

2 The Refuges

2.1 ESTABLISHMENT, ACQUISITION, AND MANAGEMENT HISTORY

The Laramie Plains refuges are managed by Service staff headquartered at the Arapaho NWR near Walden, Colorado. All three refuges are located within 15 miles of the town of Laramie, Wyoming.

Laramie is positioned in a 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. These wetland complexes provide resting, nesting, and breeding areas for migratory birds in the semiarid environment.

In the early 1930s, J. Clark Salyer III was charged with identifying areas to protect as national wildlife refuges for migratory birds. He surveyed the area around Laramie and selected two locations as national wildlife refuges for migratory birds. Bamforth NWR and Hutton Lake NWR were established by Executive Orders in 1932 within one day of each other.

Bamforth NWR was established on January 29, 1932, by Executive Order 9321. Consisting of 1,166 acres, the refuge is located approximately 6 miles northwest of Laramie. The refuge was established with 201 acres withdrawn from the public domain in 1932, and 965 acres purchased with Migratory Bird Conservation Act (Migratory Bird) funds in 1933.

Due to a number of factors, Bamforth NWR has remained within the Refuge System but has not been actively managed. The refuge comprises three parts arranged roughly in an L-shaped pattern, with the two segments one-half mile apart. Lands adjacent to and in between refuge parcels are owned by the state of Wyoming and private parties. The refuge is located in a closed basin hydrologic system that contains Bamforth Lake, but most of the lake falls outside the refuge boundary. The fragmented parcels, closed basin hydrology, and minimal water rights have contributed to the lack of active management of this refuge.

Hutton Lake NWR was established on January 28, 1932, by Executive Order 5782. Consisting of 1,928 acres, the refuge is located approximately 10 miles southwest of Laramie, Wyoming. In 1932, 153 acres were withdrawn from the public domain for the establishment of this refuge. Additional lands were purchased with Migratory Bird funds in

1933 and 1939. In 1940, 147 acres were exchanged, which completed the current 1,928 acres comprising Hutton Lake NWR. Physical features of the refuge include Hutton Lake, Rush Lake, Creighton Lake, and Lake George. Mallards, redheads, teal, pintails, great blue herons, black-crowned night-herons, phalaropes, western grebes, bitterns, and black terns use the refuge during fall and spring migrations.

With some water rights at Hutton Lake NWR the Service manages Lake George and Creighton, Hutton, Hoge, and Rush lakes for migratory birds. Water management is opportunistic due to limited water rights and a closed basin system. Ponds are filled in the spring with natural runoff and maintained as high as possible over the birds' breeding and brood-rearing seasons (June–August).

Hutton Lake NWR supports approximately 2,000 visits over the course of a year, mostly from March through October. Wildlife viewing opportunities and refuge access is limited from November through February due to frozen ponds and cold, snowy weather.

Mortenson Lake NWR was established in 1993 under the Endangered Species Act to protect the endangered Wyoming toad. The Service purchased an additional 151 acres for the refuge in 2003. The 1,968-acre refuge is located 15 miles southwest of Laramie. Within the refuge's approved acquisition boundary, 598 acres remain in private ownership. Protection for the Wyoming toad would improve if the Service could purchase these lands from willing sellers. Physical features of the refuge include Mortenson, Soda, and Garber lakes and Gibbs Pond. Last Chance, Osterman, and South ditches cross the refuge. Habitat types include open water, wetlands, wet meadow, grassland, sagebrush, and greasewood communities.

2.2 SPECIAL VALUES OF THE REFUGES

Early in the planning process, the planning team and public identified the outstanding qualities of the Laramie Plains refuges, the characteristics and features that make it special to people, valuable for wildlife, and worthy of refuge status. Identifying these values at the outset helps ensure they will be preserved, protected, and enhanced throughout the planning process. Refuge qualities can range from providing a unique biological habitat for wildlife to offering visitors a quiet place to observe a variety of

birds and enjoy nature. The following summarizes the qualities that make the Laramie Plains refuges unique and valued:

