

Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge

Coos County, New Hampshire and Oxford County, Maine



Record of Decision for the **Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



January 2009

Record of Decision

For the

Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service

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This Record of Decision (ROD) presents the decision regarding the selection of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge (formerly “Lake Umbagog” National Wildlife Refuge). It includes a brief summary of the alternatives considered, public involvement in the decision making process, and the reasons for selecting Alternative B for implementation. The Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge CCP will provide management guidance for conserving refuge resources and providing public use activities during the next 15 years.

Alternatives Considered

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) evaluated the following three alternatives contained in the Final CCP and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the management of Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

Alternative A (Current Management): This “no action” alternative, required by regulations under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, would simply extend the way we now manage the refuge over the next 15 years. It also provides a baseline for comparing the two “action” alternatives. We would continue to protect the refuge from external threats, monitor its key resources, and conduct baseline inventories to improve our knowledge of its ecosystem. We would continue our public use programs for wildlife observation, hunting and fishing, allow snowmobiling and camping at their present capacities in designated areas, and offer limited environmental education and interpretation. We would continue to acquire from willing sellers 7,482 acres within the approved refuge boundary, adding to its current 21,650 acres.

Alternative B (Management for Particular Habitats and Focal Species): This is the Service-preferred alternative. Its highest priority is to protect the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of habitats for Federal trust species on the refuge, as well as protect the associated wetlands, rivers and streams in the Umbagog Lake watershed. Active forest management would help conserve the upland mixed forest and sustain those native species dependent on the forest, including species of regional conservation concern whose habitat needs generally represent those of many other Federal trust resources. Alternative B would improve the quality of our wildlife-dependent recreation programs, and result in several new public uses being offered. New infrastructure would also be developed to provide additional trail and access

opportunities. It would also strengthen our partnerships with state and local entities and complement other recreational programs in the area. Another partnership would focus on developing a Land Management Research Demonstration (LMRD) program for applying the best available science in management decisions that affect wildlife resources in the Northern Forest. This alternative includes expanding the refuge as part of a network of conservation lands by acquiring 47,807 acres from willing sellers; our goal would be to acquire 56 percent in fee simple and 44 percent in easements. These proposed additions to the refuge are important for conserving refuge focal species and other Federal trust resources. Alternative B also proposes a new refuge headquarters and visitor contact facility. Refuge staffing and budgets would increase commensurately.

Alternative C (Management to Create Natural Landscape Composition, Patterns and Processes):

This alternative focuses on sustaining natural ecological communities, rather than selected Federal trust species or their habitats. It would result in passively or actively manipulating vegetation to create or hasten the development of natural communities, landscape patterns and processes. It would improve current wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities with primary emphasis on providing low-density, dispersed, back-country opportunities away from the lake. Alternative C would not, however, allow the new public uses planned under Alternative B nor develop all the new trails. Alternative C would strengthen our partnerships, develop the LMRD program, and add a new refuge headquarters and visitor contact facility similar to Alternative B. It would expand the refuge by 74,414 acres, which we would purchase entirely in fee simple from willing sellers. Our target would be to create contiguous blocks of hydrologically connected conservation areas greater than 25,000 acres: the size we estimate as the minimum necessary to facilitate the natural progression of ecological processes in the Northern Forest conservation network.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The alternative which causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment and best protects, preserves, and enhances natural resources is Alternative C. Its proposed refuge expansion of 74,414 acres, all in fee title, would provide the most extensive land protection of all the alternatives and would allow for complete Service management authority. In addition, compared to Alternative B, less active management in the refuge's upland forests is planned, and fewer recreational infrastructure developments would be implemented.

Alternative C, however, does not represent the best balance between resource conservation and impacts to public use, recreational opportunities, and local communities.

Public Involvement and Comments Received

Public comment has been requested, considered, and incorporated throughout the planning process in numerous ways. Public outreach has included open houses, public meetings, technical workshops, planning update mailings, and Federal Register notices. Four previous notices were

published in the Federal Register concerning this CCP/EIS (67 FR 46682, July 16, 2002; 72 FR 37041, July 6, 2007; 72 FR 45044, August 10, 2007; and 73 FR 73661, December 3, 2008). Numerous national, state, and local organizations; agencies; neighboring landowners; and interested citizens were involved in the review process. Comments and concerns received early in the planning process were used to identify issues and draft preliminary alternatives. During the 77-day draft CCP/EIS comment period that occurred from July 6, 2007 to September 21, 2007, we received a total of 14,269 comments via email, letters, faxes, comment sheets, oral testimony at public hearings, visits, or telephone calls. All substantive issues raised in the comments on the draft CCP/EIS have been addressed through revisions incorporated into the final CCP/EIS text or responses contained in Appendix O of the final CCP/EIS. With a few exceptions, management guidance and actions in Alternative B of the final CCP/EIS remain consistent with those presented in the draft CCP/EIS. The exceptions or most important modifications to Alternative B that were made between draft and final documents are detailed below under "Decision."

