

Seedskafee National Wildlife Refuge

DRAFT COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION PLAN
and
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

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Summary

Seedskaadee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is 26,382 acres in size and located within the Green River Basin in southwestern Wyoming (Map 1). The Refuge is a unique and ecologically important component of the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) which includes more than 530 refuges totaling over 93 million acres across the United States. Seedskaadee NWR was established in 1965 through the Colorado River Storage Project Act of 1956. Section 8 of this Act provided for the establishment of wildlife habitat development areas to offset the loss of wildlife habitat resulting from reservoir development in the Colorado River Drainage. The Seedskaadee Reclamation Act of 1958 specifically authorized acquisition of lands for Seedskaadee NWR.

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. This Act required development of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for each refuge and that management of each refuge be consistent with the CCP. In addition, the Act required that each refuge be managed to fulfill the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System as well as the specific purposes for which each refuge was established. Seedskaadee NWR's purpose is defined by two pieces of Federal enabling legislation. The principal purpose of Seedskaadee NWR is to provide for the conservation, maintenance, and management of wildlife resources and its habitat including the development and improvement of such wildlife resources. Additionally, the Refuge is charged to protect the scenery, cultural resources, and other natural resources and provide for public use and enjoyment of compatible wildlife-dependent activities.

The two pieces of enabling legislation are:

1. Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act: "... shall be administered by him (Secretary of the Interior) directly or in accordance with cooperative agreements ... and in accordance with such rules and regulations for the conservation, maintenance and management of wildlife, resources thereof, and its habitat thereon, ..."
16 U.S.C. 664
2. Colorado River Storage Act: "... Secretary is authorized and directed to investigate, plan, construct, operate, and maintain ... (1) public recreational facilities on lands withdrawn or acquired ... for the Colorado River project in order to "... conserve the scenery, the natural, historic, and archaeological objects, and the wildlife on said lands, and to provide for public use and enjoyment of the same and of the water areas created by these projects ... and (2) facilities to mitigate losses of and improve conditions for, the propagation of fish and wildlife." The Secretary may "... dispose of ..." the facilities "... to federal ... agencies ... upon such terms and conditions as will best promote their development and operation in the public interest." 43 U.S.C. 620g

Besides these two pieces of enabling legislation, the thirty-fifth legislature of the State of Wyoming passed enrolled Act No. 54 in 1959 "providing consent of the State of Wyoming to the acquisition by the United States where approved by the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission and the State Land Board, of lands for the establishment of migratory bird refuges." In the Act, the State of Wyoming has consented to the acquisition of up to 20,000 acres of land in Wyoming for the establishment and maintenance of migratory bird refuges in accordance with and for the purposes of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act and the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act. Thus, if ever any of these authorities, and associated funds, were invoked for the acquisition of new lands for Seedskaadee NWR, these lands would be managed for "use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds" (16 U.S.C. 715d) in accordance with the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. To date, all lands acquired have been through Section 8 of the 1956 Colorado River Storage Project Act.

All efforts leading to the preparation of this draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) were undertaken to provide the Refuge with: 1) a vision for the future; 2) guidelines for wildlife and habitat management over the next 15 years to ensure progress is made toward attaining the mission and goals of Seedskaadee NWR and the Refuge System; and 3) to comply with Congressional mandates stated in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. The CCP planning effort provided opportunities for interested people, Federal and State agencies, State and local governments, and private organizations to give input on future management of the Refuge. This CCP provides clear goals and objectives for management of Refuge habitats, wildlife, threatened and endangered species, cultural and paleontological resources, other compatible public uses, and partnerships. It also provides implementation strategies and recommended staffing and funding.

The Seedskaadee CCP will be used to prepare step-down management plans and revise existing plans. It also will be used to prepare budgets which describe specific actions to be taken by the Refuge over the next 15 years. Given that new information, guidance, and technology frequently change and become available, the CCP and/or step-down management plans will be updated as necessary throughout the 15-year period. At a minimum the CCP will be reviewed and updated every 15 years.

