U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge

Record of Decision

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National Wildlife Refuge

Record of Decision

Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan

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Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge
Rocky Mountain Arsenal – Building 121
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Introduction

This Record of Decision (ROD) for the Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge provides the basis for a decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) on the proposed management of the future Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The CCP has been prepared along with an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and Service planning policies. The Service proposes to adopt and implement a CCP that provides Refuge management direction for the first 15 years following the establishment of the Refuge. The CCP addresses the issues identified during the public process, and is consistent with Service policies, the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge Act of 2001 (Refuge Act), and sound wildlife and habitat management principles. Significant issues addressed in the Final CCP/EIS include: vegetation management, wildlife management, public use, cultural resources, property, infrastructure, and Refuge operations.

Background

The Rocky Flats site is located at the intersection of Jefferson, Boulder and Broomfield counties, along the Front Range of Colorado. The Rocky Flats site is a 6,240-acre former nuclear defense facility operated by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). All weapons manufacturing was performed in a 600-acre area in the middle of the site known as the Industrial Area. The Rocky Flats site is currently managed by the DOE according to existing management plans and policies. A 1,800-acre area in the northern half of the site is designated as the Rock Creek Reserve, and is managed in accordance with the 2001 Rock Creek Reserve Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan.

In 1992, the mission of the Rocky Flats site changed from weapons production to environmental cleanup and closure. The DOE is completing the cleanup in accordance with the Rocky Flats Cleanup Agreement under oversight by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE).

Under the Refuge Act, most of the 6,240-acre Rocky Flats site will become the Refuge following certification from the EPA that cleanup and closure have been completed. An area consisting of about 1,500 acres in the center of the site will likely be retained by DOE for long-term cleanup and monitoring. When portions of the site become a Refuge, the Service will assume management responsibility for those areas. Five sequential steps must be completed before Rocky Flats becomes a Refuge. These steps are:

1. Service completes final CCP/EIS and issues a Record of Decision
2. DOE completes site cleanup except for operations and management of the remedy
3. EPA certifies completion of the cleanup
4. DOE transfers land to Department of the Interior
5. Department of the Interior establishes the Refuge and Service begins management and implementation of the CCP

The Refuge Act requires that the DOE retain jurisdiction, authority and control over portions of the Rocky Flats site necessary for cleanup response actions. DOE anticipates that it will need to retain land in and around the current Industrial Area to maintain institutional controls and protect cleanup and monitoring systems. Such lands are referred to as the DOE retained area.

Management alternatives for the DOE-retained lands were not considered in the CCP because the lands will not be part of the Refuge and the Service will not have authority to decide how those lands should be managed. The Service is recommending a fence be built around the retained area to distinguish Refuge lands from lands under DOE jurisdiction. Such a fence will not adversely affect the movement of wildlife across the site, and will not be visually obtrusive. The DOE does not anticipate transferring any lands that would require additional safety requirements for either the Refuge worker or visitor.

Refuge Significance

In the Refuge Act, Congress found that the Rocky Flats site had several significant qualities:

- The majority of the Rocky Flats site has generally remained undisturbed since its acquisition by the federal government.
- The State of Colorado is experiencing increasing growth and development, especially in the metropolitan Denver Front Range area in the vicinity of the Rocky Flats site. That growth and development reduces the amount of open space and thereby diminishes for many metropolitan Denver communities the vistas of the striking Front Range mountain backdrop.
- The Rocky Flats site provides habitat for many wildlife species, including a number of threatened and endangered species, and is marked by the presence of rare xeric tallgrass prairie plant communities. Establishing the site as a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) will promote the preservation and enhancement of those resources for present and future generations.

Purpose and Direction

As discussed previously, the Rocky Flats NWR was established by the Refuge Act, which identified four purposes of the Rocky Flats NWR:

- Restoring and preserving native ecosystems
- Providing habitat for and population management of native plants and migratory and resident wildlife
- Conserving threatened and endangered species (including species that are candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act)
- Providing opportunities for compatible scientific research

The Refuge Act also provided some direction for managing the Refuge. The Service is to manage the Refuge to ensure that wildlife-dependent public uses and environmental education and interpretation are the priority public uses of the Refuge and to comply with all response actions.

Vision

At the beginning of the planning process, the Service developed a vision for the Refuge. 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 Refuge. 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 Refuge is:

> *Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge is a healthy expanse of grasslands, shrublands and wetlands, including rare xeric tallgrass prairie, where natural processes support a broad range of native wildlife. The Refuge provides striking mountain and prairie views and opportunities to appreciate the Refuge resources in an urbanized*

area through compatible wildlife-dependent public uses and education. Working with others, the Refuge conserves the unique biotic communities and sustains wildlife populations at the interface of mountains and prairies on Colorado's Front Range.

Goals

The Service also developed six goals for Refuge management based on the Refuge Act and information developed during project planning. The goals are:

Goal 1. Wildlife and Habitat Management. Conserve, restore and sustain biological diversity of the native flora and fauna of the mountain/prairie interface with particular consideration given to threatened and endangered species.

Goal 2. Public Use, Education and Interpretation. Provide visitors and students high quality recreational, educational and interpretive opportunities and foster an understanding and appreciation of the Refuge's xeric tallgrass prairie, upland shrub and wetland habitats; native wildlife; the history of the site; and the NWRS.

Goal 3. Safety. Conduct operations and manage public access in accordance with the final Rocky Flats' cleanup decision documents to ensure the safety of the Refuge visitors, staff and neighbors.

Goal 4. Effective and Open Communication. Conduct communication outreach efforts to raise public awareness about the Refuge programs, management decisions and the mission of the Service and the NWRS among visitors, students and nearby residents.

