

CHAPTER 1—Introduction



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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 comprehensive conservation plan (CCP).

This chapter introduces the process for the development of the refuge complex's CCP, including descriptions of the involvement of the Service, the State of Montana, the public, and others. It also describes the conservation issues and plans that affect the refuge complex. The chapters that follow contain information the Service used and results of the Ser-

vice's analysis that are the foundation of this final plan:

- Chapter 2 describes the refuge complex and planning issues.
- Chapter 3 describes the physical, biological, and social environments of the refuge complex.
- Chapter 4 describes objectives and strategies for all aspects of management of the refuge complex.

The remainder of the document contains a glossary of terms, several appendixes, and a bibliography.

The refuge complex is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). Spanning both sides of the Continental Divide, it holds 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, the animal species of these lands are diverse and reflective of a variety of habitats. Large numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds inhabit eastern wetlands while large predators such as grizzly bears make their home in the mountains and forests to the west. Figure 1 shows the location of the refuge complex within the overall planning area.

The refuge complex oversees the management of 2 refuges, 1 wetland management district containing 23 waterfowl production areas (WPAs), and 3 conservation areas (CAs) and administers 216 easements within the Refuge System:

- Benton Lake National Wildlife 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), 23 waterfowl production areas, and 4 distinct easement programs. This district covers the largest geographical area of any in the nation. The protection of habitat here continues to grow with the acquisition of more easements and waterfowl production areas.
- Blackfoot Valley Conservation Area 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. It 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 CCP to provide a foundation for managing the refuge complex. It specifies the necessary actions to achieve the vision and purposes of the refuge complex. Wildlife is the first priority 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 (Improvement Act). This CCP will be used as a working guide for programs and activities throughout the refuge complex over the next 15 years. To assist in implementing the CCP, stepdown plans will be developed to provide further detail to guide management (see section 4.2).

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 reorganized and Lost Trail Refuge and Northwest Montana Flathead County District were transferred 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 that affect this unit were identified during the scoping process for this CCP. To address these issues, an amendment to the Lost Trail CCP will be prepared. A few issues about the management of waterfowl production areas in the Flathead County Wetland Management District were also identified during scoping. These will be forwarded to National Bison Range Complex staff for consideration during their CCP efforts, which are currently in a preplanning phase.

1.1 The Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The CCP specifies the goals and objectives necessary to achieve the vision and purposes of Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Final Decision

The Regional Director of the Mountain–Prairie Region of the Service selected a slightly modified al-