- The wetland complexes of the refuges provide important water resources that support resting, nesting, and foraging areas for migratory birds in the semiarid environment of the Laramie Plains basin.
- A diversity of wetland habitat within the refuges provides a range of conditions (i.e., varying amounts of emergent and aquatic vegetation, salinity, and open water) that support a variety of wildlife species.
- The nearby University of Wyoming and Colorado State University are resources for natural resource studies to add to the body of scientific literature on semiarid environments and the importance of national wildlife refuges in the western United States.
- Two vegetative species of concern have been identified on Mortenson Lake NWR and Hutton Lake NWR. Alkali wildrye is a meadow grass at its northern limits. Pale blue-eyed grass is a wet-meadow plant in the iris family endemic to southeastern Wyoming and northcentral Colorado.
- The refuges contain native short-grass prairie habitat, which is unique in the state of Wyoming (species of special concern that use short-grass prairie include mountain plover, burrowing owl, sage-grouse, and McCown's longspur).
- The refuges are located near an urban population center (Laramie) and can be used as outdoor classrooms to provide environmental education opportunities for the local community.
- Visitors can find wide-open spaces that remain relatively undisturbed, and may often feel as if they have the place to themselves.
- The refuges are designated as Important Bird Areas by the Wyoming Audubon Society.
- Mortenson Lake NWR harbors the endangered Wyoming toad.

2.3 PURPOSE

Every refuge is established for a purpose. This purpose is the foundation upon which to build all refuge programs, from biology and public use

to maintenance and facilities. No action that the Service or public takes may conflict with this refuge purpose. The refuge purpose is found in the legislative acts or administrative orders, which are the authorities to either transfer or acquire a piece of land for a refuge. Over time an individual refuge may contain lands that have been acquired under a variety of transfer and acquisition authorities, giving it more than one purpose. The goals, objectives, and strategies identified in the CCP are intended to support the individual purpose for which the refuge was established.

Bamforth NWR was established by Executive Order 5783, January 29, 1932 (figure 5). The purpose of the refuge is to provide “*a refuge and breeding ground for birds and wild animals.*” Hutton Lake NWR was established by Executive Order 5782, January 28, 1932 (figure 6). The purpose of the refuge is to provide “*a refuge and breeding ground for birds and wild animals.*”

Mortenson Lake NWR was established in 1993 to protect the Wyoming toad's last known population (figure 7). The Wyoming toad was listed as an endangered species in 1984. The population at Mortenson Lake was found in 1987. The purpose of the refuge is “*to conserve fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species.*”

2.4 VISION

At the beginning of the planning process, the Service developed a vision for the Laramie Plains refuges. A vision describes what will be different in the future as a result of the CCP and is the essence of what the Service is trying to accomplish at the refuges. The vision is a future-oriented statement designed to be achieved through refuge management by the end of the 15-year CCP planning horizon. The vision for the Laramie Plains refuges is:

The wetland complexes and uplands of the Laramie Plains refuges are important resource components of this semiarid region that provide key habitat for the Wyoming toad, migratory birds, and resident wildlife.

These refuges will be evaluated to direct management decisions to provide natural and enhanced habitat, thereby maximizing the unique potential of each refuge. Wildlife-dependent recreation will be evaluated for each refuge to determine potential, appropriate public use opportunities.

2.5 GOALS

The Service also developed a set of goals for the refuges based on the Improvement Act, the refuge

