Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

Huron Wetland Management District
Madison Wetland Management District
Sand Lake Wetland Management District

South Dakota

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Prepared by

Huron Wetland Management District
Room 309 Federal Building
200 Fourth Street SW.
Huron, SD 57350
605/352 5894

Madison Wetland Management District
23520 SD Highway 19
Madison, SD 57042
605/256 2974

Sand Lake Wetland Management District
39650 Sand Lake Drive
Columbia, SD 57433
605/885 6320

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Region 6, Mountain–Prairie Region
Division of Refuge Planning
134 Union Boulevard, Suite 300
Lakewood, CO 80228
303 /236 8145

Contents

Summary VII
Abbreviations XI

CHAPTER 1— Introduction 1

1.1 Purpose and Need for the Plan 2

1.2 The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Refuge System 2
Overview 2
People and the Refuge System 4
Compatible Uses in the Refuge System 4
Service Activities in South Dakota 4

1.3 National and Regional Mandates 5

1.4 District Contributions to National and Regional Plans 5
Fulfilling the Promise 5
Bird Conservation 6
Partners in Flight 6
North American Waterfowl Management Plan 6
Recovery Plans for Federally Listed Threatened or Endangered Species 7
State-Level Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy 7

1.5 Strategic Habitat Conservation 8
A Broader Vision 8
Climate Change 10

1.6 Planning Process 10
Public Involvement 11
State Coordination 13
Tribal Coordination 13
Results of Scoping 13
Decision to be Made 13

CHAPTER 2— The Districts 15

2.1 Establishment, Acquisition, and Management History 15
Habitat Protection 15
District Descriptions 17
Huron WMD 17
Madison WMD 17
Sand Lake WMD 18

2.2 Special Values 18

2.3 Purposes 23

2.4 Vision 23

2.5 Goals 23
Native Prairie 23
Planted Grasslands 24
Wetlands 24
Research and Monitoring 24
Consumptive Uses 24

Nonconsumptive Uses . . . 24
Operations and Administration . . . 24
Partnerships . . . 24
Environmental Education and Interpretation . . . 24

2.6 Planning Issues . . . 24
Wetland and Upland Habitats . . . 24
Invasive Plants . . . 24
Energy Development . . . 25
Prairie Conversion . . . 25
Predator Management . . . 25
Visitor Services . . . 25
Partnerships . . . 26
Operations . . . 26
Monitoring and Research . . . 26

CHAPTER 3— Alternatives . . . 27

3.1 Alternatives Development . . . 27

3.2 Elements Common to All Alternatives . . . 28

3.3 Description of Alternatives . . . 28
Alternative A—Current Management (No Action) . . . 28
Alternative B—Increased Efficiency (Proposed Action) . . . 29
Alternative C—Increased Efficiency with Expanded Resources . . . 30

3.4 Comparison of Alternatives . . . 32

CHAPTER 4— Affected Environment . . . 41

4.1 Physical Environment . . . 41
Climate Change . . . 41
Climate . . . 42
Physiography, Geography, and Soils . . . 42
Water Resources . . . 47
Air Quality . . . 50

4.2 Biological Resources . . . 50
Vegetation Communities . . . 50
Invasive Plants . . . 53
Fire . . . 54
Grazing . . . 55
Wildlife . . . 56

4.3 Cultural Resources . . . 61
Paleoindian Period (9500–5500 B.C.) . . . 61
Plains Archaic Period (5500–500 B.C.) . . . 61
Plains Woodland Period (500 B.C.–A.D. 1000) . . . 61
Plains Village Period (A.D. 1000–1780) . . . 62
Protohistoric and Early Historic Period (A.D. 1780–1890) . . . 62

4.4 Visitor Services . . . 63
Hunting . . . 63
Fishing . . . 63
Wildlife Observation and Photography . . . 63
Environmental Education and Interpretation . . . 63
Trapping . . . 63

4.5 Partnerships . . . 64

4.6 Socioeconomic Environment . . . 64
Background . . . 64
Current Socioeconomic, Population, and Employment Conditions . . . 64

4.7 Operations 65

CHAPTER 5— Environmental Consequences 67

5.1 Effects Common to All Alternatives 67
Climate Change 67
Soils 67
Water Quality, Wetlands, and Floodplains 67
Air Quality 68
Cultural Resources 68
Socioeconomics 68
Public Health and Safety 68
Environmental Justice 68