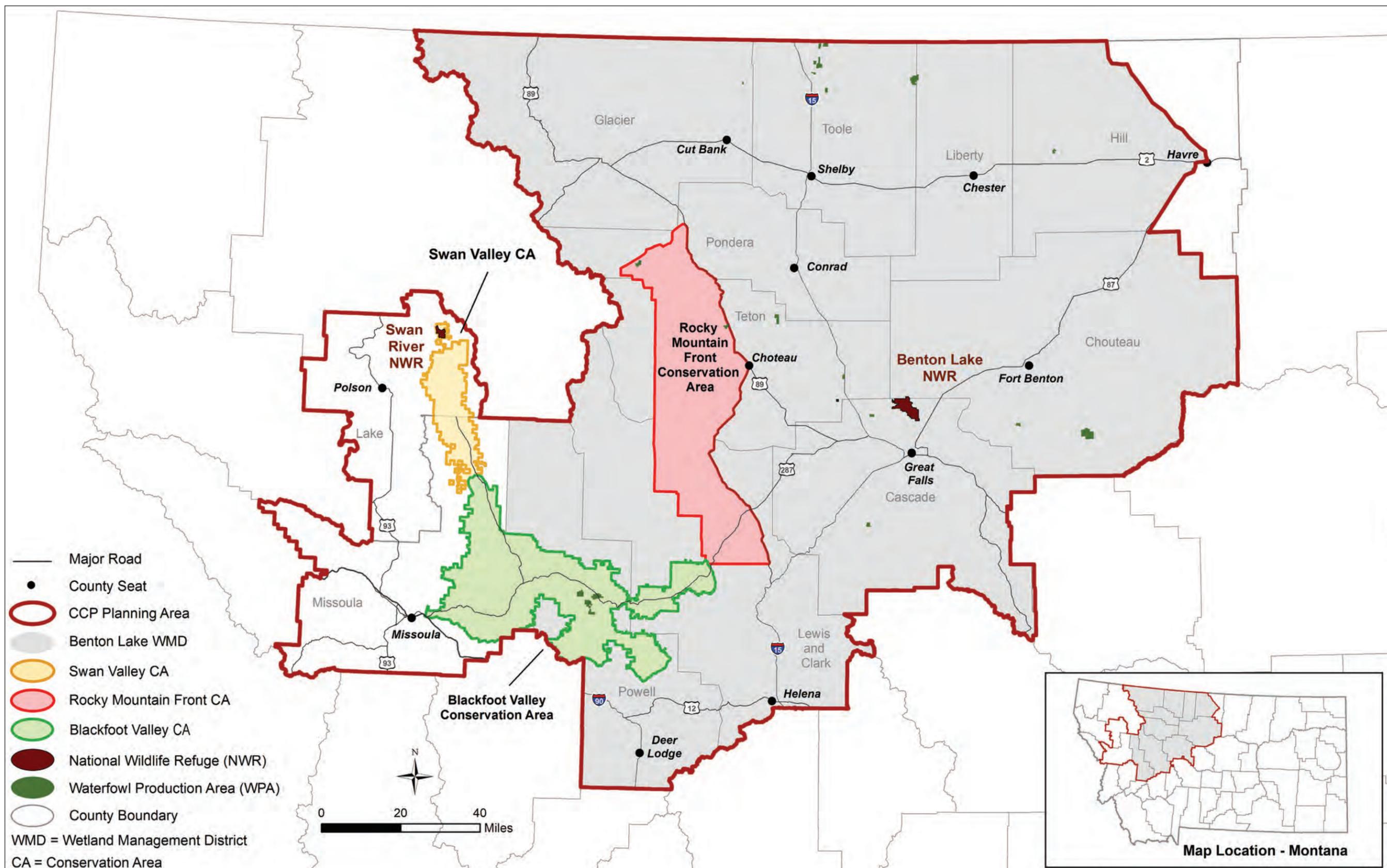


Figure 1. The comprehensive conservation planning area for Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Montana.

ternative C for overall refuge complex management and a hybridization of alternatives C1 and B1 for Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge management from the draft CCP and environmental assessment (EA) as the preferred alternatives for the final CCP for Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Appendix A documents the Regional Director's decision in the environmental action statement and the finding of no significant impact. The specifics of the final CCP can be found in "Chapter 4—Management Direction." Appendix B contains the final compatibility determinations for public uses described in this document. The section 7 biological evaluation (appendix C) documents the effects of CCP actions on threatened and endangered species—a determination of no effect or may affect but not adversely, depending on the species.

The CCP is a broad umbrella plan that provides general concepts and specific wildlife, habitat, visitor services, and partnership objectives over the next 15 years. Implementation begins with publication of the final CCP. The Service will carry out the plan with help from partner agencies, organizations, and the public. As the CCP is implemented, stepdown management plans will be developed to provide greater detail to managers and employees for carrying out specific actions and strategies authorized by the CCP. Section 4.2 in chapter 4 lists the stepdown plans needed for the refuge.

The CCP details program planning levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and thus are primarily for Service strategic planning purposes. The CCP does not constitute a commitment for staff increases, operation and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

Plan Development

The CCP was developed in compliance with the Improvement Act and Service policy. The actions described in the CCP meet the requirements of the Council on Environmental Quality regulations that implement the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Staff from several Montana State agencies, other Federal agencies, and tribes provided critical support in developing the CCP. The Service's involvement of the public was another important aspect of planning and part of compliance with NEPA. In addition to the initial scoping with the public, there was a public review of the draft CCP and EA before the final CCP was completed.

The planning process is described in detail in section 1.8, and the public involvement process is described in appendix D, including the Service's response to substantive public comments.

Plan Amendment and Revision

The Service will review the final CCP every year to see if it needs to be amended. An amendment would be necessary if significant new information became available, such as a change in ecological conditions. The Service will evaluate the plan every 5 years and revise it after 15 years, as necessary.

