Appendix K: Response to Comments

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The following is a summary of the comments received on the Draft CCP and how the issues are addressed in the CCP.

Comment 1: Two organizations wrote opposing the use of "thrillcraft" or personal watercraft, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles and two-stroke outboard motors on national wildlife refuges. One organization indicated that off-highway vehicle use needs to be addressed in the CCP to avoid possible future misunderstandings and controversies.

Response: We added the following statement to Chapter 4 in the Public Education and Recreation section: "The use of off-road vehicles such as snowmobiles, ATVs, motorized boats, etc. by the public for recreational purposes has never been permitted on Agassiz Refuge's lands and waters. The CCP would maintain this policy over the next 15 years."

Comment 2: One organization stated that emissions from two-stroke engines adversely impact air, water, and biological resources.

Response: The Service acknowledges this information and the general conclusion that two-stroke engines generate adverse environmental impacts.

Comment 3: One organization commended the Service for taking seriously the potential impacts of climate change, including potential impacts on Agassiz NWR itself.

Response: Comment acknowledged. A consensus of climatologists (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) predicts substantial rises in global temperatures by the end of the 21st century, with far-reaching implications for natural ecosystems, including national wildlife refuges. Agassiz NWR would indeed be subjected to these forces, which could bring about profound changes in the Refuge's hydrology, vegetation, wildlife, and non-native species. Most of these impacts would be likely to occur after the 15-year planning horizon of the current CCP. However, there are indications from a moose study and preliminary indications from a Wilderness Area study that climate warming is already having affects on wildlife and habitat in the area. Moose research in northwestern Minnesota from 1995-2000, (Cox, et. al., in press), that investigated the declining moose population implicated warmer summers as the probable cause of additional stress in moose by allowing parasites to have lethal effects on moose. Additionally, hydrological investigations are currently being analyzed for plant relationship to the documented increase in temperature over the past 40 years.

Comment 4: One organization expressed concern that formal partnership agreements with private entities may circumvent or prevent necessary management actions on the Refuge.

Response: As discussed in Coordination Activities section in Chapter 4, Agassiz NWR cooperates with partners on a number of activities and projects on and off the Refuge. These partners include private citizens serving as volunteers on the Refuge, cooperative farmers, watershed associations, state and federal agencies, and non-governmental conservation organizations. By and large, this cooperation not only enhances goodwill among neighbors and institutions in the surrounding community, but augments Service habitat and wildlife management efforts on and off-Refuge. The Service has not and will not enter into formal agreements that hinder its ability to realize Agassiz's goals and objectives.

Comment 5: One organization opposes the inclusion of hunting and trapping in each of the management alternatives presented in the CCP/EA.

Response: Hunting is one of the six wildlife-dependent public uses of national wildlife refuges specifically encouraged by the National Wildlife Refuge System Management Act of 1997 (the "Organic Act" of the Refuge System). Whenever a particular type of hunting is compatible with the Refuge's purposes, goals and objectives, and can be conducted in a sustainable manner, it may be permitted. Wildlife populations are monitored, and where, as in the case of moose at present, the population is below the population objective, hunting is suspended or reduced until the population recovers.

Limited trapping is conducted at Agassiz of furbearers that damage infrastructure, like muskrat and beavers, and other mammalian predators and carnivores. The trapping by several permittees is on a sustainable, relatively small scale. Trapping data indicate that there is no adverse direct effect on the long-term populations of target species or indirect effect on related prey species. As with hunting, trapping is suspended when the populations of target species appear to be low; for example, no trapping of river otters was permitted in 1993 and 1994 because of low numbers and trapping of muskrats was closed in 2004/2005 due to low numbers. Low numbers of muskrats were due to a combination of drawdown and flooding events during the peak of litter production and not as a result of trapping.

Comment 6: One organization asserts that the Draft CCP for Agassiz does not meet the requirements of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 because insufficient investigation of biological integrity, diversity and environmental health were undertaken prior to plan preparation. They state that rigorous biological analyses need to be conducted of wildlife populations to ensure that there is a surplus, before making any compatibility determinations about the killing of wildlife.

