

## Chapter 2: The Planning Process

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### 2.1 Introduction

The Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) process for Whittlesey Creek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR, Refuge) meets the dual requirements of compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Both require that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS, Service) actively seek public involvement in the preparation of environmental documents. NEPA also requires that the Service 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:

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

### 2.2 Scoping and Public Involvement

The Notice of Intent to prepare a CCP and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Whittlesey Creek 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 staff from Whittlesey Creek NWR, St. Croix Wetland Management District, and Ashland Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office 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 in Bloomington, MN in May 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 an open house event at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center (NGLVC, Visitor Center, Center) in Ashland, WI, 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, informational posters were displayed in the local community, and a notice inviting public participation was sent to more than 600 names on the Refuge mailing list. Written comments were received from 11 stakeholders. The Refuge Manager also met with numerous partners to explain the importance of the CCP process and to encourage active participation. An invitation for participation and comments was also extended to partnership agency staff at the NGLVC as well as the Friends of the Center Alliance.

## **2.3 Summary of Issues**

The following paragraphs summarize the significant issues that were identified and analyzed as part of the CCP process. They represent input from the public, other agencies and organizations, and Service staff. These issues focused the planning effort on the most important topics. They were critical in framing the objectives for the various alternatives considered and formed the basis for evaluating environmental effects. Detailed information about these issues is included in chapter 3.

### **Wildlife**

#### ***Coaster Brook Trout***

The coaster brook trout was common prior to European settlement, but numbers soon plummeted due to overharvest and habitat degradation. Conservation partners have been collaborating since the 1990s on projects to reestablish coaster brook trout in the Lake Superior basin.

The Whittlesey Creek project, begun in 2003, is a partnership between the Service and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Notable progress has been made on all four high-priority actions: improve habitat, establish protective harvest regulations, stock coaster brook trout, and assess and monitor. The goal of the experimental protocol is to reestablish a self-sustaining population of migratory brook trout in Whittlesey Creek within 30 years. The role of the Refuge is to restore suitable habitat in the creek.

Brook trout numbers have increased since the experiment began and movement into and out of Whittlesey Creek has been documented, although a breeding population has not yet been verified. Habitat restoration is incomplete and the effects of competition from non-native salmonids are not well understood. Because these fish are migratory, conditions outside the local watershed could affect the likelihood of successful coaster reestablishment within Whittlesey Creek. Climate change is a serious threat to brook trout in most of the Lake Superior basin, but Whittlesey Creek habitat is expected to remain highly suitable.

#### ***Migratory Birds***

Restoration of forests and wetlands on the Refuge improves habitat for many migratory bird species, including songbirds, raptors, waterfowl, and shorebirds. Improved water quality in Whittlesey Creek benefits birds using downstream habitat at the creek mouth and in Chequamegon Bay. The Refuge is included within the boundary of the Lower Chequamegon Bay Important Bird Area.

Some additional improvements in habitat quality are possible (e.g., forest stand management), but may not be cost effective. Additional bird population benefits would be minimal because the Refuge is small and not located along a major flyway. Bird-specific management actions have not been a high priority to date. Surveys and monitoring have been sporadic due to limited resources and not always closely tied to habitat restoration activities.

## **Habitat**

Habitat protection and restoration is underway in the creek, on Refuge wetlands and floodplains, and within the watershed, although much work remains. The habitat management plan for Whittlesey Creek NWR (FWS, 2006c) provides comprehensive guidance for habitat restoration and management on Refuge lands and conservation actions within the watershed but does not set priorities. Management actions should be focused on the highest priority projects to make the best use of limited resources and to maximize the fish and wildlife benefits of the Refuge.

### ***Stream***

Habitat activities in recent years have centered on in-stream habitat and fish passage. Large woody debris has been restored to parts of Whittlesey Creek, reducing bank erosion, providing cover for fish and invertebrates, and exposing beneficial gravel substrate. About 12 miles of in-stream habitat restoration is still needed, and none has occurred yet on either Little Whittlesey or Terwilliger Creeks. Fourteen new culverts have reduced erosion and sedimentation and improved fish access to approximately five miles of Whittlesey, the North Fork, Little Whittlesey, and Terwilliger Creeks. Additional culverts still need replacement. Five recently installed rock crossings and four runoff detention basins reduce erosion and sedimentation from watershed agricultural lands. Bridges that cross Whittlesey Creek are too narrow for the width of the stream (thus increasing velocity, erosion, and sedimentation) and should be replaced. One on a Town Road in the Refuge is scheduled for replacement during 2015. The lower mile of Whittlesey, Little Whittlesey, and Terwilliger Creeks were dredged and straightened in the 1940s and 1950s; the quality of wetland and aquatic habitat on the Refuge would improve if historic floodplain hydrology were restored.

### ***Floodplain and Coastal Wetland***

Roughly 62 acres of native conifers and shrubs have been planted in degraded riparian zones, floodplain hayfields and on the limited upland areas on the Refuge; about 180 acres still need to be planted. Planning has begun to plant sixty acres during 2015 in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) with funding provided by the [Lake Superior Landscape Restoration Partnership](#) (<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/wi/home/?cid=STELPRDB1247205>).

Ditches have been plugged in some floodplain wetlands, but additional hydrologic restoration is needed. Sedge meadows would benefit from management with prescribed fire. Non-native invasive plants found on the Refuge include reed canarygrass, buckthorn, and common tansy. Early detection and treatment are critical to controlling invasives, but inventory and control efforts are limited by lack of resources.