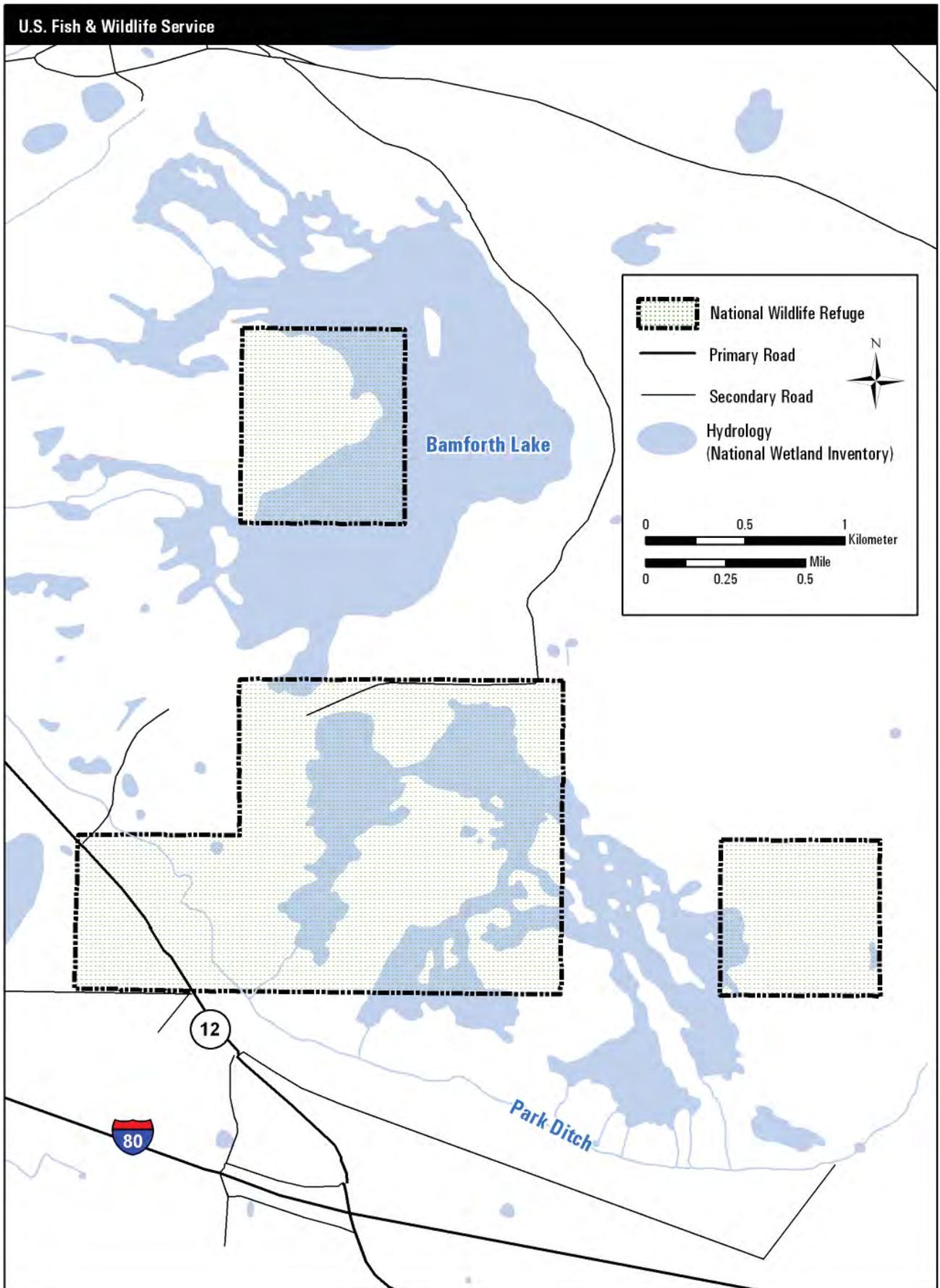


Figure 5. Base map of Bamforth NWR, Wyoming.

purposes, and information developed during project planning. The goals direct work toward achieving the vision and purpose of the refuge and outline approaches for managing refuge resources. The goals for the refuges are detailed below.

Bamforth NWR, Hutton Lake NWR, and Mortenson Lake NWR

The following goals apply to all three Laramie Plains refuges.

Research and Science Goal: Conduct natural resource management using sound science and applied research to advance the understanding of natural resource function.

Partnerships Goal: Work with partners to determine the wildlife and habitat resources on the refuges, to maximize wildlife habitat protection, and to increase understanding of wildlife needs, as well as the benefits wildlife offer to individuals and communities, on and off the refuges.

Cultural Resources Goal: Identify and protect cultural resources on the refuge.

Refuge Operations Goal: Secure and demonstrate the effective use of funding, staffing, and partnerships for the benefit of all resources in support of the refuges and the Refuge System.

Bamforth NWR

The following refuge-specific goal was identified for Bamforth NWR.

Natural Resources Goal: Conduct baseline surveys to identify refuge resources and the role they serve in the Laramie Basin ecosystem and the Refuge System.

Hutton Lake NWR

The following refuge-specific goals were identified for Hutton Lake NWR.

Wetlands Goal: Manage refuge impoundments and other wetlands to create a diverse habitat for wetland-dependent wildlife.

Uplands Goal: Gather baseline biological information to guide evaluation and management of shrub- and grass-dominated uplands for benefit to migratory birds (willet, horned lark), white-tailed prairie dogs, pronghorn, and other wildlife.

Visitor Services Goal: Provide wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities to a diverse audience when the administration of these programs does not adversely affect habitat management objectives.

