

Draft Environmental Assessment

Proposed New Co-location Multi-Use Facility at Montezuma NWR August 2025

Prepared by Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge



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Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge
Seneca Falls, New York

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Executive Summary

This Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluates the action- and no-action alternatives for the construction of a multi-use facility that would replace the current administrative office, visitor center and fur house buildings. The proposed action would be achieved by constructing a new facility at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). This would include co-location of the Refuge staff with the Ecological Services New York Field Office, which currently resides in leased space in Cortland, NY, as well as a New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Conservation Officer (currently housed in the fur house building).

The New York Field Office is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) office managed under the Ecological Services program which provides guidance and expertise to avoid and minimize impacts to natural resources for projects such as energy development, hydroelectric dams, and large-scale transportation developments meeting our society's growing energy and transportation needs. They review project plans, licenses, and even proposed laws and regulations, to avoid or minimize harmful effects on wildlife and habitats.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC) is a department of New York state government. The department guides and regulates the conservation, improvement, and protection of New York's natural resources; manages Forest Preserve lands in the Adirondack and Catskill parks, state forest lands, and wildlife management areas; regulates sport fishing, hunting and trapping; and enforces the state's environmental laws and regulations. Montezuma NWR works in partnership with the NYS DEC and provides office space to NYS DEC Conservation Officers.

The no action alternative would continue to use the existing offices and visitor center at the Refuge, and leased space for the New York Field Office. The proposed action is important as the Refuge staff currently reside in aging facilities where an updated facility is needed to avoid significant repairs. Additionally, co-location of offices would save the Service substantially on long term leased office space and facilitate cross program collaboration opportunities.

This EA examines the potential environmental impacts associated with the proposed action and complies with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)¹ in accordance with the Department of the Interior NEPA regulations (43 CFR 46; 516 Department Manual, or DM, 8), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service policy (550 Service manual, or FW, 3), and other relevant

¹ Executive Order 14154, Unleashing American Energy (Jan. 20, 2025), and a Presidential Memorandum, Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity (Jan. 21, 2025), require the Department to strictly adhere to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq. Further, such Order and Memorandum repeal Executive Orders 12898 (Feb. 11, 1994) and 14096 (Apr. 21, 2023). Because Executive Orders 12898 and 14096 have been repealed, complying with such Orders is a legal impossibility. The FWS verifies that it has complied with the requirements of NEPA, including the Department's regulations and procedures implementing NEPA at 43 C.F.R. Part 46 and Part 516 of the Departmental Manual, consistent with the President's January 2025 Order and Memorandum. The FWS has also voluntarily considered the Council on Environmental Quality's rescinded regulations implementing NEPA, previously found at 40 C.F.R. Parts 1500–1508, as guidance to the extent appropriate and consistent with the requirements of NEPA and Executive Order 14154.

regulations and requirements. NEPA requires examining the proposed action's effects on the natural and human environment.

The following resources were analyzed in the environmental assessment: aesthetics and noise, air quality, community services, cultural and historical resources, economic activity, wetlands, geology and soils, land use and real property, solid and hazardous waste, transportation, utilities, vegetation and wildlife, and water resources. Based on the analysis presented in the environmental assessment and coordination and consultation with all appropriate federal, state, and local agencies, as well as federally recognized Native American tribes, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that the impacts associated with the proposed action and its alternative would not individually or cumulatively have a significant impact on the quality of the natural and human environment.

The draft EA was made available for public comment from [month day, year] to [month day, year]. Public comments and agency responses will be available in Appendix C of the final environmental assessment. Intrastate Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultation was initiated in June 2025 and is ongoing, and National Historic Preservation Act section 106 consultation is underway.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the purposes of an individual refuge, federal laws and executive orders, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) policy, and international treaties. Relevant guidance includes but is not limited to the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 United States Code [U.S.C.] 668dd et seq.); the Refuge Recreation Act of 1962; and selected portions of the Code of Federal Regulations and the Service manual.

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.”

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 directs the Secretary of the Department of the Interior to ensure that refuges are fulfilling the intended mission of the refuge system and the purposes of individual refuges (16 U.S.C. 668dd(5)(a)(3)(A-M)).

Montezuma NWR was established in 1938 by Executive Order 7971 “...as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife...” (Figure 1).

The primary purpose for the establishment of the refuge was to provide an inviolate sanctuary for migratory birds including waterfowl. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 further expanded the mission of the Refuge System, including the Montezuma NWR, to include maintaining and restoring, where appropriate, the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health (BIDEH) of the refuge (USFWS 601 FW 3).

The Service proposes to design and construct a multi-use facility that would replace the Refuge’s current administrative office, visitor center and secondary office known as the fur house, as well as save costs on leasing space for the Ecological Services Program’s New York Field Office (NYFO) (Figures 2 and 3). To meet the directives of a 2015 Executive Order (EO 13693), Energy Policy Act of 2005, and Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 requiring Federal agencies to reduce energy consumption and increase efficiency, the proposed multi-use facility would include renewable energy or high-efficiency components where feasible.

