

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

The CCP Planning Process

The CCP for Crane Meadows NWR was written with contributions and assistance from citizens, universities, the Minnesota DNR, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The participation of these stakeholders is vital, and their contributions have been valuable in determining the future direction of the Refuge. Refuge and Service planning staff are grateful to all who have contributed time, expertise, and ideas throughout the CCP process.

Writing a comprehensive conservation plan takes an average of two to three years, and involves a great deal of effort on the part of the Refuge and regional planning staff. The process can be divided into five stages; preplanning, scoping, alternative development, draft preparation and review, and final document preparation and approval.

Preplanning

Preplanning occurs before the formal planning period begins, and at Crane Meadows NWR initial conversations commenced nearly a year in advance of the first official CCP meetings. During preplanning, policy is reviewed, the core planning team is established, a planning record is created, interest groups are identified, and an initial planning timeline is drafted. Studies, reports, surveys, research and monitoring activities, previous planning efforts, historical documents, and other background information and data resources were gathered and reviewed during this period, and a number of studies were conducted including a aerial imagery-based vegetation study and a green infrastructure assessment of the local conservation landscape.

Scoping

The formal planning process begins with the scoping period, which involves a thorough assessment of issues, concerns, opinions, thoughts, ideas, concepts, and visions for the Refuge.

The scoping period was officially launched in December 2008 with a kick-off meeting held at Crane Meadows NWR. Refuge and regional plan-



Oak savanna, Crane Meadows NWR. Photo credit: FWS

ning staff met to review existing baseline data, discuss the Refuge vision statement and goals, and review relevant planning documents. A list of required CCP elements was also developed at this meeting and during subsequent e-mail and telephone communications between Refuge staff and the Service's regional office. In addition to identifying information that would be needed in the planning process, Refuge staff also developed a list of stakeholders, and a preliminary list of issues, concerns, challenges, opportunities, new directions, and potential sources of conflict to be addressed in the CCP.

The next step was for the planning team to ask neighbors, state agencies, tribal government, non-government organizations and others interested in the future of the Refuge to identify the issues and opportunities they see confronting the Refuge. The public scoping period began on January 21, 2009, and ended on March 6, 2009. The comment period was announced in local media, and people were invited to submit comments to the Refuge. An open house was held in the Refuge maintenance building on February 19, 2009, to give the public an opportunity to discuss ideas with Refuge staff and regional

planners. More than 50 people attended the open house, and the Refuge received a total of 20 written comments during the public scoping period.

During the last week of March 2009, the Refuge hosted a planning workshop where participants helped review, evaluate, and plan the biological and visitor services programs at the Refuge. An initial set of alternative management themes was also developed during this workshop.

The semi-final stage of scoping took place at the regional office. During this step in the scoping process, leaders from the Refuge System, Migratory Birds, Ecological Services and other key Midwest Region programs further developed and refined the list of issues that would be addressed in the CCP. Refuge staff and planning staff met with a variety of Service personnel in the Regional Office in a meeting held the first week May 2009.

The final approval for scoping issues was received from the national FWS office in Washington, D.C., the third week of May 2009, following the preparation and routing of a scoping briefing statement.

The issues brought forth during the scoping phase bring important topics to the attention of the plan's authors, and are used to inform the writing of the alternative management scenarios in the Environmental Assessment. One of the proposed alternatives will ultimately be chosen as the future direction of the Refuge. The issues, concerns, and opportunities expressed during the first phase of planning have been organized under the following headings:

Habitat

Issue Statement: If the integrity of this unique, relatively unaltered wetland ecosystem is to persist, it must be protected. The remaining intact wetland and upland habitat needs to be combined with restored adjacent areas to achieve a healthy, natural system resembling historic conditions.

Background: The relatively unaltered state of Crane Meadows NWR's wetland habitats generated a great deal of interest in habitat conservation at the Refuge. In general, public comments emphasized a desire to protect intact habitats and restore altered habitats to historic conditions. The need to safeguard specific habitat types, including prairie and oak savanna, was brought up in numerous comments. Related comments acknowledged the need for a prescribed burn program to mimic historic disturbance cycles and maintain a diversity of successional habitat stages.



Yellow-headed Blackbird, Crane Meadows NWR. Photo credit: FWS

Land Acquisition

Issue statement: The slow growth of the Refuge has proven frustrating for numerous supporters of the Refuge. Small, scattered tracts of land make habitat management less efficient, diminish the benefit to wildlife, make law enforcement more difficult, and increase the potential for conflicts with neighbors.