5.2 Description of Consequences by Alternative 68
Alternative A—Current Management (No Action) 68
Alternative B—Increased Efficiency (Proposed Action) 69
Alternative C—Increased Efficiency with Expanded Resources 70

5.3 Cumulative Impacts 71

CHAPTER 6— Implementation of the Proposed Action 73

6.1 Identification of the Proposed Action 74

6.2 Description of Alternative B, the Proposed Action 74

6.3 Goals, Objectives, Strategies, and Rationale 74
Native Prairie Goal 74
Planted Grasslands Goal 92
Wetlands Goal 102
Research and Monitoring Goal 106
Consumptive Uses Goal 110
Nonconsumptive Uses Goal 112
Operations and Administration Goal 113
Partnerships Goal 124
Environmental Education and Interpretation Goal 125

Glossary 129

Appendixes
Appendix A–Compatibility Determinations 137
Appendix B–Key Legislation and Policies 213
Appendix C–Preparers and Contributors 217
Appendix D–Public Involvement 219
Appendix E–Location Notices 221
Appendix F–South Dakota Upland Plant Associations 241
Appendix G–South Dakota Species 243
Appendix H–Approved Organization Charts 259
Appendix I–Compliance with Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Guidance 263

Bibliography 265

FIGURES

1 Vicinity map of the three districts, South Dakota 3
2 Map of the bird conservation regions of North America 7
3 Map of the Plains and Prairie Potholes Geographic Area 9

4 Steps in the planning process 10
5 Service-managed lands in the Huron WMD 19
6 Service-managed lands in the Madison WMD 20
7 Service-managed lands in the Sand Lake WMD 21
8 Draft Level III and IV Ecoregions of South Dakota 43
9 Distribution of vegetation communities in the three districts, South Dakota 51
10 Map of predicted duck-pair concentrations in the three districts, South Dakota 75
11 Decision tree for prioritizing management of native sod tracts on WPAs 77
12 Dominant vegetation community types on native prairie, averaged by district, 2006–2008 81
13 North American bird population indicators based on trends for obligate species in four major habitats 82
14 Quantitative measurements of visual obstruction readings of upland nesting species 87
15 Known Dakota Skipper locations in South Dakota by county 88
16 Decision tree for prioritizing management of planted grasslands. 93
17 Whooping crane sightings throughout South Dakota 104
18 Priority wetlands. 115
19 Distribution of priority grasslands 116

TABLES

1 Planning process summary for the Huron, Madison, and Sand Lake WMDs CCP 11
2 Grassland and wetland easements in the three districts 17
3 Comparison of alternatives 32
4 Prairie decline in South Dakota 50
5 State-listed and local noxious weeds and their distribution in the South Dakota Wetland. 54
6 Birds of Conservation Concern or Priority Species. 57
7 Selected focal grassland bird species by wetland management district 58
8 Listed species (based on published population data) 59
9 Assigned priority levels according to the decision tree for prioritizing management of native prairie 78
10 Assigned priority levels according to the decision tree for prioritizing management of planted native vegetation . 94
11 Wildland-urban interface communities on Federal communities at risk and South Dakota communities of interest lists 122

Summary

Ryan Hagerty/USFWS

White-tailed Deer

Every year, millions of migratory waterfowl and other waterbirds find their way to a mosaic of wetlands and grasslands in eastern South Dakota. These habitats provide the untiring winged travelers with the sanctuary and nourishment necessary to procreate, giving rise to the future generations of migratory birds that will populate North America's Central Flyway. These lands are also of critical importance to a myriad of other endemic fish, wildlife, and plant species, and they provide thousands of sportsmen and wildlife enthusiasts with places to experience the wonders of the natural world and partake in its bounty.

It is the responsibility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to preserve the integrity of these important habitats for the benefit of fish and wildlife, as well as for the continuation of compatible outdoor recreational uses derived therein. The Service accomplishes this through a network of federally managed lands dedicated to the preservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and the habitats upon which they depend—the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The Districts

The Huron Wetland Management District, Madison Wetland Management District, and Sand Lake Wetland Management District are units of the Refuge System that manage small tracts of fee-owned Federal lands called waterfowl production areas, administer easement programs to preserve privately owned wetlands and grasslands, and conserve other tracts of lands ceded to the Service through different authorities, such as former Farmers Home Administration lands. Together, these three districts encompass 27 counties in eastern South Dakota, where their staffs manage approximately 1.5 million acres of land including more than 378,000 acres in wetlands easements, nearly 630,000 acres in grassland easements, more than 100,000 acres of fee-owned lands distributed in 445 waterfowl production areas, and miscellaneous other tracts of land.

