

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

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2.1 Introduction

The Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) process for Hamden Slough National Wildlife Refuge (NWR, Refuge) meets the dual requirements of compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), both of which require the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS, Service) to actively seek public involvement in the preparation of environmental documents. NEPA also requires the Service to seriously consider all reasonable alternatives to its Preferred Alternative including the “No Action” alternative, which represents continuation of current conditions and management practices.

Key steps in the CCP process include:

1. Form the planning team and conduct pre-planning.
2. Initiate scoping and public involvement.
3. Identify issues and develop vision and goal statements.
4. Develop alternatives and assess their environmental effects.
5. Identify the preferred alternative.
6. Publish the draft CCP and NEPA document for public comment.
7. Revise and publish the final plan.
8. Implement the CCP.

2.2 Scoping and Public Involvement

The Notice of Intent to prepare a CCP and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Hamden Slough NWR was published in the *Federal Register* dated February 18, 2010 (Vol. 75, No.32, page 7289–7290).

Internal scoping began in August 2010 when Service planning staff and Hamden Slough 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 Fort Snelling, MN in March 2011 to get input on issues from regional supervisors, biologists, planners, and other program specialists.

Public scoping began in October 2010 when Refuge staff hosted an open house event in Detroit Lakes, MN to inform the public of the planning process and to solicit their input on issues of concern. About 12 people attended. In addition, a news release was distributed to area media, informational posters were displayed in local communities, and postcards soliciting comments were sent to several hundred names on the Refuge mailing list. Written comments were received from 59 stakeholders.

In December 2010, the Refuge convened a team of resource professionals to share their perspectives on the biological and visitor services programs at Hamden Slough 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. In June 2011, the Refuge Manager met with both the Red River Basin Commission and the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District to provide information and solicit input on the Hamden Slough NWR CCP.

In July 2011, the Refuge Manager mailed letters to all landowners within the approved boundary inviting them to meet one-on-one to discuss their thoughts on the future direction of the Refuge. Meetings were completed by early August.

2.3 Summary of Issues

The following section summarizes the significant issues that were identified and analyzed as part of the CCP process. These issues represent input from the public, other agencies and organizations, and Service staff, as well as the requirements of the Improvement Act, NEPA, and other mandates and guidance. The issues were critical in framing the objectives and strategies for the various alternatives considered and formed the basis for evaluating environmental consequences.

Habitat and Wildlife

How will we sustainably restore Refuge wetlands and provide high-quality habitat for migratory waterfowl and other wetland wildlife?

Prairie Pothole Wetlands

Approximately 85 percent of Minnesota's prairie pothole wetlands have been drained, and the trend continues today as subsurface tile drainage systems improve. Temporary and seasonally flooded small pothole wetlands provide important habitat for migrating and pre-breeding waterfowl. The exact number of historical pothole wetland depressions on the Refuge is not known, although more than 200 have undergone at least partial restoration by plugging of ditches and removal of accumulated sediment. Individual basins have not been inventoried as to size, watershed, or hydrologic regime. Ongoing monitoring of the physical and biological condition of restored pothole wetlands and wildlife response has been minimal.

Managed Wetlands

The natural annual and long-term water level cycles that historically maintained wetland and wildlife productivity were heavily altered by drainage ditches and subsurface tiles in the early 20th century, primarily to improve agricultural production. Low-lying pothole wetlands and relict glacial lakes that historically captured and held water were converted to a flow-through system when the Ditch 15 system was constructed.

Several of these larger drained wetlands on the Refuge have been at least partially restored and some water level control is possible, although management capability is limited by the physical setting and lack of onsite staff. Additional restoration of Bisson Lake and the Big Six wetland complex may be possible through modifications to roads, weirs, stoplogs, spillway elevations, and/or topography.

Bisson Lake and the Big Six wetlands primarily are drawn down to provide mudflats during the spring shorebird migration and flooded to provide waterfowl breeding and brood habitat. Annual water levels also may be manipulated specifically for fall migrating shorebirds, overwintering resident wildlife, protection of roads from the freeze/thaw cycle, control of invasive plants and fish, or to alleviate downstream flooding. Hybrid cattails are an aggressive invasive plant in Refuge wetlands and invasive fish, especially fathead minnows, compete with ducklings and other wetland wildlife for food. The Refuge currently does not have an integrated wetland management plan.

Relict Glacial Lake Restoration

Although Bisson Lake and the Big Six wetlands have been partially restored, two of the largest relict glacial lakes—Pierce Lake and Hamden Lake—are still drained. The historic Hamden Lake/Slough appears to have covered as much as 25 percent of the current Refuge acquisition boundary. All of Pierce Lake and some of Hamden Lake remain as private inholdings within the approved Refuge boundary. Therefore, acquisition of these private lands must occur prior to lake restoration. Pierce Lake must be restored first in order to restore Hamden Lake.

Public Scoping

Comments generally supported continued wetland restoration and management on the Refuge, including restoration of Hamden and Pierce lakes. Commenters also wanted to see more ducks and fewer cattails. Water level drawdowns in the fall were recommended to minimize cattail germination on managed wetlands. The Matter Waterfowl Production Area was mentioned as a good model for pothole restoration on the Refuge.

How will we sustainably restore tallgrass prairie and provide high-quality habitat for migratory grassland birds and other prairie wildlife?

Tallgrass Prairie Restoration

Much progress has been made in converting former agricultural fields to native tallgrass prairie, although much work still remains. Many restored prairies on the Refuge have fairly low diversity of native plant species. A mix of warm and cool season grasses was used on initial restorations in the 1990s, and some later seedings were fairly conservative on forbs. Some sites are dominated by non-native cool season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass and smooth brome. Non-native parsnip, spurge, knapweed, crown vetch, and tansy have been found on the Refuge; all are aggressive invaders. Fire and grazing regimes that historically sustained prairie diversity have been disrupted. Data on current condition of Refuge prairie restorations is limited.

Grassland-dependent bird populations have declined from historic levels far more than any other group of birds due to habitat loss and fragmentation. Many have begun to return to the Refuge as agricultural fields are converted back to prairie vegetation. Individual species of grassland birds show a variety of habitat preferences based on vegetation height, cover density, grass/forb ratio, soil moisture, litter depth, degree of woody vegetation, and plant species composition. It is important to maintain a mosaic of grassland habitats to meet the varying needs of grassland bird species of concern.

Tallgrass Prairie Remnants

About 22 acres of unbroken tallgrass prairie exists on the Refuge in small fragmented remnants. The location, size, and current status of most remnants are not well-documented, but most are thought to be in a degraded condition as evidenced by low native species diversity, and some could be lost to invasive and/or woody vegetation if not given management attention soon. These tallgrass prairie remnants are irreplaceable. Some may contain rare plant species and could provide a local seed source for upland restoration and diversification projects.

Management Tools

About 50 acres are farmed as wildlife food plots to mitigate crop depredation on neighboring lands, but little information is available on depredation levels or use of the food plots by target species. Cropped areas near Homstad, Hesby, and Eagle wetlands are increasing the fragmentation of restored prairie habitat. Habitat fragmentation has been associated with declines in locally breeding grassland birds. The crop fields do not provide critical habitat for Refuge resources of concern. One field is especially vulnerable to erosion, which may be increasing sedimentation in the shallow lakes and marshes below. Farming on the Refuge also is used as a short-term management tool to prepare fields for conversion to tallgrass prairie. All Refuge farming programs must be compliant with new regional policy that limits use of genetically modified glyphosate-tolerant corn and soybeans.

Grazing by bison and elk helped maintain the historic tallgrass ecosystem prior to European settlement, but that historic disturbance regime has been lost. Rotational grazing by cattle was used as a management tool in the early years of the Refuge to emulate the effects of bison and elk but was phased out as other management techniques became available. Reinstating a grazing program on the Refuge could increase prairie diversity and heterogeneity, improve wildlife habitat, provide economic benefit to local landowners, and generate additional support for the Refuge in the local community. Service policy (601 FW 3) allows for livestock grazing on national wildlife refuges to meet wildlife and habitat objectives only when more natural methods, such as fire or grazing by native herbivores, cannot meet refuge goals and objectives.

Haying was a traditional economic use when the Refuge was established, and about 100 acres are still hayed in late summer to provide lek habitat for greater prairie-chickens on the Refuge. The shorter vegetation is also attractive to birds such as marbled godwits and common snipe. Varying the haying regime and integrating it with other management tools, including prescribed fire and grazing, could increase the diversity of native plants and provide the habitat structure needed by breeding grassland birds throughout the Refuge.

Public Scoping

Public comments supported food plots on the Refuge as a way to provide food for wildlife and/or to reduce depredation of crops on private land by Canada geese. Grazing was recommended as a benefit both to wildlife habitat management and the local economy. Predator control was recommended. The importance of weed control was mentioned. A few commenters would like to see Refuge land sold back to farmers.

How will we stabilize soils, increase water retention, and improve water quality in the Hamden watershed?

