Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District

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Prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Abbreviations

Administration Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act
ATV	all-terrain vehicle
the **basin**	Rainwater Basin
CAFO	concentrated animal-feeding operation
CCP	comprehensive conservation plan
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
COMLG	Conservation Order for Mid-continent Light Geese
CWCS	comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy
the **district**	Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District
DUD	duck use-day
EA	environmental assessment
FGDC	Federal Geographic Data Committee
FMP	fire management plan
GIS	Geographic Information System
GS	general pay schedule
Improvement Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
IPM	integrated pest management
ME	metabolized energy
NASS	Natural Agricultural Statistics Service
NAWMP	North American Waterfowl Management Plan
NDEQ	Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NGPC	Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
NOI	notice of intent
NVCS	National Vegetation Classification System
NWR	national wildlife refuge
ORP	outdoor recreation planner
PILT	payments in lieu of taxes
PL	public law
PM	particulate matter
RWBJV	Rainwater Basin Joint Venture
refuge	national wildlife refuge
Refuge System	National Wildlife Refuge System
RONS	Refuge Operating Needs System
SAMMS	Service Asset Maintenance Management System
Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
SWG	state wildlife grant
UNL	University of Nebraska–Lincoln
USC	United States Code
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USDOE	U.S. Department of Energy
USEPA	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
USGS–BRD	U.S. Geological Survey's biological resources division
WG	wage grade pay schedule
WMA	wildlife management area
WMD	wetland management district
WPA	waterfowl production area

Summary

Millions of ducks and geese glide into the flat plains of south-central Nebraska each spring. These migrants take their rest at the few remaining oases that dot the Rainwater Basin, where they find sanctuary and nourishment before continuing their annual migration.

Conserving the integrity of these important stopovers is the role of the Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District. The foundation for management of these public wetlands known as waterfowl production areas is the comprehensive conservation plan.

This environmental assessment includes the draft comprehensive conservation plan for the Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District. The final plan will guide management of the waterfowl production areas within the district for the next 15 years.

THE DISTRICT

The Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District is a part of the National Wildlife Refuge System of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The district, which covers 13 Nebraska counties, manages 230 tracts of land (more than 24,000 acres) that form 61 waterfowl production areas. In addition, the district manages 35 conservation easements (2,476 acres).

Each waterfowl production area typically contains wetlands that are managed for waterfowl and shorebirds. Most of the wetlands in the Rainwater Basin are small and surrounded by cropland. Extensive wetland drainage and alteration have reduced the number of wetlands in the basin to a level that threatens waterbird populations. Upland areas are managed for a high diversity of native vegetation to sustain grassland birds.

Nebraska's Rainwater Basin is internationally known for its spectacular bird migrations—329 species of birds have been observed. Common waterbirds include snow goose, northern pintail, green-winged teal, and solitary sandpiper. Grasshopper sparrow, bobolink, and ring-necked pheasant are common grassland species.

USFWS

Due to its unique location on the Central Flyway, millions of birds funnel into the district's waterfowl production areas.

Of the estimated 80,000 visitor days per year at the district, about 60% come for hunting and 40% for wildlife viewing. There is hunting that includes waterfowl, pheasant, and deer. Every spring and fall, thousands of tourists and locals visit the district to observe and enjoy the semiannual migration of cranes, waterfowl, and other birds.

VISION FOR THE DISTRICT

The Rainwater Basin provides critical habitat for millions of migratory birds. The basin's name reflects both the basis of its wetland hydrology and natural precipitation cycles. A network of functioning wetland and prairie plant ecosystems provides a native grassland mosaic that gives the local community a sense of pride and connection to the Great Plains flora and fauna. The lands managed by the wetland management district serve as an example of land stewardship mimicking natural processes, and they provide an array of wildlife-dependent educational and recreational opportunities. It is only through partnerships with individuals, agencies, and organizations that this vision can be achieved and maintained.

GOALS FOR THE DISTRICT

The following goals reflect the vision for the district—providing for healthy ecosystems and compatible opportunities for the public to appreciate and enjoy the natural environment.

Wetland Habitat Goal

Restore, enhance, and maintain the hydrology and early successional vegetation conditions essential to the conservation of migratory birds.

Upland Habitat Goal

Reestablish and maintain native grassland communities of the Rainwater Basin.

Water Rights Goal

Develop partnerships to protect the natural hydrology of WPA watersheds and ensure the necessary water rights are in place to protect future use of both ground and surface water.

Wildlife Diseases Goal

Work with partners to prevent or control the outbreak and spread of wildlife-borne diseases to protect human and migratory bird populations.

Invasive Plant Species Goal

Reduce and control the spread of nondesirable, nonnative plant species within wetland and upland habitats for the benefit of native plant and wildlife communities.

Research and Science Goal

Encourage and support research that substantially contributes to the understanding and management of the Rainwater Basin wetland and grassland ecosystem.

Cultural Resources Goal

Identify and evaluate the cultural resources in the district and protect those that are determined to be significant.

Visitor Services Goal

Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreation and educational opportunities by instilling an understanding of basic ecological processes, purpose of the Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District, and mission of the Service for persons of all abilities and cultural backgrounds.

Partnership Goal

Promote and develop partnerships with adjacent landowners, public and private organizations, Native American tribes, and other interested individuals to protect, restore, enhance, and maintain a diverse and productive ecosystem.

Socioeconomics Goal

Obtain a better understanding of the social and economic contribution WPAs make to the people and communities within the Rainwater Basin.

Operations Goal

Safely and efficiently use funding, staffing, infrastructure, and partnerships to achieve the purpose and objectives of the Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District.

THE DRAFT PLAN

The Service has prepared this environmental assessment and draft plan in cooperation with the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and the Biological Resources Division of the U.S. Geological Survey—along with public participation. After reviewing a wide range of public comments and management needs, the Service developed two alternatives for management of the district. Alternative B is the proposed action of the Service and is presented in chapter 6 as the draft comprehensive conservation plan.

Alternative A—Current Management (No Action)

Management of the district would remain the same, with changes in land management and public use occurring as opportunities arise. The current district staff would perform limited, issue-driven research and only monitor long-term vegetation change.

Alternative B—Integrated Partnership Approach (Proposed Action)

Alternative B addresses resource management in a holistic manner. There would be a focus on cooperation, coordination, and better exchange of information. An expanded district staff would work with partners to improve the waterfowl production areas across the landscape of the Rainwater Basin. The emphasis would be on adaptive management—as more information is known, management would be changed to improve effects on the environment.