Background: With ownership of approximately 1,800 acres of the 13,540 acres approved for acquisition, land acquisition continues to be among the primary concerns for Crane Meadows NWR. Since its establishment in 1992, the Refuge has worked with willing sellers inside the approved acquisition boundary, yet land acquisition has been slow and has faced a number of challenges. Land acquisition is dependent on the willingness of owners to sell to the Service, the availability of funding, the patience of private landowners with the lengthy process, and the resistance to competition from other interested buyers. As a result, property acquisition to date has been opportunistic and piecemeal, resulting in scattered land ownership and challenges to management and law enforcement. In addition, agricultural development has increased within and bordering the

Refuge acquisition boundary in recent years - specifically large-scale dairy, pork, and poultry installations. During public scoping, some people suggested that acquisition efforts focus on specific targets, such as critical habitat. Additional comments indicated that the public would like to see the Refuge shift from an opportunistic approach to land acquisition and conservation, in which the Service buys land anywhere within the boundary as willing sellers emerge and restores private lands as opportunities arise, to adopting a more strategic approach that targets critical habitat.

Water Resources

Issue Statement: Water quality, a key factor in the health of the Rice-Skunk wetland complex, is threatened by hydrologic alteration, pollution, and sedimentation from adjacent land uses.

Background: More than 55 percent of the Refuge is comprised wetland habitats and open water. Concerns related to water that were raised during scoping range from issues of quality to quantity. Furthermore, all open waters on the Refuge are under state management and publicly accessible, necessitating partnerships and larger collaborative efforts. Specific comments received expressed concerns about the impacts of increasing agricultural development in the form of field drainage, center pivot irrigation, and animal installations; nutrient loading, eutrophication, and the presence of other pollutants in area lakes and streams; water volume fluctuations in the wetland complex, associated effects on the annual wild rice crop, and the DNR weir on the Platte River; and the access to recreation on Rice and Skunk Lakes including potential effects on wildlife.

Wildlife

Issue statement: There are numerous threats to the long-term persistence of healthy wildlife populations at Crane Meadows NWR including habitat disturbance, contamination and disease, competition from exotic/invasive species, and the lack of monitoring and research necessary for management.

Background: Wildlife at Crane Meadows NWR includes an abundance of birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, and both state-listed and federally-listed species. Comments received during scoping related to wildlife issues included the concern that increasing visitation on the Refuge could have negative impacts on wildlife; the need to further inventory and monitor plants and animals, particularly rare or declining plant species that may be present on the Refuge; the threat of invasive species on the Refuge such as purple loosestrife, reed canary grass, phragmites, and carp; concerns about the effects of animal installa-

tions on local wildlife, such as avian transmitted diseases; depredation of crops by cranes, geese, and deer; and the potential decline of the brown trout fishery on the south spur of the Refuge.

Visitor Services

Hunting

Issue Statement: Some people would like to have the opportunity to hunt on Refuge lands, others would like to see the Refuge maintained as sanctuary for wildlife. Nevertheless, the lack of a large, contiguous land base presents challenges to offering high-quality and safe hunting opportunities.

Background: Hunting was originally discussed during public meetings that led to the establishment of Crane Meadows NWR in 1992, and has remained a public expectation ever since. Currently no hunting is allowed on the Refuge because Service properties are small and scattered, boundary signage is limited, and boundaries are difficult to enforce.

Fishing

Issue Statement: Some individuals would like to see the Refuge allow shoreline fishing opportunities, and others expressed opposition to fishing from Refuge shores.

Background: Fishing from boats, as well as spear fishing are commonplace on the waters at Crane Meadows NWR because all open waters at the Refuge are managed by the state and are accessible to the public. Fishing from the shores of the Refuge, however, is not currently permitted.

Environmental Education

Issue Statement: Environmental education facilities and programming are currently limited at Crane Meadows NWR. There is interest in expanding the visitor services programming to include facilities such as an outdoor classroom and increasing staff so that the Refuge can offer environmental education programming in area schools.

Background: Education and associated interaction with area schools was the second most common topic found in public comments, after land acquisition. There is interest and potential for Crane Meadows NWR to become more active with environmental education in local communities. Paralleling this public interest, is the Service's recent initiative, "Connecting People with Nature" which has an emphasis on getting people outdoors, especially children. Nature is important to children's intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development. Recommendations were made that the Refuge establish an outdoor classroom, increase staff involvement with area schools, increase events and programs for the public, and work to better define

and increase public understanding of the Refuge's identity, purpose, role in the community, and responsibilities.

Trails

Issue Statement: Motorized vehicles that are prohibited on the Refuge are permitted on the Soo Line multiple-use trail that transects the Refuge, and some people would like to see greater education and law enforcement efforts to ensure appropriate trail use.

Background: Trails received some comment from the public – particularly the Soo Line multiple-use trail which transects the acquisition boundary and allows some motorized uses not typically associated with national wildlife refuges.

Facilities

Issue Statement: Visitor services facilities on the Refuge are not sufficient to welcome, orient, and inform visitors.