1.2 Purpose and Need for the Plan

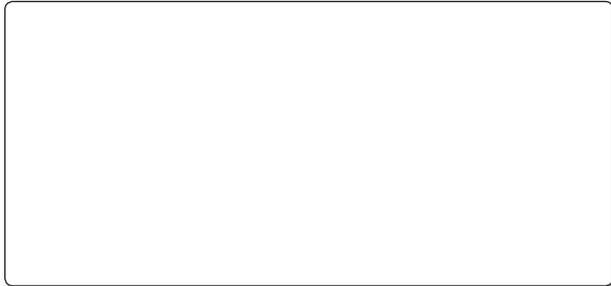
The purpose of this CCP is to show the role that the refuge complex will play in support of the mission of the Refuge System and to provide long-term guidance for managing programs and activities. The CCP is needed to help the Service achieve the following:

- 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
- understanding among neighbors, visitors, and government officials of the Service's management actions on, and around, the refuge complex
- management consistency with the mandates of the Improvement Act
- management consistency with Federal, State, and county plans
- a basis for the development of budget requests for the refuge complex's operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs

1.3 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



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 the 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 to withdraw land from the public domain for wildlife conservation (Procla-

mation 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 to recognize 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. 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,



Sandhill Crane

and the National Elk Refuge in 1912 (Fischman 2003).

Growth of the Refuge System focused on particular geographic regions and broad national needs with the enactment of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. It established the first significant preemptive, Federal restrictions on hunting and implemented new treaty obligations to sustain the populations of certain birds, especially waterfowl populations. Refuge purchases were made to help accommodate 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 the sale of Federal Duck Stamps that all waterfowl hunters are required to affix to their State hunting licenses. With an assured source of money, the growth of the Refuge System accelerated. Money for refuge acquisition increased with the passage of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1964 (LWCF), which provides money from a motorboat fuel tax and payments for Federal offshore oil and gas leases.

In 1940, as part of his New Deal innovations, 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, for the first time, combined into a single organization.

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. Under this act, 166 refuges were established (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 the “conservation, protection, restoration, and propagation of selected species of native fish and wildlife threatened with extinction.” This was the first established

connection between refuges and endangered species, which remains strong today. More than 260 listed species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) occur on refuges and 56 refuges have been added to the system specifically by ESA acquisition authority (Fischman 2003).

From 1903–1997, the U.S. Congress provided little guidance to the Service on how to consolidate 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 guidance, coordinating and ensuring the 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 through 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 or purposes for which each 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 and in 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 country.

1.4 National and Regional Mandates

Refuge System units are managed to achieve the mission and goals of the Refuge System along with their own, specific, designated purposes (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 the passage of the Improvement Act, the Service immediately began to carry out the direction of the new legislation, including preparing CCPs for all national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts. Consistent with the act, the Service prepares CCPs in conjunction with public involvement. Each national wildlife refuge and each wetland management district is required to complete its CCP within a 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 monitor 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 this CCP or the Service’s implementation of it is in “Appendix E—Key Legislation and Policy.” Service policies for the planning and day-to-day management of national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts are in the “Refuge Manual” and the “Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.”

1.5 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 year-long process by teams of Service employees to evaluate the Refuge System nationwide. The report contains 42 recommendations



USFWS

A male sharp-tailed grouse performs a courtship display at a lek.

to support vision statements for 3 topics: wildlife and habitat, people, and leadership. This CCP deals with all three of these topics, and 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 overall vision found in “Fulfilling the Promise” through a new initiative called “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 (PIF) program began in 1990 with the recognition that population levels of many migratory bird species were declining (Ruth 2006). The central premise of PIF 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 PIF identified the highest priority habitats in need of assistance in Montana as mixed grassland, sagebrush-steppe, dry forest (ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir), riparian deciduous forest, and prairie pothole wetland (Casey 2000). All of these key habitats occur within the refuge complex. The primary objectives in each priority habitat are to restore the 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 Waterbird 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 the

