U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Park Service

Planning Update

Proposed Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs Conservation Areas

Issue 1, March 2013

NPS

Fog settles on the banks of the Missouri River.

We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Park Service (NPS), have developed a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) and land protection plan for the proposed Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs Conservation Areas. These conservation areas would build on existing conservation efforts along the Missouri River in northeast Nebraska and southeast South Dakota. In creating these areas, we would work with willing private landowners, local communities, and other conservation entities to conserve important wildlife habitats, increase quality recreational opportunities, preserve sensitive cultural sites, and maintain sustainable farming and ranching operations in the region.

Conservation Areas

The proposed Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs Conservation Areas lie within the Missouri River system. The Missouri River is one of the major arteries of America's heartland, coursing its way 2,341 miles from its headwaters to its confluence with the Mississippi River at St. Louis, Missouri. Along the way it runs through the scenic landscapes of the Great Plains to the sprawling deciduous forests of the eastern United States. Its watershed, encompassing more than 500,000 square miles, drains one-sixth of the United States and is home to thousands of fish, wildlife, and plant species. The river and its environs provide seemingly unlimited recreational opportunities for visitors and support traditional historical, tribal, and rural lifestyles critical to the local communities.

Niobrara Confluence Conservation Area

The proposed Niobrara Confluence Conservation Area lies between Fort Randall Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake and includes reaches of the Missouri and Niobrara Rivers. This area contains one of the last segments of the middle Missouri River that remains unchannelized, undeveloped, and relatively free-flowing. The surrounding old, wide river valley contains important habitat for at least 60 native and 26 sport fishes. In addition, the area's riparian woodlands and island complexes are important for approximately 25 resident bird species and 115 migratory bird species including piping plovers, least terns, and bald eagles.

Ponca Bluffs Conservation Area

The proposed Ponca Bluffs Conservation Area lies between Gavins Point Dam and Sioux City. This area is a diverse, relatively unaltered, riverine–floodplain ecosystem characterized by a main channel, braided channels, wooded riparian corridor, pools, chutes, sloughs, islands, sandbars, backwater areas, wetlands, natural floodplain and upland forest communities, pastureland, and croplands. The area also supports a wide variety of wildlife and fisheries resources.

Concept

We would work with willing landowners, communities, tribes, and other agencies to conserve valuable natural, recreational, scenic, and cultural resources in the proposed Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs Conservation Areas. Specifically, we aim to enhance conservation; enhance recreation; increase tourism; contribute to local economies; improve quality of life through healthy air, water, and ecosystems; and increase the appreciation and awareness of the area's natural resources.

For acquiring conservation lands from willing landowners, we would use fee-title acquisition wherever public access or extensive rehabilitation is needed to improve the ecological function and natural meander of the river. In other cases, we would purchase conservation easements from willing landowners.

Conservation easements are remarkable tools that allow the concurrent preservation of habitat along with working landscapes like farmlands and rangelands—an approach that can be both cost effective and socially and politically acceptable. Furthermore, conservation easements allow lands to remain privately owned and on local tax rolls while still providing lifelong conservation value to the public. Landowners would be compensated for conserving in perpetuity the biological, ecological, and cultural values on their properties by promoting the growth of native grasses, shrubs, and trees; eliminating or reducing invasive species; and protecting culturally significant sites. In return, these landowners would be compensated for their contribution to regional conservation goals, and the money would eventually enter the local economy.

Collaboration is key to this undertaking. By combining agency resources and funds, we can streamline and improve the delivery of actions outlined in the land protection plan. Furthermore, by partnering with willing landowners, communities, tribes, and other entities, we can often achieve a level of conservation that helps not only fish and wildlife but also the surrounding human communities.

Project Vision

The vision for this project is stated below.

Through collaboration with landowners, communities, tribes, and other agencies, the Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs Conservation Areas will provide sustainable ecological and economic benefits within the middle Missouri River basin by maintaining native riparian and upland habitats that increase river functionality and recreational opportunities.

