

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

**ARAPAHO  
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**

**PROPOSED DONATION OF THE  
CHANDLER RANCH**

**Jackson County, Colorado**

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE**

# Environmental Assessment

## Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge Chandler Ranch Addition

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# Chapter 1 – Purpose of and Need for Action

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is the principle Federal agency with the responsibility for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and 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 (System) which encompasses more than 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 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.

National wildlife refuges are established for a particular purpose. Formal establishment is generally based upon a statute or executive order that specifies a purpose for that refuge. However, refuges can also be established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service using the authorization found within laws such as the Endangered Species Act, Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956. Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in September 26, 1967, for the following purposes:

“ . . . for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.”

16 U.S.C. § 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

“ . . . for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources . . . .” 16 U.S.C. § 742f (a)(4) “ . . . for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude . . . .” (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)

Arapaho NWR is managed to benefit the diversity of plants and wildlife found in this high mountain valley of the southern Rocky Mountains. The refuge and its resources are also managed for the benefit of the citizens of the United States.

The refuge includes wetland, meadow, sagebrush uplands, and riparian communities that provide habitat for large mammals, Neotropical migratory birds, nesting waterfowl, fishes, and species of concern from national and regional conservation plans. In particular, efforts by refuge staff to restore the Illinois River channel hydrology, areas of sagebrush uplands, and to effectively manage wetlands and meadows, contribute to the ecological integrity of the refuge, North Park, and the overall North Platte River system.

Through wildlife-dependent recreation and education, people have opportunities to learn of the wonder and significance of North Park’s fauna and flora. Firsthand experiences with the refuge

encourage people to participate as stewards, not only of the refuge, but also of the natural resources in their own communities.

Working in collaboration with the local community and other agencies and organizations helps the Service manage the refuge as a contributing ecological, cultural, and economic component of the unique mountain valley within which it sits.

### ***Proposed Action***

The Service is proposing to expand the acquisition boundary of the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge in order to protect important migratory bird habitat and key wintering grounds for the greater sage grouse. The Service is evaluating a proposal to accept, in fee title, a donation of the Chandler Ranch (figure 1).

Gloria Chandler and her husband, Ike, owned and operated the Chandler Ranch located about 12 miles north of Walden. Ike Chandler passed away in 2004 and Gloria Chandler passed away in January 2008. Unbeknownst to the Service, Mrs. Chandler had left instructions in her Last Will and Testament dated August 29, 2005, that “all of my ranch real estate together with all existing leases be given to the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge.” Mrs. Chandler’s stated intention was that, upon her death, the property would be transferred to the Service and managed as part of the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge, thereby protecting its extensive natural resources in perpetuity.

In addition to the deeded ranch acres, the Kremmling Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which manages approximately 189,200 acres in North Park, have indicated their interest and support for the withdrawal and transfer to the Service several small BLM tracts adjacent to the Chandler Ranch. These “roundouts”, which total about 605 acres, would provide additional quality sagebrush habitat, ease management, operations and maintenance costs for the Service, and reduce confusion to the general public by more clearly delineating boundaries. Total acreage for this proposed expansion of Arapaho NWR is 2,850 acres.

### ***The Refuge and Project Area***

The Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge is located in an intermountain, glacial basin south of the town of Walden, Colorado, the county seat of Jackson County. The 8,200-foot elevation basin is approximately 30 miles wide and 45 miles long, and is commonly known as “North Park” since it is the most northern of three such “parks” in Colorado. Jackson County is contained within this basin that lies in the northern tier of Colorado counties.

