Chapter 2: Refuge Planning Context

In this chapter:

Refuge System Planning Guidance
Relationship to Other Conservation Initiatives
The Planning Process

Refuge System Planning Guidance

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge (NWR, refuge) is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS, Service), the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the Nation’s fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. The Service oversees the enforcement of federal wildlife laws, management and protection of migratory bird populations, restoration of nationally significant fisheries, administration of the Endangered Species Act, restoration of wildlife habitat such as wetlands, collaboration with international conservation efforts, and the distribution of conservation funding to states, territories, and tribes. Through its conservation work, the Service also provides a healthy environment in which Americans can engage in outdoor activities. Additionally, as one of three land managing agencies in the Department of the Interior, the Service is responsible for the Nation’s National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS, Refuge System).

FWS Mission

Working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

The National Wildlife Refuge System

The National Wildlife Refuge System was founded in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt designated a three-acre island off the Florida coast, Pelican Island, as a sanctuary for colonial nesting birds. Today, the Refuge System has grown to a network of 560 national wildlife refuges, 38 wetland management districts, and 49 coordination areas covering over 150 million acres of public lands and waters. Over 50 percent of these lands (over 76 million acres) are contained within Alaska’s 16 national wildlife refuges, with the remainder distributed throughout the other 49 states and U.S. territories. Since 2006, Marine National Monuments have been added to the Refuge System, bringing over 50 million additional acres in the Pacific Ocean under federal protection and conservation management.

The Refuge System is the world’s largest collection of lands and waters specifically designated and managed for fish and wildlife. Overall, it provides habitat for more than 700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, 250 reptile and amphibian species, 200 species of fish, and more than 280 threatened or endangered plants and animals. As a result of international treaties for migratory bird conservation and related legislation (e.g., Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929), many refuges have been established to protect migratory waterfowl and their migration...
flyways that extend from nesting grounds in the north to wintering areas in the south. Refuges also play a vital role in preserving threatened and endangered species.

Refuges also provide important recreation and education opportunities for visitors. When public uses are deemed appropriate and compatible with wildlife and habitat conservation, they are places where people can enjoy hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation, and other recreational activities. Many refuges have visitor centers, wildlife trails, automobile tours, and environmental education programs. Nationwide, over 41 million people visit national wildlife refuges annually.

**National Wildlife Refuge System Mission**

To administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

**National Wildlife Refuge System Goals**

Revised goals for the Refuge System were adopted on July 26, 2006 and incorporated into Part 601, Chapter 1, of the Fish and Wildlife Service Manual (FWS, 601 FW 1). The goals are:

- Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats, including species that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered;
- Develop and maintain a network of habitats for migratory birds, anadromous and interjurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations that is strategically distributed and carefully managed to meet important life history needs of these species across their ranges;
- Conserve those ecosystems, plant communities, wetlands of national or international significance, and landscapes and seascapes that are unique, rare, declining, or underrepresented in existing protection efforts;
- Provide and enhance opportunities to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation); and
- Foster understanding and instill appreciation of the diversity and interconnectedness of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

**National Wildlife Refuge System Guiding Principles**

- We are land stewards, guided by Aldo Leopold's teachings that land is a community of life and that love and respect for the land is an extension of ethics. We seek to reflect that land ethic in our stewardship and to instill it in others;
- Wild lands and the perpetuation of diverse and abundant wildlife are essential to the quality of the American life;
- We are public servants. We owe our employers, the American people, hard work, integrity, fairness, and a voice in the protection of their trust resources;
• Management, ranging from preservation to active manipulation of habitats and populations, is necessary to achieve Refuge System and Service missions;
• Wildlife-dependent uses involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and education, when compatible, are legitimate and appropriate uses of the Refuge System;
• Partnerships with those who want to help us meet our mission are welcome and indeed essential;
• Employees are our most valuable resource. They are respected and deserve an empowering, mentoring, and caring work environment; and
• We respect the rights, beliefs, and opinions of our neighbors.

Legal and Policy Compliance

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, Service-owned lands and waters within the Glacial Ridge NWR that are not currently designated wilderness are analyzed for 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 become Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). In the study phase, a range of management alternatives are developed and evaluated for the WSAs to determine if they are suitable for recommendation for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. In the recommendation phase, the suitable recommendations are forwarded in a Wilderness Study Report that moves from the Director through the Secretary and the President to Congress.

No lands within Glacial Ridge NWR meet the criteria for wilderness established by Congress and described in Service policy (FWS 2008). The refuge 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, industrial, and transportation developments.

Brief History of Refuge Establishment and Acquisition

Glacial Ridge NWR was established in 2004 to restore and preserve the character of the historic prairie and savanna landscape (Figure 2-1). The refuge started with an initial transfer of 1,993 acres of land from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to the Service. These parcels were enrolled in the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) administered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

The initial transfer in 2004 was followed by 5,113 more acres in 2008, 7,056 acres in 2010, and a total of 5,947 acres in 2012 and 2013. The approved acquisition boundary encompasses a total of 35,670 acres. Some of the land inside of the 35,670 acre acquisition boundary is owned by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and by TNC, and is likely to continue to be
held by conservation partners as state wildlife management areas and TNC preserves (Figure 2-2).

Figure 2-1: Location of Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge
Refuge Purposes

Glacial Ridge NWR was created under the legal authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, Feb. 18, 1929, 16 U.S.C. 715d and the Emergency Wetland Resources Act of 1986, 16 U.S.C. 3901b. Funds appropriated by Congress, and the sale of Federal Duck Stamps were used to acquire land. The lands authorized for acquisition include:

“Sec. 715d. Purchase or rental of approved areas or interests therein; gifts and devises; United States lands. The Secretary of the Interior may –

(2) acquire, by gift or devise, any area or interests therein; which he determines to be suitable for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.”

“The primary purpose for the refuge under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act is ‘for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.’”
Refuge Vision Statement

A wildlife chorus of prairie-chickens, upland sandpipers, sandhill cranes, and bobolinks welcomes visitors to America’s most grand prairie and wetland restoration project. Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge is a masterpiece, where tallgrass prairie and a myriad of wetlands function to support an amazing diversity of flora and fauna. This piece of restored Northern Tallgrass Prairie landscape serves as a model of how partnerships can reclaim a lost haven, and through a suite of applied science and management, maintain a working grassland that restores lost ecological function, while benefiting the local economy.

Refuge Goals

The goals are broad statements that describe the desired future conditions of the refuge.

**Goal 1: Habitat and Wildlife**

Protect, restore, and manage the unique prairie-wetland habitats found within Glacial Ridge NWR using a variety of strategies to emulate the ecological processes and native plant communities that once existed across the Agassiz Beach Ridge landscape. The above conservation actions will result in a diversity of resilient tallgrass prairie and wetland habitats for the benefit of migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other native wildlife.

**Goal 2: People**

Provide a safe environment for visitors of all abilities to enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation, while increasing their knowledge and appreciation of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie ecosystem and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

**Goal 3: Refuge Administration**

Maintain and enhance refuge infrastructure and operations responsibly and sustainably for wildlife, the American public, and employees.

Relationship to Other Conservation Initiatives

Glacial Ridge NWR contributes approximately 36,000 acres to the conservation landscape. By itself, the refuge will have limited impact on the retention of open space, the persistence of wildlife species, and the maintenance of ecosystem services. However, refuge efforts combined with activities and partnerships across the larger conservation network have great potential to provide a measure of sustainability to the Nation’s natural resources and provide the mechanism for the Service to meet its critical mission. The following sections identify a number of conservation initiatives that overlap and complement the vision and goals outlined in this plan (Figure 2-3). Where possible, the refuge collaborates with these efforts and incorporates shared objectives.

The refuge works in concert with several state and regional partners in the conservation of our trust resources through the participatory development of the following plans and programs.
Chapter 2: Refuge Planning Context

Figure 2-3: Conservation Lands near Glacial Ridge NWR

Glacial Ridge Master Plan

The Master Plan for Glacial Ridge was developed by TNC in 2005. This document is a guide TNC has followed to “restore ecological processes” to Glacial Ridge. The plan includes key ecological attributes, objectives, monitoring plans, etc.

Western Prairie Fringed Orchid Recovery Plan (1996)

This orchid is federally threatened and Minnesota State endangered. The major cause of decline of this species is the conversion of prairie to cropland. The Red River Valley of North Dakota and Minnesota contains 90 percent of the current population. The recovery plan includes protecting existing populations, developing effective management plans, research and monitoring, and public education.