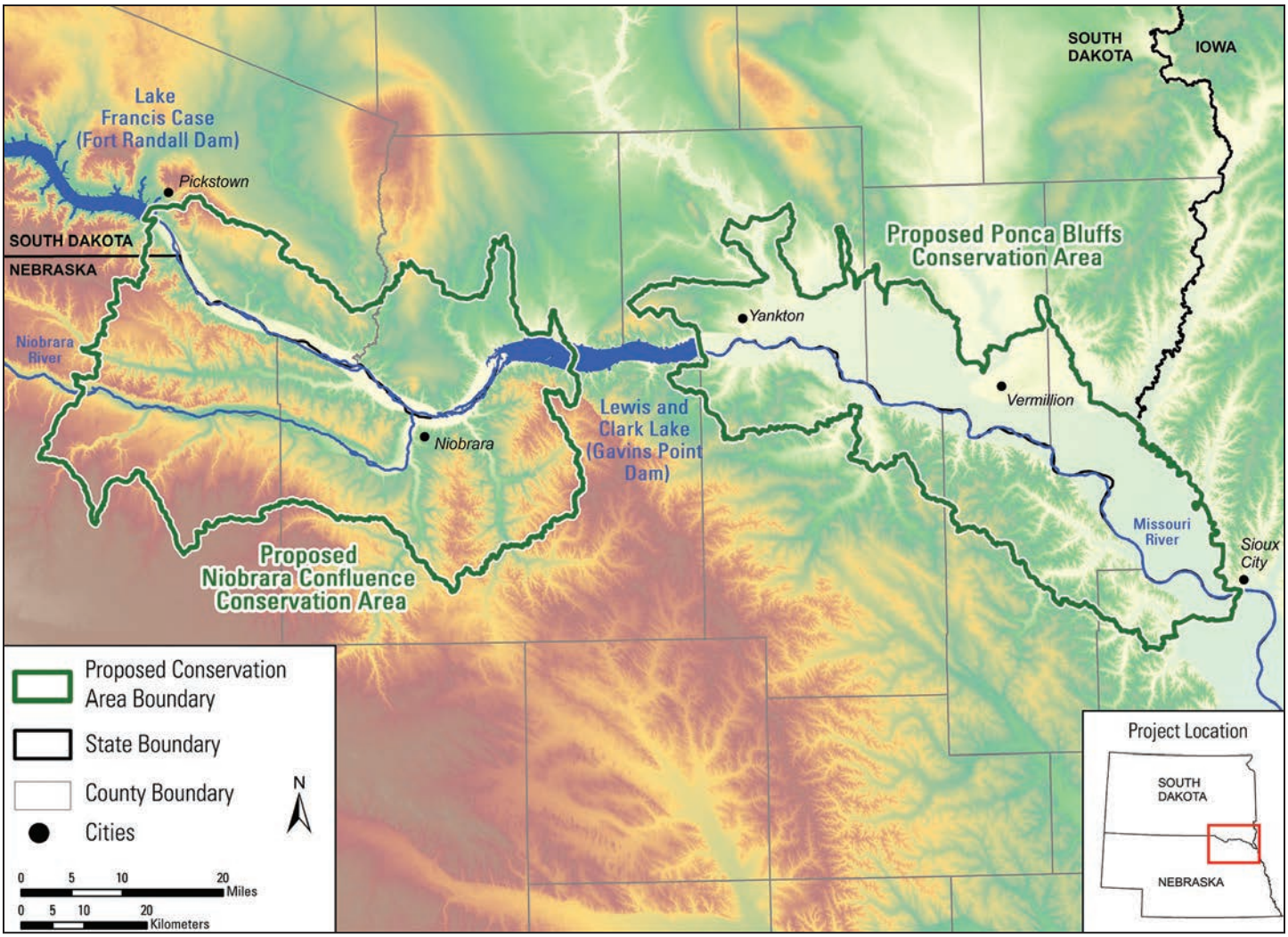
FWS

Whooping Cranes

Project Goals

To accomplish the project vision, the following goals have been created for the proposed conservation areas:

- *Local economies and tourism*—help sustain local economies through preserving working farm and ranch landscapes and conserving lands, both of which will attract tourists from across the Nation.
- *Partnerships and collaboration*—develop and foster partnerships with local landowners, communities, tribes, and others by offering financial incentives, sharing knowledge, or collaborating on projects with ecological benefits.
- *Ecological and river functionality*—increase river and ecological functionality by improving water and air quality, maintaining healthy native plant communities such as cottonwood galleries, increasing floodplain connectivity, promoting active channel processes, and reducing flood risk.
- *Cultural resources*—in consultation with our partners, locate, document, and evaluate cultural resources and encourage preservation and interpretation when appropriate.
- *Recreational opportunities*—increase recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.
- *Wildlife, fisheries, and their habitats*—support the recovery and protection of threatened and endangered species and reduce the likelihood of future listings under the Endangered Species Act, while continuing to provide migration habitats for millions of migrating birds and habitats for resident fish and wildlife populations.



Proposed Niobrara Confluence and Ponca Bluffs Conservation Areas, Nebraska and South Dakota

Alternatives

With input from other agencies and the public, we developed four alternatives for management of the proposed conservation areas:

- "Alternative A—No Action"
- "Alternative B—Minimal Conservation Action"
- "Alternative C—Moderate Conservation Action" (preferred alternative)
- "Alternative D—High Conservation Action"

The action alternatives, alternatives B–D, call for 80 percent of acquisitions to be through easements and 20 percent through fee-title acquisition. All easement conditions would be mutually agreed upon by the landowner and us.

In developing the alternatives, we focused on the overall ecological function of the Missouri River and identified areas that are important for native fish and wildlife species like bald eagles and pallid sturgeon. In addition, we prioritized areas that offer opportunities to increase access to the river, conserve scenic areas like chalkstone bluffs, and maintain culturally significant sites.

Draft EIS and Land Protection Plan Available for Review

The FWS and the NPS have completed a draft EIS and land protection plan for the proposed conservation areas. This joint document is now available for public review and comment. The deadline for submitting comments is June 14, 2013.

How to View the EIS and Land Protection Plan

To view the document online, visit:

- http://parkplanning.nps.gov/niob-ponca

To request a hard copy of the document by phone or mail, contact:

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
  Attention: Nick Kaczor
  Division of Refuge Planning
  134 Union Blvd., Suite 300
  Lakewood, CO 80228
  303/236 4387

How to Get Involved

Attend a Public Meeting

We encourage you to attend an upcoming public meeting to learn about the proposed conservation areas.

- Wednesday, April 10, 2013
  6 p.m. to 8 p.m.
  Vermillion Public Library
  18 Church Street
  Vermillion, South Dakota

- Thursday, April 11, 2013
  6 p.m. to 8 p.m.
  Lutheran Fellowship Hall
  2532 Apple Street
  (just south of Moody Motors)
  Niobrara, Nebraska

At these meetings, attendees will be given the opportunity to submit comments. You can also submit comments online or by email or mail.

Submit Comments Online

- http://parkplanning.nps.gov/niob-ponca

Submit Comments by Email

- niobrara_ponca@fws.gov

Submit Comments by Mail

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
  Attention: Nick Kaczor
  Division of Refuge Planning
  134 Union Blvd., Suite 300
  Lakewood, CO 80228

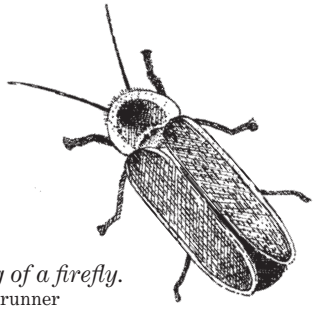
The deadline for submitting comments is June 14, 2013. All comments received from the public and interested groups will be placed in the administrative record for this planning process. Comments will be made available for public viewing, and copies may also be provided to the public.

Contact Information

To learn more about the proposed conservation areas, or if you have questions about the environmental review process, please visit our Web site:

http://parkplanning.nps.gov/niob-ponca

You may also reach staff by telephone at **303/236 4387** or by email at **niobrara_ponca@fws.gov**.



Drawing of a firefly.
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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED