



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Minnesota Valley

National Wildlife Refuge

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Project Update

September 2004

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Receives Final Approval

In September 2004, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced the completion of the comprehensive conservation plan for the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Minnesota Valley Wetland Management District.

The comprehensive conservation plan, or CCP, is intended to outline how the Refuge will fulfill its legal purposes and contribute to the National Wildlife Refuge System's wildlife, habitat and public use goals. The plan articulates management goals for the next 15 years and specifies the objectives and strategies needed to accomplish these goals. While the planned future condition is long-term, we anticipate that the plan will be updated every 5 to 10 years based on information gained through monitoring habitat and wildlife, as well as recreational usage.

Established in 1976, Minnesota Valley NWR was borne out of citizen concern for the diverse and abundant fish, wildlife, and plant communities of the Lower Minnesota River Valley. Today it consists of eight units along a 34-mile stretch of the Minnesota River located between historic Fort Snelling and the City of Jordan. The Savage Fen Unit is also located in the valley but is not immediately adjacent to the river. Nearly 12,500 acres of the authorized 14,000 acres are currently owned in fee or managed as part of the Refuge. Some areas are not owned by the Service but are administered through management agreements. Although the Refuge is the single largest landowner along this portion of the river, the valley itself contains a patchwork of ownerships including private landowners, non-profit organizations, corporations, cities, counties, and lands administered by Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MnDNR).



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This mosaic of ownerships offers great opportunities for partnerships but also requires a great deal of coordination and cooperation among all land managers.

Where You Can Find the CCP

The CCP is available online at <http://midwest.fws.gov/planning/MinnesotaValley/index.html>, and copies are also available at Refuge Headquarters: Minnesota Valley NWR, 3815 American Blvd. East, Bloomington MN 55425.

The Planning Process

The Minnesota Valley NWR CCP effort began in 1998 with internal scoping of the issues among Refuge and Regional Office staff. Throughout the duration of the planning process, we worked with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, representatives of local communities, Friends of Minnesota Valley NWR, and many others.

Public involvement has been a key part of the process. We began by hosting seven open houses to discuss the plan. Based on the comments we received in these meetings, we formed issued-based work groups to study particular



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issues. These groups included volunteers, technical experts, hunters and anglers, local government officials, and DNR staff. Once the draft CCP was released for comments, more open houses were conducted in July 2003. The plan received final approval in September 2004.

The following is a summary of major issues that are addressed in the goals, objectives, and strategies developed in the CCP:

Refuge Recreational Uses

- Hunting
- Fishing
- Recreational trail system
- Bicycling
- Horseback riding
- Canoeing

Habitat

- Wetlands
- Grasslands/oak savanna
- Floodplain forest
- Upland forest

Fish, Wildlife and Plants

- Exotic plant species
- Nuisance wildlife
- Critical migratory bird nesting areas
- Endangered and threatened species

Resource Threats

- Storm water, spills and persistent contaminants
- Land use and development adjacent to the Refuge

Land Protection

- Wetland District
- Existing Refuge and beyond

Environmental Education

- Public use facilities
- Quality of interpretive media
- Quality of exhibits
- Public awareness of Refuge and resource protection goals

Who We Are and What We Do

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Our specific responsibilities include enforcing federal wildlife laws, managing migratory bird populations, restoring nationally significant fisheries, administering the Endangered Species Act, and restoring wildlife habitat such as wetlands. The mission of the Service is to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

The Service's role also includes managing the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest collection of lands specifically managed for fish and wildlife. The System is a network of more than 540 national wildlife refuges encompassing more than 93 million acres of public land and water. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.



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Refuges are also unique places for people. When it is compatible with wildlife and habitat needs and the purpose for which the refuge was established, they can be used for wildlife-dependent activities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and environmental interpretation.

Refuge and District Vision

The Refuge and the District will add richness to the social, cultural, economic, and ecological communities by holding in public trust, a portion of the natural heritage of the Minnesota River Basin and the Cannon River Watershed for the continuing benefit of the American people. Within its area of influence, the Refuge and District will make significant contributions toward:

- Establishing an unbroken corridor of floodplain and hillside forest, wetlands, oak savanna, and native prairie along the Minnesota River beginning at historic Fort Snelling and proceeding up river to its origin at Big Stone Lake;
- Managing diverse and abundant native fish and wildlife populations that use healthy and productive native plant communities of the Minnesota River and its watershed plus the Cannon River and its watershed;
- Providing Minnesota citizens the opportunity to revitalize their spirits through high quality wildlife-dependent recreation such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation;
- Supporting a community-based effort where citizens, businesses, private conservation organizations, and local, state, and federal agencies combine their efforts to restore and protect the Minnesota and Cannon rivers and their watersheds for future generations.