Dakota Skipper and Poweshiek Skipperling Conservation Guidelines

The Dakota skipper (Hesperia dacotae) and Poweshiek skipperling (Oarisma poweshiek) have recently been listed as Threatened and Endangered, respectively, under the Endangered
Species Act. No known populations currently exist on Glacial Ridge NWR, but the habitat they require is found on the refuge.

**Migratory Bird Conservation Initiatives**

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) began in 1986 as a partnership effort to restore waterfowl populations to historic levels through habitat conservation. The 2004 plan update states that its purpose is to “sustain abundant waterfowl populations by conserving landscapes, through partnerships, that are guided by sound science.” NAWMP is international in scope but is implemented through regional partnerships called "joint ventures." Glacial Ridge NWR lies within the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, which includes 100,000 square miles in Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa.

The 2001 U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan provides a framework to determine species, sites, and habitats that most urgently need conservation action. The national assessment was stepped down into 11 regional conservation plans. Glacial Ridge NWR lies within the Northern Plains/Prairie Potholes Region, which is especially critical to long-distance migrants that need suitable stopover sites along their migratory routes, such as American golden-plover, Hudsonian godwit, white-rumped sandpiper, pectoral sandpiper, and stilt sandpiper.

The 2002 North American Waterbird Conservation Plan is a framework for the conservation and management of 210 species of wading birds, marsh birds, gulls, terns, pelicans, and seabirds and their habitats. The continental area is organized into several planning regions. Species of high concern in the Northern Prairie and Parkland Region, where Glacial Ridge NWR is located, include western grebe, Franklin’s gull, black tern, horned grebe, American bittern, and yellow rail.

Partners in Flight (PIF) was launched in 1990 and began to develop regional bird conservation plans in response to growing concerns about population declines of many landbird species. Glacial Ridge NWR lies within the Northern Tallgrass Prairie physiographic region, which occupies parts of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Manitoba, Canada. Priority bird species in the 1998 Northern Tallgrass Prairie Plan include greater prairie-chicken, Nelson’s (sharp-tailed) sparrow, sedge wren, bobolink, and yellow rail. In 2004, PIF published a North American landbird conservation plan that established population objectives and recommended actions for Species of Continental Importance.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) is a continental effort to integrate all migratory bird conservation programs under one umbrella. The goal is to facilitate bird conservation through regionally based, biologically driven, landscape-oriented partnerships. NABCI has
defined Bird Conservation Regions (BCR) as its planning units. Glacial Ridge NWR lies within BCR 11, the Prairie Potholes. In 2000, the U.S. NABCI Committee agreed to promote conservation delivery via existing and new Joint Ventures nationwide, thus eliminating redundant partnership structures and separate biological planning processes. The Service is a member of the U.S. NABCI Committee.

Birds of Conservation Concern 2008 (FWS 2008a) was developed by the Service to identify migratory and non-migratory bird species (beyond those already designated as federally threatened or endangered) that represent the Service’s highest conservation priorities. The list encompasses three distinct geographic scales—NABCI Bird Conservation Regions, FWS Regions, and National—and uses assessment scores from three bird conservation plans: the North American Landbird Conservation Plan, the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, and the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan. The assessment scores are based on several parameters including population trend, threats, distribution, abundance, and the importance of an area to a species.

More specifically, the refuge lies within the Prairie Potholes Bird Conservation Region (Bird Conservation Region [BCR] 11) (Figure 2-4). The Prairie Pothole Region is a glaciated area of mixed-grass prairie in the west and tallgrass prairie in the east. This is the most important waterfowl production area on the North American continent, despite extensive wetland drainage and tillage of native grasslands. Breeding dabbling duck density may exceed 100 pairs per square mile in some areas during years with favorable wetland conditions. The region comprises the core of the breeding range of most dabbling duck and several diving duck species, as well as providing critical breeding and migration habitat for over 200 other bird species, including such priority species as Franklin’s gull, yellow rail, and piping plover. Baird’s sparrow, Sprague’s pipit, chestnut-collared longspur, Wilson’s phalarope, marbled godwit, and American avocet are among the many priority non-waterfowl species breeding in this region. Wetland areas also provide key spring migration sites for Hudsonian godwit, American golden-plover, white-rumped sandpiper, and buff-breasted sandpiper. Continued wetland degradation and fragmentation of remaining grasslands threaten future suitability of the Prairie Pothole Region for all of these birds.
Figure 2-4: Bird Conservation Regions

U.S. Flyway Zones

Joint Ventures

Bird Conservation Regions
Strategic Habitat Conservation

Strategic habitat conservation (SHC) is a science-based approach to conservation focused on providing landscapes capable of sustaining trust species populations at objective levels. This approach is founded on an adaptive, iterative process of biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, monitoring, and research. SHC is an application of the scientific method and adaptive management to conservation at multiple spatial scales. This strategic conservation approach will include all Service programs and address both habitat and non-habitat factors limiting fish and wildlife populations.