The Service makes every effort to co-locate facilities within a reasonable proximity to each other to improve collaboration and save money. The benefits of co-location include better service and convenience for the public, improved outreach and partnership capabilities, more efficient delivery of habitat conservation, improved communication among staff, shared resources (e.g., equipment, administrative, and maintenance staffs), and savings through reduced space costs.

The NYFO staff are currently located in space leased from the General Services Administration (GSA) in Cortland, NY. Co-location of Service offices would decrease expenses through cost sharing, eliminate lease fees and reduce energy demand from antiquated systems. Several structures would be demolished at Montezuma NWR to offset the impacts of the new footprint of the new facility.

1.2 Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose for this action is to construct a new multi-use facility to serve as the Refuge Headquarters and visitor center, and office for the New York Ecological Services Field Office and a NYS DEC Conservation Officer while meeting policy guidance and mandates to reduce energy use, co-locate Service programs, and provide a safe place for staff, partners, visitors, and volunteers to work and enjoy quality wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities. The installation of high- efficiency components at the proposed multi-use facility and the visitor center would assist the Service in achieving the energy standards required of Federal agencies and reduce operation and maintenance costs.

The Service conducted a detailed review of the Refuge administrative office, visitor center and fur house which determined existing buildings have reached their life expectancies. The buildings would require extensive repairs to bring them up to current standards. The exterior

materials are old and weathered. The plumbing, mechanical, electrical and water delivery systems have all reached the end of their useful life. The rehabilitation work needed on both energy-inefficient buildings would be too substantial. Neither their designs nor their current condition justifies continued, expensive maintenance for these energy-inefficient facilities. Additionally, the current square footage is inadequate to accommodate the NYFO.

1.3 Proposed Action

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to construct a multi-use facility that replaces the existing Refuge administrative office, visitor center and secondary office known as the fur house. The new building would accommodate the Refuge staff of 10, NYFO staff of 22, and a NYS DEC Conservation Officer. This would consist of constructing a new two story building adjacent to the existing visitor center. The Refuge visitor center, Refuge administrative office and NYS DEC Conservation Officer office would all be on the first floor while the NYFO staff offices would be on the second floor. This action would also replace the existing leased space utilized by NYFO in Cortland, NY. The existing refuge buildings, except for the maintenance shop and vehicle barn, would be demolished, and the sites would be restored to native habitats.

A proposed action is an initial proposal and may evolve during the development of alternatives, the impact analysis, and public involvement. The lead federal agency may determine that there are other, better, or less impactful ways to address the purpose and need, resulting in a different preferred alternative. The proposed action and alternatives may change during the NEPA process as the agency refines its proposal and gathers feedback from the public, federally recognized tribes and tribal entities, and other agencies or organizations. Therefore, the final preferred alternative may differ from the initial proposed action and will be finalized at the conclusion of the public comment period after the incorporation of substantive comments. A decision to implement a proposed action will not be made until the environmental review process is complete.

Chapter 2: Alternatives

2.1 Decision Framework

Following completion of the EA, the Regional Refuge Chief in the Northeast Region of the Service will determine if the selected alternative(s) is a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment and require preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) or, alternatively, determine there would be no significant effects to the human environment and complete a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

2.2 Alternatives

Alternative A - No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, a new multi-use facility would not be constructed at Montezuma NWR. NYFO would stay in GSA-leased space and therefore would not co-locate. Existing Refuge buildings would continue to serve as an administration headquarters and visitor center site. There would be no direct impacts at the development sites related to the proposed action, as they would likely remain until deterioration of the building worsens to become uninhabitable or pose a safety risk to employees and the public.

Alternative B – Proposed Development - Preferred Alternative

The proposed project would construct an approximately 12,000-square-foot multi-use facility (Figures 2 and 3). The multi-use facility would house staff from the Refuge, NYFO and NYS DEC law enforcement. It would also contain a visitor center, nature store run by the Friends of the Montezuma Wetlands Complex (Friends) and multi-purpose room that can be used for educational events, large meetings with the public and partners, training, and volunteer events for the over 210,000 annual visitors. The proposed project includes structure demolition, building design, site investigations, site improvement, repaving existing road and parking lots and utility enhancements.

The proposed project area is located at the Montezuma NWR main campus immediately to the east of the existing visitor center (Figure 2). This location reduces the need to construct a new parking lot and allows for the continued use of the existing office building until the new structure is completed. The alignment of the building was chosen to maximize exposure to visitors, minimize the loss of trees on the adjacent refuge property and to minimize traffic impacts.

The proximity to the Wildlife Drive and nature trails were also considerations in site selection. Visitors would have immediate access to refuge information and facility resources. In addition, the proposed site is adjacent to one of the Refuge's many wetlands which would continue to be a focal point for visitors as they enter the Refuge's 1/3-mile-long entrance road which runs adjacent to this wetland.

Mitigation Measures

The location of the new building would not detract from the vista of the refuge environment. The relative size of the project area (~5 acres total, which includes existing infrastructure) is small and would have minimal negative impact.

The existing visitor center (2,259 sq. ft.) would need to be demolished to make room for construction. After the completion of the new building, the Refuge would demolish the current administrative office building (2,973 sq. ft.), and fur house (1,585 sq. ft) to offset the footprint of the new building. The sites of these demolitions would be restored back to a native

landscape that matches the existing surroundings, and would include native trees, shrubs, wildflowers, and grasses.

