Record of Decision

for

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Driftless Area

National Wildlife Refuge

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Division of Conservation Planning
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Introduction

This Record of Decision (ROD) has been developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) in compliance with agency decision-making requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended. It documents the decision of the Service, based on the information contained in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and the entire administrative record. The Service has selected the preferred alternative (Alternative C) as described in the FEIS as the best alternative for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). A notice of this decision will be published in the *Federal Register* and a news release will be sent to the media.

Purpose of Action

The purpose of this action is to specify and adopt a long-term management direction for the Driftless Area NWR that will achieve the Refuge purpose and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Need for Action

A long-term management direction does not currently exist for Driftless Area NWR. Management is currently guided by endangered species recovery plans, general policies, and shorter-term plans. Since the Refuge was established, there are new threats to endangered species habitat, new laws and policies have been put in place, new scientific information is available, and levels of public use and interest have increased. In addition, the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 mandates that the Secretary of the Interior, and thus the Service, prepare CCPs for all units of the National Wildlife Refuge System by October, 2012.

Key Issues

Through public scoping and with input from various agencies and publics, key issues and possible solutions were identified. The issues were 1) habitat management, 2) visitor services, 3) refuge expansion, and 4) species assessment. These issues were thoroughly examined in the Draft and Final EIS.

Alternatives Considered

Three alternatives and their consequences were described in detail in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statement. Under all alternatives recovery plans for the Iowa Pleistocene snail and the Northern monkshood would be updated, cultural resources would be protected, and the Refuge's Fire Management Plan would guide prescribed fire and wildfire suppression.

Alternative A. No Action

Present management practices would continue under this Alternative. The No Action alternative is a status quo alternative where current conditions and trends continue. The alternative served as the baseline to compare and contrast with the other alternatives. Acquisition efforts would not occur under this alternative because there would be no approved expanded acquisition boundary.

Alternative B. Habitat Protection Emphasis

Under this alternative the primary focus of Refuge activities would be on the permanent protection of endangered species habitat through land acquisition and minimal physical disturbance of endangered species habitat. The expanded acquisition area for the Refuge would include a total of 6,000 acres in 22 counties in four states as described in a Land Protection Plan (Appendix J of the FEIS). The 3,400 acres specified in this alternative is the acreage that would be protected within the 15-year life of the CCP given anticipated levels of willing sellers, funding, and Refuge personnel.

Alternative C. Habitat Protection, Increased Management, and Integrated Wildlife-dependent Recreation (Preferred Alternative)

Under this alternative the focus would be on the permanent protection of endangered species habitat and additional algific slopes through land acquisition and active management of endangered species habitat. New information and threats increase the need for active management. Fewer acres acquired in this alternative would allow limited Refuge resources to address all impacts to the habitat. The total expanded acquisition area for the Refuge would include 6,000 acres in 22 counties in four states as described in a Land Protection Plan (Appendix J of the FEIS). The 2,275 acres specified in this alternative is a realistic acreage that would be protected within the 15-year life of the CCP given

anticipated levels of willing sellers, funding, and the need to accomplish other Refuge objectives in this alternative.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

Alternatives B and C are environmentally preferable to Alternative A (No Action) because the primary recovery goal of permanent protection of the listed species would occur in both alternatives. Alternative C represents the most environmentally preferable alternative because it would lead to meeting multiple recovery goals and the likely delisting of the Iowa Pleistocene snail.

Basis for the Decision

The Service selected Alternative C, as described in the FEIS, as the best alternative for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan to guide refuge management for the next 15 years. Alternative C is the most environmentally preferable alternative. Alternative C is likely to lead to the delisting of the Iowa Pleistocene snail and significant progress towards recovery for Northern monkshood and Leedy's roseroot, as well as beneficial effects for other trust species. Algific talus slopes are more likely to benefit under the management proposed in Alternative C than the other alternatives. Alternative C is also expected to lead to more public support and more public opportunities than the other alternatives. Alternative A was not selected because it would not lead to reaching recovery goals or delisting of species. Alternative B was not selected because minimal management would likely lead to negative effects on algific talus slopes and delisting of species might not occur.

The rationale for choosing the selected alternative as the best alternative for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan is based on the impact of this alternative on the issues and concerns that surfaced during the planning process. The environmental impacts of the three alternatives were analyzed as to how they would impact: 1) habitat management, 2) visitor services, 3) refuge expansion, and 4) species assessments. Chapter 7 of the FEIS reproduced all written comments sent to the Service regarding the Draft EIS and gave the Service's response to each comment. Oral comments received at the public meetings were summarized and the Service's response given.

Public Comments to FEIS

The Service filed the FEIS for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on February 3, 2006. In compliance with agency decision-making requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended, the Service is required to circulate the FEIS for 30 days after filing with the EPA before issuing a Record of Decision on the Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

During the 30-day circulation period, which ended March 6, 2006, the Service received no comments.

Mitigation

Because all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been incorporated into the preferred alternative, no mitigation measures have been identified.

Conclusion

Based on a thorough review of the Administrative Record for this project, and careful consideration of the full range of impacts from the Comprehensive Conservation Plan on all aspects of the human environment, including the social, economic, cultural, and natural resources of the area, I have decided to implement the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge as described in Alternative C in the FEIS (February 2006).

Robyn Thorson APR 18 2006

Robyn Thorson
Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Date