Chapter 2: Planning Process, Issues and Goals

Description of Planning Process

The planning process for this Comprehensive Conservation Plan began October 1, 1997, when a Notice Of Intent to prepare a comprehensive management plan was published in the Federal Register (Vol 62: 51482). Because the six Districts face similar issues, Managers and planners decided to follow a shared CCP process that would result in separate documents for each District. This chapter describes the planning process that was employed.

Initially, members of the planning team identified a list of issues and concerns that were likely to be associated with the management of the District. These preliminary issues and concerns were based on the team members' knowledge of the area, contacts with citizens in the community, and ideas already expressed to the District staff. District staff and Service planners then began asking District neighbors, organizations, local government units, schools, and interested citizens to share their thoughts in a series of open house events.

Open houses were conducted on the following schedule:

November 17, 1997 – Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District, 7 attended
November 18, 1997 – Fergus Falls Wetland Management District, 9 attended
November 19, 1997 – Morris Wetland Management District, 9 attended
November 20, 1997 – Litchfield Wetland Management District, 1 attended
November 25, 1997 – Windom Wetland Management District, 15 attended
February 4, 1998 – Regional Office, Twin Cities, 62 attended

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People were also invited to send in written comments describing their support or concerns about the Districts. Fifty-one written comments were received.

A survey of public use on the Wetland Management Districts was conducted through contract with Dr. Dorothy Anderson, University of Minnesota. Forty individuals, all regular users of the Wetland Management Districts, were invited to participated in this survey. Participants had extensive experience with the Fish and Wildlife Service managers (i.e., they contacted WMD managers an average of almost 11 times/year) and had good working relationships with managers. Almost all participants had visited waterfowl production areas, and many were members of conservation organizations (e.g. Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, and other organizations). Of the 40 people interviewed, 37 were men, averaging 51 years of age and averaging 39 years living in the area.

The participants were able to list benefits of the Wetland Management District activities provide to rural communities and citizens. The following list of benefits is

ordered from benefits frequently mentioned, to benefits not as frequently discussed but still mentioned often.

- Provides areas for hunting waterfowl and upland bird species,
- Protects wetland areas for ecological reasons,
- Retains water and helps with flood control,
- Improves water quality
- Improves communities economically through purchasing of hunting equipment
- Provides opportunities to introduce children to hunting, and
- Adds to the overall quality of life for rural residents

Many participants believed that the Wetland Management District managers were good at acquiring and managing land. They appreciated the habitat provided in the Waterfowl Production Areas and the work that District managers do with farmers to increase wildlife habitat by taking drained wetlands out of agricultural production. Participants also praised the cooperative role managers have with local citizens and conservation organizations.

In addition to public meetings and survey, the following focus group meetings were conducted to develop the issues, goals, and objectives for the Plan. These meetings included the District Managers and invited participants from the University of Minnesota, The Nature Conservancy, and the U.S. Geological Survey, Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center.

The following focus groups meetings were held:

- Fergus Falls, Minnesota March 2-4, 1999
- Alexandria, Minnesota July 27-29, 1999
- Twin Cities, Minnesota August 26, 1999

Concurrent with the focus group meetings, planning staff met with individual Districts numerous times to review issues and discuss District management.

A wide range of issues, concerns, and opportunities were expressed during the planning process. Numerous discussions among Refuge and planning staff, focus groups, and resource specialists brought to light several recurring themes. Issues fall into broad categories of wildlife, habitat, and people. Dealing with these issues is at the core of the development of goals and objectives for the management of the Minnesota Wetland Management Districts.

Planning Issues

Wildlife and Habitat

1. Can we improve waterfowl productivity?

2. Strategic Acquisition: Can we buy the highest priority land in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible?

3. Managing Uplands: Can we improve prairie restoration by planting the right seeds and using the right management tools?

4. Managing and Restoring Wetlands: How do we manage wetlands to maintain or increase productivity?

5. Can we improve biological inventories and monitoring on WPAs?

6. Can we stem the loss of migratory birds in the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Ecosystem?
7. Can we manage District land to preserve, restore, and enhance threatened and endangered species, rare and declining species, and address Regional priority species?