A storm water retention/infiltration area would be designed to contain runoff from the building and parking areas. Replacing the substandard septic systems for the buildings would have an immediate positive impact on ground water quality. These septic systems have been problematic for years causing routine backups and bathroom closures, especially in the spring when the water table is high.

Minimal, short-term impacts associated with construction and/or operation activities at the project area would be expected for the following environmental elements: air quality, noise, geology and soils, vegetation and wildlife. However, the magnitude of impacts to each of these resources is limited given the nature of the proposed activity and the relatively small area of potential effect.

Alternatives Considered but Dismissed (if applicable)

An alternative considered but not studied any further was to keep the existing buildings, adding an office addition to the Refuge's existing administrative office to accommodate NYFO's 22 employees. This was not further studied due to the existing office's age and previously discussed physical condition. Additionally, other sites were considered but not pursued as it could result in segmenting the visitors from the staff.

Mitigation Measures Applicable to All Alternatives

Mitigation measures include:

1. Avoidance of an impact by not taking an action or parts of an action;
2. Minimizing impacts by limiting the degree or magnitude of an action; or
3. Rectifying impacts by repairing, rehabilitating, or restoring the affected environment.

Best Management Practices (BMPs) can include an array of alternatives that produce desirable results with minimal impact on other resources. Construction BMPs can be put into place to eliminate or reduce environmental impacts associated with construction activities, such as erosion or sediment control. This allows the Service to choose the most economical, effective, and possibly innovative BMPs to reduce or eliminate impacts.

As part of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Certification requirements for the new facilities, this project would include compliance with Pilot Credit 55: Bird Collision Deterrence to minimize impacts to migratory birds. This measure is intended to reduce the chances of bird injury and mortality from in-flight collisions with buildings. This rule requires

designers and builders to comply with building façade and site structures that include a lighting, and a monitoring plan designed to minimize bird collisions.

Contractors would provide erosion control methods (such as watering dry soils) and structures (such as silt fences) as necessary to prevent wind-borne dust and water-borne silt from leaving the immediate work areas.

Additionally, native topsoil would be stockpiled and reused for landscaping purposes around the exterior of the facilities. Access points would be designated and flagged to minimize soil compaction. Mats or boards would be used to access equipment during wet conditions to prevent rutting and soil loss.

In the unexpected event that paleontological, archaeological, or historical remains (including burials or skeletal material) were encountered, all work would be immediately halted and a construction representative, contracting office representative, contracting officer, or a Service representative would be notified. The contracting officer would notify the regional archaeologist, to ensure that the provisions of 36 CFR 800.13 and other relevant laws are followed. Work would cease in the immediate vicinity until permitted to resume by written order from the contracting officer. Work in other areas may proceed as approved by the contracting officer.

All construction debris will be removed by the contractor. Single-use packaging, particularly Styrofoam, would be opened in an enclosed area and immediately swept up.

Chapter 3: Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

This section is organized by affected resource categories. Each affected resource section discusses the existing environmental baseline in the impact zone (potential area of impact of any of the alternatives) and the effects of the alternatives on each resource. Effects from the proposed action or alternatives are reasonably foreseeable changes to the human environment, whether adverse or beneficial as compared to the environmental baseline for the no action alternative. The impact analysis directly follows the description of the affected environment for a resource and is organized by alternative.

The impact analysis will evaluate various criteria, as defined below, to describe the context and intensity of impacts on affected resources. The Council on Environmental Quality does not require the use of these terms; however, they are commonly used in NEPA documents and will be referenced in the subsequent sections.

Impact analysis criteria and terminology are listed below.

- Adverse effects: negative or detrimental effects to the resource
- Beneficial effects: positive effects on the resource

- Cumulative effects: effects on the environment resulting from the incremental effects of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions regardless of what agency (e.g., federal or non-federal) or person undertakes the action
- Direct effects: caused by the action and occur at the same time and place
- Indirect effects: caused by the action and are often later in time or farther in distance but are still reasonably foreseeable
- Irreversible: unable to be undone or altered
- Irretrievable: unable to regain, recover, or repair
- Short-term effects: occurring in or relating to a relatively short period of time
- Significant effects: substantial adverse effects with respect to the context and intensity of a proposed action's impacts on resources
- Long-term effects: occurring in or relating to a relatively long period of time

3.1 General Description of Affected Environment Applicable to All Affected Resources

The Affected Environment would consist of the current existing Refuge headquarters area. This area is approximately 5 acres and is developed with multiple buildings, roads, associated utilities, and patches of native habitat. Work will occur within a portion of this already developed area (Figures 2 and 3).

3.2 Natural Resources

Habitat and Vegetation: Affected Environment

Montezuma NWR lies within the Finger Lakes region of New York and is identified as a globally significant Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society. This region is a mosaic of lakes, wetlands, forests, and farmland. Wetlands surround the immediate proposed facility site. Conditions presented in the 2013 Montezuma NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) include detailed discussions of vegetation and wildlife known to occur near the proposed multi-use facility site (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2013.).

