

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**



# **News Release**

*Great Lakes - Big Rivers Region  
External Affairs Office*

**Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building, 1 Federal Drive, Ft. Snelling, MN 55111-4056  
612/713-5360 Fax: 612/713-5280 <http://midwest.fws.gov>**

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Contact:  
Don Hultman, (507) 494-6218

## **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Makes Decision on Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today signed and released its decision on the alternative in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that will become the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Robyn Thorson, the Service's Midwest Regional Director, signed a Record of Decision choosing Alternative E, the preferred alternative in the Final EIS, as the plan which will guide the 240,000-acre, multi-state refuge for the next 15 years. "Alternative E represents the best balance between the needs of fish and wildlife and the needs expressed by the community that utilizes the refuge," said Thorson.

With the signing of the Record of Decision, the refuge will begin implementation of the CCP. Changes called for in the plan will not be implemented until 2007 at the earliest, including changes to Waterfowl Hunting Closed Areas and the designation of Electric Motor Areas and seasonal Slow, No Wake Areas. All current public uses on the refuge will continue.

This final decision will also set in motion a broad range of actions to improve habitat for fish and wildlife, complete land acquisition within the refuge, address water quality issues, and provide more effective rest areas for waterfowl and other birds.

Thorson said the most impressive aspect of the CCP was the incorporation of public involvement. "The level of public input into this plan is unprecedented," said Thorson. "The passion of the people who love this river is clearly evident in the quality of the plan approved today. I appreciate the many citizens who took the time to participate in this process." The Service hosted 46 public meetings and workshops attended by 4,500 people since August 2002.

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Thorson acknowledged that differences remain on certain aspects of the plan. She said she believes that changes made to the alternatives during the past year show the Service listened to people, weighed their comments and suggestions, and reached a balance that is most sustainable, both for wildlife and people, in the long term.

With more than three million visitors per year, the “Upper Miss” Refuge is the most visited refuge in the country and has the added complexity of a major navigation system, including 11 locks and dams within its boundary. It is also a world-class fish and wildlife area which harbors 306 species of birds; 119 species of fish; more than 160 active bald eagle nests; thousands of heron and egret nests; spectacular concentrations of canvasback ducks, tundra swans, and white pelicans; and several threatened or endangered species.

“Differences of opinion are expected when managing a national wildlife refuge of this size, scope and ecological importance,” said Thorson. “As this plan is implemented, we will continue to work closely with state agencies, the public and all our partners in an open and respectful way to maintain a balance between the fish, wildlife, plants and people that call this river home.”

The Record of Decision, which outlines the basis of the Service’s decision, will be available soon on the Internet at: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/uppermiss>. People may also pick up a copy at refuge district offices in Savanna, Ill.; McGregor, Iowa; La Crosse, Wis.; and Winona, Minn.; or call the refuge at (507) 452-4232, or leave a message at the toll-free number (888) 291-5719.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

NOTE: A one-page summary of what the CCP will do is available at <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/uppermiss>