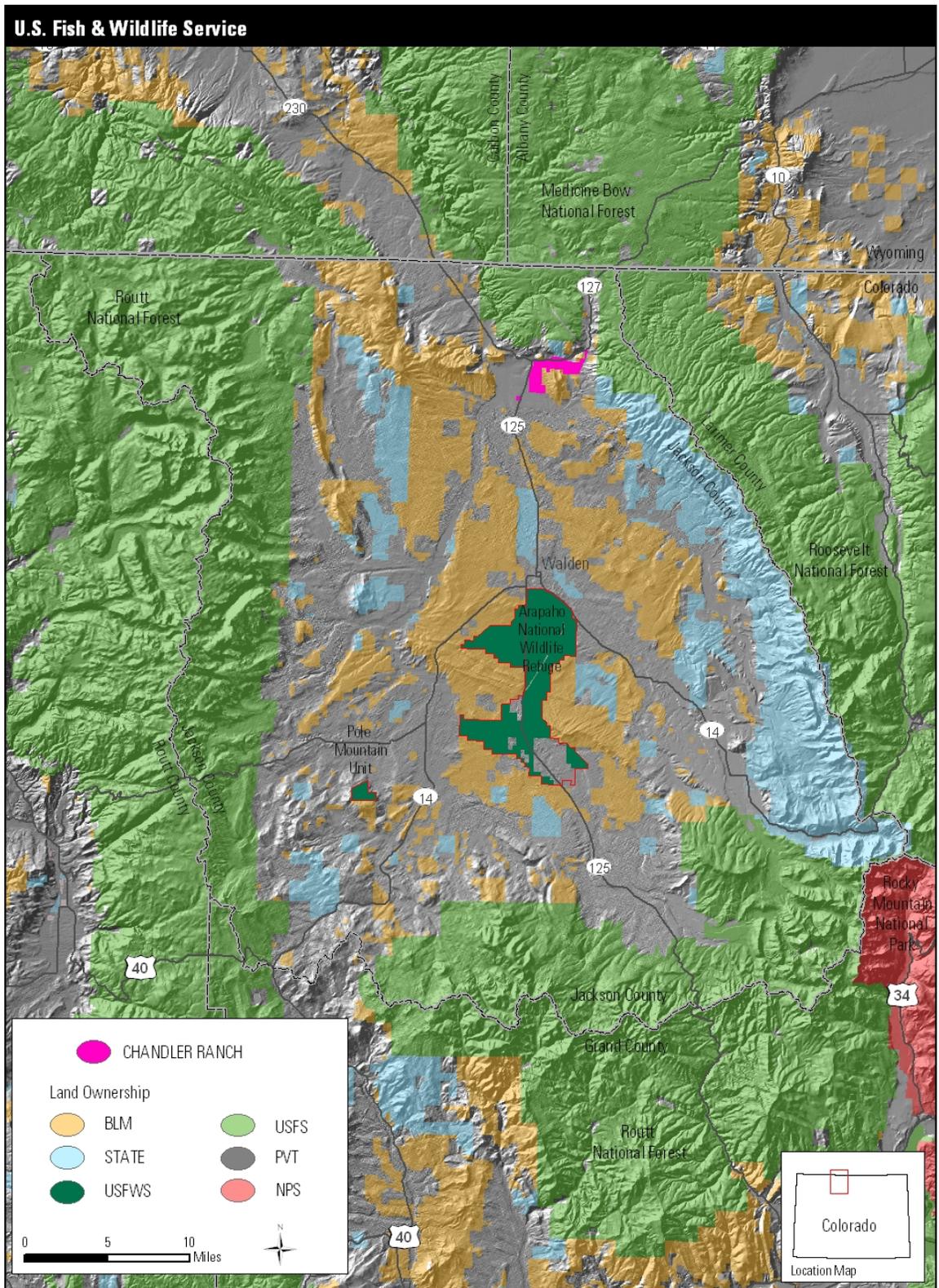


Figure 1. Landownership in North Park, Colorado.

The Chandler Ranch includes nearly 2,250 acres of deeded land with additional BLM grazing leases on adjoining BLM lands. The majority of the ranch is located to the east of the junction of State Highways 125 and 127. Pinkham creek runs for approximately 2.5 miles on the north end of the property. In addition, a small 40-acre parcel is located west of Highway 125 (about 2 miles from the main ranch) and included Ms. Chandler residence. The residence was destroyed in October 2008 according to the instructions in Mrs. Chandler's Will. A second house and several outbuildings are located on the main ranch.

