2977

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation

720 ST. CROIX ST., SUITE 101, PRESCOTT, WI 54021 • (715) 262-9279 • 1-800-897-4161

AFFILIATED WITH NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

March 2, 2006

Upper Mississippi River NW& FR
ATTN: CCP Comment, Room 101
51 East Fourth Street
Winona, MN 55987

RE: Comments Regarding the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CPP), Alternative E

To Whom It May Concern:

The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation (WWF) would like to thank the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service(FWS) for listening to the public last summer, for revising the preferred alternative; and for returning to the public for further comment on Alternative E. In our review of Alternative E we found many positive changes, however, there are still some significant issues and problems that we would like to call to your attention.

Regarding the authority of the FWS to carryout all actions proposed in Alternative E, there are a number of serious jurisdictional questions that directly impact important topics such as the restriction of navigation in and around the river. We strongly feel that the FWS needs to work cooperatively with all units of national, state and local governments to answer these jurisdictional questions **before** the CPP is finalized. Please consider these five points.

- The State of Wisconsin agreed to the establishment of the refuge as long as the waters and places between remain common highways for navigation and portaging and use is not denied. It is not clear that FWS has the authority to restrict use of the waters to electric motors only or to slow no-wake boating.
- Not all lands are owned by FWS, a significant portion of the lands are owned by the Army Corps of Engineers and there is no evidence that the Army Corps is in agreement with all proposed changes and restrictions;
- Four states will be depended upon to enforce many of the changes in closed area boundaries and other restrictions, but there is no evidence that the four States have agreed to any of the proposed changes;
- In some cases city, town and county governments will need to agree to and enforce proposed changes, but there is no evidence that the affected cities, towns and county governments are in agreement with the proposed changes;
- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Coast Guard have jurisdiction in some areas, but there is no evidence that they have been consulted regarding proposed changes.

Regarding what is best for the resource we would like to make the following comments:

- From strictly a biological standpoint, in the fall waterfowl are not involved with breeding or raising their young and should arrive on the Refuge in excellent physical condition. This means there is really no need to "protect waterfowl" in the fall with excessive numbers of closed areas and motor use restrictions as proposed in Alternative E.

-MORE-

- On the other hand, in the spring season there are a significant number of other birds such as herons, egrets, terns, shorebirds and songbirds that use the refuge for nesting and breeding activities. Very little is said about protecting these birds in Alternative E. Once again, on strictly biological grounds, in areas of high nesting and breeding activity some restrictions and requests for voluntary avoidance in the **Springtime,** may be justified. These areas need to be determined with input from the states.
- The FWS claims that the Refuge is the most visited refuge in the nation with 3.7 million visitors a year. Alternative E proposes a wide variety of actions to substantially increase the number of persons who annually visit the refuge including: new or an increased number of: hiking trails (+9), canoe trails (+15), observation decks (+12), observation towers (+3), photography blinds (+4), biking trails (+3), auto tour routes (+2), stand alone interpretative signs (+102), and information kiosks (+55). In addition, a 50% increase in media interviews, news releases and special events is proposed. With 3.7 million annual visitors already, these proposed efforts are the equivalent of pouring gasoline on an already burning fire. They may be appropriate for a national park, but they are clearly not appropriate for a refuge. A substantial increase in visitors will require additional parking, toilet facilities, waste receptacles, oil/gas/grease pollution, traffic and boat congestion, as well as a need for additional staff.

- Major impacts on the resource that are either not addressed, or not adequately addressed in Alternative E include:
  - Following the completion of the CCP, there clearly is a need for a furbearer management plan that includes reasonable navigation provisions drawn up in cooperation with the Trappers Associations in all states;
  - At least six major point and nonpoint pollution sources that are badly affecting overall water quality, the fishery, and safe use of beaches need to be addressed;
  - There are many major sedimentation problems that are resulting in adverse impacts on water clarity and depth and these in turn are threatening the fishery, the availability of waterfowl food, and boating. Environmental Management Plan (EMP) efforts to combat major sedimentation problems take an average of seven years from start to completion. This is unacceptable.
  - The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Private Lands Program is plainly underfunded. This budget item needs to be increased to $2,000,000 to start making significant progress in combating erosion and sedimentation problems being caused by private landowners up and down the Mississippi River.
  - The number, size and impact of barges on the resource, including the impacts of wave action on steambanks and the deposit of dredging spoils on adjacent lands, is not even mentioned in Alternative E. Due to the size of these impacts on the refuge, for a truly comprehensive plan, the impacts and the work of the Army Corps and other federal agencies addressing barge impacts should at least be mentioned.
  - In addition to inventories of invasive plants and animals, forest lands, wildlife, bluff lands and grasslands it would be equally important to conduct an inventory of wetlands, birds and waterfowl.

In conclusion, the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation strongly encourages the FWS to resolve the major outstanding issues briefly defined above before closing the Comprehensive Conservation Plan. No one, the FWS, the local units of government, or the refuge itself will benefit from continued political or legal struggles if consensus is not reached on the scope, reach and jurisdiction of the CCP.

Sincerely,

Donald L. Hammes
Chair, Wetlands Committee

Mr. Don Hammes
3507 Valley Ridge Road
Middleton, WI 53562

Cc: Corky Meyer, President
George Meyer, Executive Director