

# **Appendix A: Record of Decision**



# Record of Decision

*for*

## Comprehensive Conservation Plan

### Trempealeau

*National Wildlife Refuge*



**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

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# Record of Decision for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge

## 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 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 Trempealeau 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 Trempealeau 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 Trempealeau NWR. A Comprehensive Conservation Plan will help ensure that management and administration of the Refuge will meet the need of achieving the mission of the

Refuge System, the purpose for which the Refuge was established, and the goals for the Refuge. In addition, the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 mandates that the Secretary of the Interior, and thus the Service, prepare Comprehensive Conservation Plans 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 grouped into five categories: 1) landscape, 2) wildlife and habitat, 3) public use, 4) neighboring landowners and community, and 5) administration and operations. 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 threatened and endangered species would be protected; cultural resources would be protected; the Refuge's Fire Management Plan would guide prescribed fire and wildfire suppression; mosquito control would only be allowed in cases of a documented human health emergency; appropriate control of fish and wildlife disease would be undertaken if warranted, feasible, and effective; an emergency response plan and training would be developed to address possible contaminant spills; regulations regarding harvesting of fruit,

nuts, and other plant parts would be clarified; neighboring landowners would be contacted frequently to discuss issues of concern; an easement and rights-of-way management plan would be developed; and general public use regulations would be annually reviewed and updated.

### **Alternative A. No Action (Current Direction)**

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.

### **Alternative B. Wildlife and Habitat Focus**

This alternative favors minimal disturbance to wildlife from public use and increased level of effort on fish and wildlife habitat management. Boundary issues would be addressed with annual inspections, new surveying and installation of an automatic gate at the main entrance. The remaining 340 acres within the approved acquisition boundary and 12 acres outside the current boundary would be purchased as opportunities arose. Habitat management would be a high priority. Invasive species control in the forested habitats would allow restoration of prairie and oak savanna. Pine plantations would be eliminated. Prescribed fire and mowing would be used to manage the resulting 11 prairie units totaling 585 acres. Researchers would be actively sought to conduct research to determine effects of management strategies. Monitoring of grasslands, aquatic vegetation, and extent of invasive plant species would be conducted. Additional dikes and water control structures would be placed within existing impoundments. The C2 impoundment would be divided into three separate units to allow for moist soil management. Three other impoundments would be carved out of Pool B to create manageable units as well as additional emergent habitat. Islands would be built in Pools A and B. Water level management in Pools A and E would continue on their present course. Rough fish would be intensively managed in all pools using commercial fishing and water level management. The managed deer hunt would continue, but harvest levels would be regulated based on deer population and vegetation monitoring. Furbearer trapping

would continue with harvest levels based on population estimates and habitat monitoring. No waterfowl hunting would be allowed. Public use opportunities would be reduced. Environmental education programs would be limited to those that explain Refuge regulations. To reduce disturbance to migrating birds, all pools would be closed to water craft during fall migration (from September 15 through November 15). The staff would include the addition of a permanent full-time biologist and a private lands biologist and a seasonal biological technician and tractor operator. The Refuge would maintain its present entrance road, which is open to all traffic except for an average of 6 weeks each year when the road is flooded. The Refuge office would remain as is, but the 70-year-old shop would be replaced. Staff would include the addition of two seasonal and two permanent full-time positions in a range of disciplines which would benefit the wildlife and habitat management objectives in this alternative.

### **Alternative C. Integrated Public Use and Wildlife and Habitat Focus (Preferred Alternative)**

This alternative focuses on returning upland areas to pre-European settlement habitats, increasing flexibility in wetland management within impoundments, and increasing public use opportunities. Boundary issues would be addressed as in Alternative B. Prairie and oak savanna restoration would be a high priority. Increased efforts to control invasive species would be made using biological, mechanical, and chemical methods. Prescribed fire and mowing would be used to manage 11 prairie units totaling 435 acres. Half of the trees in the pine plantations would be removed through selective thinning. Additional dikes and water control structures would be placed within existing impoundments. The C2 impoundment would be divided into three separate units to allow for moist soil management. The remaining three impoundments (Pools C1, D, and F) would reduce the size of Pool B to a manageable unit as well as create additional emergent habitat. Islands would be built in Pools A and B. Water level management in Pools A and E would continue on their present course. Rough fish, particularly carp, would be managed in specified pools using commercial fishing and water level management. Researchers would be actively sought to conduct studies that would determine effects of management strategies.

Grasslands, aquatic vegetation, and the extent of invasive plant species would be monitored. The deer hunt would continue as in the past, except harvest levels would be based on population and habitat monitoring. Furbearer trapping would continue and the number of beaver and muskrat taken would be determined based on annual monitoring of harvest and of dike damage and interference with water control structures. Public use opportunities would be expanded.

Environmental education programs would be promoted at local schools and to community groups and the general public. A multi-purpose room would be added to the office/visitor contact station to accommodate larger groups and provide a place for orientation. Waterfowl hunting opportunities would be expanded by opening the area west of the Canadian National Railroad dike to a limited hunt. Ski trails would be maintained when conditions permit. Options to alleviate flooding of the entrance road to provide year-round access to the Refuge would be explored. Use of volunteers would be expanded in all programs. A Trempealeau NWR Friends Group would be started. Outreach would be expanded to provide opportunities for awareness and understanding of Refuge management and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Traveling exhibits that bring the Refuge to the people would be developed. The staff would include the addition of three seasonal positions, including a biological technician, a tractor operator, and a park ranger. Law enforcement duties would be covered by a new position shared with Winona District. A private lands biologist would also be shared with Winona District.

## Environmentally Preferable Alternative

Based on a review of the environmental consequences of each alternative (Chapter 4, Final EIS), Alternative C is judged to be the environmentally preferable alternative. All alternatives have positive physical and biological environmental consequences since all contain similar emphasis on increasing habitat quantity and quality. However, Alternative C also addresses a variety of social and economic issues in balancing the needs of fish and wildlife and the needs of people.

## 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. Chapter 1 of the Final EIS identified three broad needs: 1) contribute to the Refuge System mission, 2) fulfill the purposes of the Refuge, and 3) achieve Refuge goals. Alternative C meets these needs through the most balanced and integrated approach compared to the other alternatives. 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 alternatives were analyzed as to how they would impact: 1) landscape, 2) wildlife and habitat, 3) public use, 4) neighboring landowners and community, and 5) administration and operations. Alternative C has long-term benefits to the natural and human environment. Alternative C will increase water quality and more effectively control invasive plants. Alternative C ensures abundant opportunity for all current recreational uses (e.g. hunting, fishing, observation and photography, interpretation and environmental education). Alternative C will have a positive economic impact. Alternative C will increase the capacity of the Refuge to meet its purposes and mission of the Refuge System. The alternative identifies staffing needs tied to objectives and strategies to increase the capacity of the Refuge to meet its purpose and the Refuge System mission. It also addresses infrastructure needs for effective and efficient administration and management of the Refuge while serving the needs of the visiting public. Alternative C is also expected to lead to improved communication and problem solving with neighboring land owners.

## Public Comments to FEIS

The Service filed the FEIS for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, which published a notice of availability of the FEIS on April 25, 2008. 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 May 27, 2008, the Service received one comment, which expressed opposition to hunting. The Service had responded to this comment in the FEIS.

## 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 Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge as described in Alternative C in the FEIS (April 2008).



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

JUN 17 2008

Date