Habitat and Vegetation: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no adverse impacts on the habitat and vegetation of the area as there would be no changes. There would be no direct impacts at the development site related to the proposed action because no activity would occur. However, the degradation of the facilities over time, including the failing septic system would have an impact on the habitat and vegetation.

Alternative B

The current administrative office and fur house, as well as the visitor center, would be demolished to accommodate the proposed multi-use facility. Overall, temporary, minor impacts to wildlife habitat may be expected during the construction phase of the project. However, due to the developed area at the proposed project area, no major effects are anticipated. The removal of 0.1 acre of trees and early succession habitat would result but would be offset by rehabilitation occurring at the demolition sites.

Floodplains: Affected Environment [Required if EO 11988 applies]

This project would not occur within a floodplain. Because of the channelization of the Seneca River circa 1918, the river is largely disconnected from this area, even during high water events typical in the spring. Therefore, no impacts are expected to floodplains from these alternatives.

Wetlands: Affected Environment [Required if EO 11990 applies]

Montezuma NWR Headquarters area sits atop dredge spoils, or soils classified as made land, from the construction of the NYS Barge Canal circa 1918 (Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Web Soil Survey website, 2021). This area is surrounded by wetlands.

Wetlands: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no additional impacts on the wetlands of the area as there would be virtually no changes.

Alternative B

Under the preferred alternative, the new building would be constructed in an upland area immediately adjacent to a wetland. There would be no impacts on surrounding wetlands. Storm water would be handled through best management practices (BMPs) such as infiltration swales in accordance with New York State regulations. Ground disturbance at the project area would be limited, and BMPs would be implemented during construction to minimize soil erosion and runoff such as silt fencing, detention ponds, seeding and mulching.

Vegetation of special management concern: Affected Environment

The Montezuma NWR Headquarters area is a mix of manicured lawns, grassland, pollinator garden and some trees and shrubs. There is no old growth as the land was created around 1918. Much of the existing vegetation was either planted or came in naturally.

Vegetation of special management concern: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

None applicable.

Alternative B

Under the preferred alternative, there is potential for the introduction of invasive plant species that could have a negative impact on native species. Site restoration would be required to avoid negative impacts including planting native species and long-term invasive species monitoring and control.

Fish and Wildlife Species: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no adverse impacts on the fish and wildlife of the area as there would be no changes. There would be no direct impacts at the development sites related to the proposed action because no activity would occur.

Alternative B

The current administrative office, fur house, and visitor center would be demolished to accommodate the proposed multi-use facility. However, due to the developed area at the proposed project area, no major effects are anticipated. There would be no impacts to fish as the project would be entirely within upland habitats. The removal of 0.1 acre of trees and early succession habitat would result but would be offset by rehabilitation occurring at the demolition sites encompassing approximately 1 acre. Temporary minor impacts to wildlife may be expected during the construction phase of the project because of construction operations.

Candidate, Threatened and Endangered Species and Critical Habitat: Affected Environment

Two federally endangered bat species, the northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*) and the Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*), as well as three proposed species (tri-colored bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*), Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) and a small freshwater mussel, green floater, (*Lasmigona subviridis*) may occur in the vicinity of the current administrative office and visitor center per U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC).

Population levels of both northern long-eared bats and tri-colored bats have declined by over 90 percent due to white nose syndrome, a deadly fungus which affects bats during hibernation. The northern long-eared bat was previously captured on the Refuge at two locations, including at the Refuge headquarters in 2008. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC) conducts annual acoustic bat surveys throughout the Montezuma Wetlands Complex, including the Refuge, and most recently detected an Indiana Bat in 2023 and tricolored bat in 2017.

Candidate, Threatened and Endangered Species and Critical Habitat: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no adverse impacts on Candidate, Threatened and Endangered Species and Critical Habitat of the area as there would be no changes. There would be no direct impacts at the development sites related to the proposed action because no activity would occur.

Alternative B

The current administrative office, fur house, and visitor center would be demolished to accommodate the proposed multi-use facility. The removal of 0.1 acre of trees may negatively impact endangered bat species. An Intra-Service Section 7 Biological Evaluation Form would be completed prior to demolition, and these impacts would be minimized through the implementation of BMPs such as limiting the cutting of large diameter (> 3" dbh) trees to November 1 to March 31. If large diameter trees need to be cut from April 1 through October 31, then we would require an emergence survey in advance and only proceed with the cutting if no bats are detected. Cutting of trees from April 1 through October 31 without emergent surveys would be limited to small diameter (<3" dbh) trees. There would be minimal to no impact to Monarch butterflies as there would be minimal loss of quality pollinator habitat. Mowing of the construction site would occur outside of the growing season to eliminate the potential of impacting individual Monarch butterflies. Finally, the green floater mussel would not be affected because no work would occur in or adjacent to streams or rivers and site runoff during construction will be pre-treated and not affect water quality or something similar.

Overall, temporary, minor impacts to wildlife may be expected during the construction phase of the project which would be less than approximately 2 years. However, due to the developed area at the proposed project areas, no major effects are anticipated. The removal of 0.1 acre of trees and early succession habitat would result but would be offset by rehabilitation occurring at the demolition sites. There is no designated critical habitat within the project area and therefore no impacts; impacts to species could be described as insignificant or discountable.