As a leader in fish and wildlife and habitat conservation and management, the Service is embracing a framework designed to maximize agency efficiency and increase on the ground conservation impacts. SHC enables the Service to:

- Respond to new environmental challenges;
- Advance opportunities with new and existing partners;
- Utilize science-based tools and resources to plan and evaluate our conservation efforts; and
- Continue to ensure conservation successes locally, while advancing landscape objectives.

The Service mission can be met at a landscape scale, especially in the face of climate change, by:

- Fully utilizing existing technology such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS);
- Becoming trained in better decision making through the Structured Decision Making process;
- Reaching out to even more partners that have the necessary expertise to advance knowledge of the resource and its needs at multiple spatial and temporal scales; and
- Being diligent and transparent in planning and decision making processes.

SHC Guiding Principles

- Habitat conservation is simply a means to attain the Service’s true goal—the conservation of populations and ecological functions that sustain them.
- Defining measurable population objectives is a key component of SHC, at any scale.
- Biological Planning must use the best scientific information available, both as a body of knowledge and a method of learning. Service understanding of ecological conditions is never perfect. An essential element of SHC is managing uncertainty through an iterative cycle of planning, doing, and evaluating.
- Management actions, decisions, and recommendations must be defensible and explicit about the nature and magnitude of potential errors.
- Conservation strategies consist of dynamic suites of objectives, tactics, and tools that change as new information enters the SHC cycle.
• Partnerships are essential, both for management and for developing conservation strategies.

**North American Waterfowl Management Plan**

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) was first signed in 1986 and has been updated several times since then. The most recent version states that “the purpose of the Plan is to sustain abundant waterfowl populations by conserving landscapes, through partnerships that are guided by sound science” (NAWMP, Plan Committee 2004).

**Prairie Pothole Joint Venture Implementation Plan**

The Prairie Pothole Joint Venture was established under the NAWMP but has since expanded from a focus on waterfowl to planning for “all-bird” conservation. The most recent implementation plan (Ringelman et al. 2005) provides stepped-down objectives from the four major species group plans described earlier (waterfowl, shorebirds, waterbirds, and landbirds).

**Tomorrow’s Habitat for the Wild and Rare**

Tomorrow’s Habitat for the Wild and Rare (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources [MNDNR] 2006a) is the Minnesota State Wildlife Action Plan. This strategic plan guides management for species in greatest conservation need: “native animals whose populations are rare, declining, or vulnerable to decline and are below levels desirable to ensure their long-term health and stability.”

**A Vision for Wildlife and its Use-Goals and Outcomes 2006–2012**

Minnesota DNR’s strategic wildlife plan is working to conserve wildlife and their habitat throughout the state for the public’s use.

**Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Long Range Duck Recovery Plan**

The Minnesota Duck Recovery Plan (MNDNR 2006b) identifies both challenges and strategies to recover “historical breeding and migrating populations of ducks in Minnesota for their ecological, recreational, and economic importance to the citizens of the state.” The Duck Recovery Plan sets a 50-year goal to sustain a breeding duck population of one million birds.

**Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan (2011)**

The Prairie Conservation Plan focuses efforts on grassland and wetland and demonstrates unprecedented cooperation between federal agencies, state agencies, and the state’s most active conservation organizations. The plan identifies core conservation areas and creates a vision of a connected landscape from Canada to Iowa. The unified 25-year plan by multiple partners provides a more efficient future direction while also building on past conservation actions of a wide array of organizations and agencies.
Wetland Reserve Program (Natural Resources Conservation Service)

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) was a voluntary program that offered landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provided technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts through WRP. This program offered landowners an opportunity to establish long-term conservation and wildlife practices and protection. Landowners had the option to enroll their land in a permanent easement, which paid 100 percent of the appraised agricultural land value, or a 30-year easement, which paid 75 percent. Under a WRP easement, the landowner controls the access and use of the land, as the tax liability remains with the landowner.