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 to operate where conservation issues are significantly affected by agriculture, oil, gas, and other human development activities. Wetland loss and deterioration are top concerns and are further influenced by the region's natural wet and dry cycles as well as the widespread and uncertain ramifications of climate change. Reliable, comprehensive population information that incorporates wetland availability and landscape context is needed 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 activities. Joint ventures develop implementation plans that focus on areas of concern that are 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 are supported and promoted in this 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 an 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. Major issues for shorebirds in this area include the conservation of declining species, habitat loss, and filling in 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 that have the greatest need for conservation; identify management strategies to conserve the fish and wildlife and related habitats with 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 Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) ability to address present and future money challenges and opportunities; and integrate the 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. These are the Rocky Mountain Front foothills, Mission and Swan Valleys and Mountains, grassland complexes, riparian areas and wetlands, and 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 the refuge complex that is 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 Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Northern Great Plains Steppe Ecoregional Assessment encompasses approximately 250,000 square miles (an area about one and a 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 to target for conservation. Portfolio sites that are also priorities for the refuge complex include the Rocky Mountain Front and the Sweet Grass Hills. Existing land management practices support many of the portfolio sites, however, significant threats persist that could either destroy or significantly degrade sites and their conservation targets. The TNC identified the need to strengthen existing partnerships and more effectively reach out to stakeholders in the ecoregion. The Service considered how to support this effort in this CCP and through future management.

The Nature Conservancy— Canadian Rocky Mountains Ecoregional Assessment

The TNC's Canadian Rocky Mountains Ecoregional Assessment covers approximately 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 mammals. 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 Canada lynx. The ecoregional assessment represents the first step in developing a network of conservation areas that, with proper management, would ensure the long-term persistence of 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 address pervasive threats to targets across the ecoregion.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program Strategic Plan

In 2004, Service directors instructed the Partners for Fish and Wildlife 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 was updated in 2011, 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 11 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. Draft recovery plans are available for the bull trout and water howellia. The recovery needs of all listed species within the refuge complex were considered

in the development of this CCP. Those species that have large numbers living within the refuge complex and are likely to be most affected by this CCP, either through the 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 accelerating climate change to 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 entitled *Rising to the Urgent Challenge—Strategic Plan for Responding to Accelerating Climate Change* (USFWS 2010d). 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:

- 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.

1.6 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 along the Rocky Mountain Front and established 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 grizzly bear, bull trout, and Canada lynx. As new information on population objectives, habitat needs, and threats becomes available, the land

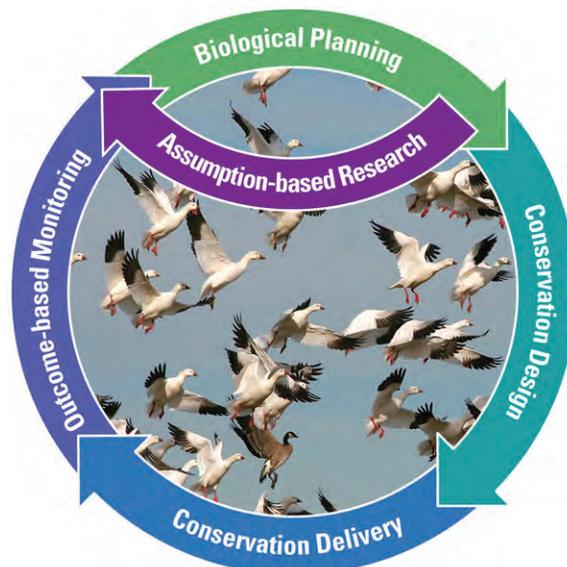


Figure 2. The strategic habitat conservation process.

protection plans will be updated. Efforts by key partners such as TNC, Trout Unlimited, MFWP, the Service's Ecological Services branch, the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, and the Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GNLCC) are essential for completing the monitoring and feedback parts of SHC and for keeping conservation efforts focused on the highest priorities.