Response: The Draft CCP listed a number of wildlife surveys and censuses that are conducted at Agassiz, such as of moose, deer, waterfowl, and scent stations which in sum provide an adequate basis for making informed decisions on the compatibility of hunting and trapping. Beginning in 2004 an annual spotlight count of predators was initiated on a 22 mile route to alleviate any deficiencies in predator population data. In addition, the year-to-year trapping records themselves, and long-term trends in these numbers, furnish valuable information that can be used in opening or closing seasons. Recognizing that it does not have limitless budgetary and personnel resources to conduct ideal surveys that would yield perfect information on wildlife population sizes, the Refuge and Service use adaptive resource management, several features of which are monitoring, feedback, flexibility, and making adjustments in midcourse whenever the data point in that direction.

Comment 7: One commenter favors Alternative C (the Service's Preferred Alternative and basis for the proposed plan) because of the additional hunting opportunities it would furnish.

Response: Comment acknowledged. The commenter is correct that this alternative would indeed expand hunting opportunities at Agassiz.

Comment 8: One commenter favors Alternative C because of its partial restoration of natural flows in certain wetlands.

Response: Comment acknowledged. This alternative does indeed restore more natural hydrology on an experimental, adaptive management basis in part of the Refuge.

Comment 9: One commenter opposes opening the Refuge to waterfowl hunting because waterfowl need sanctuary in a region with many areas open to hunting and because non-hunters deserve a spot where they can see waterfowl unmolested by hunters.

Response: The proposed opening for a youth waterfowl hunt would be at Farmes Pool on the southern edge of the Refuge south of Rte. 7. This is limited to one weekend and adjoins a State Area which is open to waterfowl hunting. Opening this area would reduce crippling losses and spread hunters out on an area easily accessible by youth. The Service supports this type of wildlife-dependent activity. The great majority of the Refuge would remain closed to waterfowl hunting and would therefore continue to constitute a sanctuary for ducks and geese and those humans who appreciate observing and photographing them.

Comment 10: One organization supports implementation of the Preferred Alternative (C) because it integrates effective wildlife and habitat management with expanded public use opportunities.

Response: Comment acknowledged. The Service appreciates this statement of support from a partnering organization.

Comment 11: One national organization supports the Service's Preferred Alternative and commends the ambitious and ecologically sound management objectives outlined in the CCP.

Response: Comment acknowledged. The Service appreciates this endorsement of its proposed plan.

Comment 12: One national organization commends the Service for its proposed phase-out of croplands on Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge.

Response: Comment acknowledged. The Service appreciates this statement of support for its comprehensive efforts to restore native biodiversity and vegetative communities on the Refuge.

Comment 13: One national organization indicated that it is pleased to see that spruce and tamarack die-off in the Wilderness Area is being studied and that the conclusions of this study will be published and used in making future management decisions.

Response: Refuge management is hopeful that scientific research may explain the cause of this die-off and perhaps suggest solutions to the problem.

Comment 14: A concerned citizen expressed dissatisfaction with the way DNR [sic] originally obtained the land that now constitutes the Refuge from farmers 60-70 years ago and its general mismanagement of wildlife and wildlands in the region.

Response: Comment noted. As explained on pages 3 and 4 of the Draft CCP (under "History and Establishment"), the Minnesota Conservation Department (a predecessor agency to Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources) was involved in the original acquisition of Mud Lake Refuge (now Agassiz National Wildlife) in the 1930's. A poorly-conceived, federally-subsidized drainage project on an inherently wet, flood-prone site that should probably never have been farmed proved a terrible burden for struggling homesteaders and nearly plunged Marshall County into bankruptcy. The State Legislature stepped in and forgave the county its debt on the condition that the State would then appropriate the lands in the drainage district for conservation purposes.

In the decades since, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (known as the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife in the 1930's) has managed habitats on the Refuge to the overall benefit, not detriment, of waterfowl in particular and wildlife in general.

Comment 15: Two commenters strongly support Alternative C (Preferred Alternative – Open Landscape/Natural Watercourses) because it would aim to maintain and restore native grassland-shrubland wildlife species, like the sharp-tailed grouse, and their open habitats. One commenter further recommends the use of prescribed fire as a key management tool in maintaining open landscapes.

Response: Refuge management appreciates this expression of support for its Preferred Alternative and concurs with the commenter's view of the critical role prescribed fire use will play in maintaining open landscapes on the Refuge.

Comment 16: One commenter suggests that Appendix C, Species Lists, identify all exotic species documented on the Refuge, as was done with mammals. The commenter further observes that the house mouse should be identified as an exotic (non-native) mammal.