Congress first authorized the WRP in the 1990 Farm Bill and reauthorized it in three subsequent farm bills which altogether restored over a million acres of wetlands and associated habitats. The 2014 Farm Bill realigned WRP, now called the Wetlands Reserve Easement (WRE), under the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. WRP remains an important part of habitat management at Glacial Ridge NWR as 91 percent of refuge lands (20,790 acres) were enrolled in WRP easements prior to The Nature Conservancy or private landowners transferring parcels to the Service (Figure 2-5). Enrolled lands are subject to certain management restrictions to protect wetland habitats.
Figure 2-5: Wetland Reserve Program Permanent Easements

Wetland Reserve Program Permanent Easements - 20,790 ac

Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge

NWRS Land Status
- NWRS Fee Title Land - 22,885 ac
- Inholdings - 13,513 ac

FWSCadastral Data as of 3/18/2016

Scale 1:105,000
Region 3 Fish and Wildlife Conservation Priorities

Every species is important; however, the number of species in need of attention exceeds the resources of the Service. To focus effort effectively, Region 3 of the Service compiled a list of Resource Conservation Priorities in 2002. The list includes:

- All federally listed threatened and endangered species and proposed and candidate species that occur in the region;
- Migratory bird species derived from Service-wide and international conservation planning efforts; and
- Rare and declining terrestrial and aquatic plants and animals that represent an abbreviation of the Endangered Species Program’s preliminary draft “Species of Concern” list for the region.

Climate Change Planning

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Service’s Rising to the Urgent Challenge: Strategic Plan for Responding to Accelerating Climate Change (FWS 2010) establishes a basic framework within which the Service will work as part of the larger conservation community to help ensure the sustainability of fish, wildlife, plants, and habitats in the face of accelerating climate change. It was developed in an effort to rise up and respond to, as well as in recognition of, what is perhaps the 21st century’s largest stressors on fish, wildlife, and plants: climate change. Part of the plan’s primary purposes is to lay out a vision for accomplishing the Service mission to “work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people” in the face of accelerating climate change. In this plan, a commitment to the Service’s vision is expressed through strategic goals and objectives that must be accomplished to sustain fish and wildlife nationally and internationally. A 5-Year Action Plan for Implementing the Climate Change Strategic Plan identifies specific actions that will lead to the accomplishment of these goals and objectives. The goals and objectives most relevant to this planning effort include the following:

- Goal 2: Develop long-term capacity for biological planning and conservation design and apply it to drive conservation at broad, landscape scales.
- Objective 2.1: Access regional climate science and modeling expertise through regional climate science partnerships.
- Objective 2.2: Develop landscape conservation cooperatives to acquire biological planning and conservation design expertise.
- Objective 2.3: Develop expertise in and conduct adaptation planning for key species and habitats.
- Objective 2.4: Incorporate climate change in service activities and decisions.
- Objective 2.5: Provide requested support to state and tribal managers to address climate change issues that affect fish and wildlife service trust resources.
Objective 2.6: Evaluate fish and wildlife service laws, regulations, and policies to identify barriers to and opportunities for successful implementation of climate change actions.

The Conserving the Future: Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation (FWS 2011b) document is the Service’s bold, new vision for the Refuge System. This 21st-century strategic vision for the Refuge System acknowledges the broad social, political, and economic changes that have made habitat conservation more challenging since the agency last set comprehensive goals in 1999. In the intervening 12 years, the new vision states the Nation’s population has grown “larger and more diverse . . . and the landscape for conservation has changed—there is less undeveloped land, more invasive species, and we are experiencing the impacts of a changing climate.” The document includes 24 recommendations to guide the future of the Refuge System. The recommendation most relevant to this planning effort concerning climate change is:

Recommendation 2: Develop a climate change implementation plan for the Refuge System that dovetails with other conservation partners’ climate change action plans and specifically provides guidance for conducting vulnerability assessments of climate change impacts to refuge habitats and species as well as direction for innovation in the reduction of emissions and improved energy efficiency on federal lands.

The Planning Process

Public Involvement

The Notice of Intent to prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Glacial Ridge NWR was published in the Federal Register dated January 17, 2013 (Vol. 78, No.12, page 3909–3910).

Internal scoping began in January 2013 when Service planning staff and Glacial Ridge NWR staff developed a preliminary list of issues, concerns, and opportunities associated with management of the refuge. A second internal scoping session was held with the Service’s Midwest Regional Office staff at Bloomington, MN in March 2013 to get input on issues from regional supervisors, biologists, planners, and other program specialists.

