

Planning Update

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex Issue 2, April 2012



This planning update describes the progress the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has made in the development of a comprehensive conservation plan for the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex (refuge complex), Montana:

- Summarizes the different alternatives the Service considered for achieving the draft vision and goals for the refuge complex.
- Provides information about how to comment on the draft plan.

The Refuge Complex

The refuge complex encompasses 163,304 acres in northwestern and north-central Montana and spans both sides of the Continental Divide. It is a collection of diverse landscapes, from wetlands and mixed-grass prairie in the east to forests, intermountain grasslands, rivers, and lakes in the west. Likewise, animal species that inhabit these lands are diverse and reflect a variety of habitats. Large numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds inhabit wetlands in the east, while large predators such as grizzly bears make their home in the mountains and forests to the west.

The refuge complex oversees management of 2 national wildlife refuges, 1 wetland management district containing 22 waterfowl production areas, 3 conservation areas, and numerous easements within 12 counties: Cascade, Chouteau, Glacier, Hill, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Liberty, Missoula, Pondera, Powell, Teton, and Toole.

Since the last planning update in August, 2008, Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge and the Northwest Montana Flathead County Wetland Management District have been removed from this refuge complex and are not part of this comprehensive conservation plan.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. This legislation provided clear guidance for the management of the Refuge System. To implement this guidance, the act also requires that, by 2012, the Service will have developed a comprehensive conservation plan for each unit in the Refuge System.

Consequently, the Service has been preparing a comprehensive conservation plan and associated environmental assessment for the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The plan will guide management for all refuge programs and be updated every 15 years.

Draft Vision Statement

The spirit of the American West resonates on both sides of the Continental Divide in the prairies, mountains, rivers, and wetlands of the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Here, migratory birds fill the sky, bull trout thrive, and grizzlies and wolves still roam. Visitors experience many of the same landscapes that Lewis and Clark explored on their journey through the "Crown of the Continent." Conservation efforts in the refuge complex protect intact landscapes, manage productive habitats, and offer people opportunities to connect with wildlife in solitude under Montana's big sky. These efforts rely on innovative public and private partnerships, are supported by the region's people, and harmonize with the historic rural economy.



Swan River National Wildlife Refuge.

Draft Goals

The Service developed the following goals to describe management focus needed to achieve the draft vision.

Landscape Conservation. Actively pursue and continue to foster relationships within the Service, other agencies, organizations, and private partners to protect, preserve, manage, and restore the functionality of the diverse ecosystems within the working landscape of the refuge complex.

Habitat. Actively conserve, restore, and manage upland and wetland habitats across the northern prairies and intermountain valleys of the refuge complex, through management strategies that perpetuate the integrity of ecological communities.



Mark Wilson / USFWS

Piping plover is a shorebird that nests on open shorelines at the refuge complex.

Wildlife. Support diverse and sustainable continental, regional, and local populations of migratory birds, native fish, species of concern, and other indigenous wildlife of the northern prairies and intermountain valleys of northern Montana.

Cultural Resources. Identify and evaluate the cultural resources of the refuge complex and protect those that are determined to be significant.

Visitor Services. Provide opportunities to enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation on Service-owned lands and increase knowledge and appreciation for the refuge complex's ecological communities and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Administration. Provide facilities, strategically allocate staff, and effectively use and develop funding sources, partnerships, and volunteer

opportunities to maintain the long-term integrity of habitats and wildlife resources of the refuge complex.

Visitor and Employee Safety and Resource Protection. Provide for the safety, security, and protection of visitors, employees, natural and cultural resources, and facilities throughout the refuge complex.

Alternatives

The Service completed two separate analyses for the draft plan:

1. Overall management of the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex
2. Management to address the declining condition of wetland habitats at Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

For each analysis one alternative was selected as the proposed action. After public review and comment, these draft proposed actions will be presented to the Regional Director of the Service's Mountain-Prairie Region, who will make the final determination to accept them or to request further analysis. The following sections summarize the two analyses. More detailed descriptions and consequences are in the draft plan and environmental assessment.

1. Overall Refuge Complex Management

Alternative A (Current Management—No Action). This alternative represents the current management of the refuge complex—a baseline against which to compare the other alternatives. Programs would follow the same direction, emphasis, and intensity as they do now and with the same budget and staff levels. Current habitat and wildlife practices benefitting migratory species and other wildlife would not be changed or expanded. The Service would not develop any new management, visitor services, or education programs.

Alternative B. The Service would take a more active management role in maintaining the resiliency and sustainability of habitats throughout the refuge complex by emulating natural processes, using techniques

that replicate historical disturbance factors.

Key actions would include baseline monitoring of habitat conditions, preservation of large blocks of land that have functioning natural processes, reducing the carbon footprint of facilities, and addressing climate change stressors through management that emulates natural processes and increased monitoring feedback.

High priority would be placed on the preservation and management of native grasslands, using easements to protect native grasslands from conversion. Vegetation would be managed with prescribed fire, grazing, haying, and herbicides.

Migratory bird populations would be supported through effective habitat management and participation in annual population and landscape-level surveys. Seasonal closures would be implemented on fee-title lands to reduce disturbance to migratory birds during nesting season.

Hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation programs would be maintained and enhanced. Opportunities to increase hunting at Benton Lake and Swan River refuges would be explored.

Alternative C (Proposed Action). The Service would focus on maintaining and restoring ecological processes in order to increase self-sustaining systems. Whenever possible, habitat conditions would be allowed fluctuate with climatically driven wet and dry cycles, which are essential for long-term productivity.

Key actions of alternative C include preserving large blocks of land that have functioning natural processes; reducing the carbon footprint of facilities; installing more weather stations to monitor climate change; using scaled-downed climate change models to a greater extent; actively participating in data acquisition, monitoring, and analysis related to climate change; and installing an additional photovoltaic system to support headquarters office expansion.

Conservation of intact landscapes would be a high priority and opportunities for cooperative landscape-level monitoring of conservation areas would be pursued. Degraded tame grass stands would be planted back to

native species, and all nonnative tree plantings would be removed.

Migratory bird populations would be supported through effective habitat management, with an increase in monitoring and the use of indicator species to provide feedback for evaluating the success of management actions to help achieve national and State migratory bird goals.

Increased hunting opportunities at Benton Lake and Swan River refuges would be explored, along with adding walking tours throughout the refuge complex. Interpretive panels, brochures, tearsheets, Web sites, and maps would be updated as money allows, and environmental education would be increased to enhance public understanding of restoration and landscape-scale conservation efforts.

2. Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge

One of the most significant issues identified for the refuge complex during the planning process, by both the public and the planning team, was the declining condition of the Benton Lake Refuge wetlands.

A separate analysis for Benton Lake Refuge resulted in five alternatives: Alternative A1 (Current Management–No Action), Alternative B1, Alternative B2, Alternative C1 (Proposed Action), and Alternative C2.

After more than two years of analysis, the Service proposes alternative C1 as the best option for meeting wetland objectives for Benton Lake Refuge. This decision was based on a number of factors including the effectiveness of treatment, environmental and socioeconomic consequences,

and cost. The following summarizes the proposed action; the environmental assessment describes all five alternatives.

Alternative C1 (Proposed Action). Protection of native grasslands through easement programs and management of native fee-title tracts would continue to be the highest priority throughout the refuge complex and on the refuge. Up to 15.5 miles of nonnative tree plantings would be removed. Degraded tame grass stands would be planted back to native grass species. Partnerships in the Lake Creek watershed would be expanded. Work with watershed groups, non-governmental organizations, other Federal programs and local landowners to reduce contaminants in natural runoff and pumped water entering the refuge would be increased.

Benton Lake would become a seasonally flooded wetland dependent entirely upon natural precipitation and runoff. Pumping would no longer continue except to prevent loss of the refuge's Muddy Creek water rights, or to employ adaptive management because of new information or a change in conditions. Units 1 and 2 would be restored to wet meadow wetlands, with water entering the refuge through the old Lake Creek channel and natural diffuse runoff. The pumphouse, equipment, and conduit between the pump station and the refuge would be maintained. Monitoring would track long-term trends in wetland cycles, health, and wildlife use. Monitoring would be especially important for restoration to see if systems are recovering.

In years with limited precipitation and runoff, there would be no

waterfowl-hunting opportunities since there would be limited or no water in the fall. These dry years would provide increased upland game-hunting opportunities with the potential for the refuge hunting area to be expanded for upland game. Upland game hunting would be enhanced by expanding the closure from November 30 to close of the State season (usually January 1).

Through partnership with the Great Falls Public Schools, all third graders would continue to visit the refuge. As time allows, the refuge would also continue to collaborate with other school groups to provide tours, teach science, and work together on monitoring projects. Greater emphasis would occur with interpretive panels and maps to explain the purpose and importance of emulating natural processes for the health of ecological systems and changes to public use to accommodate rotating closed areas due to changes in wetland and water management.

Next Steps

- A 45-day public review of the draft plan and environmental assessment will commence and include public meetings.
- The Service will revise the draft plan as needed based on the public comments, and the Regional Director will select a preferred alternative for each of the two analyses, which will guide development of the final plan.
- A “notice of availability” published in the Federal Register will let the public know that the Service has completed and approved the final plan. The Service will make the final plan available online and provide hard copies upon request.
- The Service will begin implementation of the approved, final plan.

Contact Information

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Sharp-tailed grouse.

Draft Plan Available for Public Review

The Service has completed a draft plan and environmental assessment for public review. The plan is based on a draft vision statement, which is supported by seven goals.

How to Request a Draft Plan

You may view the draft plan online: www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/forms/bnl_form_mailing.php, or you may request a hard copy of the draft plan from the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Telephone: 406/727 7400, Email: bentonlake@fws.gov or from the planning team leader at the contact information above.

How to Provide Comments

The Service invites you to share your comments about the environmental assessment and proposed actions and the draft plan. **To be considered, all written comments must be emailed or postmarked by May 18, 2012.** You can use the comment form under

“Public involvement” on the project Web page. In addition, we will accept emails, faxes, and letters.

- Comment form: www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/forms/bnl_form_comments_.php
- Email: bentonlake@fws.gov
- Fax: 303/236 4378 “Attn: Toni Griffin, Team Leader”
- Postal mail:
Toni Griffin,
Planning Team Leader
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
P.O. Box 25486
Denver, CO 80225-0486

Public Meetings

You may also wish to participate in one or more of our public meetings. There will be a short presentation on the draft plan, and then we will record any comments you would like to provide. For directions please call 406/727 7400.

Tuesday, April 17
5 to 7 p.m.
Holiday Inn
404 10th Ave South, Trigg Room
Great Falls, MT 59405

Wednesday, April 18
5 to 7 p.m.
The Pavilion at Choteau City Park
204 1st Street NE
Choteau, MT 59422

Thursday, April 19
5 to 7 p.m.
The Stray Bullet
403 Main Street
Ovando, MT 59854

Thursday, April 19
5 to 7 p.m.
Swan Valley Center
Hwy 83 Milepost 42
Condon, MT 59826

*Front photograph: Rocky Mountain
Front Conservation Area.
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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED