

CHAPTER 1—Introduction



Mitch Werner

Swan River National Wildlife Refuge.

The United States (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) manages the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex (refuge complex)—encompassing 163,304 acres in northwestern and north-central Montana. To address the long-term management of the refuge complex, the Service has developed a draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental assessment (EA).

The Benton Lake Refuge Complex is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), and is located in northwest and north-central Montana (figure 1). Spanning both sides of the Continental Divide, the refuge complex is a collection of diverse landscapes, from wetlands and mixed-

grass prairie in the east to forests, intermountain grasslands, rivers, and lakes in the west. Likewise, animal species that inhabit the refuge complex lands are diverse and reflective of a variety of habitats. Large numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds inhabit wetlands in the east, while large predators such as grizzly bears make their home in the mountains and forests to the west.

The refuge complex oversees management of 27 units (2 refuges, 1 wetland management district containing 22 waterfowl production areas [WPAs], and 3 conservation areas [CAs]) and administers 216 easements within the Refuge System:

- Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge (refuge) was established in 1929 and consists of 12,383 fee-title acres and 76.88 acres of right-of-way easement. It is located on the northern Great Plains, 50 miles east of the Rocky Mountains and 12 miles north of Great Falls, Montana.
- Benton Lake Wetland Management District (district) was established in 1975. It includes 10 counties (Cascade, Chouteau, Glacier, Hill, Lewis and Clark, Liberty, Pondera, Powell, Teton, Toole), 22 waterfowl production areas, and 4 distinct easement programs. This district covers the largest geographical area of any in the United States. The protection of habitat in the district continues to grow with acquisition of more easements and waterfowl production areas.
- Blackfoot Valley Conservation Area (CA) was established in 1995 and expanded in 2011. This conservation easement program has the potential to protect up to 103,500 acres in the Blackfoot Valley by buying conservation easements on private land within the 824,024-acre project area.
- Rocky Mountain Front CA was established in 2005 and expanded in 2011. This conservation easement program has the potential to protect up to 295,000 acres in the Rocky Mountain Front (Front) by buying conservation easements on private land within the 918,000-acre project area.
- Swan River National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1973 and consists of 1,568.81 acres. It is located in the Swan Valley, 38 miles southeast of Creston, Montana.
- Swan Valley CA was established in 2011. This conservation area has the potential to protect up to 10,000 acres in the Swan Valley by buying conservation easements on private land, and up to 1,000 acres in fee-title land next to the Swan River Refuge within the 187,400-acre project area.

The Service has developed this draft CCP to provide a foundation for the management and use of the refuge complex. Figure 1 shows the location of the refuge complex within the overall planning area. The CCP specifies the necessary actions to achieve the vision and purposes of the refuge complex. Wildlife is the first priority in refuge and district management, and public use (including wildlife-dependent recreation) is allowed and encouraged as long as it is compatible with the purposes of each management unit, in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improve-

ment Act). During the planning process, it became evident that the issues surrounding the management of Benton Lake Refuge, and the wetland basin in particular, were unique within the refuge complex. Therefore, the issues, alternatives, proposed action, consequences, and objectives for Benton Lake Refuge have been addressed in a separate chapter. The material described in chapter 7 fits within the umbrella of the refuge complex but explores some aspects in detail. When completed, the management direction for the refuge complex, described in chapters 1–6, and the management direction for Benton Lake Refuge, described in chapter 7, will be used in conjunction to serve as a working guide for management programs and activities throughout the refuge complex over the next 15 years. As part of implementing the final CCP (refer to section 6.3 in chapter 6) stepdown plans will be developed to guide management in further detail.

When the CCP process began in 2008, the Lost Trail Refuge and the Northwest Montana Flathead County Wetland Management District were administratively managed as a unit of the refuge complex. In 2012, the refuge complex was administratively reorganized, which resulted in the transfer of the Lost Trail Refuge and Northwest Montana Flathead County District to the National Bison Range Complex in Moiese, Montana. Although Lost Trail Refuge has a CCP that was completed in 2005 and remains in effect, several issues were identified during scoping for the refuge complex CCP. To address these issues, an amendment to the Lost Trail CCP will be prepared. Also during scoping for the refuge complex CCP, a few issues about management of waterfowl production areas in the wetland management district were identified. These issues will be forwarded to the staff of the National Bison Range Complex for consideration during their CCP efforts, which are currently in the preplanning phase.

This chapter introduces the process for development of the refuge complex's CCP, including descriptions of the involvement of the Service, the State of Montana, the public, and others. Chapter 1 also describes the conservation issues and plans that affect the refuge complex. The remaining chapters contain information the Service used and results of the Service's analysis that is the foundation of the draft plan:

- chapter 2 describes the refuge complex and planning issues.
- chapter 3 sets out the alternatives for management of the refuge complex.