Response: Refuge management thanks the commenter for this suggestion and correction. We will adopt the suggestion to identify non-native species in the other vertebrate taxa listed in Appendix C, that is, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish The commenter is correct that the house mouse is indeed an exotic species and should have been tagged as such; the correction has been made in the Final CCP.

The following is a list of other exotic species that have been observed on the Refuge: Gray Partridge, Ring-necked Pheasant, Rock Dove, House Sparrow, European Starling, and European Widgeon.

Comment 17: Minnesota DNR supports Preferred Alternative C, which will support and enhance DNR's own habitat management efforts on Elm Lake State Wildlife Management Area. DNR specifically supports the increased use of prescribed fire to set back succession and increase the acreage of open lands on the Refuge.

Response: The Service welcomes this expression of support for its Preferred Alternative from a partnering state agency.

Comment 18: The DNR supports the continued use of firearms deer hunting on the Refuge during the state season as well as the proposed archery deer hunting season. However, The DNR contends that as proposed, (walk-in hunts only, during and following the firearms season), these hunts would elicit only limited interest and participation by prospective hunters. The DNR thus encourages the consideration of additional archery hunting opportunities on the Refuge prior to the firearms season and suggests that disturbance to migratory waterfowl could be minimized by limiting the area open to archery deer hunting prior to freeze-up.

Response: The DNR may be correct in its assessment that the deer archery season as proposed would elicit only limited interest and participation by prospective hunters. However, an early archery season would be a safety concern placing hunters in the field during the Refuge's fall burning season. Fall burning is an important habitat management tool in the transition zone and on the refuge. Recent studies indicate that a more frequent cycle of burning than is currently practiced is needed to effectively control shrublands.

Annually, Agassiz NWR plans to burn between 10,000 to 15,000 acres during spring and fall. Burn units are large with several encompassing 3,000 to 5,000 acres. Adaptive management indicates that fall burning is an important habitat management tool occurring primarily during September and October. Recently during two seasons, fall burning conditions were perfect throughout November both during the deer firearms hunt and afterward. Prescribed burns were not conducted during the deer firearms season, but they were carried out later. However, since these conditions were atypical,

refuge staff focused on providing addition hunting opportunities during and after the deer firearms season. It is important to note that local DNR land managers are unable to conduct necessary fall burning due to hunter safety concerns and staff commitment to managing hunts.

Limited access, primarily walk-in access after the deer firearms season may limit interest. During the deer firearms season, archery hunters would have access to the same system of interior roads (20 miles) and parking lots (7) that are available to the firearms hunters. After the firearms hunt there are several parking lots (3), and associated roads (4 miles) within the interior of the refuge that could be left open until snow inhibits safe travel. Also, we plan to open the North Boundary Road (5 miles) after the deer firearms season. In the past, this road has been closed during all state hunting seasons. The details will be worked out in the Step-down Hunting Plan. It should be noted that limited access and OHV prohibitions on the refuge during the deer firearms season attracts hunters that are looking for this kind of experience, this would also be true for a segment of the archery deer hunter population.

Comment 19: The DNR states that the grouse hunt as proposed (walk-in hunts only, during and following the firearms deer season), would also draw limited interest and participation by prospective hunters. The DNR thus encourages consideration of opening portions of the Refuge to grouse hunting at other times as well. Disturbance to migratory waterfowl could be minimized by limiting the area open to grouse hunting to un-utilized areas prior to freeze-up. Moreover, hunting should be authorized for Sharp-tailed Grouse as well as Ruffed Grouse, since this would have very little anticipated impact to Sharp-tail numbers on the Refuge.

Response: The response to Comment 18 would apply here. The refuge agrees to Sharp-tailed Grouse hunting at the same time as Ruffed Grouse hunting.

Comment 20: The DNR thinks the proposed youth waterfowl hunt at Farmes Pool is a logical and reasonable addition to the existing youth hunt on the state side of the pool (in Elm Lake WMA).

Response: Comment acknowledged.

Comment 21: The DNR states that an earlier draft of the plan included a youth firearms deer hunt and encourages the Refuge to consider offering youth hunting opportunities.