The draft CCP considers various alternatives for management of Seedskadee NWR. Each of the alternatives was evaluated for environmental consequences in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The draft CCP contains the goals, objectives, and strategies found by the Service to best aid the Refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System to attain their mission. For a summary of the alternatives considered during the planning process, see the Seedskadee NWR Environmental Assessment following the CCP. The CCP is the preferred alternative.

Vision Statement:

Seedskadee NWR will strive to preserve, restore, and enhance the ecological integrity of the Green River riparian corridor and associated uplands as habitat for migratory birds and other indigenous wildlife for the benefit of present and future generations. Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge will manage for a variety of native plants and wildlife, with emphasis on migratory birds and threatened and endangered species. Natural habitats of the Green River will be preserved or restored. The Refuge will provide interpretation of the natural and human history of the area and provide for wildlife-dependent recreation that is compatible with Refuge purposes. To meet this Vision, the Service will seek partnerships with other agencies, interest groups, landowners, and local communities.

The management focus of the CCP is summarized by the following goals that are supported by a series of objectives and implementation strategies. The goals are:

Wildlife:

- To restore, enhance, or protect threatened and endangered flora and fauna that currently occur or have historically occurred in the area of Seedskadee NWR.
- Preserve, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity and abundance of migratory and resident wildlife with emphasis on native species.

Habitat:

- Protect and restore riparian habitats along the Green River to provide for the annual life needs of migratory birds and native wildlife utilizing the Green River Basin.
- Wetlands will be managed to meet the breeding and migratory requirements of waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and other wetland dependent species.
- Preserve, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity of indigenous flora associated with the Great Basin upland desert shrub and grassland habitats to support native wildlife found in the Green River Basin.
- The Refuge staff, in collaboration with Wyoming Game and Fish Department and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), will manage water quality and quantity in the Green River to maintain and/or restore the riparian and cottonwood forests and provide habitat for waterfowl, trumpeter swans, fish, and other native species dependent on river and forested habitat.
- Restore and maintain indigenous flora diversity by controlling the invasion of exotic plant species on the Refuge.

Public Use and Recreation:

- Nurture an understanding of and appreciation for wildlife and other natural resources of the Green River Basin by providing opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation while maintaining the primitive, uncrowded nature of the area.
- Educate and inform the public about the Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the Upper Colorado Ecosystem by providing quality environmental education and interpretation opportunities.
- Protect Refuge resources from adverse natural and/or man-made impacts.
- Protect and interpret significant historic and prehistoric cultural sites and objects associated with Refuge lands.
- Foster partnerships to promote wildlife conservation and habitat management in the Green River Basin and to help Seedskadee NWR accomplish its vision and goals.

The achievement of these goals and associated objectives will fulfill the mission and purposes of the Refuge and Refuge System.

Potential Refuge Expansion

After the release of the first draft CCP and EA for Seedskadee NWR, Reclamation announced to the Service its intention to dispose of most of the lands acquired under the "Seedskadee Project." Remaining Seedskadee Project lands owned by Reclamation are to be transferred to another Federal agency for management. A portion of the lands available from Reclamation surround the Big Sandy River and adjoin the Refuge.

In this draft CCP we identify interest in amending the Refuge boundary if additional tracts of land become available which would contribute to the Refuge's mission. Included for consideration are lands surrounding the Big Sandy River, a significant tributary that joins the Green River inside the Refuge boundary (see section B3.1 #16, and the EA).

Careful consideration was given to including an analysis in this draft CCP of amending the Refuge boundary to include lands associated with the Big Sandy River. However, the decision was made to not include the Big Sandy analysis in this CCP process for two primary reasons: 1) the CCP is too far along in the review process; and 2) a separate review process, independent of this CCP, would provide a more thorough analysis of any possible land acquisition, including better public scoping and participation in the process. Currently, the Refuge is beginning an internal review to evaluate the feasibility of amending the Refuge boundary to include lands along the Big Sandy River. If a decision is made to pursue a land transfer, a full public process will ensue complete with public involvement consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