## **Watershed**

The Whittlesey Creek watershed has good quality surface and groundwater; the primary concern is sediment that degrades fish and wildlife habitat. Bank erosion is the main source of sediment, so consideration of the ongoing impacts of ground-disturbing activities (logging, farming, grazing, ditch and road construction, and stream channelization) and flash flood characteristics of the watershed on stream bank stability remains important. Protecting groundwater, slowing runoff, facilitating surface water infiltration, and controlling erosion in the upstream watershed are crucial to successful restoration of downstream fish and wildlife habitat on the Refuge.

Continued success depends upon strong partnerships. The Refuge is collaborating with landowners in the watershed to acquire conservation easements and implement conservation practices on private land. Defining the highest priority locations for such activities could help make the most effective use of limited funding. The USFS is an active conservation partner in the area and Whittlesey Creek watershed lies partly within the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. Additional opportunities may exist to share resources and expertise with the USFS to achieve mutual objectives for protection and restoration of the watershed. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, Bayfield County Land and Water Conservation Department, Town of Barksdale, and numerous other partners are also committed to watershed protection, enhancement and restoration efforts.

## **Climate Change**

Climate models show projected temperature increases of 5 to 11 °F in Wisconsin by the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century. Precipitation is likely to increase in winter, spring, and fall, but expected changes in summer precipitation are unclear. A [fisheries model](#) developed by Lyons et al. (2010) indicates that the effects of a warming climate are expected to eliminate brook trout habitat in many Wisconsin streams by mid-century, but Whittlesey Creek is expected to remain highly suitable. Boreal and lowland forests will be subject to increased stress and may be lost altogether in northern Wisconsin. Hardwood trees are predicted to expand their range in the state.

Climate change will interact with other stressors—including habitat loss and fragmentation, invasive species, and pollution—amplifying the challenges they pose to natural habitats and biodiversity. Through proper stewardship, protected habitats such as the Refuge can be maintained to promote the highest levels of natural resilience to change.

## **People**

### ***Hunting and Fishing***

The Refuge offers opportunities for archery deer hunting and waterfowl hunting in designated locations. Should more or fewer opportunities be available? The small size of the Refuge and patchwork land ownership can result in trespass issues on adjacent private lands. Fishing is allowed within Whittlesey Creek waters in accordance with state regulations. The Refuge itself, however, has never been opened to fishing per Service regulations, so anglers must be in the water to fish legally within the Refuge boundary. Should streambank fishing be allowed in the Refuge?

### ***Wildlife Observation and Photography***

Ideas to enhance wildlife observation and photography on the Refuge have included new foot trails and construction of an overlook at the mouth of the creek. Additional facilities and increased visitation on such a small Refuge must be carefully evaluated to limit wildlife and habitat disturbance.

Another idea for enhancing visitor use of the Refuge was to develop a biking/hiking trail along the old railroad alignment through the Refuge. This was suggested as part of an idea to link Washburn with the NGLVC.

### ***Environmental Education and Interpretation***

Environmental education has been a high priority at the Refuge, but capabilities currently are limited due to lack of visitor services staff. The biologist provides inventory, monitoring, sampling techniques, and habitat restoration experiences to local students and participates in (NGLVC) programs that contribute to the mission of the Service. The biologist provides habitat restoration experiences to local students and participates in NGLVC programs that contribute to the mission of the Service. There is a need to define the vision and priorities for environmental education and interpretation on the Refuge, and Refuge staff participation in special events at NGLVC. The Coaster Classroom is underutilized; creative ideas are needed to make better use of this high quality Refuge facility.

### ***Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center***

The Service is a partner in the NGLVC, which is adjacent to Whittlesey Creek NWR. The partnership includes five agencies and one non-profit group: U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wisconsin State Historical Society, University of Wisconsin Extension, and Friends of the Center Alliance Limited—that together provide a unique combination of perspectives and opportunities. The mission of the NGLVC is to help people connect with the historic, cultural, and natural resources of the region. It also serves as Refuge headquarters and point-of-contact for Refuge visitors. The NGLVC partnership offers many opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration and enhancement of Service identity in the region, but current Service involvement in day-to-day activities is limited. The Refuge biologist is the only staff biologist at the NGLVC and therefore assists with habitat restoration, land management and natural resources projects. Refuge staff previously included a full-time visitor services professional, but that position is now vacant, and the Refuge Manager is located several hours away.

Participation in the partnership occurs through an annual Intergovernmental Transaction Agreement between the Service and the USFS. The agreement provides a general description of the use of the NGLVC and the Service role in the partnership. The agreement does not address the Service's long-term commitment to the partnership nor does it provide clearly defined roles and expectations

## **2.4 Preparation, Finalization, and Implementation of the CCP**

The CCP and EA are being prepared by the staff of Whittlesey Creek NWR and the Service's Midwest Regional Office. The document will be published in two phases in accordance with NEPA. The EA (Appendix A: Environmental Assessment) presents a range of alternatives for

future management and identifies the preferred alternative, which also provides the basis for the draft CCP. A public review period of at least 30 days will follow release of the draft document and will include one or more open houses to provide an opportunity for people to comment in person. Written and electronic comments also will be accepted.

Comments received by the Service will be incorporated where appropriate and perhaps result in modifications to the preferred alternative or in the selection of one of the other alternatives. The alternative that is ultimately selected will become the final CCP, which will provide a framework for managing the Refuge over the next 15 years. It will guide the development of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas, and it will underpin the annual budgeting process through Service-wide allocation databases. Most importantly, it lays out the general approach to managing wildlife, habitat, and people at Whittlesey Creek that will inform day-to-day decision making and actions.