

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

Introduction

Planning for Driftless Area NWR began with preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement. Public involvement efforts followed Service policy for comprehensive conservation planning, and also adhered to National Environmental Policy Act requirements for environmental documentation.

Originally, planning for Driftless Area NWR was included in planning for the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which in addition to Driftless Area NWR also includes Trempealeau NWR. It quickly became apparent that the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge would be a significant planning project in its own right, and the two other refuges within the Complex would be better served by proceeding with comprehensive conservation planning and preparation of an EIS on their own. For that reason, the initial public scoping meeting held for Driftless Area NWR were held as part of the larger Upper Mississippi River NWR Complex planning project.



Prothonotary Warbler: USFWS

Meetings and Public Involvement

Four public scoping meetings were held in August and September 2002 to obtain input on issues. The meetings were held in Dubuque, Elkader, and Lansing, Iowa, and Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, in combination with the Upper Mississippi River NWR scoping meetings. Eighty-four citizens attended and 21 comments were received. One additional written comment was received after the meetings. An evening “Manager for a Day” workshop was held in Elkader, Iowa in Spring 2003 to obtain potential solutions to the issues. There were 15 participants at the workshop. Four mailings of a CCP newsletter have been sent to a mailing list of 2,800 people including individuals, landowners, organizations, media, and congressional staff.

From public involvement activities, the Service learned about issues that concerned people about management of the Refuge. Refuge staff also identified issues. We organized the issues into four categories: Habitat Management, Visitor Services, Refuge Expansion, and Species Assessments. Alternatives were evaluated in the EIS on the basis of these issues.

Issues Identified in Scoping

Issue 1: Habitat Management

Because of the purpose of the Refuge, management of endangered species habitat is the top priority. Land acquired for the Refuge typically has been impacted by agricultural or logging activities. Habitats include hardwood forest, grassland and riparian areas. Refuge lands are small parcels, often fragmented from similar habitat in the area. Current management is to restore as much as practical to presettlement habitat types around algific slopes, although lack of funds and staff limit restoration efforts. Several external factors are influencing management efforts on the Refuge. Invasive species such as garlic mustard are impacting endangered species and other wildlife habitat. High local deer populations may also impact habitat. Erosion from farming adjacent to the Refuge can affect habitat on the Refuge.



Northern monkshood, Driftless Area NWR. Terry Tracy

Potential solutions identified by the public were to develop management strategies for forests, including consideration of deer impacts, expand management of habitats surrounding endangered species habitat, and work to control invasive species.

Issue 2: Visitor Services

Public use has not been emphasized on Driftless Area NWR because of concern for the fragile endangered species habitat, and the small size and lack of access to some units. Two of nine units are currently open to public use. Potential solutions suggested by the public were to maintain current hunting policies but increase awareness of regulations at the site, consider trail development in less sensitive areas, provide on-site information and education at select algific slopes while restricting direct access and negative impacts, provide guided walks, and encourage volunteers.

Issue 3: Refuge Expansion

The Refuge has reached its approved acquisition acreage. Refuge expansion will facilitate recovery goals and allow delisting of target species according to their recovery plans. Refuge land acquisition is aimed at protecting the entire algific slope system (endangered species habitat), including upland sinkholes and buffer area around the slope. Many of the currently protected algific slopes do not have adequate protection of sinkholes nor provide buffer from adjacent agricultural or other uses. Conservation of additional snail and monkshood populations is also needed to preserve genetic diversity over their range, protect large populations, and protect the majority of the populations as required by the recovery plans. Therefore expansion in Wisconsin is needed. Expansion in Minnesota would also allow protection of threatened Leedy's roseroot and species of concern. Protection of Service species of concern may preclude the need for future listing and would conserve a unique representative natural community and its biodiversity.

Potential approaches raised by the public were: to investigate other alternatives in addition to acquisition (e.g. conservation easements), increase funding for land protection, connect parcels of land where possible and expand boundaries to roads, railroads, or more recognizable features.

Issue 4: Species Assessments

Algific slopes were first described and mapped in the 1980s (Frest 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1987). Additional information about algific talus slopes and the species that inhabit them is needed. For example, locations of sinkholes and specific information on distances and function of the cold air flow have not been studied. There are nearly 400 algific slopes/moderate cliffs in the Driftless Area, but not all are occupied by currently listed species. Few in-depth species surveys were done and many of

the known algific slope sites were only visited once. There may be rare, endemic, or unidentified species in this habitat. It is important to know what plants and animals depend on this habitat to prepare effective management strategies. Although original surveys to locate this habitat type were systematic and comprehensive, some sites likely remain undiscovered.

Review of the Draft EIS/CCP

The Draft EIS was released in May 2005 for a 60-day public review period. The review period extended from May 18 through July 22, 2005. During this review period, four public meetings were held in Decorah, Elkader, and Peosta, Iowa, and LaFarge, Wisconsin. Thirty-three people attended.

Approximately 156 copies of the DEIS summary and 87 copies of the Draft EIS were mailed based on the distribution list and upon request. A letter inviting comment was also sent along with the summary to 81 landowners who adjoin Refuge lands or who have species listed under the Endangered Species Act occurring on their land. Each Draft EIS summary contained information on how to obtain a copy of the DEIS.

Comments at the public meetings were recorded on a flip chart and a comment sheet was provided to encourage and facilitate additional written comments. Twelve comment letters or emails were received during the public review period and are included in the Final EIS. We adapted many of the revisions that were suggested regarding Refuge management. Several comments related to slight editorial corrections, and these comments were incorporated into the document.

Final EIS/CCP and Record of Decision

The Final EIS/CCP was distributed to local libraries and persons who requested the full document. The document was also posted on the Region's planning website. A project update was sent to elected officials and others who requested information about the project. The update described the highlights of the final document and how to request a copy. A Notice of Availability of the Final EIS/CCP was published in the Federal Register by the Environmental Protection Agency on February 17, 2006.

No comments were received in the 30 days after the publication of the Federal Register notice.

The Regional Director signed a Record of Decision on April 18, 2006.