

## Chapter 2 The Planning Process

The Ottawa Refuge Complex CCP has been written with the participation of Service staff, Refuge users and the local community. Because it will serve as a guide to Refuge management for the next 10 to 15 years, public input into the CCP is vital. Refuge staff and the entire planning team are grateful to all of the people who have contributed their time, expertise and ideas either by attending open houses or focus group discussions or through written comments. All of the ideas have been valuable and they have contributed to a useful plan.

The CCP planning process began in July 1997 with informal discussions among Refuge employees, local residents and representatives of groups concerned with the future of the Ottawa Refuge Complex. Refuge staff members and a group of local individuals with various outdoor interests gathered in August 1997 to discuss their thoughts and ideas during a two-day session. Members of the public were notified of two open house events held in Oregon, Ohio, and Oak Harbor, Ohio, in November 1997 via news releases and posters displayed in the two communities. News releases were also issued inviting people who were unable to attend the open houses to send in written comments on any Refuge *issue*. Eighteen people attended the two open houses and 12 individuals submitted comment sheets.



Photo by Sharon Cummings

In addition to the open house events, the Refuge sought input from technical experts, including a group of regional migratory bird biologists and others. All of the group notes and written comments focused on ways to help the Ottawa Refuge Complex achieve its purpose, goals and objectives. A summary of public and focus group comments is presented in Appendix H.

The Ottawa Refuge Complex CCP was published in two phases. In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, a draft plan presented a range of *alternatives* for future management and identified the *preferred alternative*. A 30-day public review period followed the release of the draft plan. More than 400 copies of a Draft Summary CCP were mailed to individuals who had requested to be on the Service's mailing list for this project. One hundred copies of the full CCP were distributed to agencies and people who had requested them. In addition, the planning team held a public open house event on June 22, 2000, at the Refuge to present the draft CCP.

Verbal and written comments received from the public concerning the draft CCP contributed to several modifications reflected in this document. The



Service received 12 letters and e-mail comments during the review period. The comments covered a variety of topics and detail and not all thoughts could result in direct changes to the CCP. For example, some writers simply endorsed the future direction of Refuge management presented in the plan. Five people supported the land acquisition program and one person offered a strategy to link existing riparian habitats. Several writers stated a preference for wildlife observation (primarily bird watching) over hunting or recommended a shift in the balance of these uses on the Ottawa Refuge Complex. In a few cases, reviewers offered smaller, technical changes and we were able to easily incorporate those ideas.

## Summary of Issues, Concerns and Opportunities

A wide range of issues, concerns and opportunities was expressed during the planning process. Numerous discussions among Refuge and planning staff, focus group participants and resource specialists brought to light several recurring themes. These thoughts have been consolidated into the following five categories:

### Habitat Management

A primary concern during the planning process has been the future direction of habitat management throughout the Ottawa Refuge Complex. Planning participants expressed a desire to see improved diversity of plant, fish and wildlife species through the restoration of native habitat. Habitat management can be divided into these broad categories:

#### Upland Habitat

Several participants wanted to see more emphasis placed on creating grassland and woodland habitats on the Refuge. Specific comments included converting existing croplands, approximately 410 acres, to these habitat types. The timing of grass and brush mowing on dike roads to benefit migrating birds was also a point of concern to several individuals.

#### Wetland Habitat

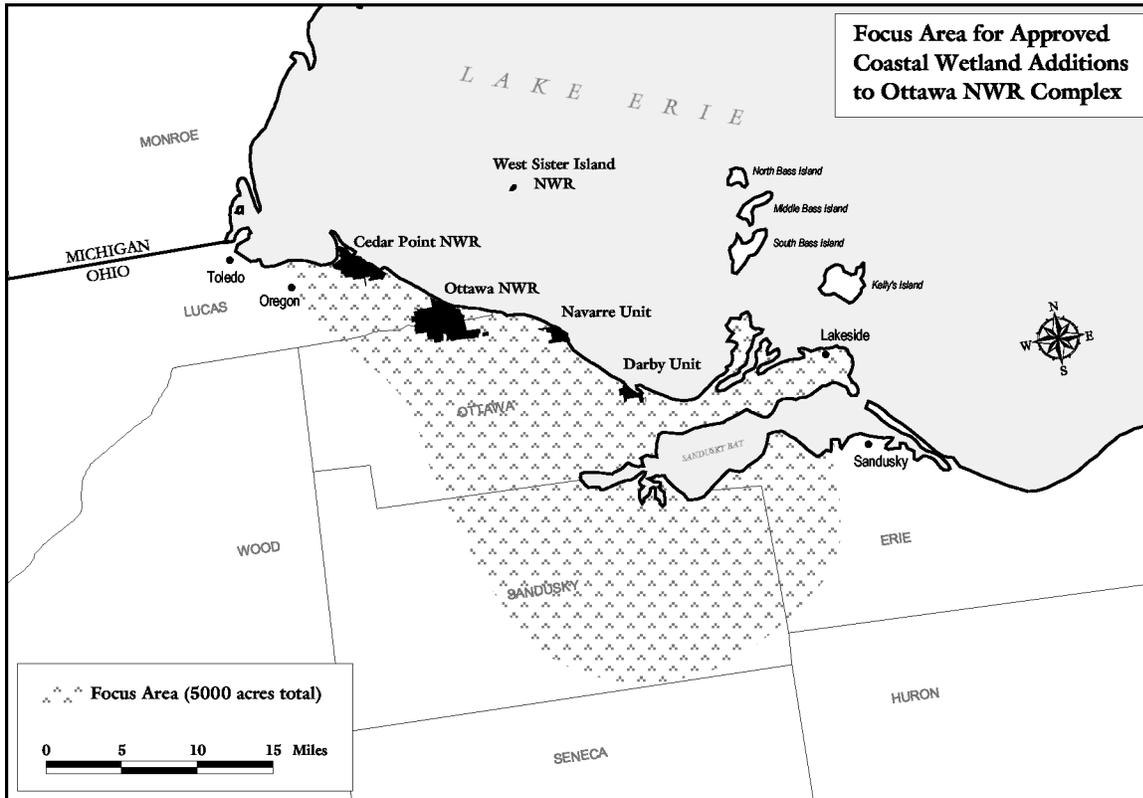
The Ottawa Refuge Complex actively manages water levels in a number of diked wetland impoundments to maintain or improve fish and wildlife habitats. Several planning participants expressed interest in the location and timing of water impoundment drawdowns and flooding.

#### Croplands

Some planning participants said that planting row crops, such as corn and soybeans, within Refuge units is unnecessary because of the volume of private croplands surrounding the Refuge. Conversely, comments were also made that growing crops on Refuge land helps to reduce crop damage by deer on surrounding farmlands and provides an accessible food source for migrant waterfowl.



Figure 3: Focus Area for Approved Coastal Wetland Additions to ONWR



### Land Acquisition

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed an *environmental assessment* in 1994 that recommended acquisition of up to 5,000 acres of critical wetland habitats in Lucas, Sandusky, Ottawa and Erie counties for addition to the Ottawa Refuge Complex (Figure 3). This land will be purchased from willing sellers as opportunities and funding arise. Several comments for and against Refuge expansion were received during the CCP *scoping* process.

### Migratory Bird Diversity

A number of ideas and concerns were expressed about land management practices that could be used to encourage use of Refuge lands by a wider variety of migratory birds. Discussions focused on creating desirable habitat for shorebirds and neo-tropical migrant songbirds.

### Recreation and Environmental Education

#### Visitor Services

Nearly all participants agreed that the Ottawa Refuge Complex is not well known in the local community. Many participants believe that the Refuge is often perceived as “off limits” to the general public. Ideas for increasing visibility included building a visitor center, maintaining weekend hours at the existing Refuge headquarters and expanding the Refuge environmental education program.



#### Vehicle Access

Several people expressed a desire to see more Refuge roads opened to the general public for vehicle traffic as an auto-tour. All roads, with the exception of the main entrance road near the Refuge headquarters, are currently closed. Several participants cautioned the Refuge to weigh vehicle access against the potential impacts to nesting bald eagles, migrating birds and other wildlife.

#### **Partnerships and Cooperative Relationships**

A number of participants felt that the Refuge staff should expand cooperative working relations with local non-profit organizations, industry, neighboring landowners and State and local governments. Participants said that the Ottawa Refuge Complex could benefit directly by finding new sources of volunteers for a variety of programs. In addition, improved relations could result in support and understanding of Refuge management objectives by local residents.