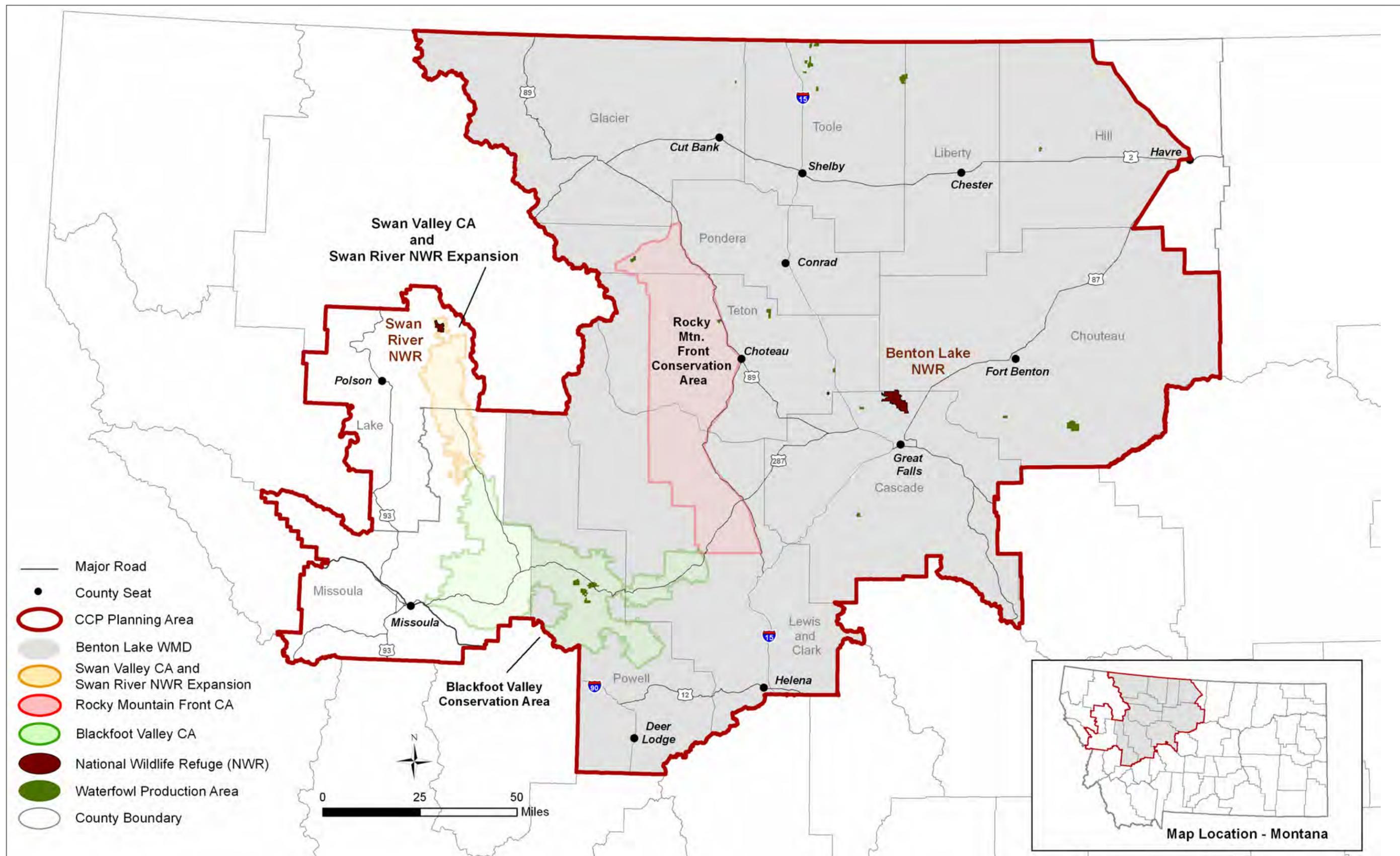


Figure 1. The comprehensive conservation planning area for Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Montana.

- chapter 4 describes the physical, biological, and social environment that the alternatives would affect.
- chapter 5 explains the expected consequences of carrying out each of the alternatives.
- chapter 6 describes objectives and strategies for the proposed action (alternative C) for the refuge complex, which compose the draft CCP.
- chapter 7 describes the issues, alternatives, background information, expected consequences, objectives, and strategies for the proposed action (alternative 4) for the Benton Lake Refuge.

1.1 Purpose and Need for the Plan

The purpose of this draft CCP is to show the role that the refuge complex will play in support of the mission of the Refuge System and to provide long-term guidance for managing programs and activities. The CCP is needed to help the Service achieve the following:

- communication with the public and other partners in efforts to carry out the mission of the Refuge System
- a clear statement of direction for managing the refuge complex
- providing neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of the Service's management actions on and around the refuge complex
- make sure that management actions by the Service are consistent with the mandates of the Improvement Act
- make sure that management of the refuge complex is consistent with Federal, State, and county plans
- formulate a basis for development of budget requests for the refuge complex's operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs

1.2 The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation. The Refuge System is one of the Service's major programs.

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE MISSION

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working with others, is to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM MISSION

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

History of the National Wildlife Refuge System

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, America's fish and wildlife resources were declining at an alarming rate, largely due to unrestricted market hunting. Concerned citizens, scientists, and hunting and angling groups joined and generated the political will for the first significant conservation measures taken by the Federal Government. These actions included the establishment of the Bureau of Fisheries in the 1870s and, in 1900, passage of the

first Federal wildlife law—the Lacey Act—which prohibited interstate transportation of wildlife taken in violation of State laws. In 1892, Benjamin Harrison's order to protect Afognak Island, Alaska as a forest and fish culture reservation was the first presidential proclamation withdrawing public domain for wildlife conservation (Proclamation No. 39). Although the reservation was not deliberately established for the protection of sea lions and sea otters, its motivation was to sustain commercial harvest and recognized the need to regulate harvest and test the presidential power to rein in commercial excess (Fischman 2003).

Theodore Roosevelt viewed the conservation imperative as a moral issue as well as a necessary condition for sustaining national prosperity. Roosevelt had long expressed concern for the viability of birds targeted by plume hunters for fashion. In Florida's Indian River drainage, plume hunters were decimating egrets, ibises, roseate spoonbills, and other birds with colorful features (Cutright 1985). On March 14, 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed Pelican Island as a "preservation and breeding ground for native birds." Between 1903 and 1909, Roosevelt decreed 52 bird and 4 big game reserves. In 1906, The U.S. Congress endorsed Roosevelt's Executive reservations.



Donna A. Dewhurst / USFWS

Sandhill cranes nest at Benton Lake Refuge.

Roosevelt inspired The U.S. Congress to reserve land that would become wildlife refuges beginning with Wichita Mountain Forest and Game Preserve in 1905, the National Bison Range in 1908, and the National Elk Refuge in 1912 (Fischman 2003).

The following growth of the Refuge System focused on particular geographic regions and broad national needs with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. It established the first significant preemptive, Federal restrictions on hunting and implemented new treaty obligations to sustain populations of certain birds especially waterfowl populations. Refuge purchases were made to help accommodate the multistate north-south migrations (Fischman 2003).

In 1929, the Migratory Bird Conservation Act was authorized to acquire lands to serve as avian refuges or 'inviolable sanctuaries' for migratory birds. After a precipitous decline in waterfowl populations in the early 1930s, The U.S. Congress enacted the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act of 1934, which dedicated money for acquiring waterfowl conservation refuges from sales of Federal Duck Stamps that all waterfowl hunters were required to affix to their State hunting license. With an assured source of money, the growth of the Refuge System accelerated. Money for refuge acquisition was augmented following the passage of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1964 (LWCF), which provides money from the receipts from motorboat fuel tax and payments for Federal offshore oil and gas leases.

In 1940 as part of the New Deal innovation, President Franklin Roosevelt established the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and placed it within the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), and existing Federal wildlife functions including law enforcement, fish management, animal damage control, and wildlife refuge management were combined into a single organization for the first time.

In 1956, the U.S. Congress gave the Executive branch the authority to acquire refuges not just for migratory birds but also for any wildlife through the Fish and Wildlife Act. There were 166 refuges established under this act (Fischman 2003).

In 1962, the passage of the Refuge Recreation Act marked the beginning of the modern trend to provide the Service with systematic management guidance. The Refuge Recreation Act mandated that public recreation use be permitted in a refuge "only to the extent that is practicable and not inconsistent with the primary objectives for which the particular area is established." In 1966, the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (Administration Act) consolidated the land units managed by the Service, provided a comprehensive management mandate, and extended the applicability of the compatibility standard. It also provided for a program for the "conservation, protection, restoration, and propagation of selected species of native fish and wildlife threatened with extinction." This was the first establishment of the connection between refuges and endangered species, which remains strong today. More than 260 listed species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) oc-

cur on refuges and 56 refuges have been added to the system specifically by ESA acquisition authority (Fischman 2003).