8. Under what circumstances should we reintroduce rare native species to District land?

9. How do we mitigate negative external influences such as contaminants on WPAs and reduce its impact on long-term health and productivity of District land?

10. How do we balance management for Federal trust species with the needs of resident species?

11. How do we reduce crop loss caused by Canada geese foraging on private land adjacent to WPAs?

12: Invasive species, both exotic and native, are negatively impacting the natural ecological balance of grasslands and wetlands on WPAs.

13. What is the Long Range Goal of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Private Lands) on Wetland Management Districts?

Public Use

14. There are conflicting views concerning the costs and benefits of federally owned land in a community. Who benefits? Who pays?

15. How do we provide adequate facilities and programs for the public to fully enjoy wildlife-related recreation in a way that is compatible with our main mission?

Operations

16. Districts need sufficient staff in critical areas to fully meet resource challenges and opportunities.

17. Districts need office, maintenance, and equipment storage facilities to carry out their mission.

18. Vehicles and other necessary equipment need to be replaced on a regular basis according to Service standards.

19. Funding is needed to develop and manage newly acquired WPA land and facilities.

20. Discretionary money is needed for managing newly acquired land. Historic preservation responsibilities and other cultural resource concerns add cost and delays.

21. Individual WPA development plans and record keeping need to be updated.

22. The Districts need to be consistent in their application of policy and resource protection efforts.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Goals

The following Goals were identified through a variety of meetings to address the issues raised during the planning process:

Wildlife and Habitat

Wildlife: Strive to preserve and maintain diversity and increase the abundance of waterfowl and other key wildlife species in the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Ecosystem. Preserve, restore, and enhance resident wildlife populations where compatible with waterfowl and the preservation of other trust species. Seek sustainable solutions to the impact of Canada geese on adjacent private croplands.

Habitat: Restore native prairie plant communities of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Ecosystem using local ecotypes of seed and maintain the vigor of these stands through various processes. Restore functioning wetland complexes and maintain the cyclic productivity of wetlands. Continue efforts for long-term solutions to the problem of invasive species with increased emphasis on biological control to minimize damage to aquatic and terrestrial communities. Continue efforts to better define the role of each District in assisting private landowners with wetland, upland, and riparian restorations

USFWS Photograph

Acquisition: Within current acquisition acreage goals, identify the highest priority acres for acquisition taking into account block size and waterfowl productivity data. These priority areas should drive acquisition efforts whenever possible. Service land acquisition should have no negative impact on net revenues to local government. Understand and communicate the economic effects of federal land ownership on local communities

Monitoring: Collect baseline information on plants, fish, and wildlife and monitor critical parameters and trends of key species and/or species groups on and around District units. Promote the use of coordinated, standardized, cost effective, and defensible methods for gathering and analyzing habitat and population data. Management decisions will be based on the resulting data.

Endangered Species/Unique Communities: Preserve, enhance, and restore rare native northern tallgrass prairie, flora, and fauna that are or may become endangered. Where feasible in both ecological and social/economic terms, reintroduce native species on WPAs in cooperation with the Minnesota DNR

People

Public Use/ Environmental Education: Provide opportunities for the public to use the WPAs in a way that promotes understanding and appreciation of the Prairie Pothole Region. Promote greater understanding and awareness of the Wetland Management District's programs, goals, and objectives. Advance stewardship and understanding of the Prairie Pothole Region through environmental education.

Operations

Preparation of WPA Development Plans: Complete Geographic Information System (GIS) based WPA Development Plans for each unit in each District. Provide Districts with GIS to assist with acquisition, restoration, management and protection of public and private lands.

Provide necessary levels of maintenance, technician, and administrative support staff to achieve other Wetland Management District goals: Provide all Districts with adequate and safe office, maintenance, and equipment storage facilities. Acquire adequate equipment and vehicles to achieve other District goals. Maintain District equipment and vehicles at or above Service standards.

Ensure that annual capital development funds are large enough to meet necessary development of new WPA land: Have adequate funds available each year to permit completion of maintenance needs for each Wetland District's current land base of Waterfowl Production Areas.

Develop and apply consistent policies for habitat, public use, and resource protection and ensure frequent coordination among Districts, both in Minnesota and in neighboring states with WPAs (North and South Dakota, Iowa, and Wisconsin).