Geology and Soils: Affected Environment

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Survey, soils of the Headquarters area consist of made land. This is the result of the placing of dredge spoils from the construction of the NYS Barge Canal circa 1918 (Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Web Soil Survey website 2021.).

Geology and Soils: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no impacts on the geology and soils of the area.

Alternative B

The proposed construction would occur wholly within prior disturbed lands. All appropriate BMPs would be implemented as required by applicable Federal and State rules and regulations to minimize the potential for soil loss and subsequent water quality impacts from construction activities. Displaced soils would be reused at the facility site, as they are most useful in landscaping applications.

Minimal impacts to the geology of the site are expected to occur because of depth to bedrock and the excavations or additions of earthen materials. Use of drilling and trenching equipment may result in localized soil compaction and mixing of the soil horizon. However, given the localized nature of these disturbances, potential impacts from such activities on geology and soils are expected to be minimal.

Air Quality: Affected Environment

The EPA collects emissions data which are summarized in the Air Data database. Overall air quality in this region is good (EPA 2025).

Air Quality: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be minor impacts on the air quality of the area. Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems close to the end of their useful life could possibly leak Freon into the atmosphere and consume electricity at a higher rate which contributes to greenhouse gas emissions from power generation stations. Internal air quality due to water intrusion, which may cause mold and sewer gas leaking from inadequate plumbing, has the potential to lead to health complications to staff and the public.

Alternative B

Development of the proposed multi-use facility and utility enhancements at the project area would require demolition, minimal clearing, grading, and the addition of soil fill for foundations. During the development of the proposed project, emissions from heavy equipment and generation of dust from the vehicles involved with earthmoving activities could temporarily increase levels of some pollutants.

The implementation of appropriate BMPs to control soil erosion and dust should minimize releases of emissions to the atmosphere. It is expected that Service and construction contractors would properly maintain their fleet of vehicles/equipment so that emissions are kept to a minimum.

Impacts to air quality are expected to be short-term and minor. Beneficial impacts from the utility enhancements would help address potential water intrusion, sewer gas leaks, and reduced health risks to staff and the public. The installation of high efficiency HVAC and lighting in addition to photovoltaic panels would reduce the carbon footprint of refuge facilities.

Water Resources: Affected Environment

Sources of water on the refuge include rainfall, runoff, the Seneca and Clyde Rivers and Black Brook. Unpolluted sources of water are critical to the environmental health of the refuge, as contaminants can affect vegetation (e.g., excessive nutrients cause growth of undesirable plants) and wildlife (e.g., a range of toxins affect everything from fish to birds). Land use practices in the watershed largely dictate the water quality on the refuge (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013). The project area sits atop upland or made land with wetlands to the west and north. The visitor center wetland is immediately adjacent to the proposed project site.

Water Resources: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no impacts on the water resources of the area as there would be no changes.

Alternative B

This alternative would incorporate storm water management BMPs to mitigate the flow of storm water runoff and enhancing groundwater recharge. During site development, appropriate BMPs would be implemented as required by applicable Federal and State regulations to minimize potential water quality impacts from construction activities. Measures to control soil erosion and sedimentation would be implemented. The use of fuels, chemicals and equipment could lead to spills or accidents which have the potential to impact water quality. The project area is surrounded by sensitive habitat and a pollutant release could be ecologically devastating. We will rely on good planning, spill response measures and the BMPs mentioned to mitigate potential impacts.

Soundscape: Affected Environment

Soundscape of the proposed project area is the result of the natural environment (birds vocalizing), refuge operations, and visitors coming and going. Additionally, there is noise from nearby State Route 5/US Route 20.

Soundscape: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be negligible to minimal impacts on the noise level of the area. Noise at the proposed project areas is generally associated with the operations of the Refuge, such as operation of lawn equipment for periodic grounds maintenance during the growing season. Noise from vehicle traffic is only slightly noticeable at the proposed project area.

Alternative B

Short-term noise impacts to the surrounding area are expected to occur during the construction phase such as heavy equipment and power tool use, foundation pile driving, current structure demolition, and increased interactions among visitors, staff, and workers. Noise pollution impacts would be minimized by limiting construction activity to daylight hours and by requiring properly muffled equipment. Minimal long-term noise impacts are expected due to the increase of staff at the site.

Special Land Status Designations: Affected Environment

The project site is entirely within the Montezuma NWR and has no other special land status designations. The proposed project will have no effect on the status of these lands.

3.3 Cultural and Historic Resources

Historic Structures: Affected Environment

There are not any records of Native Americans occupying the project site. Coordination under Section 106 with the NY State Historic Preservation Officer will occur throughout the project.

Historic Structures: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

The no action alternative would result in no changes.

Alternative B

The proposed project would result in the potential demolition of three refuge buildings. The administrative office and visitor center were both constructed in 1980. The fur house was constructed in the mid 1950's. .

