

# Proposed Expansion of Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake National Wildlife Refuges



USFWS / Rhonda Foley

*View of Mortenson Lake National Wildlife Refuge and Laramie Mountains from the refuge.*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to establish a conservation area that would expand the boundaries of the Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake National Wildlife Refuges. Under the proposal, the Service would work with private landowners to conserve the natural resources and working landscape of the area by acquiring perpetual conservation easements and limited fee title land purchases from willing sellers.

The proposed project would help maintain important habitat for a variety of fish, mammals, plants, amphibians,

reptiles, and birds. In particular, it would significantly contribute to the conservation and recovery of the endangered Wyoming toad by protecting habitat needed for this species' persistence.

The Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake refuges are part of the high plains basin ecosystem known as the Laramie Basin. The shallow depressions of the basin within the relatively flat topography of the region support wetland complexes that are unique to the area. Radiating out from these wetlands are a myriad of other types of habitats: alkali flats,

shrublands, native grasslands dominated by short-grass species with mid-grass species scattered throughout, manipulated meadows, and widely scattered stands of trees.

Currently, much of the approximately 43,300 acres within the proposed boundaries of the two refuges is used for agriculture in the form of cow-calf and hay production. Cattle are pastured on the native grasslands, shrublands, and meadows, and flood irrigation is often applied to the meadows to produce higher yields of hay.

## What resources would benefit from the proposed conservation area?

The lakes, riparian corridors, and marshes of the two refuges and the surrounding area provide a wildlife oasis in a semiarid environment that provides a place for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds to rest and refuel. Some bird species such as the sandhill crane, black-crowned night heron, white-faced ibis, black tern, and American bittern use the wetlands for nesting. In addition to the high-quality wetland habitats, the basin provides large expanses of grassland and shrubland habitats necessary for many other species in need of conservation, including the mountain plover, swift fox, burrowing owl, loggerhead shrike, white-tailed prairie dog, Brewer's sparrow, and ferruginous hawk. These species all use these types of habitats during part of their life cycles.

Isolated cottonwoods, often associated with historic homesteads, offer nesting locations and hunting platforms for Swainson's and ferruginous hawks as well as golden eagles. The trees' bark also provides daytime loafing sites for various bat species.

The Wyoming toad is the most endangered amphibian in North America. It is found only in Albany County, with the only wild population occurring at the Mortenson Lake refuge. The majority of extant Wyoming toads (approximately 500) are held in captivity and bred at the Red Buttes Captive Breeding Facility south of Laramie, Wyoming; Saratoga National Fish Hatchery in Saratoga, Wyoming; and eight zoos participating in the Wyoming Toad Species Survival Plan in the U.S. and Canada. The eight zoos are all accredited members of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. Long-term recovery of the Wyoming toad requires reintroduction sites on Federal lands within the historic range of the toad. The historic range would be encompassed by the proposed expansion.

## How would the perpetual conservation easements and fee title land acquisition work?

The Service recognizes that the most effective technique for conserving the remaining intact wetland, grassland, shrubland, and meadow habitats in the

proposed area would be to work with private landowners on conservation matters of mutual interest. The proposed expansion of the current boundaries of the Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake refuges would involve acquiring conservation easements and fee title acquisition only from willing sellers across the project area to protect intact habitats from being converted to other uses that are not as compatible with wildlife needs.

As a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and the Service, a conservation easement is a perpetual agreement that the Service would buy from a willing landowner. Conservation easements contain language that allows for the continuation of traditional ranching practices while detailing habitat protection measures that prohibit certain uses, such as subdividing the property for home construction, draining wetlands, and plowing the land. Land ownership and other property rights, including control of public access, would remain with the landowner. Easement properties would also remain on the local tax roll. The Service would purchase conservation easements mainly using funds generated by the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965. These funds are derived



*Pronghorn fawns on Hutton Lake refuge.*



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*Wyoming toad on Mortenson Lake refuge.*

from revenues on oil and gas leases on the Outer Continental Shelf, motorboat fuel taxes, and sales of surplus Federal property. Easement prices offered to willing sellers would be determined by an appraisal completed by a Service-contracted appraiser familiar with the local market. Funding is appropriated by Congress to use for a specific project, such as the proposed expansion of the executive boundaries of the Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake refuges.

Although the purchase of conservation easements is the primary tool planned to be used to protect the area, the Service would consider fee title acquisition of a parcel of land more appropriate in some situations. This would be the case if fee ownership is considered necessary for the conservation of the Wyoming toad, if the landowner in an appropriate area prefers to sell the land outright rather than have an easement, or if a section of land is within the original executive boundaries of the Mortenson refuge and the landowner is willing to sell the property.

The Service works with numerous partners, many of which have complementary conservation programs, and will cooperate with them on easement or fee title acquisition in the Laramie Basin. Included among these potential

partners are the Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Wyoming Audubon, Albany County, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Association, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Intermountain West Joint Venture, and other interested groups.

## What are the next steps in the process?

The Service will be holding a public meeting in Laramie, Wyoming, to discuss the proposed conservation areas around the Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake refuges. At the meeting, members of the public will be able to meet with Service personnel, learn about the proposal, and tell us what you think about the proposal. We also encourage you to comment through letters, emails, and telephone calls to the contacts listed below. We will use input provided by the public for the environmental analysis required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and for developing a land protection plan for the proposed expansion of the boundaries of the Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake refuges. The land protection plan and the NEPA document will highlight the resource values of the project area;

present alternatives for the proposed project that address issues the Service, our conservation partners, and the public identify; and evaluate the environmental, social, and economic effects that could occur if the proposal is carried out. The Service will make the draft land protection plan and the NEPA document available to anyone who would like to review and comment on them. The Service will consider all comments in the preparation of the final land protection plan.

