and exclude general visitors from experiencing the Refuge.
- Acquire in-holdings and water rights within WSAs.
- Manage WSAs as wilderness until Congress determines their designation.

Refuge hot springs support many unique species. (USFWS)

Public Access, Roads, and Transportation. The road network on the Refuge provides access to most major habitat types and recreational points of interest. Concerns include adverse impacts to wildlife, habitats, cultural and historical resources, the back-country visitor experience, and Wilderness Study Areas.

Administrative issues include: confusing road access designations; off-highway and all terrain vehicle (OHV/ATV) use on and off roads; lack of classification of road type (e.g., 4-wheel drive vs. 2-wheel drive); seasonality of road conditions; and opportunities for conversion of closed roads to non-motorized recreational trails.

Public comments follow.

- The Refuge needs to clearly indicate open and closed roads using signs, maps, and brochures.
- Do not close any existing access within the Refuge, the public should have access to enjoy wildlife viewing in the unique Sheldon habitats.
- Approximately the same number of comments opposed or supported OHV/ATV use on the Refuge.
- Limit ORV/ATV use to designated routes. Develop a travel management plan based on wildlife needs, not human recreation demands that might further

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The Public Open House Meetings were Successful

We held 5 public meetings in 2008 as follows:

- Lakeview, Oregon on May 14th;
- Denio, Nevada on May 21st;
- Winnemucca, Nevada on May 22nd;
- Alturas, California on June 4th; and
- Reno, Nevada on June 11th.

We began each meeting by explaining the CCP process and providing some background information on the Refuge, including the Refuge's purposes; the preliminary Refuge vision and current management; and the preliminary management issues, concerns, and opportunities we identified early in the planning process.

Private citizens, government entities, and representatives from various organizations attended the meetings, asked questions, and provided comments on issues and opportunities presented.

We answered and documented questions and collected written comments. The information we gained from listening to public comments at the meetings will be considered during the planning process, as will comments we received by other means.

A Scoping Report is posted on the Service's website at http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning (see Sheldon Refuge).

Virgin Valley Campground. (USFWS)

Tentative CCP Planning Schedule

Planning Step:	Target Date:
Planning Update 1	May 2008 **COMPLETED**
Public Scoping Meetings	May/June 2008 **COMPLETED**
Planning Update 2	April 2009 **COMPLETED**
Planning Update 3, Prelim. Alternatives	Summer 2009
Public review of Draft CCP and EIS and distribution of Planing Update 4	Spring 2010
Distribution of final CCP and Planing Update 5	Winter 2010

We will keep you informed if dates change.

Mouth of Creek Gorge. (USFWS)

Virgin Valley. (USFWS)

How Do I Contact the Refuge?

Mail questions and comments to:
Paul Steblein, Project Leader
Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex
P.O. Box 111
Lakeview, OR 97630

Fax comments to: (541) 947-4414

Email comments to: SheldonCCP@fws.gov
To help us reduce our use of paper, please email a request to us to receive planning update notifications via email.

For more information visit our website:
http://www.fws.gov/sheldonhartmtn/Sheldon/

Historic IXL Ranch homestead on Sheldon Refuge. (USFWS)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex
P.O. Box 111
Lakeview, Oregon 97630

Change of address requested.

In this issue:
What we learned from your comments on the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge.

To learn more about the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge visit our website: http://www.fws.gov/sheldonhartmtn/Sheldon/