Response: Objective 3.1 of the Draft CCP, second strategy states: "….Contact and work with Minnesota DNR, schools, …to explore possible youth hunt for deer on the refuge". The refuge agrees with conducting a special youth deer hunt in conjunction with adjacent State lands under the current parameters of the hunt (one weekend in October) and we have changed the wording of the strategy. The area that will be open to the youth hunt on the refuge will need to be identified in the Step-down Hunting Plan. It will not include the entire area opened during the deer firearms season. If the State decides to extend the season for the youth deer hunt, the refuge will not participate beyond one weekend, as this could affect fall burning activities.

Comment 22: One commenter wanted to know if the Refuge would participate in future efforts of the State mandated flood reduction mitigation process that was addressed under current Habitat Management (page 52, last paragraph) since the past flood reduction mitigation team recommendation is not part of this CCP.

Response: The paragraph did not intend to infer that the Refuge would not participate in future planning efforts. That portion of the flood reduction plan that affected the Refuge is not being incorporated into this CCP, because the plan that was developed by the mitigation team is not moving forward at this time, nor does it appear that it will happen in the immediate future. The

Refuge would like to see further comprehensive, basin wide watershed planning that would reduce flooding and improve water quality and would be very willing to participate in these planning efforts. Wording has been added to the final CCP to make this intention clear.

Comment 23: One person questioned current coordination activities regarding compromises to accommodate flood waters during extreme flooding events. Who makes the decision and with what criteria?

Response: These decisions are made on a case by case basis using biological parameters regarding nesting cover conditions, time of year, anticipated inflows and length of inundation, downstream implications, and infrastructure integrity. This has been clarified in the Final CCP. Also, during the decision making process during flooding events daily communications and coordination occur with the MnDNR and Red Lake Watershed District.

Comment 24: One commenter suggested placing some emphasis on water quality improvements that can be gained by habitat work in wildlife corridors in the Refuge Management District and suggested that actions for water quality improvements can be justified by responsibilities under the Clean Water Act (1977) and Executive Order 11988 (1977).

Response: The suggestion is well taken and wording has been added to show this concern in Goal 2.13.

Comment 25: One agency and an individual commenter addressed issues on the importance of water quality issues in the Thief River downstream from the Refuge, since it is part of the water supply for the town of Thief River Falls. Both provided supporting documents from past studies and dredging activities in the Thief River Falls impoundment. Seasonal problems with hydrogen sulfide, high sediment loads, high organic material loads, high phosphorus and low oxygen are some of the concerns.

Response: The Refuge would like to participate in comprehensive, basin wide watershed planning that would reduce flooding and improve water quality. The Refuge participated in a cooperative sediment study in 1995-97 that showed the importance of the Refuge in reducing sediment loads by 66% (Total Suspended Sediment Loadings Red Lake, Thief, Mud and Moose Rivers. Houston Engineering, June 6, 2003). The Refuge also recognizes that some sediment and nutrient load is part of the natural process. Butler (Reservoir Renovation and Sedimentation Study for Thief River Falls, Phase II) states that the sedimentation rates reflect the normal geologic sediment yield in the Thief River Falls impoundment. Past studies indicate that bank erosion may be the most important factor in sediment and Phosphorus loads. The Thief River was dredged to become Ditch 83 in the early 1900's and has the same 1:1 side slopes that are characteristic of the Ditches that deliver water to the Refuge. The Refuge impoundments have the same process of sediment build up that is of concern with the Thief River Falls impoundment.

Evaluation of data cannot just focus on extreme events such as floods and drawdowns and must address inflows to the Refuge as well as outflows. Participation by the Refuge in watershed planning will be guided by biological parameters that guide Refuge management for waterfowl and other marsh birds. These include maintaining stable water levels during the nesting season, minimizing water elevation bounces from run off events during the nesting season, over winter water depths that maintain adequate numbers of prey fish to provide a food base for piscivorous birds without creating large populations of fish that compete for invertebrates with waterfowl and other invertebrate eating birds, over winter muskrat populations to maintain a population that contributes to providing nest sites and open water areas for waterfowl and other birds.

One area that may provide opportunity to coordinate activities for better water quality are water releases prior to nesting season on years without major spring runoff events. Water quality concerns are now reflected in Objective 2.7.

Comment 26: One agency suggested that a Refuge representative participate in the Marshall County water planning process to keep informed about water management and water quality issues.

Response: The Refuge has a staff person participating in Marshall County's 10-year revision of their watershed plan.