

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

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This chapter describes key points in planning, public involvement, issues, and opportunities identified for Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge (NWR, Refuge), the publication of the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA), and the public review and comment period for the Draft CCP and EA. Note that steps 7 (Implement Plan, Monitor, and Evaluate) and 8 (Review and Revise Plan) are listed in this chapter, but the details for each are provided in chapter 5.

Overview of the Planning Process

Below is a brief overview of each of the eight steps of the comprehensive conservation planning process as they played out for Big Stone NWR.

1 – Pre-planning: Plan the Plan

The Refuge began pre-planning for the CCP in 2008. At an October 2008 meeting Regional Office planners and Refuge staff met to discuss likely planning issues, data needs, and to develop a draft version of the Refuge vision and goals for public review. We formed a planning team comprised of Refuge staff, Regional Office planning staff, representatives from other programs within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS, Service), and representatives from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR). We also assembled and organized Geographic Information System (GIS) data.

2 – Initiate Public Involvement and Scoping

In December 2008 scoping and public involvement officially began. Scoping is a term used in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to describe the process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action, in this case developing a CCP for the Refuge. In late January 2009, the planning team met with invited representatives from the Service and the Minnesota DNR to discuss Refuge management concerns and opportunities. In February 2009, the Refuge held an open house meeting to collect public input. The sequence of scoping events and other planning milestones are summarized in table 2-1; additional scoping information is included in the planning record.

Table 2-1: Summary of Scoping and Planning Events

Date	Event
October 7, 2008	The planning team held a meeting with Refuge staff to kick off the CCP process and collect comments on known issues and opportunities and develop a draft version of the Refuge vision and goals.
December 17, 2008	A Notice of Intent to prepare a CCP was published in the <i>Federal Register</i> marking the official start of the scoping process.
December 30, 2008	An invitation letter was sent to local elected officials inviting them to attend a January open house meeting.
December 31, 2008	A news release was sent to eight local media outlets announcing the date, time, and location of an open house to gather public comments.
January 8, 2009	The website for the Refuge CCP planning effort, with planning information such as the date and location of the scoping meeting and online comment submission, was made available.
January 13, 2009	An open house meeting scheduled for this date was postponed because of inclement weather.
January 27-29, 2009	The planning team met with invited representatives from the Service and Minnesota DNR to discuss Refuge management concerns and opportunities.
February 24, 2009	An open house meeting was held at Odessa City Hall from 2:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. attended by about 25 people who submitted 15 response sheets collectively containing dozens of comments.
March 19, 2009	The planning team held a meeting in the Midwest Regional Office at Fort Snelling, MN to collect additional comments from regional staff on issues and opportunities associated with the Refuge.
December 1–3, 2009	The planning team met to develop alternatives.
May 9, 2012	The Draft CCP and EA is made available for public comment
May 23, 2012	An open house meeting was held at Odessa City Hall from 2:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. attended by about 10 people.
June 8, 2012	Close of the comment period on the Draft CCP and EA.

3 – Review Vision Statement and Goals, and Determine Significant Issues

The Refuge vision is presented in chapter 1 and the Refuge goals are included in chapter 3. We determined significant issues by grouping and summarizing the comments received from the public as well as by Service and Minnesota DNR staff into nine planning issues that describe problems or opportunities associated with the Refuge. Two of the nine issues were not considered in detail. A summary of each issue and an explanation for the two not addressed in detail follows.

Planning Issues

An issue is any unsettled matter that requires a management decision, such as an initiative, opportunity, resource management problem, threat to the resources of the unit, conflict in uses, public concern, or the presence of an undesirable resource condition. Issues arise from both within and outside of the Service. Public scoping as well as scoping of Refuge and Region Service staff and other agencies produced nine issues, with seven presented immediately below and two more detailed later in this chapter under “Other Issues Considered.”

Minnesota River Channel Flow

The course of the Minnesota River within the Refuge changed in 1985. That year marked the completion of a diversion channel built to serve as an additional water pathway during high flows. The diversion channel never worked as intended. Instead of handling excess water during high flows, it shifted the course of the Minnesota River, displacing five miles of meandering river with less than a mile of straight channel. The redirected flow increased water supply and sediment deposition and decreased the quality of waters in Refuge wetlands. Cattails flourished atop accumulated sediment. The expanding cattail mats further slowed waterflow leading to yet more sedimentation. This ongoing process continues to cause water to spread out and move as sheet flow overland instead of within a defined channel. Combined with poor drainage, this hampers water level management of West Pool impoundment, which in turn affects the amount and quality of habitat available to migratory birds.