1.7 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 GNLCC 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

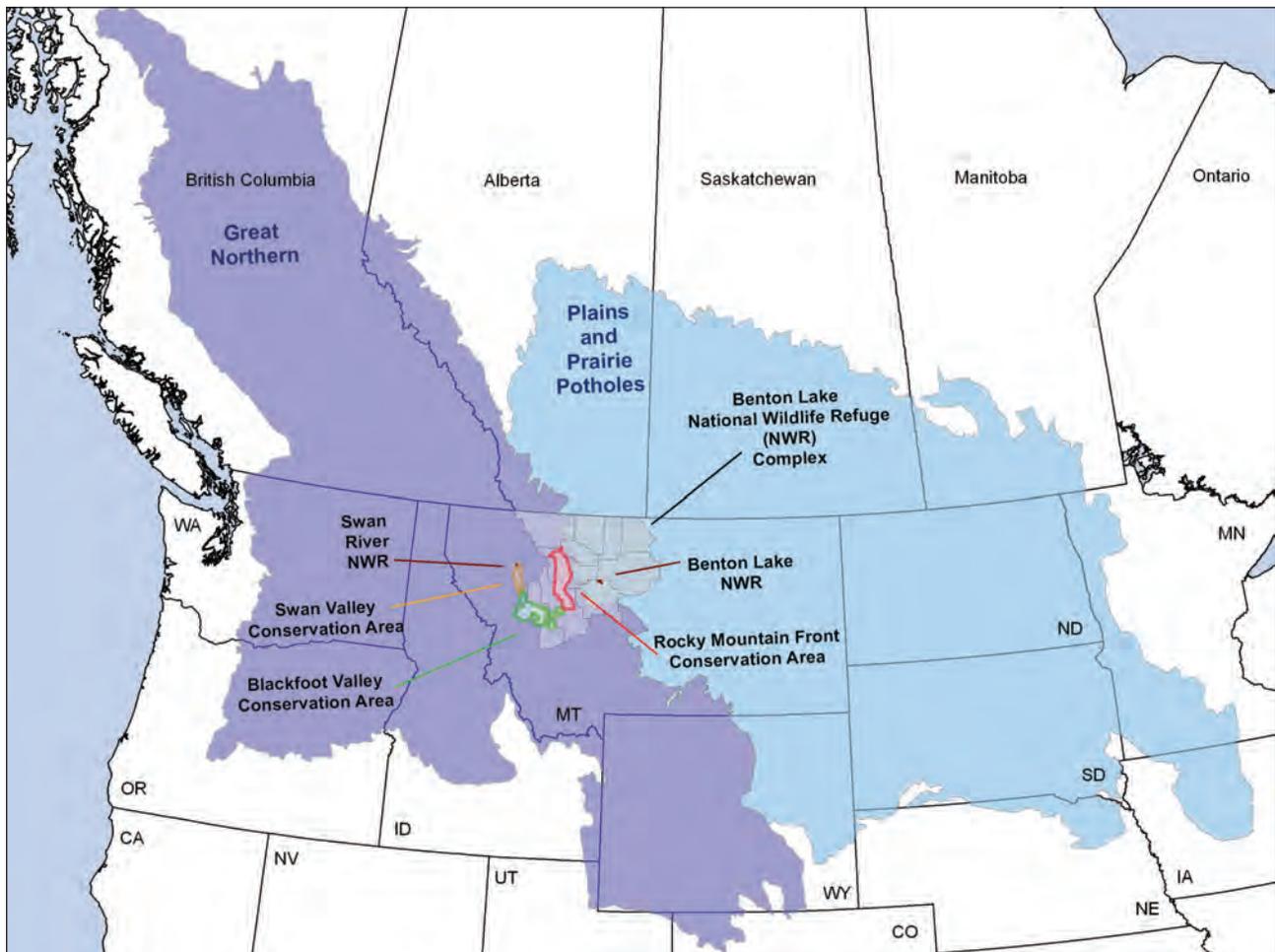


Figure 3. The Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative and the Plains and Prairie Potholes Landscape Conservation Cooperative with Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Montana.

and grassland systems in the world. The area provides habitat for both breeding and migrating birds, as well as for 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 for them will be to serve as convening bodies that bring 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 the identification of key issues and decisions;
- collect and assimilate climate information to support vulnerability assessments for populations and habitats that are 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 find 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 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 to continue to consider opportunities where refuge management, partnership work, conservation delivery, and research needs coincide with the work of the LCCs (USFWS 2009c).

1.8 The Planning Process

The Improvement Act requires the Service to develop a CCP by 2012 for each national wildlife ref-

uge. This is the final plan for the refuge complex, and it will guide the management of the refuge complex for the next 15 years.