Mortenson Lake NWR

The following refuge-specific goals were identified for Mortenson Lake NWR.

Wyoming Toad Goal: In conjunction with the Wyoming Toad Recovery Team, manage refuge lands around Mortenson Lake and other areas, on the refuge, as necessary to protect, create, and manage habitat suitable for Wyoming toad recovery from endangered status.

Wetlands Goal: Following considerations for Wyoming toad needs, manage refuge impoundments and other wetlands to create diverse habitat for wetland-dependent wildlife.

Uplands Goal: Following consideration for Wyoming toad needs, gather baseline biological information to guide evaluation and management of shrub- and grass-dominated uplands for the benefit of migratory birds, white-tailed prairie dogs, pronghorn, and other wildlife.

2.6 PLANNING ISSUES

Several key issues were identified following the analysis of comments collected from refuge staff and the public, as well as a review of the requirements of the Improvement Act and the NEPA. Substantive comments (those that could be addressed within the authority and management capabilities of the Service) were considered during the formulation of the alternatives for future management. These key issues for the Laramie Plains refuges are summarized below.

Bamforth NWR, Hutton Lake NWR, and Mortenson Lake NWR

The following planning issues apply to all three Laramie Plains refuges.

Refuge Uses

Refuge uses (grazing, recreation, transmission lines) need to be evaluated to ensure existing and proposed uses are compatible with the purpose of the refuges and mission of the Refuge System. Refuge uses have not been actively evaluated over time due to minimal staff presence. Through the development of this CCP, refuge uses and management activities will be evaluated to ensure the best, most informed decisions are made for proper management of refuge lands.

Water Resources

Water and water availability are vital in semiarid regions. The limited water rights for these refuges can result in dry spring conditions and poor wildlife