## How do I continue to be involved?

We want to hear from you. There are a variety of ways to provide your questions and comments to the Service about the proposed expansion of the executive boundaries of the Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake refuges:

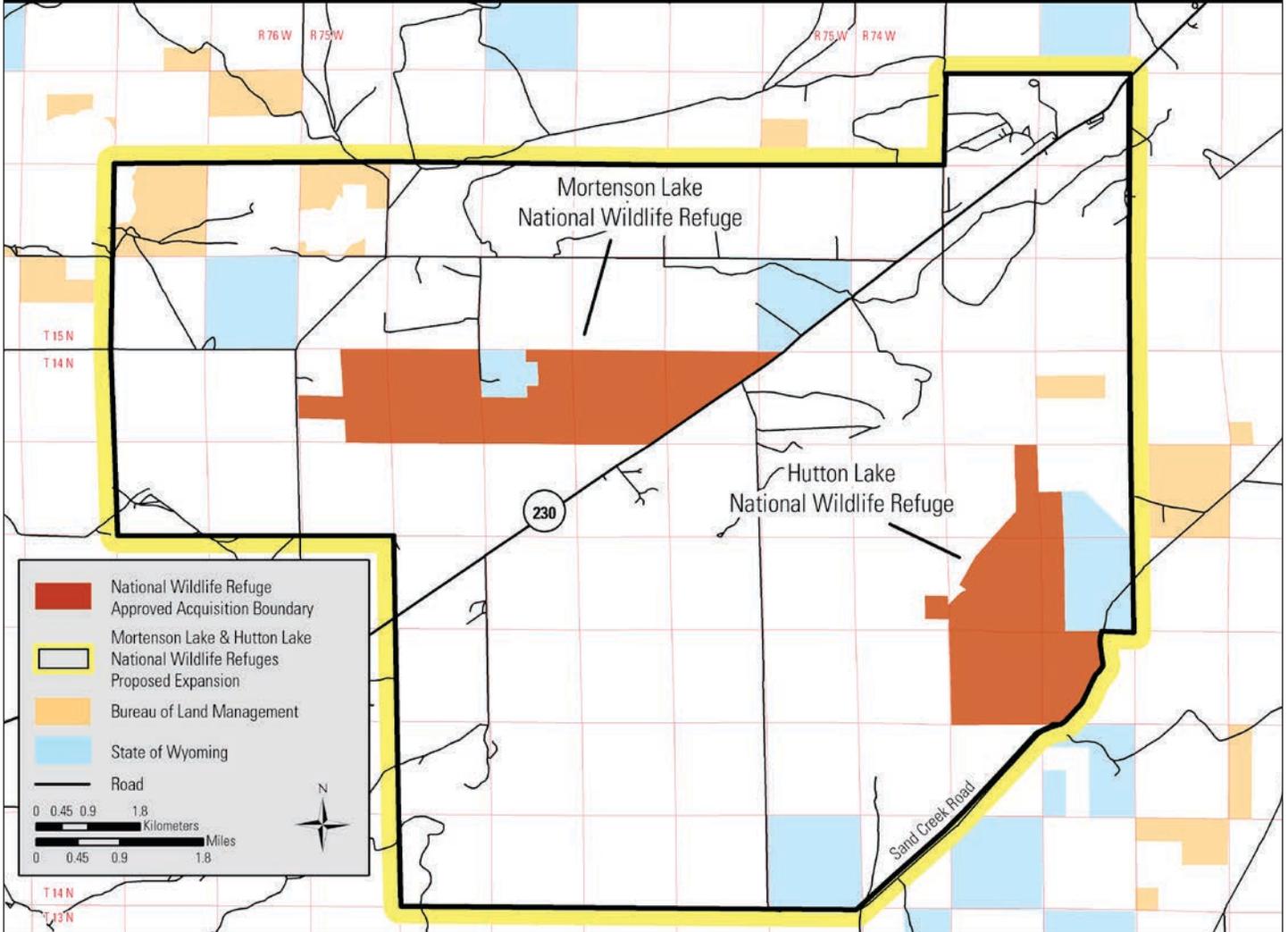
- Email ([MRL\\_comments@fws.gov](mailto:MRL_comments@fws.gov)), call, or write the Service with questions and comments. See the contact information on the back page.
- Attend the upcoming public meeting in Laramie.
- Visit the Web site: [http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/plans\\_wy/index.html](http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/plans_wy/index.html)

There will also be opportunities to comment on the proposed project during the public comment period for the NEPA document.

## Contact Information

Amy Thornburg  
Planning Team Leader  
National Wildlife Refuge System  
Region 6  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
P.O. Box 25486  
Denver, CO 80225-0486  
303 / 236 4345 (Office)  
303 / 236 4792 (Fax)

Ann Timberman  
Project Leader  
Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge  
Region 6  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
953 County Road 32  
Walden, CO 80480  
970 / 723 8202 x3 (Office)  
970 / 723 4285 (Fax)



Mortenson Lake and Hutton Lake Refuges proposed expansion project area.

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