From 1903–97, the U.S. Congress had provided little guidance to the Service on consolidating refuges into a system. Conservation has always been the common theme for refuge mandates; however, conservation encompasses a range of concerns from ecosystem preservation, to endangered species recovery, to sustaining game populations for hunting. Without overarching guidance, coordinating and ensuring alignment of individual refuges toward a larger goal was difficult. In 1997, the Improvement Act was passed, which provided the Refuge System with an overall mission.

As conservation challenges have changed, the Service has adapted and responded. This has been shown repeatedly from such circumstances as the Service’s response to marketing hunting in late 1880s, plume hunters of the 1900s, falling waterfowl populations in the 1930s, protection of endangered species in the 1960s and 1970s, loss of wetland and prairie habitat from 1920 through the 1980s, challenges facing forest landbirds and grassland bird species, and more recently effects from climate change. As conservation issues are identified, the Service has responded with shifts in management agendas and priorities in keeping with the original purpose for which the refuge unit was established.

The Nation’s fish and wildlife heritage contributes to the quality of American lives and is an integral part of the country’s greatness. Wildlife and wild places have always given people special opportunities to have fun, relax, and appreciate the natural world. Currently, the Refuge System has become the largest collection of lands in the world specifically managed for wildlife, encompassing more than 150 million acres within 550 refuges and more than 3,000 waterfowl production areas. Today, there is at least one refuge in every State including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Today, the Service enforces Federal wildlife laws, conserves lands and resources, conducts landscape conservation, conserves and manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores vital wildlife habitat, protects and recovers endangered species, and helps other governments with conservation efforts. In addition, the Service administers a Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars to States for fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, and related programs across the United States.

1.3 National and Regional Mandates

Refuge System units are managed to achieve the mission and goals of the Refuge System along with the designated purposes of the national wildlife

refuges and wetland management districts (as described in establishing legislation, Executive orders, or other establishing documents). The key concepts and guidance for the Refuge System are in the Administration Act, Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), “Fish and Wildlife Service Manual,” and the Improvement Act.

The Improvement Act established a clear mission for the Refuge System. The act states that each national wildlife refuge (meaning every unit of the Refuge System, which includes wetland management districts) shall be managed to do the following:

- Fulfill the mission of the Refuge System
- Fulfill the individual purposes of each refuge and district
- Consider the needs of fish and wildlife first
- Support the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System
- Recognize that wildlife-dependent recreation activities including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation are legitimate and priority public uses
- Keep the authority of refuge managers to decide compatible public uses
- Fulfill the requirement of developing a CCP for each unit of the Refuge System and fully involve the public in preparation of these plans
- In addition to the mission for the Refuge System, the wildlife and habitat vision for each unit of the Refuge System supports the following principles:
 - Wildlife comes first.
 - Ecosystems, biodiversity, and wilderness are vital concepts in refuge and district management.
 - Habitats must be healthy.
 - Growth of refuges and districts must be strategic.
 - The Refuge System serves as a model for habitat management with broad participation from others.

Following passage of the Improvement Act, the Service immediately began to carry out the direction of the new legislation including preparation of CCPs

for all national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts. Consistent with the act, the Service prepares CCPs in conjunction with public involvement. Each refuge and each district is required to complete its CCP within the 15-year schedule (by 2012).

The Improvement Act amends the Administration Act by providing (1) a unifying mission for the Refuge System, (2) a new process for determining compatible public uses on refuges and districts, and (3) a requirement that each refuge and district be managed under a CCP. The Improvement Act states that wildlife conservation is the priority of Refuge System lands and that the Secretary of the Interior will make sure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of refuge lands are supported. Each refuge and district must be managed to fulfill the Refuge System's mission and the specific purposes for which the unit was established. The Improvement Act requires the Service to check the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each national wildlife refuge and wetland management district.

A detailed description of these and other laws and Executive orders that may affect the CCP or the Service's implementation of the CCP is in "Appendix A—Key Legislation and Policy." Service policies for planning and day-to-day management of refuges and districts are in the "Refuge Manual" and the "Fish and Wildlife Service Manual."

1.4 Contributions to Regional and National Plans

The refuge complex contributes to the conservation efforts outlined in the various regional and national plans described here.

FULFILLING THE PROMISE

A 1999 report, "Fulfilling the Promise, the National Wildlife Refuge System" (USFWS 1999a), is the culmination of a yearlong process by teams of Service employees to evaluate the Refuge System nationwide. The report contains 42 recommendations packaged with three vision statements for wildlife and habitat, people, and leadership. This CCP deals with all three of these major topics. The planning team looked to the recommendations in the document for guidance during CCP planning.

The Service has recently embarked on an effort to update the vision in "Fulfilling the Promise" through a new initiative, "Conserving the Future." A landmark conference was held in 2011 to solidify the direction of this effort. Updated guidance and documents will be developed in the near future. As the vision for "Conserving the Future" develops, these new ideas and

directions will be incorporated into the management of the refuge complex.

PARTNERS IN FLIGHT

The Partners in Flight program began in 1990 with the recognition of declining population levels of many migratory bird species (Ruth 2006). The central premise of Partners in Flight has been that the resources of public and private organizations in North and South America must be combined, coordinated, and increased to achieve success in conserving bird populations in this hemisphere.

Montana Partners in Flight identified the highest priority habitats in Montana as mixed grassland, sagebrush-steppe, dry forest (ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir), riparian deciduous forest, and prairie pot-hole wetlands (Casey 2000). All of these key habitats occur within the refuge complex. The primary objectives in each priority habitat are to restore ecological processes necessary to provide suitable habitat for priority (target) species, find and protect those remaining blocks of habitats that have undergone drastic declines, and develop management prescriptions that can be applied at all geographic scales.

NORTH AMERICAN WATER-BIRD CONSERVATION PLAN

The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan provides a contiguous framework for conserving and managing colonial-nesting waterbirds, seabirds, coastal waterbirds, wading birds, and marshbirds. The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan includes a goal to establish conservation action and exchange information and expertise with other bird conservation initiatives. The plan also calls for establishment of practical units for planning for terrestrial habitats (Kushlan et al. 2002). The refuge complex is located within the Northern Prairie and Parklands Region.