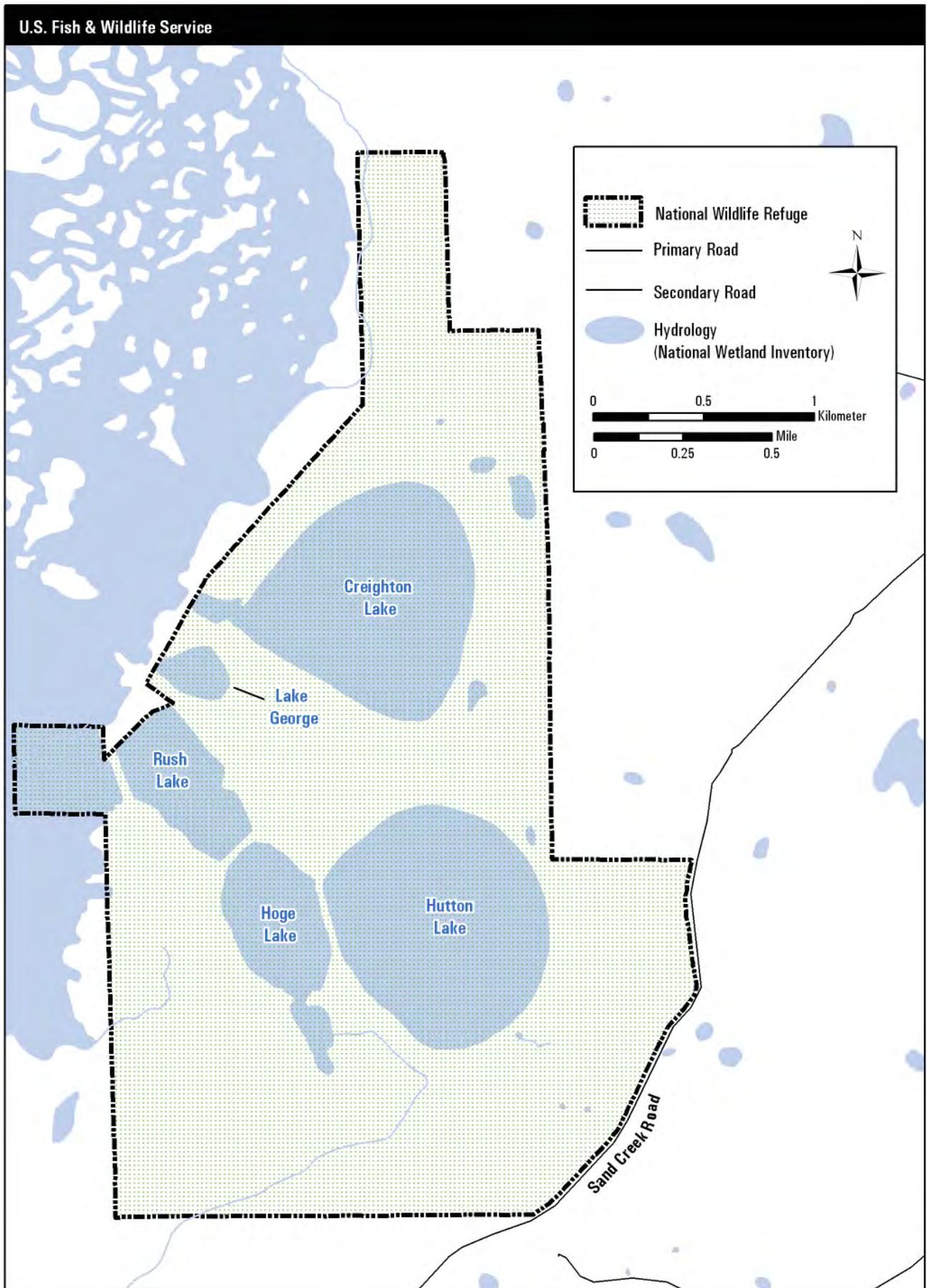


Figure 6. Base map of Hutton Lake NWR, Wyoming.

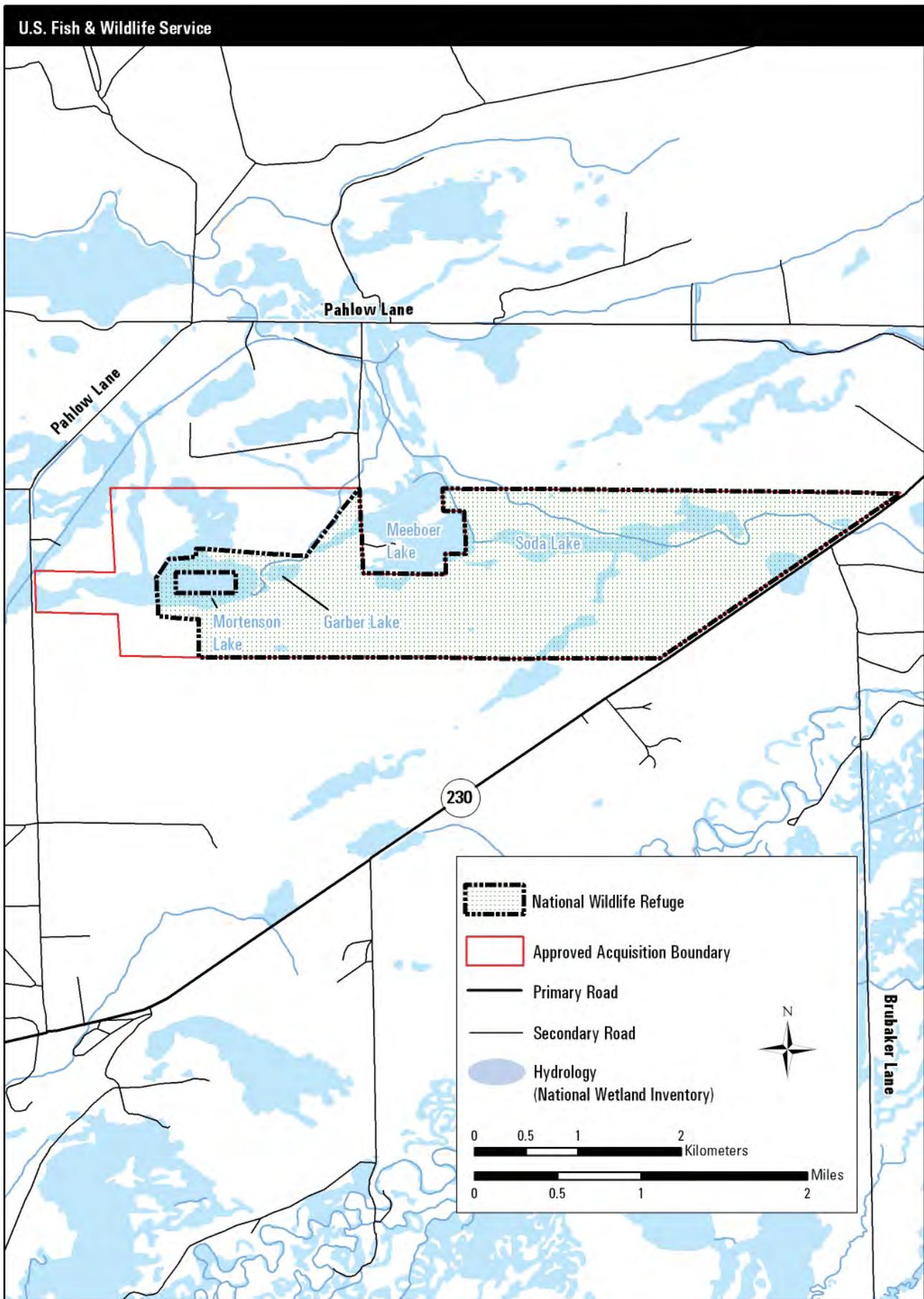


Figure 7. Base map of Mortenson Lake NWR, Wyoming.

habitat for trust species. Acquiring additional water rights would enable the Service to consistently provide high-quality spring migration and nesting habitat for trust species. The Service needs to research the availability and feasibility of obtaining additional water rights for the refuges.

Invasive Species

Invasive species are a threat to quality habitat. If not contained early, they can also drain resources. Though the refuges do not have significant invasive species issues, vigilance is required. Tamarisk has been identified and managed at Hutton Lake NWR, but an increase in monitoring, management, and control of it and other invasive species is needed.

Research and Science

The Service needs to obtain good baseline biological information for the refuges. Monitoring programs need to be implemented for species that use the refuges. The University of Wyoming, located within 15 miles of the refuges, could be a partner in gathering quality research data on the refuges.

Land Protection

Areas of concern center on the small size of the individual refuges and a lack of buffer zones. Each refuge is less than 2,000 acres in size, and the refuges' proximity to Laramie and urban growth in the area pose a potential threat. (Mortenson Lake NWR may already be affected by septic systems from a home site overlooking the lake.) Refuge advocates want to increase protections through conservation easements or expansions through willing seller acquisitions to ensure the refuges are large enough to preserve wildlife qualities.

Partnerships

Cooperation with other agencies is needed to address issues of common concern. Opportunities for the public to assist in protection and management of the refuges should be identified and provided.

Staffing

The refuges should be actively managed by Service staff stationed in Wyoming. This issue was raised frequently in public meetings. The managing staff is headquartered at Arapaho NWR in Walden, Colorado, an hour's drive south of Laramie. The remote location and the small number of staff assigned to Arapaho NWR prevent active, consistent oversight of the Laramie Plains refuges.

Bamforth NWR

The following planning issue applies only to Bamforth NWR.

Lack of Information

Bamforth NWR has not been actively managed since its establishment in 1932. The refuge is not properly posted, fenced, or signed to indicate its status as a national wildlife refuge. The planning team struggled with a lack of information about the refuge's wildlife and habitat resources. The planning team discussed whether Bamforth NWR should maintain its national wildlife refuge status. The Service's region 6 divestiture model was used to evaluate the refuge. The evaluation indicated the refuge should remain in the Refuge System, mainly due to insufficient information. The Service needs to obtain a good understanding of the refuge resources before advocating divestiture or promoting public use. With the possibility of recommending divestiture of the refuge in the future, it would not be prudent to fund the development of the infrastructure needed to provide public use opportunities at this time. This plan strives to identify the resources and potential of the refuge to determine its appropriate role in the Refuge System.

Hutton Lake NWR

The following planning issue applies only to Hutton Lake NWR.

Public Use

The refuge is currently closed to public use and is not signed or fenced to mark the refuge boundaries. Until baseline biological information has been obtained to determine the role the refuge plays in the Refuge System, and whether divestiture of the refuge is warranted, it would not be prudent to invest resources in the development of infrastructure to safely support public use programs.

Mortenson Lake NWR

The following planning issue applies only to Mortenson Lake NWR.

Endangered Species

Mortenson Lake NWR was established for the endangered Wyoming toad. Although the refuge staff participates on the Wyoming Toad Recovery Team, not having a staff member specifically assigned to the refuges has hindered management decisions and active, planned oversight of these lands for the Wyoming toad.