Forming the headwaters of the North Platte River, the basin opens north into Wyoming and is rimmed on the west by the Park Range, on the south by the Rabbit Ears Range, and on the east by the Medicine Bow Range. Elevation ranges from 7,800–12,953 feet above sea level. The floor of the basin is interspersed with many slow, meandering streams that come together in the north-central part of the county to form the North Platte River. Main tributary rivers are the Michigan, Illinois, Canadian, and Grizzly.

### ***Purpose of and Need for Proposed Action***

The addition of this area into the refuge system will enhance and ensure protection of habitats valuable to migratory birds that utilize North Park. Riparian willow habitats, in addition to providing breeding habitat for numerous species, provide critical stopover areas for neo-tropical birds migrating on to northern breeding areas. Riparian habitats, especially those of high quality as occurs on this ranch, are lacking not only in North Park, but throughout the west. These areas contain the highest diversity of breeding birds among any habitat type, yet compose only a fraction of the available habitat to birds.

Sagebrush provides habitat for a suite of species, some of which are entirely dependent on this habitat. These species, referred to as sagebrush-obligate species include greater sage grouse, sage thrasher, sage sparrow, and Brewer's sparrow. All of these are recognized as Species of Concern by state and federal agencies. Greater sage grouse, currently under review for Endangered Species Act protection, have been documented to utilize lek sites within two miles of the project area. Because of the proximity to an active lek site, irrigated meadows on the south side of the property have been identified as a greater sage grouse "Brood and Production Area" by the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

Raptors such as bald eagle, golden eagle, peregrine falcon, Swainson's hawk, short-eared owl, and northern harrier all use habitats that occur within this project area, thus are likely residents during the year.

Grassland nesting birds such as savanna sparrows, Lincoln's sparrows, and song sparrows are also common nesters in North Park and can be expected to occur within the project area. Sandhill cranes have been documented using irrigated meadows within the project area.

North Park phacelia, a federal listed endangered plant, is known only to occur in Jackson County, Colorado. The majority of known populations occur on a BLM Natural Resource Area located northwest of Walden. It also occurs on the Arapaho NWR in two locations. This plant appears to prefer disturbed eroding sandstone outcrops of the Coalmont Formation on west

southwest facing slopes. These types of areas do occur within the project area, however, the plant is not known to exist. Surveys would be conducted in the future.

Canada lynx, a federally-listed threatened species, is known to occur in the forested areas surrounding North Park. This species likely travels through riparian corridors to reach preferred habitats.

Adding the Chandler Ranch in the refuge system will provide important connectivity between forested areas on the Routt and Medicine Bow National Forests and large blocks of BLM-managed lands on the valley floor, namely the Sentinel Mountain area. This connectivity will protect short-migration routes for wintering elk and deer, as well as other wildlife.

### ***Decision to be Made***

Based on the analysis in this environmental assessment (EA), the Service's director of region 6, with the concurrence of the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will make three decisions.

- Determine whether the Service should expand the acquisition boundary of the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge in order to accept the Gloria Chandler land donation.
- If yes, select an approved boundary that best fulfills the habitat protection purposes.
- If yes, determine whether the selected alternative would have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 requires this decision. If the quality of the human environment would not be significantly affected, a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) will be signed and made available to the public. If the alternative would have a significant impact, completion of an environmental impact statement would be required to address further those impacts.

### ***Issues Identified and Selected for Analysis***

A news release was issued on November 18, 2008 to the media, conservation interests, and the general public expressing the Services' request for comments concerning this expansion project. Local newspapers ran the notice prior to the meeting. An open house was held at the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge on November 25, 2008 from 5:00 pm to 7:00 pm. Public comments were taken during the meeting to identify any additional issues of concern to be analyzed for this project.

The Service has contacted county government officials, state congressional members, government agencies, and other public agencies.

There are two general categories of commonly expressed issues and concerns – biological and socioeconomic.

The biological issues include:

- the impact of development activities and the disturbance to wintering sage grouse within the project area

- the impact of habitat fragmentation and loss of habitat connectivity resulting from future development activities

The socioeconomic issues include:

- public access for hunting or other recreational activities
- Rights of an individual to donate land through last will and testament
- lands owned by the Federal Government
- use of historic buildings as a public interpretive site

### ***National Wildlife Refuge System and Authorities***

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. Various authorities have been granted to the Service allowing acceptance of gifts or donations into the refuge system including the Fish and Wildlife Act (1956), the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (1929), the National Wildlife Refuge System Act (1966), and the Wilderness Act (1964).