The challenge for the Northern Prairie and Parklands Regional Plan is operating in a landscape significantly affected by agriculture, oil, gas, and other human development activities that factor immensely in the region's conservation issues. Wetland loss and deterioration tops the list, which is further influenced by the region's natural cycles of drought and inundation as well as the widespread and uncertain ramifications of global climate change. Reliable, comprehensive population information that incorporates wetland availability and landscape context is the foremost information need in this area (Beyersbergen et al. 2004).

NORTH AMERICAN WATERFOWL MANAGEMENT PLAN

Recognizing the importance of waterfowl and wetlands to North Americans and the need for international cooperation to help in the recovery of a shared resource, the United States, Canadian and Mexican Governments have joined together to develop a strategy to restore waterfowl populations through habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement. Originally written in 1986, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan is innovative because of its international scope and its implementation at the regional level. Its success depends on the strength of partnerships called joint ventures, which involve Federal, State, provincial, tribal, and local governments; businesses; conservation organizations; and individual citizens. (USFWS and Canadian Wildlife Service 1986).

Joint ventures are regional, self-directed partnerships that carry out science-based conservation through a wide array of community participation. Joint ventures develop implementation plans that focus on areas of concern identified in the plan. The refuge complex lies within the Intermountain West and Prairie Pothole Joint Ventures. The North American Waterfowl Management plan and the supporting efforts of the Intermountain West and Prairie Pothole Joint Ventures have been considered throughout the planning process and will be supported and promoted in the CCP.

U.S. SHOREBIRD CONSERVATION PLAN

The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan is a partnership involving organizations throughout the United States committed to the conservation of shorebirds. The organizations and individuals working on the Plan have developed conservation goals for each region of the country, identified critical habitat conservation needs and key research needs, and proposed education and outreach programs to increase awareness of shorebirds and the threats they face (Brown et al. 2001).

The national plan has been stepped down by region, including the Intermountain West Region and the Northern Plains Prairie Pothole Region, which include the refuge complex. Managing for shorebirds in the prairies is challenging due to the dynamic nature of wetland conditions in time and space. Major issues for shorebirds in this area include conservation of declining species, habitat loss, and filling information

gaps on threats (Skagen and Thompson 2003). The most important issue facing shorebird conservation in the Intermountain West is the availability of quality water. The shorebird plan for this area focuses on habitat management, monitoring, research, outreach, and planning (Oring et al. 2000).

STATE COMPREHENSIVE FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION STRATEGY

Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (MFWP 2005) is for all vertebrate species known to exist in Montana including both game and nongame species. The plan recognizes that managing fish and wildlife more comprehensively is a natural progression in the effective conservation of the remarkable fish and wildlife resources of Montana. The goals of the plan are to identify all of Montana's fish and wildlife and related habitats in greatest need of conservation, identify management strategies to conserve fish and wildlife and related habitats in greatest need, work independently and in partnership to conserve, enhance, and protect Montana's diverse fish and wildlife resources, and address each species equitably regardless of classification as game or nongame, rare or at risk, improve the ability of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) to address present and future money challenges and opportunities and integrate monitoring and management of game and nongame fish and wildlife species.

Several Tier I (greatest conservation need) focus areas and community types were identified that overlap geographically with the refuge complex and with the Service's management alternatives under consideration in this plan. These are the Rocky Mountain Front foothills, Mission/Swan Valley and Mountains, grassland complexes, riparian and wetlands, mountain and prairie streams. In addition, there are at least 15 Tier I wildlife species identified in this plan that are also trust responsibilities of the Service. The 15-year management direction for refuge complex outlined in this CCP has significant potential to complement and advance the conservation needs MFWP outlined in their comprehensive conservation strategy.

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY—NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS STEPPE ECOREGIONAL ASSESSMENT

The Northern Great Plains Steppe Ecoregional Assessment encompasses approximately 250,000 square miles (an area about one and half the size of California) and includes parts of five States and two Canadian provinces: Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Alberta, and Saskatchewan (TNC 1999). Historical and current land use practices have significantly affected many native species in the ecoregion. Grassland species have begun to show widespread declines—most notable are endemic Great Plains birds, which have shown steeper and more consistent declines than any other group of North American species. The Northern Great Plains Steppe Ecoregional Plan identified 42 primary species, 18 secondary species, 323 natural communities, and 2 general aquatic communities as targets of conservation. Portfolio sites that are also priorities for the refuge complex include the Rocky Mountain Front and the Sweet Grass Hills. Much of the portfolio is being supported by existing land management practices; however, significant threats persist that could either destroy or significantly degrade sites and their conservation targets. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) identified the need to strengthen existing partnerships and more effectively reach out to stakeholders in the ecoregion. The Service will consider its role in supporting this effort through the CCP and future management direction.

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY— CANADIAN ROCKY MOUNTAINS ECOREGIONAL ASSESSMENT

The Canadian Rocky Mountains ecoregional assessment covers approximately 27.1 million hectares (66.9 million acres) across a large part of the Rocky Mountains from southeastern British Columbia and southwestern Alberta to northern Idaho, northwestern Montana and a small part of northeastern Washington (Rumsey et al. 2004). This ecoregion is best recognized for its full complement of large mam-

mals. Elk, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, mountain goats, mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, and woodland caribou are among the large ungulate species. Some of the most threatened species are carnivores, and this ecoregion supports populations of grizzly bears, gray wolves, wolverines, fishers, and lynx. The ecoregional assessment for the Canadian Rocky Mountains represents the first step in developing a network of conservation areas that, with proper management, would make sure the long-term persistence of the ecoregion's species, communities, and ecological systems. The refuge complex is a key stakeholder in several of these conservation areas, including the Crown of the Continent. The goal is to conserve the entire portfolio of conservation areas, which will need a combination of strategies, including on-the-ground action at specific conservation areas and multiple-area strategies to abate pervasive threats to targets across the ecoregion.

PARTNERS FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE PROGRAM STRATEGIC PLAN

In 2004, Service directorate instructed the Partners Program to develop a national strategic plan. The plan included regional geographic areas in which to focus local projects to realize the greatest help to those fish and wildlife resources most in need. The guidance directed the preparation of regional and State stepdown plans. The 2007 Montana Step-down Strategic Plan identifies geographic focus areas, provides focus area habitat accomplishment targets, and describes benefits to Federal trust species. Focus areas within the refuge complex include the Rocky Mountain Front, Blackfoot River watershed, and the Swan Valley (USFWS 2007a). The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is currently updating their 5-year plan and the results of that effort will be considered in the management direction for the refuge complex.

RECOVERY PLANS FOR THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

There are eleven threatened, endangered, or candidate species that occur, or have historically occurred, within the refuge complex (USFWS 2012). Recovery plans have been completed for the pallid sturgeon, black-footed ferret, grizzly bear, and piping plover.