Responses to Comments Received On the Final CCP/EIS

The Service issued a final CCP/EIS in December 2008 for a 33-day review period. We held a public information session on December 16, 2008 attended by 50 people. People attending the session were asked to submit any comments to us in writing. We received 90 emails in support of implementing Alternative B, and 3 emails in support of additional land protection, but with concerns for Federal government ownership. We also received support or concurrence for Alternative B from the following federal and state agencies: Environmental Protection Agency; Maine Department of Conservation – Land Use Regulatory Commission; Maine Historic Preservation Commission; Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife; New Hampshire Fish and Game; and, New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources. Four additional emails state opposition to Alternative B as detailed in the final CCP/EIS; however, their comments did not raise significant new issues, or result in changes to the analysis, or warrant any further changes to Alternative B. Their comments were previously addressed in our response to public comments detailed in Appendix O of the final CCP/EIS.

Decision

We have selected Alternative B, Management for Particular Habitats and Focal Species, as specified in the final CCP/EIS as the CCP for Umbagog NWR. Alternative B is the most effective alternative at addressing the issues and concerns identified during the planning process and will best achieve the purpose and need for developing a CCP, the purpose and goals of the refuge, as well as the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Implementation of the CCP will occur over the next 15 years. This decision includes the following important modifications we made to Alternative B in the final CCP/EIS in response to public comment:

- 1) Designated areas on the refuge will be open to certain public uses not included in the draft document. These include dog-sledding, horseback riding, bicycling, and the collection of berries, fiddleheads, mushrooms and shed antlers.

- 2) The number of acres proposed for acquisition from willing sellers will be 47,807 acres. The Service now proposes a target goal of acquiring 56 percent of these lands in fee title (full ownership) and 44 percent in conservation easement, rather than 65 percent in fee title and 35 percent in easement as proposed in the draft document.
- 3) Two new maps in the final CCP/EIS clarify the roads, trails, and boat launches we will open or maintain for public use on both current refuge lands and proposed refuge expansion lands. These are presented as Maps 2-8 and 2-9 in Chapter 2.
- 4) We will postpone a decision on whether to manage furbearer species, and whether that management should include trapping. We will conduct further analysis and prepare a more detailed Furbearer Management Plan, if appropriate, under a separate planning and public involvement process within three years of CCP approval.
- 5) We will postpone a decision on whether to expand our current hunt program to include bobcat hunting in Maine and turkey hunting in Maine and New Hampshire. We will conduct further analysis in conjunction with preparing an environmental assessment under a separate planning and public involvement process within two years of CCP approval.
- 6) We clarify in Chapter 2 under the Alternative B discussion that our hunting and fishing programs will not change, and we better explain that we intend to implement those programs similarly on any newly acquired lands.
- 7) We commit to completing a Fire Management Plan within two years of CCP approval.
- 8) We modify our proposal in alternatives B and C regarding boat access, by eliminating our original proposals for a boat launch at Sturtevant Pond and major improvements at B Pond. We are scaling back our proposal at B Pond to include a small parking area near the road, away from the shore. We also propose keeping the boat launch at the current refuge headquarters on Route 16 North open to public access, instead of closing it.

Factors Considered in Making the Decision

This decision was made after considering the impacts identified in Chapter 4, Environmental Consequences, of the draft and final CCP/EIS; the results of public and other agency comments; how well the alternative achieves the stated purpose and need for action and the seven goals presented in the final EIS/CCP Chapter 1; how well the alternative addresses the relevant issues, concerns, and opportunities identified during the planning process; and other relevant factors, including fulfilling the purposes for which the refuge was established, contributing to the mission and goals of the Refuge System, and statutory and regulatory guidance.

Compared to the other two alternatives, Alternative B includes the suite of actions that best meet those evaluation criteria using the most balanced and integrated approach, and with due consideration for both the biological and human environment. Alternative B will best fulfill the biological goals as a priority, with its emphasis on managing for particular Federal trust species and habitats that are of regional conservation concern. It clearly defines which Federal trust species and habitats will be a management priority in both uplands and wetlands, and details specific objectives and strategies for their management. Within the biological program,

protecting the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of Umbagog Lake and its associated rivers and wetlands is paramount, followed by the conservation of migratory birds in both wetland and upland habitats. These are the two primary areas of emphasis stated in the refuge's establishment purposes. Alternative B also integrates management for other native regional species of concern, such as the Eastern brook trout, to assist in implementation of the goals and objectives in the interagency Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture.