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Refuge Goals

The CCP established clear goals for Minnesota Valley NWR and Wetland Management District over the next 15 years. Objectives for achieving each goal and strategies for achieving each objective are detailed in the CCP. Goals for the Complex are:

- *Floodplain Forest:* To restore, protect, and maintain natural species diversity while emphasizing priority wildlife and plants characteristic of floodplain forests within the northern tallgrass prairie ecosystem.

- *Wetlands:* To restore, protect, and maintain natural species diversity while emphasizing priority fish, wildlife and plants characteristic of wetlands within the northern tallgrass prairie ecosystem.
- *Upland Forest:* To restore, protect, and maintain natural species diversity while emphasizing priority wildlife and plants characteristic of upland forests within the northern tallgrass prairie ecosystem.
- *Land Protection:* To enhance the integrity of lands within the authorized boundary of the Refuge and contribute to the protection and restoration of fish and wildlife habitats within the Minnesota River watershed.
- *Public Use:* To provide high quality wildlife-dependent recreational and environmental education opportunities to a diverse audience. These activities will promote understanding, appreciation and support for Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and the Wetland Management District as well as the entire National Wildlife Refuge System.

To accomplish these goals, 27 objectives have been identified. A number of strategies for each objective provide additional detail regarding how the objective will be accomplished.

Management Direction

Over the course of the next 15 years, we will promote active management of existing habitats, higher quality recreational experiences for visitors and improved public outreach strategies. Refuge staff will continue to restore and maintain existing wetland, grassland and floodplain forest areas. Oak savanna habitats may receive new and intensive maintenance applications. The Refuge's authorized boundaries are expanded by 10,737 acres. Actual acquisition will be dependent upon willing sellers and the availability of funds. The Wetland Management District's Waterfowl Production Area program will also expand as worthy sites are identified. Integrated biological controls and harvest methods will be used to control exotic plant or nuisance wildlife species. Horseback riding and the use of snowmobiles and mountain bikes will be limited to authorized segments of the Minnesota Valley State Trail. The environmental education program could see a new visitor education facility upriver with needed improvements in existing exhibits and interpre-

tive materials. Additional staff, along with volunteers and interns, will be essential to implement an expanded public use program.

Refuge Mitigation Projects

Beginning in 1989, the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC) began to explore alternatives for expanding the operations of the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. This action led to the preparation of an environmental impact statement that considered building a brand new airport or expanding the existing facility. Ultimately, the Minnesota State Legislature weighed in on this issue and directed MAC to construct a new north-south runway on existing airport property.

The new runway will be constructed on the west side of the airport roughly parallel to Cedar Avenue. Although the south threshold of the runway will be nearly 1 mile away from Refuge lands, the use of this runway will result in overflights, on average, every other minute between 500 and 1,000 feet above the river valley. The impact of these overflights to the Refuge and its various programs is significant. Although current literature is not conclusive concerning the impacts of overflights on area wildlife, there is no question that the noise generated from these flights will significantly affect noise-sensitive public use activities such as bird watching, environmental education, and nature hikes.

Following prolonged negotiations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to a settlement to compensate for damages associated to Refuge facilities and programs.

In developing this Plan, the Service sought to replace the public use and wildlife values that will be affected on the Refuge by future aircraft overflights. In addition, the Service sought to provide mechanisms for the long-term administration and management of the new lands and facilities that will be acquired with Refuge Mitigation Funds.

Included as strategies within this CCP are projects that have been designated as airport mitigation projects. They include the acquisition of lands, the construction of the environmental education center and interpretive facilities, plus intern housing. These projects are described in greater detail in Appendix L of the CCP.

Implementing the Plan

This CCP outlines an ambitious course of action for the future management of Minnesota Valley NWR and Wetland Management District. It will require considerable staff

commitment as well as funding commitment to acquire more wildlife habitats, to maintain existing public use facilities and to develop additional high-quality public use facilities. The Refuge will continually need appropriate operational and maintenance funding to implement the objectives in this plan.

The CCP details program planning levels that are above current budget allocations. As such, the Service will use the plan for strategic planning and programs. The plan is not a commitment for staffing or operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

Our highest priority projects for the Refuge include:

- Improve maintenance of visitor facilities
- Inventory and control the spread of exotic species
- Construct Rapids Lake Environmental Education Center or Classroom Modules on Refuge units
- Construct residence at Rapids Lake Unit for Refuge employee with law enforcement authority
- Convert historic home into environmental education site
- Construct intern housing on or near Rapids Lake Unit
- Hire park ranger and staff for Rapids Lake Environmental Education Center.

Wetland Management District priority projects include:

- Hire a full-time maintenance worker
- Improve visitor access to District lands
- Hire a senior wildlife biologist
- Hire a full-time law enforcement officer.



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