

CHAPTER 1

Purpose and Need for Action

We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), are an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior. We have several ongoing partnerships with Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT or Tribes) that allow us to work together to share resources and knowledge on projects of mutual interest. The Tribes have asked us to further expand and formalize this partnership through an annual funding agreement (AFA).

The purpose for this action—an AFA—is to fulfill our desire to enter into an expanded partnership agreement with CSKT under the authority of the Tribal Self-Governance Act of 1994 (Self-Governance Act) that would allow the Tribes to take part in refuge programs that are of special geographic, historical, or cultural significance. An AFA is needed to carry out the Tribe’s desire for tribal involvement in activities on the National Bison Range Complex (refuge complex or NBRC) under the framework of the Self-Governance Act. We have prepared this environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate the draft AFA we have developed with CSKT under the authority of the Self-Governance Act (United States House of Representatives [USHR] 1994). As part of the environmental analysis process under the National Environmental Policy Act (USHR 1970a), we have developed and analyzed four other alternatives (including no action) to the draft AFA, which is the proposed action in this EA. Each AFA alternative would allow CSKT to manage or assist with programs, services, functions, and activities on the refuge complex to various degrees for a term of 5 years.

An AFA would cover specific activities in only those portions of the refuge complex located within the boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation (reservation) in Lake and Sanders Counties in the Mission Valley of Montana (figure 1):

- National Bison Range (Bison Range or range)
- Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge (Ninepipe Refuge)
- Pablo National Wildlife Refuge (Pablo Refuge)
- Nine waterfowl production areas in the Lake County portion of the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District (district)

The remaining refuge complex units, including Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge and those portions of the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District outside the Reservation boundary, would not be included in any AFA. In addition, the management and enforcement of the Service’s conservation easement agreements would remain with the Service.

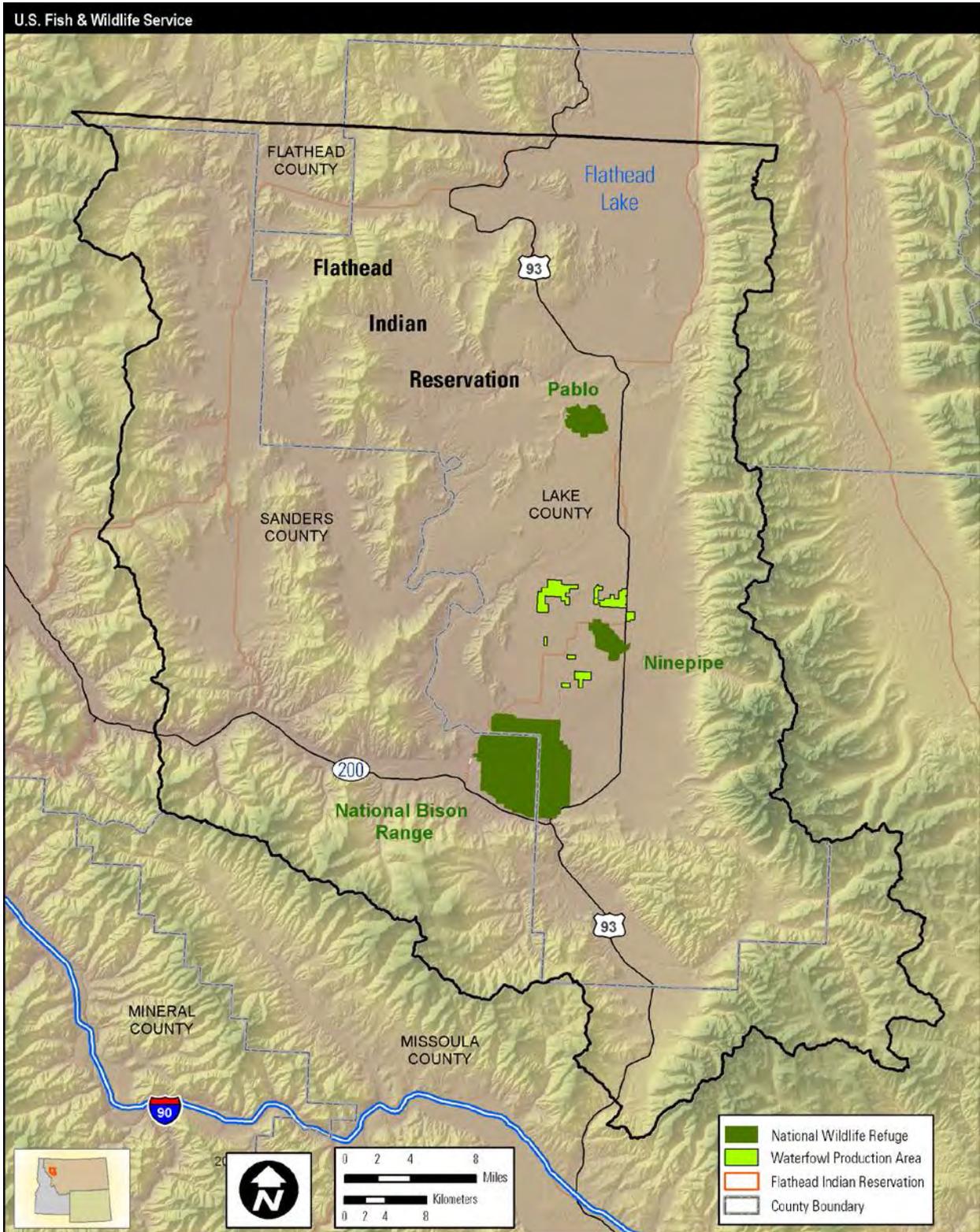


Figure 1. Map of the National Bison Range Complex within the boundary of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana.

All of these affected units, totaling 26,604 acres, and associated resources are further described in “Chapter 6—Affected Environment.” The United States owns all the lands within the refuge complex except the Ninepipe and Pablo Refuges. CSKT owns these two refuges, which are tribal trust lands. In 1948, the Service purchased perpetual refuge easements from CSKT that allows the Service to manage these lands as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System).

Besides providing an avenue for involving the Tribes in managing the refuge complex, an AFA should also help the refuge complex to:

- add or combine resources that would increase our capabilities for better understanding, management, and protection of refuge complex resources;
- share biological information and resources on projects and issues of mutual interest, both as colleagues and neighboring landowners;
- develop and deliver quality visitor services programs that interpret and inform visitors about the historical, cultural, and biological aspects of the refuge complex;