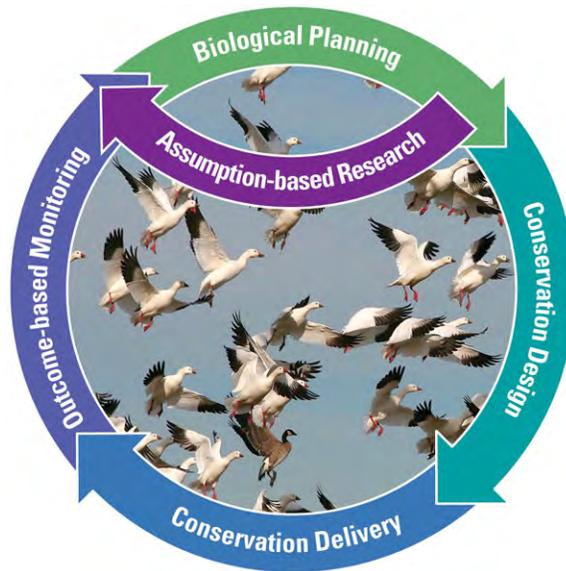


Figure 2. The strategic habitat conservation process.

Draft recovery plans are available for the bull trout and water howellia. The recovery needs of all listed species within the refuge complex are considered in the development of the CCP. Species that have a significant part of their population within the refuge complex and are likely to be most affected by this CCP, either through direct management of fee-title lands or through partnership in conservation easements, include the grizzly bear (threatened) Sprague’s pipit (candidate) and bull trout (threatened).

CLIMATE CHANGE STRATEGIC PLAN

The Service expects that accelerating climate change will affect the Nation’s fish, wildlife, and plant resources in profound ways. While many species will continue to thrive, some may decline and in some instances go extinct. In 2010, the Service completed a strategic plan to address climate change for the next 50 years titled, *Rising to the Urgent Challenge—Strategic Plan for Responding to Accelerating Climate Change* (USFWS 2010c). The strategic plan employs three key strategies: adaptation, mitigation, and engagement. In addition, the plan acknowledges that no single organization or agency can address climate change without allying itself with others in partnership across the Nation and around the world. This plan is an integral part of the DOI’s strategy for addressing climate change as expressed in Secretarial Order 3289 (September 14, 2009).

The Service will follow five guiding principles in responding to climate change Service-wide and within the refuge complex:

- Continually evaluate priorities and approaches, make difficult choices, take calculated risks, and adapt to climate change.
- Commit to a new spirit of coordination, collaboration, and interdependence with others.
- Reflect scientific excellence, professionalism, and integrity in all work.
- Emphasize the conservation of habitats within sustainable landscapes, applying the Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC) framework.
- Assemble and use state-of-the-art technical capacity to meet the climate change challenge.

1.5 Strategic Habitat Conservation

SHC is a means of applying adaptive management across large landscapes. SHC involves an ongoing cycle of biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, outcome-based monitoring, and assumption-based research (figure 2). SHC uses science to focus conservation in the right places (USGS, USFWS 2008).

In 2010, the Service started to expand its conservation easement programs in the Blackfoot Valley and

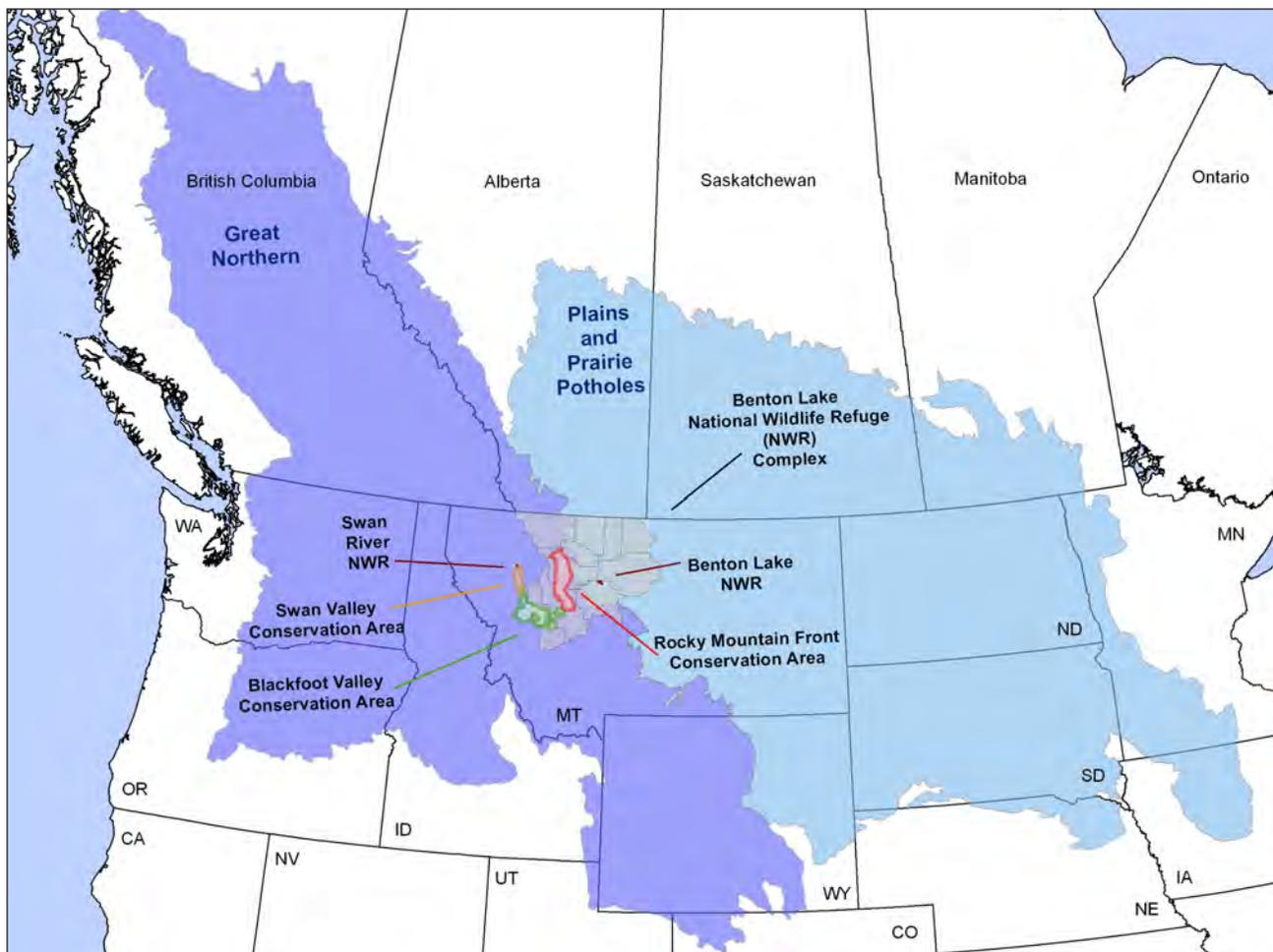


Figure 3. The Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative and the Plains and Prairie Potholes Landscape Conservation Cooperative with Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Montana.