The Service prepared this CCP for Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex in compliance with the Improvement Act and Part 602 (National Wildlife Refuge System Planning) of the “Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.” The actions described herein meet the requirements of the Council on Environmental Quality regulations that carry out 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 stepdown 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 the refuge complex and from the Service’s Region 6 Division of Refuge Planning. A broader advisory planning team was also established to meet the great interest held by other refuge divisions. During workshops and other critical stages in the planning process, the broader team was part of the decision-making process. Contributors included other Service divisions stationed in the Region 6 office, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and Greenbrier Wetland Services, (see “Appendix F—Preparers and Contributors”). During preplanning, the team developed a mailing list, identified internal issues, and wrote down the unique qualities of the refuge complex (see section 2.5 in chapter 2). The planning team identified and reviewed current programs, compiled and analyzed relevant data, and defined the purposes of the 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, the issuance of the first planning update, and by holding a series of public scoping meetings:

- 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.

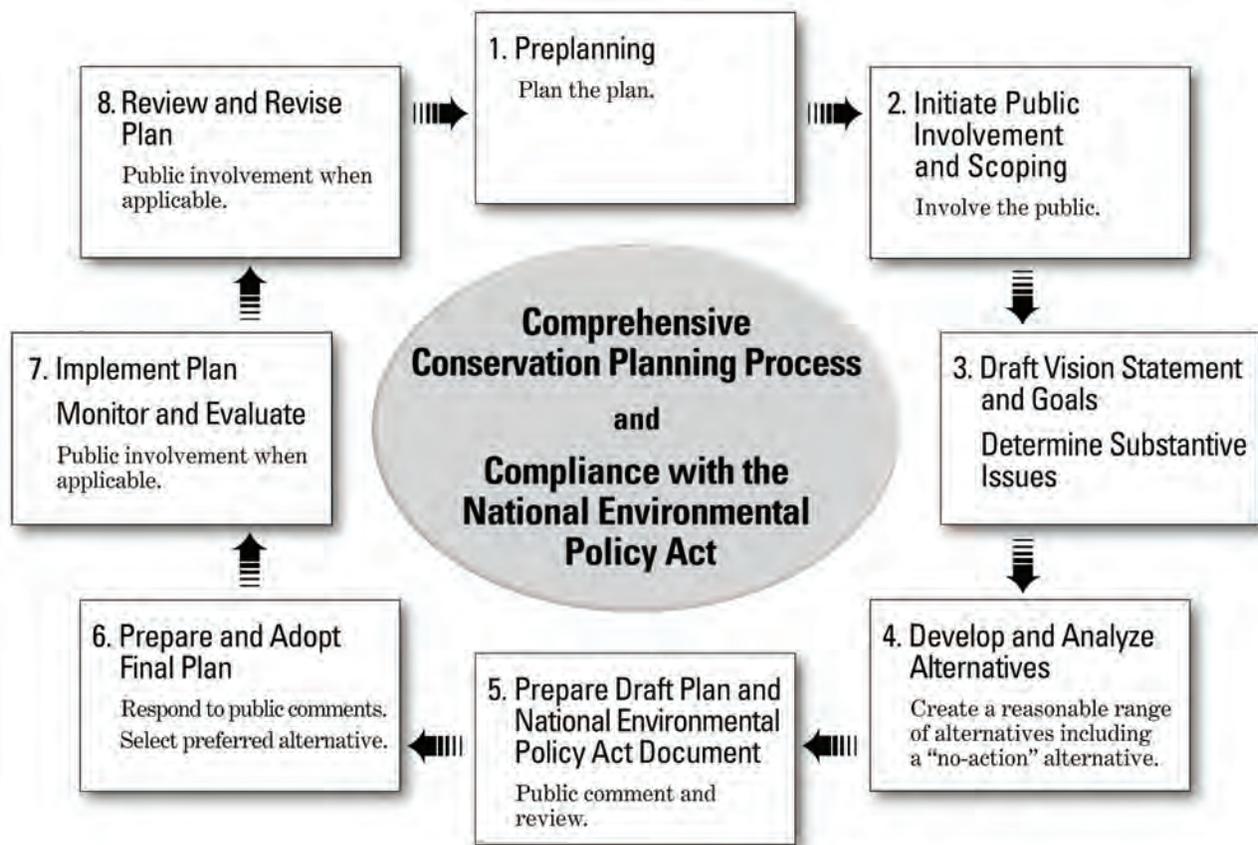


Figure 4. Process steps for comprehensive conservation planning and associated environmental analysis.