Background: Facilities have expanded and improved over the past few years at Crane Meadows NWR, and their use continues to increase. However, some people commented that visitor use can be improved by increasing staff available to greet the public, increasing landholdings within the Refuge acquisition boundary, and augmenting existing visitor facilities. Comments advocated for a permanently staffed visitor center, increased signage and brochures, a wetland boardwalk, and additional platforms for wildlife observation and fishing.

Archaeological Resources

Issue Statement: There are a number of cultural resources within the Refuge acquisition boundary that are not adequately identified or protected.

Background: The Refuge and surrounding areas were active Native American sites, and host a number of historical and cultural resources. Some studies have been conducted, but more research and surveys of the area are needed to understand the scope and extent of these cultural resources.

Support

Issue Statement: To meet current and future management needs at the Refuge, additional support in the form of staffing and partnerships will be needed.

Background: The Refuge currently has two full-time positions: a private lands biologist/refuge operations specialist, and a maintenance worker. During public scoping, some comments urged the Service to increase staffing to provide the resources for additional programming, research, monitoring, law enforcement, and other management activities. The needs noted by the public include a full-time man-

ager, personnel to staff a visitor center, and additional help with the field activities such as prescribed burning and habitat restoration.

The importance of partnerships and the benefit of additional staffing at Crane Meadows NWR were commonly discussed topics during CCP scoping. With steadily increasing human populations and associated effects on the landscape, it has become imperative for natural resource agencies and organizations to collaborate and seek creative ways to coordinate conservation efforts. This can both reduce redundancy in conservation efforts, and increase efficiency in protecting natural landscapes. With approximately 900 acres of land within the acquisition boundary and a parallel mission, the Minnesota DNR offers a unique and important partnership opportunity. Recommendations were also made to augment the relationship with Camp Ripley north of the Refuge, whose 53,000 acres support over 600 plant species, 202 migratory birds, 51 species of mammals, and 23 species of reptiles and amphibians.

Alternatives Development

The practice of developing management alternatives as a part of the Refuge planning process is derived from the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA) [42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.] This act requires federal agencies to consider the impacts of proposed actions and to develop a reasonable range of alternatives to those actions.

The development of an initial set of alternative management themes occurred during the Refuge planning workshop in March 2009. The resulting set of four alternatives was further refined and ultimately reduced to three during the Alternatives Workshop held in September 2009. The Alternatives Workshop included both Service and state representatives, and was used to define and clarify the details for management under each of the three alternatives. The draft objectives and strategies were finalized in a meeting at Sherburne NWR in January 2010.

Preparation, Review, and Finalization of the CCP

The CCP for Crane Meadows NWR was prepared by a team consisting of Refuge and Regional Office staff, and state partners. The first complete draft was completed in June 2010. The CCP was then published in two phases, draft and final, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Draft Environmental Assessment, Appendix A of the Draft CCP, presented a



Waterfowl on Rice Lake. Photo Credit: Beau Liddell

range of alternatives for future management and identified the preferred alternative, which was the basis for the CCP.

The Draft CCP/EA was first reviewed and revised by Refuge and Regional Office staff, a time period that culminated with an internal review meeting at the Midwest Regional Office on June 11, 2010. The Draft CCP/EA was then released to the public for a 31-day review period running from July 7 to August 6, 2010. The public was notified of the release with a notice in the Federal Register as well as through local media outlets.

A summary brochure or the full Draft CCP/EA was sent to approximately 265 individuals, organizations, elected officials, and local, state, and federal agencies; and an electronic copy was made available on the Service's website.

An open house was held during the comment period (July 20, 2010) in the Refuge maintenance building, providing the public with an opportunity to discuss the plan with Service staff. One comment was submitted and three individuals attended this event.

During the full public review period, only three written comments were received by the Service, none of which recommended changes to the preferred alternative. Due to limited feedback, only minor grammatical and editorial changes were made to the draft in preparing the final CCP. Consequently, no formal Response to Comments Appendix was produced for this CCP.

The final CCP will become the basis for guiding management on the Refuge over the coming 15-year period. It will also guide the development of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas, and it will underpin the annual budgeting process through Service-wide allocation databases. Most importantly, it will lay out the gen-

eral approach to managing habitat, wildlife, and visitor services at Crane Meadows NWR, and will direct day-to-day decision-making and actions.

Wilderness Review

As part of the CCP process, lands within the legislative boundaries of the Refuge were reviewed for wilderness suitability. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines and outlines the requirements for a wilderness area as follows:

“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined... (as) an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.”

No lands at Crane Meadows NWR were found suitable for designation as Wilderness as defined by the Wilderness Act. The Refuge does not contain 5,000 contiguous roadless acres, nor does it have any units of sufficient size to make preservation practicable as Wilderness. Lands and waters within the defined acquisition boundary have been substantially affected by humans, particularly through agriculture, transportation infrastructure, and water control.