along the Rocky Mountain Front as well as establish a new conservation easement program in the Swan Valley. Input from the public was solicited in May 2010 and used to complete an EA and land protection plan for each Conservation Area. The land protection plans (USFWS 2011c,d,e) outline how the refuge complex will use SHC to focus the purchase of conservation easements to meet objectives for focal species such as the grizzly bear, bull trout, and Canada lynx. As new information on population objectives, habitat needs, and threats become available, the Service will continue to update the land protection plans. Efforts by key partners such as TNC, Trout Unlimited, MFWP, the Service's Ecological Services branch and the Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GN-LCC) are essential to completing these monitoring and feedback parts of the SHC process and for keeping conservation efforts focused on the highest priorities.

1.6 Landscape Conservation Cooperatives

Landscape conservation cooperatives (LCCs) facilitate the application of adaptive management and SHC across large landscapes. These cooperatives are conservation-science partnerships between the Service and other Federal agencies, States, tribes, nongovernmental organizations, universities, and others. Designed as fundamental units for planning and science, the cooperatives have the capacity to help the Service carry out the elements of SHC—biological planning, conservation design and delivery, and monitoring and research. Coordinated planning and scientific information will strengthen the Service's strategic response to accelerating climate change.

The refuge complex lies within the Service's GN-LCC and the Plains and Prairie Potholes Landscape Conservation Cooperative (PPPLCC) (figure 3). The GN-LCC has identified priority species including bull trout, grizzly bear, Lewis's woodpecker, trumpeter swan, westslope cutthroat trout, Arctic grayling, wolverine, willow flycatcher, greater sage-grouse, burrowing owl, and Columbia spotted frog. Eight of these priority species exist within the refuge complex. The PPPLCC includes three main subunits, the Prairie Pothole Region, northern Great Plains, and the riparian corridors of several major river systems including the Missouri River, the Yellowstone River, and the Red River of the North. The refuge complex lies primarily within the PPPLCC's Prairie Pothole Region, which includes millions of wetlands that constitute one of the richest wetland and grassland systems in the world. The area provides habitat for both breeding and migrating birds, as well as a host of other wetland and native grassland-dependent species, including waterfowl, shorebirds, grassland birds, native stream fishes, and big river fishes such as the pallid sturgeon, and paddlefish.

As LCCs continue to develop, an overarching priority will be to serve as a convening body, bringing together partners to address existing and future issues

related to climate change and landscape-scale conservation. LCCs will continue to:

- convene forums for the assessment of conservation needs and identification of key issues and decisions;
- collect and assimilate climate information to support vulnerability assessments for populations and habitats most susceptible to the effects of climate change;
- develop population and habitat models as necessary to enhance conservation delivery in response to climate change and other effects to landscapes;
- identify conservation delivery strategies;
- jointly figure out and address research needs for priority species and priority habitat conservation;
- provide decision support systems and tools that are accessible to partners and help define the

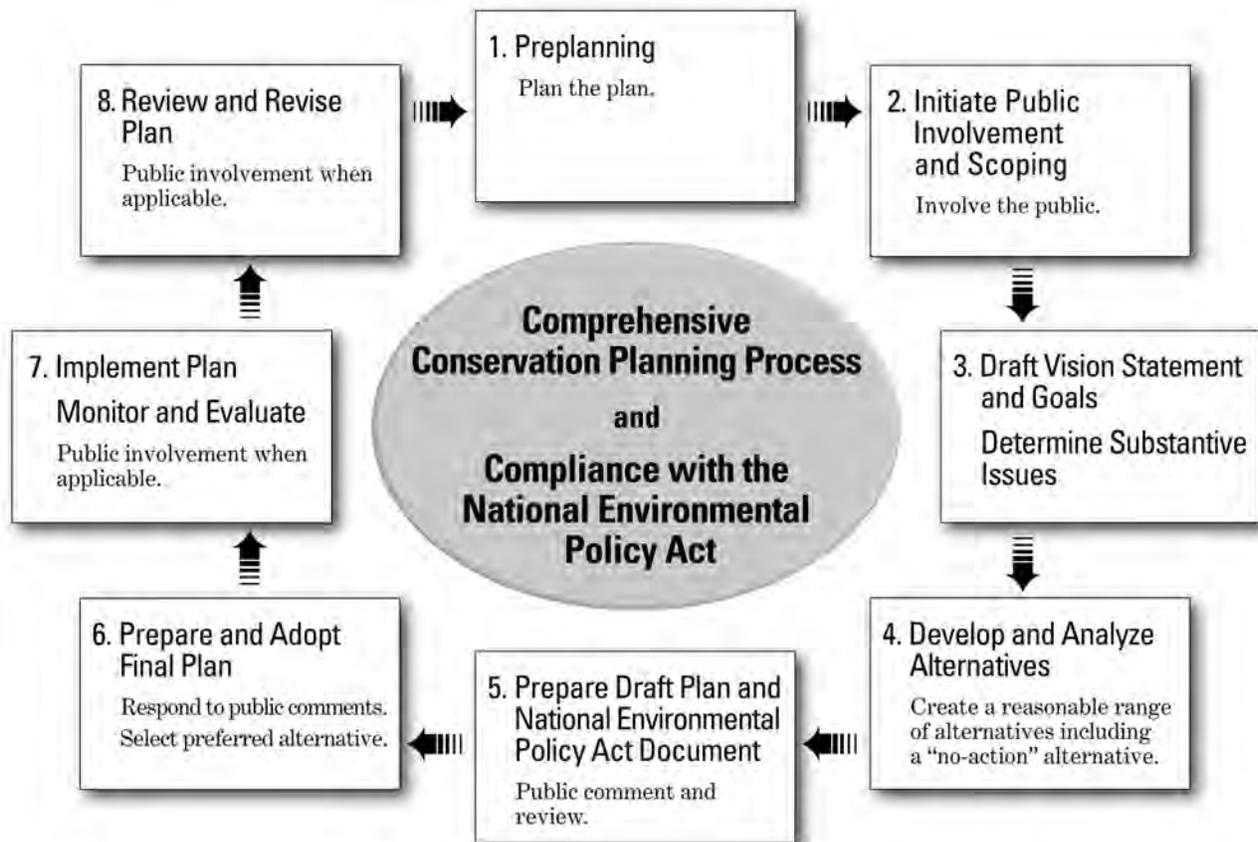


Figure 4. Process steps for comprehensive conservation planning and associated environmental analysis.

conservation actions needed including how much and where;

- support proper data sharing,
- develop monitoring and evaluation protocols;
- leverage existing capacities and avoid inefficiencies and redundancy in landscape conservation and monitoring.