The proposed refuge expansion of 47,807 acres, acquired through a combination of fee title and conservation easement from willing sellers, is essential to meeting the biological goals and objectives. These lands are predominantly undeveloped; either are or have the potential to be high quality wildlife habitat; occur in an amount and distribution to provide the Service management flexibility to achieve our habitat goals and objectives; and, will collectively result in a land base that affords a vital linkage to other conserved lands in the Upper Androscoggin watershed and Northern Forest Region. This proposal is the result of a very active regional partnership and fully complements the management on adjacent conserved lands, both public and private. It also complements the original purposes and intent for which the refuge was established. The easement option is not provided for under Alternatives A and C, but is an important benefit of Alternative B for many landowners. It allows the landowner and the Service greater flexibility with potential acquisition methods (fee versus easement) in order to meet the stated resource goals and objectives. Ultimately, the method of acquisition within the approved refuge boundary is dependent on the desires of the willing seller.

Alternative B also provides the best balance of new and improved recreational opportunities and visitor services, and allows new public uses desired by the public that would not occur under Alternatives A and C. It will enhance the existing priority public use opportunities for hunting and fishing by providing better outreach and information materials, and improving access and parking. Opportunities for other priority public uses, such as viewing and photographing wildlife and interpretation will expand, primarily by providing new infrastructure such as trails, viewing areas, new roadside pullouts, information kiosks, and viewing platforms. As for other public uses, we will continue to allow recreational activities established in the area such as snowmobiling and camping in designated areas. Under Alternative B, in response to public comment, we plan to formally open the refuge to new uses including collecting berries, fiddleheads, mushrooms and antler sheds for personal use, and allowing bicycling, dogsledding, and horseback riding on designated trails. Alternative B will also extend permanent protection for that public access and recreation through the proposed refuge expansion.

Umbagog NWR's role in the regional land conservation partnership is clearly defined under Alternative B, as is its role in contributing to the Land Management and Research Demonstration program in the Northern Forest. This partnership with other Northern Forest national wildlife refuges will promote research and the development of applied management practices to benefit species and habitats of conservation concern. It will also provide us an opportunity to showcase an adaptive management approach to dealing with spatial and temporal changes and environmental events, whether foreseen or unforeseen, and other new information or events that

occur. This process will be especially critical as we deal with the uncertainty surrounding the extent and potential impacts of climate change. Alternative B also includes an enhanced monitoring program to ensure we are assessing management actions and outcomes and tracking critical resources and indicators of biological integrity, diversity and environmental health.

Alternative B will have a positive local and regional socio-economic impact. It will enhance local community outreach and partnerships, support a Friends Group, and provide valuable volunteer experiences to both youth and adults. It emphasizes improved communications and problem-solving with local communities and adjacent landowners. Alternative B contributes positively to the overall two-county economy through Refuge Revenue Sharing payments, staff purchases and other expenditures, and the expenditures of refuge visitors to the local area. A detailed economic analysis showing the various economic contributions was provided in Appendix G of the final CCP/EIS.

In summary, Alternative B was selected for implementation because it provides the greatest number of opportunities for Umbagog NWR to contribute to the conservation of fish, wildlife, and habitat in the region, will increase the capacity of the refuge to meet its purposes and contribute to the Refuge System mission, will provide the means to better respond to changing ecological and socio-economic conditions within the surrounding environment, and will make a positive contribution to the local and regional communities.

Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm

Public concerns, potential impacts, and measures or stipulations to mitigate those impacts are addressed in the final CCP/EIS. All practicable measures to avoid or minimize environmental impacts that could result from implementation of Alternative B have been identified and incorporated into Chapter 2 (Alternatives Considered, Including the Service-preferred Alternative), Chapter 4 (Environmental Consequences), and Appendix C (Findings of Appropriateness and Compatibility Determinations) of the final CCP/EIS. The stipulations identified in the compatibility determinations in Appendix C ensure that public and other uses are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. These compatibility determination stipulations and other mitigation measures identified for Alternative B in Chapters 2 and 4 of the final CCP/EIS are adopted by the Service in this ROD and will be followed or enforced by refuge staff or their designee.


Findings Required by Other Laws and Executive Orders.

The final CCP/EIS complies with all Federal laws and Executive Orders (EO) related to the planning process and Umbagog NWR. These include, but are not limited to, the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57); the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (Public Law 91-190, as amended); the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-205, as amended); the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665); the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577, as amended); EO 12898,

Environmental Justice; EO 11988, Floodplain Management; EO 11990, Protection of Wetlands; EO 12372, Intergovernmental Review; EO 13186, Protection of Migratory Birds; and EO 13175, Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal governments.

For Further Information

For further information contact the Refuge Manager, Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge, P.O. Box 240, Route 16 North Errol, New Hampshire 03579, Phone (603) 482-3415. Copies of the final CCP/EIS and ROD may be viewed at refuge headquarters and at the following libraries in the states of New Hampshire: Errol Public Library, Berlin Public Library, White Mountains Community College, and Gorham Public Library; and, in Maine: Bethel Public Library. The final CCP/EIS and this ROD will also be available for viewing and downloading online at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/Lake%20Umbagog/ccphome.html>.



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Date