Archeological and Cultural Resources: Affected Environment

The project area consists of several feet of dredge spoils sites atop the original Montezuma marshlands. Historic human use concentrated on the perimeter of the wetlands, not in the interior. The project is within the historic interior of the marshlands.

Archeological and Cultural Resources: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no anticipated impacts on the cultural and historical resources of the area.

Alternative B

No impacts to cultural resources are expected to occur because of the proposed development of the new multi-use facility and utility enhancements at the project area. In the unlikely event that undocumented cultural resources are encountered during ground-disturbing activities at the site, all work in the immediate area of the discovery would cease, and a qualified archaeologist would be notified. The work in the immediate vicinity of the discovery should not resume until the resource has been documented and evaluated for cultural significance.

3.4 Socioeconomics

Local and Regional Economies: Affected Environment

The CCP and Hunting and Fishing Plan prepared by the Service helped to inform this assessment. The main impact of the Refuge on local and regional economic activities is associated with public use of the Refuge through activities such as wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation, hunting, and fishing. Visitors to the Refuge impact the regional economy through monies spent on food, fuel, and lodging; in addition to purchasing licenses for hunting and fishing.

Local and Regional Economies: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be negligible to minimal impacts on the economic activity of the area. Further deterioration of the buildings would reduce the experience for visitors, which could lead to a decrease in visitation numbers and expenditures.

Alternative B

The existing visitor center would need to be demolished to make room for the construction of the new building. This would result in the temporary interruption of some visitor service functions which may temporarily impact local economies, however minimal.

It is anticipated that there would be increased visitation associated with the new facility. The new facility would have new displays and educational opportunities which would create a draw

for returning and new local and regional visitors. This would have positive impacts on the economy as visitors would require local services such as food and gas.

Beneficial impacts to the communities are anticipated to include enhanced visitor services and facilities which would increase visitation, enhanced employment for supporting services to refuge visitors such as fuel, lodging, and food, and temporary jobs for trades associated with the construction of the facilities. The multi-use facility would provide aesthetically pleasing and energy-efficient facilities for community outreach activities and community events.

Public Health and Safety: Affected Environment

The headquarters area is in Seneca County and receives Emergency Medical Services and fire services from local volunteer fire departments and police from the Sheriff's Department, New York State Police and Department of Environmental Conservation officers. The Refuge is located within 11 miles of a full-service hospital located in Auburn.

Public Health and Safety: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no additional impacts to public health and safety in the area.

Alternative B

Local fire, police and medical services would not be noticeably affected. In the case of an emergency, refuge staff and contractors would use current safety plans in place to address those needs.

Land use: Affected Environment

The proposed project area is located entirely within the boundaries of the Refuge. The proposed site is in an area that has developed infrastructure allowing public use in proximity to present utilities. Land use in the immediate surrounding areas consists of wetlands, forests, and early successional habitat.

Land use: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no impacts on the land use and real property of the area.

Alternative B

No transfer of ownership is required for the development of the proposed project. This alternative is contained within the boundary of the existing refuge and would have no impact on land use, property values, or tax revenues. The proposed development plans are consistent

with the current uses of refuge operations. Beneficial impacts would include increased visitation by the public, better orientation to the facility, and longer life expectancy of the facility.

3.5 Refuge Resources

Visitor Use and Experience: Affected Environment

In 2024, the Refuge had over 224,000 annual visits—many of which stop at the visitor center for orientation and maps, as well as shopping in the nature store, before heading out on the wildlife drive and trails.

Visitor Use and Experience: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no immediate impacts on Visitor use and Experience. However, as the existing buildings continue to deteriorate the visitor experience would be diminished.

Alternative B

The construction of a new facility would require the demolition of the existing visitor center to make room for the construction of the new building. This would result in the temporary interruption of some visitor service functions for the duration of the construction period—up to 2 years. This disruption may possibly be mitigated by some form of a temporary facility.

It is anticipated that there would be increased visitation associated with the new facility. The new facility would have new displays and educational opportunities which would create a draw for returning and new local and regional visitors. The multi-use facility would provide aesthetically pleasing and energy-efficient facilities for community outreach activities and community events.

Aesthetics, Viewsheds and Visual Resources: Affected Environment

Approximately 15 acres of the approximately 10,270-acre Refuge have been sparsely developed as a headquarters complex with associated infrastructure (roads, administrative/maintenance facilities, parking lots, utilities, and on-site wastewater disposal systems). The proposed project area would be approximately 5 acres, is within this campus, and is immediately adjacent to the existing visitor center (Figure 2).

Aesthetics, Viewsheds and Visual Resources: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be negligible to minimal impacts on the aesthetics of the area. Through time, this alternative could result in decreased aesthetics such as the continued deterioration of the headquarter building's facades and internal infrastructure resulting in an unappealing experience for refuge visitors.

Alternative B

The aesthetics of the Refuge and the surrounding properties are not expected to be adversely impacted in the long-term by the preferred alternative, but rather improved. The area immediately surrounding the project would remain undeveloped. The architecture of the proposed new building would reflect local architectural styles which would improve the aesthetics of the Refuge. Placement and design of the new building are planned to work with the existing viewshed, featuring views of the Visitor Center Wetland.