The refuge complex intends to continue to be an active participant in LCCs and continue to consider opportunities where refuge management, partnership work, conservation delivery, and research needs coincide with the work of the LCCs (USFWS 2009a).

1.7 The Planning Process

The Improvement Act requires the Service to develop a CCP by 2012 for each national wildlife refuge. The final plan for the refuge complex is scheduled for completion in 2012 and will guide the management of the refuge complex for the next 15 years.

The Service prepared this draft CCP and EA in compliance with the Improvement Act and Part 602 (National Wildlife Refuge System Planning) of the “Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.” The actions described in the draft CCP and EA meet the requirements of the Council on Environmental Quality regulations that carry out the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). More requirements and guidance are contained in the Refuge System’s planning policy, issued in 2000. This policy established requirements and guidance for refuge and wetland management district plans—including CCPs and step-down management plans—to make sure that planning efforts follow the Improvement Act. The planning policy identified several steps of the CCP and environmental analysis process (figure 4).

The Service began the preplanning process in February 2008 with the establishment of a planning team comprised primarily of Service staff from refuge complex and the Region 6 Division of Refuge Planning. A broader advisory planning team also was established due to the great interest by other refuge divisions. During workshops and other critical stages in the planning process, the broader team was part of the decision process. Contributors included other Service divisions stationed in regional office, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and Greenbrier Wetland Services, (refer to “Appendix B—Preparers and Contributors”). During preplanning, the team developed a mailing list, internal issues, and identified the unique qualities of the refuge complex (see section 2.2 in chapter 2). The planning team identified and reviewed current programs, compiled and analyzed relevant data, and

defined the purposes of the refuge units within the refuge complex.

Public scoping started with a Notice of Intent to prepare the draft CCP and EA that was published in the Federal Register on August 18, 2008. Information was distributed through news releases, issuance of the first planning update, and holding a series of public scoping meetings. Meetings were held as follows:

- September 2, 2008, La Quinta Inn, Great Falls, Montana, 4–7 p.m.
- September 3, 2008, Stage Stop Inn, Choteau, Montana, 4–7 p.m.
- September 3, 2008, Ovando School, Ovando, Montana, 4–7 p.m.
- September 4, 2008, Red Lion Inn, Kalispell, Montana, 4–7 p.m.
- October 15, 2008, Benton Lake Refuge Headquarters, Great Falls, Montana, 5–7 p.m.
- November 16, 2010, Benton Lake Refuge Headquarters, Great Falls, Montana, 5–7 p.m.
- January 11, 2011, Benton Lake Refuge Headquarters, Great Falls, Montana, 4–6 p.m.
- June 9, 2011, Best Western Heritage Inn, Great Falls, Montana, 8 a.m.–3 p.m.

In addition to hosted meetings, several opportunities to meet with a variety of interest groups occurred. Service employees shared the CCP planning process, solicited issues and concerns from individuals attending meetings, and answered any questions. These opportunities provided staff greater understanding of issues, concerns, and effects shared by the public. Refuge staff attended meetings or met with the following: Ducks Unlimited, Great Falls Audubon, Montana Audubon, Russell Country Sportsmen’s Association, Muddy Creek Watershed Group, Sun River Watershed Group, Montana Bird Conservation Partnership, Great Falls Public School, and Rocky Mountain Front Land Manager’s Forum.

The planning team encouraged public comment during the planning process through the development and release of this draft CCP and EA. This project complies with public involvement requirements of NEPA, and the planning team incorporated public input throughout the planning process. Over the course of the planning process, the planning team collected available information about the resources of the refuge complex units and the surrounding areas. This information is summarized in chapter 4—Affected Environment. Table 1 lists the specific steps in the planning process to date for the preparation of this draft CCP and EA.

Table 1. Summary of the comprehensive conservation planning process for Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Montana.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Outcome or purpose</i>
February 7, 2008	Preplanning meeting	Service staff discussed the initial planning team list, started the mailing list, discussed the planning schedule, and discussed the biological data needs.
April 30, 2008	Planning team invitation letters mailed	The Regional Director invited tribal nations and MFWP to take part on the planning team.
May 12–14, 2008	CCP kickoff and vision statement meeting	The planning team reviewed the refuge complex purposes, identified refuge complex qualities and issues, and developed a draft vision statement for the refuge complex.
July 15, 2008	Work plan	The work plan was completed.
August 18, 2008	Notice of Intent	The Notice of Intent to prepare a CCP was published in the Federal Register (volume 73, number 160, pages 48237–38).
August 2008	Planning update	The first planning update was sent to people and organizations on the mailing list. The update described the planning process and announced the upcoming public scoping meetings.
September 2, 2008	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held in Great Falls. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
September 3, 2008	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held in Choteau. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
September 3, 2008	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held in Ovando. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
September 4, 2008	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held in Kalispell. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
October 15, 2008	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held at the Benton Lake Refuge Headquarters. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
November 20, 2008– January 13, 2009	Six planning team conference calls	The process for developing goal statements for the refuge complex was agreed on, and goal statements were developed for the refuge complex.
April 28–30, 2009	Biological review planning meeting	The planning team met in Great Falls for a presentation by Greenbrier Wetland Services of the draft report, “An Evaluation of Ecosystem Restoration and Management Options for Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge” followed by a question and answer session. The planning team discussed mCoordination anagement alternatives for the refuge.
July 29, 2009	Alternatives development planning meeting	The planning team met at the refuge to discuss management alternatives and environmental consequences for the refuge.
September 9, 2009– January 20, 2010	Ten planning team conference calls	The planning team developed and analyzed three management alternatives for the refuge complex.
February 16–18, 2010	Environmental consequences and selection of proposed action workshop	The planning team met in Great Falls to review the environmental consequences for the alternatives, and select a proposed action alternative.
November 2–30, 2010	Four planning team conference calls	The planning team began writing objectives and strategies for the proposed action alternative.
November 16, 2010	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held at the Benton Lake Refuge Headquarters. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.

Table 1. Summary of the comprehensive conservation planning process for Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Montana.

December 7–9, 2010	Objectives and strategies work session	The planning team met in Great Falls to review and complete objectives and strategies for the proposed action alternative.
January 11, 2011	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held at the Benton Lake Refuge Headquarters. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
June 9, 2011	Options Workshop	A workshop was held in Great Falls to discuss management issues and options related to water management, selenium contamination, and public use at the Benton Lake Refuge.
January–November 2011	Draft plan preparation	The planning team prepared the draft CCP and EA.
January 2012	Draft plan internal review	The planning team and other Service staff reviewed the draft CCP and EA and provided comments to help clarify the analyses and provide consistency.
March 2012	Draft plan public review	The planning team completed the draft plan for distribution to the public for review.