Public scoping began in April 2013 when refuge staff hosted open house events in Crookston, MN and at the Rydell NWR headquarters to inform the public of the planning process and to solicit their input on issues of concern. About 20 people attended. In addition, a news release was distributed to area media and informational posters were displayed in local communities. Written comments were received from 12 stakeholders.

In August 2013, the refuge convened a team of resource professionals to share their perspectives on the biological and visitor services programs at Glacial Ridge NWR. Participants outside the Service included partner agencies, researchers, educators, and refuge volunteers. Purposes of the workshop were to define significant issues and opportunities facing the refuge and identify potential options for addressing them: share knowledge, ideas, and perspectives to ensure that best available information is considered, and begin to develop a shared vision for the future of the refuge and the ecosystem.
Step-Down Management Plans

The CCP is a plan that provides general concepts and specific wildlife, habitat, and people-related objectives. Step-down management plans provide detail to managers and employees who will carry out the strategies described in the CCP. The refuge staff will develop the following step-down plans after completion of this CCP (Table 2-1):

Table 2-1: Step-Down Management Plan Completion Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step-Down Management Plan</th>
<th>Amount of Time for Completion after CCP Approval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Habitat Management Plan (HMP)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inventory and Monitoring Plan (IMP)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitor Services Plan (VSP)</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inventory, Monitoring, and Research

Following approval of the CCP and public notification of the decision, implementation will begin. Funding and staff time will be allocated to implementation of the CCP as appropriations and budgets allow. Development of a stepped down Habitat Management Plan (HMP) and other plans (e.g., Visitor Services Plan) will begin and serve to guide habitat management, restoration and reconstruction priorities and public use. A companion Inventory and Monitoring Plan (IMP) or additional chapters on inventory and monitoring appended to the HMP will be written to guide the refuge’s priorities for monitoring. Information gained via inventories, monitoring, or research activities will allow the station to evaluate its progress in achieving the planning unit purposes, vision, and goals. The associated step-down plans will address habitat and/or population objectives and provide a means for evaluating the effects of management activities and public use. Through adaptive management, evaluation of monitoring, and research results may indicate the need to modify refuge objectives or strategies.

Plan Review and Revision

The CCP is meant to provide guidance to the refuge manager and staff over the next 15 years. However, the CCP is also a dynamic and flexible document, and several of the strategies contained in this plan are subject to uncontrollable events of nature. Likewise, many of the strategies are dependent upon Service funding for staff and projects. For these reasons, the recommendations in the CCP will be reviewed annually and revised if necessary. The annual plan review process will include an evaluation of changing information and ecological conditions related to climate change. If significant changes are identified that compromise the refuge’s purpose, vision, or goals, then the CCP will be revised. The CCP will be revised every 15 years or sooner when significant new information becomes available, ecological conditions change, major refuge expansion occurs, or when determined necessary by the periodic review. All plan revisions will follow the Service’s planning process and will be compliant with NEPA. Minor plan revisions that meet the criteria of a categorical exclusion will be handled in that manner; however, if the plan requires a major revision, then the CCP process starts anew at the preplanning step.
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 regional Service staff and other agencies produced many issues that suggest alternative ways of managing the refuge.

The planning team sorted the issues into the categories of wildlife, habitat and people.

Wildlife

- Limited information on wildlife population levels
- Status of endangered butterfly species
- Effects of climate change on wildlife and habitat

Habitat

- Control of invasive plant species
- Cattail control in restored wetlands
- Conversion of forested areas to native prairie

People

- Future growth of the hunting program
- Law enforcement
- Outreach and guidance for non-hunting visitors
- Visitor contact facilities and signage

Public Review of the EA/Draft CCP

The EA/Draft CCP was officially released for public review on May 10, 2016; the 42-day comment period ended on June 20, 2016. A notice of availability and news release were sent via e-mail to numerous individuals, organizations, and local media outlets. During the comment period the refuge hosted two 3-hour open house events at the Rydell NWR Visitor Center to receive public comments on the EA/Draft CCP. Attendance was minimal at these events, and no written comments were received.

Written comment letters were received from one federal agency and one non-governmental organization during the comment period. Both respondents endorsed the selection of Alternative B and the general approach of the proposed future management of the refuge. No specific changes were suggested for the EA/Draft CCP. Consequently, we did not produce a formal Response to Comments Appendix for the final plan.