Management and Operations: Affected Environment

The current administrative office/visitor center area is already developed. The site contains electricity, a water delivery system, septic systems, and gas for heating.

Management and Operations: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the No Action Alternative, over time there would be increasing impacts on the management and operations of the area. Current utilities such as internet and phone are in a constant state of disrepair, which significantly reduces communications. Inadequate insulation, windows, and HVAC components of the current administrative office and visitor center would cause greater expenditures for energy use. Most of the HVAC systems and components are at the end of their useful life and would need to be replaced. Under this Alternative, water, septic and internet will eventually need to be upgraded for operations to continue. Leaking roofs, wet floors, and rodent infestations present a potentially unhealthy environment for staff and visitors.

Alternative B

Under the preferred alternative, management and operations would be enhanced through the upgrade of several important utilities, providing more reliable services and greater energy efficiency. Electric service would need to be upgraded from 2 phase power to 3 phase. Propane would not be needed for the new building as it would be total electric with some solar capabilities. This alternative would develop a new, more efficient septic system that would replace two aging and failing systems.

More complexity to operations would result at the Refuge from an additional 22 employees onsite. There would be more personal vehicles in the parking lots, higher usage of water and electricity, etc. However, this additional complexity would simply be the result of combining the two existing offices.

Separate from this proposal, the site is working towards updating internet service to fiber optic. Also separate from this EA, water is proposed to be brought in from a municipal system 0.6 mile away. The existing water system consists of buried cisterns where roof water is collected from buildings and supplemented from trucked in deliveries with separate deliveries for bottled potable water.

Administration: Affected Environment

Administration of the Refuge occurs from the headquarters area where the proposed project would occur. Administration of NYFO currently occurs from leased space in Cortland, NY. NYS DEC Conservation Officers currently use office space in the fur house.

Administration: Environmental Consequences

Alternative A

Under the no action alternative there would be no immediate interruption to the administration of the Refuge and NYFO. However, overtime as the existing buildings degrade, Refuge administration could be affected from things including increasing interruption of septic and water systems, internet, and building degradation.

Alternative B

Under the proposed alternative, there will be minimal temporary interruption to refuge administration. During construction, all staff would remain in their respective administration buildings. The move would occur after the new building has been completed. The only interruption would result from the actual move. The combination of the respective offices would increase the complexity onsite at the Refuge, but existing supervisory structure would remain intact and be able to effectively administer staffs.

3.7 Summary of Analysis

Alternative A – No Action Alternative

The No Action Alternative would not improve the renewable energy options or utility infrastructure of the facilities, would not allow co-location of Service programs, and would not meet the objectives of the project purpose and need. Additionally, no action would result in the continued occupation of the existing administrative office and visitor center. This would continue to result in higher energy costs and failing components that in the future would need

to be replaced. Finally, the life cycle of the components and building would not be renewed or extended. The visitor experience would be reduced over time as the state of the current building continues to deteriorate.

Alternative B – Proposed Development – Preferred Alternative

Based on the information gathered during preparation of the Environmental Assessment, the Proposed Development would not result in significant impacts to the environment and would provide a long-term beneficial impact.

Minimal adverse impacts include short-term decreased air quality due to heavy equipment and construction of new facility and soil compaction and vegetation displacement associated with the development. We do not anticipate any significant impacts to wetlands, cultural resources or protected species by the proposed project.

Beneficial impacts include improved aesthetics, improved ability to serve visitors and the community, enhanced economic value to the area, longer life cycle of the constructed assets, possible minor increase to the area population through co-location of Service staff, improved access to the multi-use facility, greater energy efficiency, and improved water quality.

Given the identified land use in the area surrounding the Refuge, as well as the limited affected acreage for the proposed project, there would be no loss of wetland habitat. Impacts are expected to be negligible at both a local and regional level because of the development and operation of the new multi-use facility.

Cumulative impacts are those impacts that result from the incremental impact of an action added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions in the future. The proposed project would require the demolition of the current administrative office and visitor center in addition to the design and construction of the multi-use facility. Disturbance would occur on a portion of the approximately 5 acres of developed property within the approximately 10,200-acre refuge. Other improvements likely to happen outside of this project would be to bring in municipal water and fiber optic. Both would follow the path of the entrance road.

Chapter 4: Consultation and Coordination

4.1 Public Involvement

This draft environmental assessment will be available for public review and comment for 30 days, from September 2, 2025, through October 1, 2025. Members of the public were notified of the availability of the draft documents via press release, social media, and the Refuge website. The draft document is available at the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge visitor center (3395 US Route 20 east, Seneca Falls, NY 13148), via email (mnt_refuge_admin@fws.gov), or it can be downloaded from the Refuge website

(<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/montezuma>). To access the document in an alternative format, contact the Refuge. Comments may be submitted in writing via email or by mail to the Refuge. Any comments, concerns, suggestions, or other feedback will be incorporated into the final environmental assessment if a substantive response is required.

4.2 State, Federal, and Local Agency Coordination

Consultation with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation occurred in August 2025. Several of their comments have been incorporated into the draft document for public review. Consultation related to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act began in June 2025 and is ongoing. Also ongoing is the Section 106 consultation.