Historically, the matrix of prairie vegetation interspersed with wetlands in the Hamden Slough watershed slowed surface water runoff, allowing soil infiltration and recharge of groundwater aquifers. This prairie wetland ecosystem provided habitat for wildlife, maintained water quality, and helped to mediate downstream flooding in the Buffalo River. Now, however, the watershed is dominated by row crop production. Prairie vegetation has been removed. Ditches and subsurface tile lines have accelerated water drainage and dried up wetlands. It is likely that elevated concentrations of nutrients, bacteria, and sediment are being transported downstream onto the Refuge during storm runoff events (Newman and Eash, 2011), which can affect recruitment, growth, productivity, and viability of wetland plants and animals (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2002). Ongoing warmer and wetter climate conditions could further exacerbate these issues. Restoration of sustainable plant communities, wildlife habitat, and ecological processes (such as flood storage and groundwater recharge) on the Refuge will require restoration of more natural patterns of waterflow into, through, and out of the area (Heitmeyer, 2012).

Public Scoping

Public comments supported the capture and storage of water in Refuge wetlands to reduce downstream flood damage. The need to address issues related to climate change in the CCP was recognized.

People

How will we encourage people to connect with the Refuge while ensuring visitor safety and minimizing disturbance to wildlife and habitat?

Hunting

A late-winter deer muzzleloader season was initiated in 2008 on all Hamden Slough NWR lands. A one-day youth waterfowl hunt was opened in 2009 in the Audubon and Riceville township portions of the Refuge.

Public Scoping

Most comments received during the public scoping period addressed the Refuge hunt program. Some requested elimination of all hunting on Hamden Slough NWR to provide a sanctuary for wildlife. Some wanted elimination of the muzzleloader hunt only; some wanted a more controlled muzzleloader hunt including limits on the number of hunters allowed. The two primary reasons given were concerns about public safety and too much hunting pressure on area deer. Comments on the youth waterfowl hunt were generally supportive. Some comments suggested initiating a goose hunt to reduce crop depredation on nearby lands.

Wildlife Observation and Photography

Wildlife observation and photography are popular Refuge uses. Current opportunities include roadside viewing, one wetland overlook, one short hiking trail, and a seasonal prairie-chicken observation blind. Demand for additional Refuge access outside these areas is low, but disturbance could become an issue if opportunities and/or demand increase. Clear definition is needed of where these uses should be allowed and with what stipulations. We want to encourage visitor connections to the Refuge while also minimizing wildlife and habitat disturbance. The entire Refuge is sensitive to disturbance due to its small size; the prairie-chicken lek is especially sensitive.

Public Scoping

Comments described the enjoyment of exploring restored Refuge wetlands, especially with grandchildren. Bird-watching, hiking, and cross-country skiing were mentioned specifically as wildlife observation activities that should continue. One comment expressed support for a multi-use Refuge while also acknowledging the value of sometimes closing areas for management purposes. Traffic resulting from roadside wildlife observation was mentioned as sometimes hindering movement of farm machinery and causing additional road maintenance costs to local townships.

Environmental Education and Interpretation

The Refuge does not have a formal environmental education program due to lack of visitor services staff, although a prairie-chicken webcam and curriculum materials are available for educators, and a shelter for use by school groups recently was constructed. Interpretive programs for the public also are limited due to lack of staff, and more brochures and kiosks are needed.

Public Scoping

Local schools would appreciate more opportunities for hands-on environmental education and would like qualified staff and programs to be a part of Hamden Slough NWR. One rural school principal commented that, "Educational outreach is a wonderful way to plan for the future."

Outreach and Community Partnerships

Communication and partnerships with area residents and local communities are crucial to the success of Hamden Slough NWR. It is important that people, organizations, and agencies in the area know about the Refuge and support it as a valuable part of the community. Methods currently used include news releases, appearances on local television and radio stations, and presentations to community groups. The volunteer group "Friends of the Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District" participates in the annual Detroit Lakes Festive of Birds, which increases awareness of both the Wetland Management District and the Refuge. The Refuge has limited resources, so expansion of these programs must be carefully considered to generate the most positive impact for the Refuge and the local area.

2.4 Preparation, Finalization, and Implementation of the CCP

The Hamden Slough NWR CCP was prepared by a team of staff from the Detroit Lakes WMD and the USFWS Regional Office. The CCP was published in two phases and in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Environmental Assessment, published as appendix A in the Draft CCP, presented three alternatives for future management and identified a preferred alternative. A 30-day public review period, including a public open house, followed release of the draft plan.

The alternative that was selected has become the basis of the Final CCP, which will guide management over the next 15 years. It will guide the development of more detailed step-down plans for specific resource areas and it will underpin the annual budgeting process through Service-wide allocation databases. Most importantly, the CCP lays out the general approach to managing habitat, wildlife, and people at Hamden Slough NWR that will direct day-to-day decision making and actions.

2.5 Public Comments on the Draft CCP

The Draft CCP was officially released for public review and comment on August 29, 2012; the comment period ended on September 28, 2012. A news release was sent to local media outlets and a summary of the document was mailed to more than 150 individuals and organizations. The complete Draft CCP was posted on the Service website and hard copies were available on request. Four people attended the open house event on September 6th in the city of Detroit Lakes. By the end of the comment period, four written responses had been received. Below is a summary of comments and the Service response.

Wildlife and Habitat

Respondents who commented on habitat restoration all supported the overall goal of wetland and prairie restoration. Concern was expressed that restoration of Pierce Lake within the next 15 years might be overly ambitious. The Buffalo Red River Watershed District (BRRWD) and Ducks Unlimited (DU) both indicated strong support for restoration of Pierce Lake and Hamden Lake and want to work in partnership with the Refuge to accomplish that objective. Several comments emphasized the importance of restored wetlands and prairies outside the Refuge boundary, especially on those lands that drain directly into Hamden Slough NWR.

Additional herbicide spraying to control invasive hybrid cattails was recommended. Concern was expressed about converting cropland to native prairie due to economic loss to the local community and potential crop depredation on nearby private lands. The local economic benefit of using haying and grazing as tools for habitat management was appreciated. The bobolink population estimate was thought to be too low, and several additions to the mammal list in Appendix C were proposed. Additional background information on several topics was provided to help document Refuge history and clarify current issues for future staff, Service partners, and the public.

Service Response:

It's true that restoration of Pierce Lake within the next 15 years is an ambitious objective and success is not guaranteed, but working with landowners, the BRRWD, DU, and other partners to make it happen is a high priority for Refuge staff. We also remain committed to working with willing partners to increase the conservation value of lands throughout the Hamden Slough watershed.

Invasive cattails usually can be adequately controlled with techniques other than herbicide application, including mowing, burning, and grazing. When feasible, these alternative tools are preferred in order to increase environmental benefits, reduce chemical use in wetlands, and reduce costs.

When Hamden Slough NWR was established in 1989, the Service agreed to maintain approximately 500 acres of cropland to address wildlife depredation and loss of income as the Refuge was restored. However, several changes that occurred since then have prompted a reexamination of the Refuge farming program: the Minnesota DNR began issuing landowner permits for Canada goose control to protect crops from depredation; there has been no evidence that waterfowl are using Refuge crops as an alternative food source; Refuge cropland is giving predators access to nearby waterfowl and songbird nests; and Service policy now limits use of GMO (Genetically Modified Organism) crops to no more than five years as part of the procedure for restoring lands to native vegetation. Through the process of developing this CCP, the Service determined that conversion of Refuge food plots to native vegetation is now the best option. This conversion will create a contiguous piece of wetland and prairie habitat totaling more than 800 acres.

Current survey data on Hamden Slough NWR bird populations is limited, so the bobolink objective was based on the best available science using population models developed by the Service's Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (HAPET). As additional monitoring data is collected, the population target can be revised if appropriate. The mammal list includes most of the species mentioned by the commenter.

A short description of the wildlife impact of overhead power lines on the Refuge has been added to chapter 3. Burial or removal of those lines is desirable over the long term, but is not a priority for the 15-year timeframe of this CCP. Additional detailed information on topics such as remnant prairies, historic fire shadows, and early habitat restoration efforts will be included as appropriate in the step-down Habitat Management Plan to be developed for Hamden Slough over the next few years.

People

The Service received comments both in support of and against continuing the muzzleloader deer hunt on the Refuge. Continuation of the youth waterfowl hunt was appreciated. The Minnesota DNR recommended implementation of a Canada goose hunt and increased deer hunting opportunities on the Refuge. The need to build more trust with local landowners on issues of mutual interest including weed control, ditch/drainage maintenance, and hunting was discussed.

Service Response:

The Refuge is one of the few wetland locations without goose hunting pressure so Refuge lands provide an important sanctuary for other migratory waterfowl species. The muzzleloader deer season occurs in late winter after the waterfowl migration, which also limits disturbance. The State already has an effective goose population reduction program and allowing goose hunting on the Refuge would do little to reduce population numbers. Goose and deer hunting opportunities are available to the public on all Waterfowl Production Areas adjacent to Hamden Slough NWR.

Public support for the muzzleloader deer hunt was strong when the program was initiated in 2008. However, the Service received numerous negative public comments during the initial public scoping period for this CCP in 2010, so the pros and cons of eliminating the deer hunt were carefully considered. Ultimately, the Service decided to continue the muzzleloader hunt and to explore opportunities to improve its quality. Refuge staff will work to improve communication with adjacent landowners and to keep them well-informed on relevant Refuge management activities.