



Conceptual Management Plan

Baca National Wildlife Refuge

May 2005

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Baca National Wildlife Refuge
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Cover photograph by Wendy Shattil/Bob Rozinski
2005 © *Grassland and shrubland habitats interspersed with playa wetlands are common on the Baca National Wildlife Refuge.*

Summary



Executive Summary

BACA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Authorized in 2000, the Baca National Wildlife Refuge is one of the largest and most recent additions to the National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuge, at 92,500 acres, is located in Saguache and Alamosa counties in the San Luis Valley of south-central Colorado (figure 1). Congress authorized acquisition of land within the refuge with passage of Public Law 106-530, also known as the "Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act of 2000." This legislation, which received widespread support, focused not only on protecting the region's hydrology, which the incredibly unique sand dunes ecosystem depends upon, but also at protecting the exceptional ecological, cultural, and wildlife resources of the area.

Situated in the San Luis Valley, a high mountain desert surrounded by two 14,000 foot mountain ranges, the refuge contains a highly diverse suite of habitats including desert shrublands, grasslands, wet meadows, playa wetlands, and riparian areas. Fed largely by melting mountain snow, numerous streams crisscross the refuge providing an abundance of life in an otherwise arid landscape. The refuge is home to a multitude of wildlife and plant species, some of which only occur in the San Luis Valley.

Adding to the uniqueness and importance of the refuge is its juxtaposition to other conservation lands in the area. The refuge abuts lands owned or controlled by other conservation entities including

The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the National Park Service (NPS), the USDA Forest Service (USFS), and the Colorado State Land Board (SLB). This complex of lands, totaling more than 500,000 acres, contains one of the largest and most diverse assemblages of wetland habitats remaining in Colorado.

In addition to the incredible plant and animal resources contained on the refuge, the area is also tremendously rich in cultural resource sites, some of which date over 12,000 years ago. Many of these sites have been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

SCOPE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This conceptual management plan (CMP) will provide local landowners, neighboring governmental agencies, and the interested public with a general understanding of the anticipated management approaches for the refuge over the next 3 to 5 years. The purpose of this CMP is to provide a broad overview of the Service's proposed management approach to wildlife and their relative habitats, public uses, facilities, interagency coordination, and other operational needs. The comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) planning process, which is similar to the current NPS general management plan planning process, is scheduled to start in 2008. The CCP will provide a thorough, in-depth analysis of all facets of current and future refuge management



Shrubland habitat on the Baca National Wildlife Refuge

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activities. Management actions described in this CMP apply only to those lands under the jurisdiction of the Service.

REFUGE PURPOSE

The legislation creating the refuge did not specify a refuge purpose. By default, the purpose of the refuge is the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System until a new purpose is approved. Based on analysis of the intent of the enabling legislation, the following purpose is proposed and some form of it will likely be approved in the near future.

- The purpose of the Baca National Wildlife Refuge is to restore, enhance and maintain wetland, upland, riparian and other habitats for wildlife, plants and fish species that are native to the San Luis Valley, Colorado. Management of the refuge will emphasize migratory bird conservation and will consider the refuge's role in broader landscape conservation efforts.

INTERIM REFUGE GOALS

Within the next 3 to 5 years, refuge staff, (given sufficient resources) will strive to achieve the following goals at the refuge and in doing so, protect and foster a better understanding of the ecological processes that have shaped and will continue to shape this unique landscape.

- Evaluate pre-acquisition management strategies in relation to wetland, upland, and riparian habitats.
- Assemble resource information including wildlife and biological, hydrological, and cultural resources.
- Assemble visitor services information and needs for the development of the visitor services program.
- Assemble operational and funding needs including staff requirements and inventorying real property assets such as fences, windmills, buildings, water control structures, and roads.
- Maintain and evaluate pre-acquisition irrigation strategies.
- Ensure law enforcement protection including but not limited to facilities, boundaries, cultural resources, and refuge-specific regulations.

- Respond to public concerns and provide information in a timely manner.

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

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. The underlying foundation of the Refuge System is that "wildlife comes first" (Fulfilling the Promise, USFWS 1999). The refuge will be managed with this underlying principle at the forefront. Table 1 provides a summary of the major action items related to habitats, operations, public use, partnerships, and cultural resources for the Baca National Wildlife Refuge that can be expected, given sufficient resources, during the first 3 to 5 years of refuge activities. The level of assessment for any one action



Bob Sanders/Ducks Unlimited

Wetlands in the San Luis Valley are critical for migratory birds.

Table 1. Management Actions

<i>Management Direction</i>	<i>Component</i>	<i>Actions</i>
<i>Habitat Type</i>	Shrublands/Grasslands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assess habitat conditions. ▪ Evaluate grazing and haying activities to improve vegetation health and wildlife habitat. ▪ Evaluate prescribed fire to improve habitat for wildlife. ▪ Assess wildlife use.
	Wetlands – Wet Meadows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assess habitat conditions. ▪ Continue and evaluate current irrigation practices. ▪ Evaluate grazing and haying activities to improve vegetation health and wildlife habitat. ▪ Evaluate prescribed fire to improve habitat for wildlife. ▪ Assess wildlife use. ▪ Assemble existing hydrology data, develop research needs.
	Wetlands - Playas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assess habitat conditions. ▪ Assemble hydrology data, develop research needs. ▪ Evaluate water management options. ▪ Assess wildlife use.
	Riparian Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assess habitat conditions. ▪ Evaluate grazing activities to improve vegetation health and wildlife habitat. ▪ Evaluate prescribed fire to improve habitat for wildlife. ▪ Assess wildlife use.
<i>Operations, Maintenance, Law Enforcement</i>	Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assess and maintain real property inventory. ▪ Secure funding and staff. ▪ Establish headquarters.
	Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Maintain boundary signs. ▪ Evaluate and maintain infrastructure including roads, water control structures, and buildings. ▪ Evaluate existing fencing and future needs.

Table 1. Management Actions Continued

<i>Management Direction</i>	<i>Component</i>	<i>Actions</i>
<i>Operations, Maintenance, Law Enforcement</i>	Law Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assess habitat conditions. ▪ Evaluate grazing and haying activities to improve vegetation health and wildlife habitat. ▪ Evaluate prescribed fire to improve habitat for wildlife. ▪ Assess wildlife use.
<i>Public Use</i>	Public Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assemble information required for development of a public use plan.
<i>Partnerships</i>	Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Continue to develop partnerships and cooperation between neighboring government agencies, local governments, non-governmental organizations, and the members of the public.
<i>Cultural Resources</i>	Cultural Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coordinate with partners to ensure the protection of known culturally significant sites. ▪ Survey areas where human-caused disturbance may occur (such as any area proposed for prescribed fire activities).

item will depend upon sufficient funding and staffing.

FUTURE DIRECTION

The Baca National Wildlife Refuge will be managed following the direction provided in this document. As outlined in this document, a large percentage staff time will be devoted to acquiring baseline information and knowledge about the resources contained on the refuge and how those resources intact within the larger landscape of the area. In 2008, the refuge is scheduled to begin a comprehensive conservation planning process which will outline refuge activities for the next 15 years. All interested individuals and groups will be asked to participate throughout this process. For more information on the content provided in this document or for additional clarification, please contact:

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