COORDINATION WITH THE PUBLIC

A mailing list of more than 450 names was prepared during preplanning. The mailing list includes private citizens; local, regional, and State government representatives and legislators; other Federal agencies; and interested organizations (refer to “Appendix C—Public Involvement”).

The first planning update was sent in August 2008 to everyone on the mailing list. Information was provided on the history of the refuge and the CCP process and included an invitation to attend any of the four public scoping meetings being held in early September. The planning update included a mailing list consent form to be placed on the CCP mailing list. The update also provided opportunities for submitting comments including emails.

The Service held five public scoping meetings from September 2–October 15, 2008. Turnout was relatively low with 5–10 people attending each meeting and 28 attendees, primarily local citizens, including surrounding ranchers. The public meetings were conducted as open houses, where attendees could individually view a PowerPoint presentation about the refuge complex and an overview of the CCP and NEPA processes, as well as other supplemental information on the extent of the refuge complex, the purpose for each unit and the vision for the refuge complex. Attendees were encouraged to ask questions and offer comments. Verbal comments were recorded and each attendee was given a comment form to submit other thoughts or questions in writing.

Written comments for the initial scoping effort were due September 15, 2008. Sixty written comments were received orally and in writing throughout this scoping process. The Service received letters from five nongovernmental organizations (Sun River Watershed

Group, Montana Audubon, Born Free USA, Friends of the Wild Swan, Flathead Wildlife) and two agencies (MFWP, Region One; and Montana Salinity Control Association). All comments were shared with the planning team and considered throughout the planning process.

One of the most significant issues identified for the refuge complex, by both the public and the planning team, was the declining condition of the Benton Lake Refuge wetlands. To fully understand what was causing this decline, the Service met with consultants from Greenbrier Wetland Service on April 28 and July 29, 2009, to develop a hydrogeomorphic (HGM) assessment of Benton Lake. The scientists from Greenbrier Wetland Services are recognized experts in the field of wetland ecology. They worked with Service staff to understand what changes had occurred in the Benton Lake wetlands over time and how this might relate to the observed declines in productivity, increases in invasive species and increasing selenium contamination (Heitmeyer et al. 2009). These findings and other information were used to analyze the management alternatives and to select a proposed action alternative for the refuge.

After choosing the proposed action alternative at the meeting in February 2010, refuge staff began another scoping effort to share the results with the public. Refuge staff focused on groups and individuals who had expressed interest or concern about Benton Lake during the first scoping effort. Refuge staff organized and led presentations to local interest groups (Russell County Sportsmen’s Association, Upper Missouri Breaks Audubon, Sun River Watershed Group), MFWP, congressional representatives, and the public. Many people attended the meetings and provided comments that the Service recorded. These comments were considered by the planning team in preparation of this draft CCP and EA and are addressed in chapter 7, which describes the issues at Benton Lake Refuge in detail.

STATE COORDINATION

At the start of the planning process, April 2008, the Regional Director (Region 6 of the Service) sent a letter to MFWP, inviting them to take part in the planning process. MFWP did not designate a representative to take part on the planning team; however, several MFWP staff members have been involved in the planning process to date. Service staff met periodically with local, regional, and headquarters staff to discuss various planning issues and conduct an onsite tour of the Benton Lake Refuge. In June 2011, MFWP staff members took part in a workshop to discuss water management options at Benton Lake Refuge.

In MFWP Region 2, engagement with State employees occurred from initial planning process with attendance at open houses and requests to address particular issues including the River to Lakes Initiative, expanding conservation protection around the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge and enhancement of elk hunting at this refuge. Due to the subsequent administrative reorganization of the refuge complex in 2011, issues raised by MFWP about the Lost Trail Refuge will be incorporated in an amendment to the CCP for the Lost Trail Refuge.

At the start of the process, the offices of each of the three State Congressmen (then Senator John Tester, Senator Max Baucus, and Representative Dennis Rehburg) were sent letters telling them about the planning process and inviting them to comment on the plan. The refuge complex manager met with each local office representative informing them of the planning process and opportunity to comment. Seven other Montana State senators and representatives and Governor Brian Schweitzer were sent similar letters.

TRIBAL COORDINATION

Early in the planning process, April 2008, the Regional Director (Region 6 of the Service) sent a letter to tribes identified as possibly having a cultural and historical connection to the area in which the refuge complex is located. Those contacted were the Confederated Salish Kootenai, Blood, Fort Belknap Assiniboine and Gros Ventre, Blackfeet, and Peigan tribal councils. The tribal councils did not submit responses to the Region 6 letter; nevertheless, the councils were provided opportunities to comment.

RESULTS OF SCOPING

Comments collected from scoping meetings and correspondence were used in the development of a final list of issues to be addressed in this draft CCP and EA. The planning process makes sure that issues

with the greatest effect on the refuge complex resources and programs are resolved or given priority over the life of the final CCP. These issues, as well as changes suggested to current refuge management, are summarized in chapter 2. The Service subsequently developed alternatives that could best address these issues. A description of these alternatives can be found in chapter 3.

SELECTING AN ALTERNATIVE

After the public reviews and provides comments on the draft CCP and EA, the planning team will present this document along with a summary of all substantive public comments to the Regional Director (Region 6 of the Service). The Regional Director will consider the environmental effects of each alternative including information gathered during public review.

The Regional Director will select a preferred alternative for each of the two analyses in the draft CCP and EA: (1) management of declining wetland productivity, selenium contamination, and visitor services at Benton Lake Refuge; and (2) all other management aspects of the refuge complex. If the Regional Director finds that no significant impacts would occur, the Regional Director's decision will be disclosed in a finding of no significant impact included in the final CCP. If the Regional Director finds a significant impact would occur an environmental impact statement will be prepared. If approved, the actions in the preferred alternatives will compose the final CCP.

After the planning team prepares the final CCP for publication, a notice of availability will be published in the Federal Register, and copies of the final CCP or accompanying summary will be sent to individuals on the mailing list. Subsequently, the Service will carry out the CCP with help from partner agencies, organizations, and the public.

The CCP will provide long-term guidance for management decisions; support achievement of the goals, objectives, and strategies needed to accomplish the purposes of the refuge complex; and describe the Service's best estimate of future needs. The CCP will detail program-planning levels that may be substantially above budget allocations and, thus, are primarily for strategic planning purposes. The CCP does not constitute a commitment for staff increases, operation and maintenance increases, or money for future land acquisitions.