All 445 waterfowl production areas managed by these districts are open to the public to engage in compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses, of which hunting and fishing, followed by wildlife observation and photography, are the ones that attract the greatest number of visitors each year. Biannual bird migrations each spring and fall attract thousands of local residents as well as tourists from around the world to experience this breathtaking display of one of nature's profound cycles. Environmental education and interpretation are other compatible public uses that take place at certain designated sites within each district, usually requiring closer involvement of district staffers.

Vision for the Districts

Clear blue skies frame spectacular views of grasslands and wetlands teeming with migratory waterfowl and other wildlife in the Huron, Madison, and Sand Lake Wetland Management Districts. Here, future generations will experience the whistle of the northern pintail, the song of the western meadowlark, and the distant boom of the prairie chicken. Located in the Prairie Pothole Region of South Dakota, these districts preserve timeless landscapes in the face of change. Conservation of these lands is achieved through hard work and the support of friends and neighbors who value natural places as an essential component of their quality of life.

Goals for the Districts

Native Prairie
Conserve, restore, and improve the biological integrity and ecological function of the native prairies to support healthy populations of native plants and wildlife and promote the natural role of fire and grazing in shaping and managing these landscapes.

Planted Grasslands
Manage planted grasslands to contribute to the production and growth of continental waterfowl populations, other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other wildlife.

Wetlands
Protect, restore, and enhance prairie pothole wetlands to support diverse plant communities and provide habitat to waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and associated wetland-dependent wildlife.

Research and Monitoring
Provide a learning platform that uses science, monitoring, applied research, and adaptive management to advance understanding of the Prairie Pothole Region and management of these areas.

Consumptive Uses
Provide visitors with quality opportunities to enjoy hunting, fishing, and trapping in waterfowl production areas and expand their knowledge and appreciation of the prairie landscape and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Nonconsumptive Uses
Provide visitors with quality opportunities to enjoy, observe, photograph, and appreciate the prairie ecosystem while expanding their knowledge of and support for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Operations and Administration
Through effective communication and innovative partnerships, secure and efficiently utilize funding, staffing, and volunteer programs for the benefit of all natural resources in the districts.

Partnerships
Promote and develop partnerships with landowners, public and private organizations, and other interested individuals to maintain, restore, and enhance a diverse and productive landscape in the Prairie Pothole Region.

Environmental Education and Interpretation
Provide quality educational opportunities for persons of all abilities to learn about, understand, and appreciate prairie landscapes and the role of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Planning Process and Issues

The comprehensive conservation planning process for these districts began in April 2008 with public notices on the Service's intent to prepare this plan, seek public input, hold public meetings, and identify key issues to be addressed in the plan. The following is a summary of the issues identified and that are covered within the scope of this plan.

Wetland and Upland Habitats

Wetland and upland habitats within the planning area are in need of protection and enhancement. The current and likely future staffing situation at the districts requires that habitat management and protection be carefully evaluated and eventually follow a system of prioritization so that the districts can fulfill the purposes for which they were established.

Invasive Plants

Previously farmed lands that have been restored to a semblance of native prairie are compromised by invasive plant species such as leafy spurge, Canada thistle, sow thistle, and absinth wormwood. Other invasive plants of concern to the districts, and that substantially degrade the quality and suitability of habitats for wildlife species, include smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, and crested wheatgrass.

Energy Development

Increasing demand for energy, particularly in the form of biofuel and wind energy production, is becoming a great concern for the districts due to these industries'

potential to affect wildlife habitat quality and integrity. The Service needs to study and analyze ways in which to support our Nation's increasing energy needs while affording adequate protection to fish, wildlife, plants, and the habitats on which they depend.

Prairie conversion

Conversion of native prairie to agricultural, urban, and other uses is of great concern to the Service and to many conservation and traditional ranching advocacy groups. The districts play a preeminent role in helping to preserve and enhance remaining prairie lands in South Dakota, as well as in helping to restore degraded or previously converted lands back to native prairie.