Refuge Integrity

Some activities beyond the Refuge boundary affect the ecological integrity and aesthetic qualities within the Refuge boundary. Land use and activity on lands adjacent to the Refuge, within the Upper Minnesota River Watershed and beyond, affect the water, air, and solitude within the Refuge. The Service is also emphasizing the conservation challenge posed by global climate change. The local consequences of global climate change are uncertain but could profoundly impact Refuge resources.

Abandoned Quarries

Abandoned quarries on the Refuge offer potential recreation opportunities and hazards. There are three abandoned quarries, now filled with water, within the Refuge boundary. In the past, access was permitted at the three quarry sites. Access was discontinued and the sites fenced because of the hazards posed by cables, metal plates, and other remnants left behind from the quarry operation.

Invasive and/or Nuisance Species

Certain plants and animals increase in number or extent to the point that they diminish species diversity, often displacing other species of greater conservation concern. Whether native to the local area—such as cattails, or non-native—such as common carp or reed canarygrass, all are prone to dominate and alter habitats in a way that adversely affects the ability of the Refuge to meet its management objectives.

Maintenance

The amount of maintenance associated with Refuge habitats and facilities exceeds existing workforce capacity. Roads, dikes, water control structures, administrative buildings, and public access facilities on the Refuge and within the Big Stone Wetland Management District are maintained by Refuge staff. In the past, two workers, one full-time and one half-time, were devoted to these duties. Today the Refuge has only one full-time maintenance worker position.

Law Enforcement

The Refuge System is guided by a policy of wildlife first, but it also encourages providing wildlife-dependent recreation at suitable levels. Refuge regulations set the boundaries for visitor activities, and enforcing those regulations plays an important role in helping the Refuge fulfill its purposes as well as the mission of the agency. Formerly, enforcement duties were carried out by Refuge staff with training and collateral responsibilities in law enforcement. The Service now relies on fewer full-time law enforcement officers that provide services to one or more Refuge System units. Currently, under this model, the Refuge has less onsite law enforcement presence than in the past.

Visitor Services

Demand for visitor services, facilities, and information exceeds existing supply and/or the capacity of existing staff and budgets. Annual visitation is estimated at approximately 30,000, and the Refuge currently offers opportunities for wildlife observation, photography, hunting, fishing, environmental education, and interpretation. There is interest in increasing or enhancing existing opportunities as well as for offering new opportunities. Most often this is expressed as requests for additional services or facilities. The cumulative effect of these actions must be balanced against the wildlife first policy of the Refuge System.

Other Issues Considered

The public identified some additional issues and concerns during scoping. The planning team considered these issues but did not address them in detail. The issues along with explanations of why they were not addressed in detail are described below.

Wildlife Abundance and Visibility

Some Refuge visitors who drive the Auto Tour Route report seeing less wildlife than in past years, especially deer, and attribute this to various causes including inadequate food resources or high coyote numbers. Some support planting more crops to provide food for wildlife while others believe coyote numbers should be reduced on the Refuge through hunting and trapping.

Explanation

The planning team considered this issue but chose not to include a specific response within the range of alternatives, because the abundance of white-tailed deer, coyotes, and other commonly viewed wildlife occur on the Refuge within expected levels. Wildlife abundance is closely correlated with habitat quality. The alternatives do address management of Refuge habitats.

Wildlife food sources vary seasonally and annually in response to a number of factors. Many who enjoy viewing white-tailed deer and other wildlife are alarmed when these animals are not concentrated and easily visible. Native habitats, like those on the Refuge, offer a variety of widely available food sources that both sustain wildlife and distribute it, making it less visible. Crops and food plots do attract deer and other wildlife making them more visible. But cropland is not native habitat, it requires intensive management, and it has less value to many wildlife species, including those in decline such as grassland birds. A greater number of wildlife species benefit from native habitat, especially habitats that are scarce such as prairie and wetlands.