- 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 these hosted meetings, there were several other opportunities to meet with a variety of interest groups. Service employees shared the CCP planning process, solicited issues and concerns from individuals attending meetings, and answered questions. These opportunities provided staff a greater understanding of the issues, concerns, and effects expressed by the public. Refuge staff attended meetings or met with the following: Ducks Unlim-

ited, 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.

Over the course of the planning process, the planning team collected information about the resources of the refuge complex units and the surrounding areas. This information is summarized in Chapter 3—Affected Environment. The planning team also encouraged public comment during the planning process throughout the development and release of the draft CCP and EA—in compliance with the public involvement requirements of NEPA—and analyzed and incorporated public input on the draft into the final CCP. After the Regional Director decided which alternatives to implement, the planning team prepared the final CCP.

Table 1 lists the specific steps in the planning process to date for the preparation of this final CCP.

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 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.



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Wetland gathering on the refuge complex.

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>
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 management 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.
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.
April 17, 2012	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.
April 18, 2012	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held in Choteau. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
April 19, 2012	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held in Ovando. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
April 19, 2012	Public scoping meeting	A public meeting was held in Condon. The public had an opportunity to learn about the CCP process and provide comments.
October 1, 2012	Public meeting on structured decisionmaking	A public meeting was held in Great Falls. The public had an opportunity to learn about the structured decisionmaking process which was used in alternative development.

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>
October 2–5, 2012	Structured decisionmaking workshop	Refuge and MFWP staff met in Great Falls and applied the structured decisionmaking process to develop alternatives.
May–November 2012	Public comments review	The planning team reviewed the public comments and determined needed changes for the final CCP.
December 2012	Decision on preferred alternatives	The Regional Director selected the preferred alternatives and signed the finding of no significant impact.
January–May 2013	Final plan preparation	The planning team finished revising and editing the final CCP for printing and distribution.

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 (see “Appendix D—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 five public scoping meetings being held in early September. The planning update included a mailing list consent form that was used by interested parties to get 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 to October 15, 2008. Turnout was relatively low, with 5–10 people attending each meeting, and included 28 attendees, primarily local citizens including surrounding ranchers. The public meetings were conducted as open houses, where attendees could individually view a Power-Point 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, Flat-head 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, recognized experts in the field of wetland ecology, on April 28 and July 29, 2009, to develop a hydrogeomorphic method (HGM) assessment of Benton Lake. 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 a proposed action alternative at a meeting in February 2010, refuge staff began another scoping effort to share the results with the public in late 2010 and early 2011. Refuge staff focused on groups and individuals who had expressed interest or concern about Benton Lake during the first scoping effort. They organized and led presentations for 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. Additional scoping meetings were then held in April 2012. Comments collected from all of the scoping meetings were considered by the planning team in preparation of the draft CCP and EA. An additional meeting was held in October 2012 to discuss the structured decision-

making process that was applied to alternative development.

The public commented on the draft CCP and EA during a review period. The Service recorded all comments, oral and written. The planning team then reviewed them. Some modifications were made to this final CCP based on the public review. Appendix D has more detail about the Service's involvement with the public, including responses to substantive public comments on the draft CCP and EA.

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 MFWP local, regional, and headquarters staff to discuss various planning issues and to 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 October 2012, they also took part in a workshop to apply the structured decisionmaking process in making recommendations for future management direction of the refuge.

In MFWP Region 2, engagement with State employees began during the 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 the refuge. Due to an administrative reorganization of the refuge complex in 2011, issues raised by MFWP about the Lost Trail Refuge will be incorporated in an amendment to that unit's CCP.

At the start of the planning 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.

The State participated in the public review of the draft plan. Numerous changes were made to the final CCP based on their comments.

Tribal Coordination

Early in the planning process, on 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 letter. Nevertheless, they were provided subsequent opportunities to comment.

During the release of the draft CCP and EA for public review, the Service made additional contacts with the identified tribes.



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Wilson's Phalarope