Predator management

Because of modifications to native prairie and other factors, the populations of several predatory species have increased above their historical levels. This situation adversely affects the ability and success of grassland-nesting bird species, including waterfowl and other migratory birds, to maintain or increase sustainable population levels. The Service needs to find ways to counter these deleterious effects in order to fulfill the purposes for which the districts were established.

Visitor services

There is an increasing demand by local residents and tourists for places to engage in outdoor recreational opportunities. The districts, through the six wildlife-dependent priority uses—hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation—are uses currently authorized on lands administered by the districts. A growing demand for public recreation in South Dakota and the nation makes these six wildlife-dependent recreational uses, as specified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, an issue of primary interest.

Partnerships

The Service puts a high priority on working in partnership with conservation and agricultural groups to support conservation programs such as Federal Farm Bill legislation, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks projects, water quality and watershed projects, and private conservation efforts.

Operations

Funding and staff are not sufficient to fulfill the districts' purposes or to meet their goals. Consequently, identification of priorities and efficient direction of resources will always be an issue. The Service's staff needs to identify and describe unfunded needs to be able to compete effectively for additional money from within the Service as well as from partners and other sources. District facilities need to be evaluated and upgraded.

© Chris Bailey

American Kestrel

Monitoring and research

Monitoring habitat and wildlife populations is an essential element in achieving the districts' primary goals and objectives. Basic data about recruitment, mortality, and habitat use for a representative group of species must be collected and analyzed on a regular basis to make appropriate decisions for maintaining the viability of the habitats on which these species depend. Using the districts for field research could contribute to new directions in management and expand the knowledge of field biologists.

The Draft Plan

The Service has prepared this document with public participation. After reviewing a wide range of public issues and comments as well as management needs, the Service developed three management alternatives for the districts. Alternative B, the proposed action, is presented in chapter 6 as the draft comprehensive conservation plan.

Management Direction

Management of the three districts will emphasize developing and implementing an improved, science-based priority system to restore native prairie habitats for the benefit of waterfowl and other migratory birds. District staff will focus on high-priority tracts and, when possible, on medium-priority tracts. The focus of this alternative is to restore ecological processes and native grassland species to the greatest extent possible within the parameters of available resources and existing constraints. District staff will seek to maintain the existing levels and types of public use programs, ensuring that programs offered to the public are of consistently high quality.

Abbreviations

Administration Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966
APHIS	Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
BAER	Burned Area Emergency Response
BAR	Burned Area Rehabilitation
BCC	Birds of Conservation Concern
BCR	bird conservation region
BIDEH	Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Health
BMP	best management practice
CCP	comprehensive conservation plan
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CO_2	carbon dioxide
CRP	Conservation Reserve Program
CWCS	comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy
CWD	chronic wasting disease
districts	Huron, Madison, and Sand Lake Wetland Management Districts
DOI	U.S. Department of Interior
DPS	Distinct Population Segment
DNC	dense nesting cover
Duck Stamp Act	Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act
EA	environmental assessment
EO	Executive order
ESA	Endangered Species Act
EPA	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
FmHA	Farmers Home Administration
FMP	Fire Management Plan
FTE	full-time equivalent
GIS	geographic information system
HAPET	Habitat and Population Evaluation Team
HFI	Healthy Forests Initiative
HPAI	Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza
Improvement Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
IPM	integrated pest management
NAAQS	national ambient air quality standards
NABCI	North American Bird Conservation Initiative
NAWCA	North American Wetlands Conservation Act
NAWMP	North American Waterfowl Management Plan
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act of 1969
NFP	National Fire Plan
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NPAM	Native Prairie Adaptive Management

Partners Program	Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program
P.L.	Public Law
PPJV	Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
RECD	Rural Economic and Community Development
RLGIS	Refuge Land Geographic Information System
SDDOT	South Dakota Department of Transportation
SDGFP	South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks
Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
SIP	State Implementation Plan
SUP	special use permit
SWG	State Wildlife Grant
System	National Wildlife Refuge System
U.S.C.	United States Code
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
VCS	visitor contact station
VOR	visual obstruction reading
WMD	wetland management district
WNV	West Nile virus
WPA	waterfowl production area

Definitions of these and other terms are in the glossary, located after chapter 6.