However, cropping is used on the Refuge as an initial stage in grassland restoration, and a portion of the Refuge is likely to be in cropland for years to come as part of such restoration.

Coyotes do occur on the Refuge but not in high numbers. Although coyotes may occasionally prey upon white-tailed deer, deer are not a primary food source. White-tailed deer numbers are at or above population goals set by the Minnesota DNR for the management zone where the Refuge is located. Also, coyotes prey upon and displace smaller predators, such as red fox, which otherwise would occur in higher numbers. Red fox and other small predators commonly prey on waterfowl and other birds.

Tree Removal for Habitat Restoration

There is opposition to removing trees as part of habitat restoration. People object to removing trees for various reasons including that trees provide cover for hunters, nostalgia associated with former homesteads, loss of trees as wildlife habitat, and concern about resource waste if the trees are not utilized for other purposes.

Explanation

The planning team considered this issue but did not include tree retention within the range of alternatives, because Service policy calls for maintaining or restoring Refuge habitats to historic conditions if doing so does not conflict with Refuge purposes. The Refuge is located in an area that was historically prairie with few trees. Through the years people increased the amount of trees through plantings and suppression of wildfire. Prairie restoration includes removing many of these trees. Leaving trees within prairies and other grasslands diminishes their value to grassland-associated wildlife, including some, such as grassland birds, that are declining in number.

4 – Develop and Analyze Alternatives, Including the Proposed Action

The planning team met in early December 2009 to develop a range of alternatives created to address the planning issues and adhere to Refuge management direction. The planning team developed five alternatives in addition to the No Action alternative using the following process.

- The team considered the issues, current Refuge management, existing policies and guidance, and other information regarding biological resources and visitor services.
- Next, the team identified the aspects of Refuge management associated with each issue; that is, the elements of management likely to change in response to the issue.
- For each issue, the team identified a range of potential changes for the associated elements of Refuge management.
- The team broke into two groups, each drawing from the range of potential changes, to develop two alternatives.
- The two groups reconvened, deliberated, and ultimately developed an additional alternative that became the preferred alternative.

The six alternatives represented different approaches to the protection, restoration, and management of the Refuge's fish, wildlife, plants, habitats, and other resources as well as to compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

5 – Prepare Draft Plan and NEPA Document

We submitted the Draft CCP and EA for a 30-day public review from May 9 to June 8, 2012. The EA described, compared, and analyzed the six alternatives including the proposed action, which is also referred to as the Draft CCP. We notified the public with a notice in the *Federal Register* as well as through local media outlets. We mailed 135 copies of a summary of the Draft CCP and EA to individuals, organizations, elected officials, and local, state, and federal agencies; mailed copies of the complete document to local libraries; and posted a digital copy on the Service's website. Approximately ten individuals attended an open house meeting held during the comment period. We received four written comments about the Draft CCP and EA.

6 – Prepare and Adopt Final Plan

We responded to each of the comments received (see appendix L) and finalized the plan. The CCP will guide management on the Refuge over a 15-year period providing general direction for managing habitat, wildlife, and visitor services at Big Stone NWR. It will also guide preparation of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas.

7 – Implement Plan, Monitor, and Evaluate

See chapter 5.

8 – Review and Revise Plan

See chapter 5.

Wilderness Review

Refuge planning policy mandates that wilderness reviews be conducted through the comprehensive conservation planning process (FWS, 2000). The wilderness review process consists of three phases: inventory, study, and recommendation. In the inventory phase we look at Service-owned lands and waters within the Refuge that are not currently designated wilderness and identify those areas that meet the criteria for wilderness established by Congress. The criteria are size, naturalness, opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation, and supplemental values. Areas that meet the criteria are called Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). In the study phase we develop and evaluate a range of management alternatives for the WSAs to determine if they are suitable for recommendation for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. In the recommendation phase we forward the suitable recommendations in a Wilderness Study Report that moves from the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the Secretary of the Interior and the President to Congress.

No lands within Big Stone NWR meet the criteria for wilderness established by Congress and described in Service policy (FWS, 2008). Big Stone NWR does not contain 5,000 contiguous acres of roadless, natural lands, nor does the Refuge possess any units of sufficient size to make their preservation practicable as wilderness. Refuge lands and waters have been substantially altered by humans, especially by agriculture, dam construction, river channel modifications, and road building.