The Service boundary expansion to include the Chandler Ranch donation, would occur under the authority of the Fish and Wildlife Act (1956).

### **Goals of the Refuge System**

Specific goals of the Refuge System include:

- Fulfill our statutory duty to achieve refuge purpose(s) and further the Refuge System mission
- Conserve, restore where appropriate, and enhance all species of fish, wildlife, and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- Perpetuate migratory bird, inter-jurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations.
- Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants.
- Conserve and restore, where appropriate, representative ecosystems of the United States, including the ecological processes characteristic of those ecosystems.
- Foster understanding and instill appreciation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their conservation, by providing the public with safe, high-quality, and compatible wildlife-dependent public use. Such use includes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

### **Guiding Principles of Refuge System**

In addition to the goals outlined above, four guiding principles for the management and general public use of the Refuge System have been established:

- **Habitat** - Fish and wildlife will not prosper without high quality habitat, and without fish and wildlife, traditional uses of refuges cannot be sustained. The Refuge System will continue to conserve and enhance the quality and diversity of fish and wildlife habitat within refuges.
- **Public Use** - The Refuge System provides important opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation.
- **Partnerships** - America's sportsmen and women were the first partners who insisted on protecting valuable wildlife habitat within wildlife refuges. Conservation partnerships with other federal agencies, state agencies, tribes, organizations, industry, and the general public can make significant contributions to the growth and management of the Refuge System.
- **Public Involvement** - The public should be given a full and open opportunity to participate in decisions regarding acquisition and management of our national wildlife refuges.

The conservation and protection of the project area would continue to be consistent with the following policies and management plans:

- Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918)
- Bald Eagle Protection Act (1940)
- Endangered Species Act (1973)
- North American Waterfowl Management Plan (1994)
- Migratory non-game Birds of Management Concern in the U.S. (2002)

### ***Related Actions and Activities***

The Service is working with other public, private, and tribal entities to maintain wildlife habitat and protect wildlife values within the vicinity of the project area and throughout North Park.

Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) manages about 11,150 acres of land in North Park. The refuge works directly with CDOW on big game issues and hunting opportunities as well as in larger landscape efforts through the Owl Mountain Partnership. Sagebrush habitats on private lands in North Park are recognized as a focus area for the CDOW in their most recent comprehensive statewide wildlife plan (CDOW 2006)

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages over 180,000 acres in North Park and is the main adjacent landowner of Arapaho NWR as well as the Chandler Ranch. The refuge and local BLM office work together on a variety of habitat improvement projects for wildlife habitat in the area.

The mission of Owl Mountain Partnership (OMP) is to: serve the economic, cultural, and social needs of the community while developing adaptive long-term landscape management programs, policies and practices that ensure ecosystem sustainability. The partnership was formed in 1993 and the steering committee consists of USFWS, BLM, USFS, DOW and private landowners. Habitat improvement projects are a focus for the OMP.

### ***The Acquisition Process***

It is the long standing policy of the Service to acquire minimum interest in land from a willing seller that best achieves habitat acquisition goals. Mrs. Chandler was the sole owner of the ranch. Her stated intent was to leave the ranch to the Arapaho NWR.

Because the property is being donated to the Service, no federal source of funding will be needed to acquire the property. Future costs will include staff time to post/sign the land, and staff time for developing land management plans. No new additional refuge staff will be added to manage this acquisition. Currently, there is a grazing permittee managing the ranch. It is anticipated that the permittee will continue to graze the Chandler ranch for the short term. In working with this individual the Service can utilize his knowledge of the ranch to increase the refuge staff knowledge of the irrigation system, identify any fencing issues, which in turn will minimize costs. Annual refuge revenue sharing cost is estimated to be \$3,442, which would be paid to Jackson County. BLM payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILT) are estimated to be \$193.