4.3 Tribal Consultation

Consultation with the Cayuga Nation occurred in August/September 2025.

Chapter 5: List of Preparers and Sources

5.1 List of Preparers

Primary preparers : Bill Stewart, Refuge Manager, MNWR

Cassidy Attanasio, Biological Science Technician, MNWR

Reviewers: Laurence Levesque, Planning Chief, Region 5 Regional Office

Andrea Van Beusichem, Visitor Services Manager, MNWR

Tim Sullivan, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, NYFO

Lelaina Muth, Chief-Public Engagement, Historic Preservation, and Planning, Region 5 Regional Office

Meta Miner, Assistant Refuge Supervisor—North, Region 5 Regional Office

Erin Holmes, Acting Deputy Regional Refuge Chief, Region 5 Regional Office

Stacey Lowe, Acting Regional Refuge Chief, Region 5 Regional Office

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Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Web Soil Survey website (<http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/HomePage.htm>), accessed April 2021.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, 2008 Habitat Management Plan, July 2008.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, 2020 Hunting and Fishing Plan, July 2020.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, Comprehensive Conservation Plan, February 2013.



Figure 1. Vicinity Map of Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge.

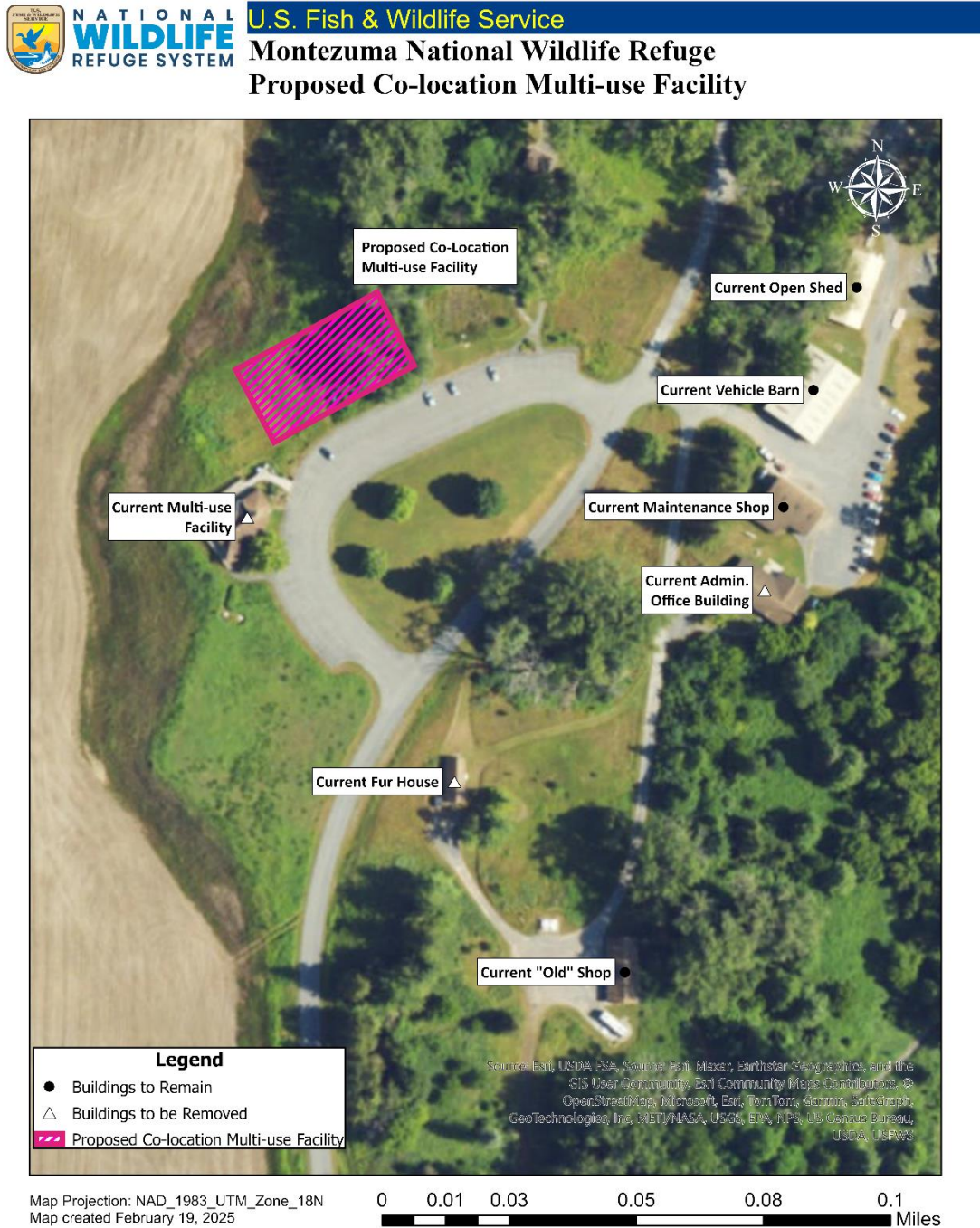


Figure 2. Current and Proposed locations of the Montezuma NWR Buildings.