Goal 5. Working with Others. Foster beneficial partnerships with individuals, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and others to promote resource conservation, compatible wildlife-related research, public use, site history and infrastructure.

Goal 6. Refuge Operations. Based on available funds, provide facilities and staff to fulfill the Refuge vision and purpose.

Planning Issues

Several significant issues were identified following the analysis of all comments collected through various public scoping activities. These issues, as well as the many other substantive issues identified during scoping, were considered during the formulation of alternatives for future Refuge management. The significant issues are:

Vegetation Management: Native plant community preservation and restoration, fire management and weed control.

Wildlife Management: Wildlife species protection and management, including strategies to address species reintroduction, population management, migration corridors and coordination with regional wildlife managers.

Public Use: Policies and facility options to address several scenarios, from no access to multiple recreational and educational uses. This includes a range of facility development to accommodate these scenarios.

Cultural Resources: Preservation and recognition of elements related to site history, including Lindsay Ranch structures and Cold War heritage.

Property: Privately owned mineral rights, transportation right of way, and adjacent landowner relationships.

Infrastructure: Facilities, such as roads, fences, signs and water systems that

accommodate Refuge needs and user comfort/safety. Also includes surface water hydrology and maintenance of water quality.

Refuge Operations: Staffing requirements and management strategies to preserve significant resources and coordinate with surrounding communities and landowners.

Future Planning

The CCP will be adjusted to include new and improved information as it becomes available over the course of the CCP's 15-year duration. Implementation of the CCP will be monitored and reviewed regularly during inspections and programmatic evaluations. Budget requests and annual work plans will be tied directly to the CCP. Fifteen years after the Refuge has been established, the CCP will be formally revised, following the process used on this CCP. Any substantive changes to the CCP before the 15-year period will involve a public involvement process.

The CCP describes the desired future conditions of the Refuge and provides long-range guidance and management direction. Chapter 2 describes objectives and strategies that the Service will use to achieve the desired future conditions. During the 15-year planning period, the Service will prepare additional plans, called step-down management plans. A step-down management plan provides specific guidance for the Service to follow to achieve objectives or implement management strategies related to specific management topics such as habitat, fire and public use. Step-down plans will be developed as the need arises. The Service anticipates the following plans will be needed at the Refuge:

- Vegetation and Wildlife Management Plan
- Integrated Pest Management Plan
- Fire Management Plan
- Health and Safety Plan
- Historic Preservation Plan
- Visitor Services Plan - an umbrella document that will include interpretation, environmental education, hunting management and research protocols.

Refuge Resources

The Rocky Flats site is located at the interface of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, where it supports a diverse mosaic of vegetation communities. Many areas of the Rocky Flats site have remained relatively undisturbed for the past 30 to 50 years, allowing them to retain diverse natural habitat and associated wildlife. Some of the significant vegetation communities include the rare xeric tallgrass grassland and the tall upland shrubland communities. The xeric tallgrass grassland community covers over 1,500 acres on the Rocky Flats pediment tops, and is believed to be the largest example of this community remaining in Colorado and perhaps North America. The tall upland shrubland community is primarily found near seeps on north-facing slopes in the Rock Creek drainage. While this community covers less than 1percent of the total area at Rocky Flats, it contains 55 percent of the plant species on the site.

Wildlife communities are supported by a regional network of protected open space that surrounds Rocky Flats on three sides and buffers wildlife habitat from the surrounding urban development. Preble's meadow jumping mouse, a federally listed threatened species, occurs in every major drainage at Rocky Flats, as well as in wetlands and shrubland communities adjacent to the Rock Creek and Woman Creek drainages. A resident herd of about 160 mule deer inhabit the site and elk are occasionally present.

Cultural resource surveys identified and recorded 45 cultural sites or isolated artifacts at Rocky Flats. None of the identified cultural resources are recommended as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The Lindsay Ranch within the Rock Creek drainage provides opportunities to interpret the early history of settlement and ranching on the prairie.

Decision (Alternative B)

The Service selected Alternative B – *Wildlife, Habitat, and Public Use* as described in the Final CCP/EIS. The Service identified Alternative B as the Preferred Alternative in the Final CCP/EIS. The Service believes that Alternative B best satisfies the missions of the Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System, the direction of the Refuge Act, and the long-term needs of the habitats and wildlife at Rocky Flats. Alternative B represents a balance between wildlife and habitat management needs, compatible wildlife-dependent public uses, and budgetary constraints, and will guide Refuge management for the first 15 years after Refuge establishment.

Habitat management efforts will include the use of a variety of tools, including prescribed fire, grazing, and mowing to stimulate and maintain native grassland communities. As part of an integrated pest management plan, these tools will be used along with herbicides, biological controls, and other mechanical controls to reduce the density and spread of noxious weed species. The Service will remove and revegetate 28 miles of unused road, and 13 stream crossings. These efforts will improve habitat conditions for a variety of wildlife species, including the wetland and riparian habitat areas that are important to the Preble's meadow jumping mouse.

The Service will work with the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) to manage wildlife species. Deer and elk populations on the Refuge will be managed through public hunting, culling, and other means. Prairie dog populations will be allowed to expand up to 750 acres in areas outside of recognized Preble's habitat and the xeric tallgrass community. In partnership with the CDOW, the Service will evaluate the suitability for reintroducing native extirpated species, such as the sharp-tailed grouse, to the Refuge.

Public use programs will include environmental education programs for high school and college students, a limited hunting program (two weekends per year) for youth and the disabled, and interpretive programs. Visitor use facilities will include 12.8 miles of multi-use trail, 3.8 miles of hiking-only trail, a visitor contact station, interpretive overlooks, viewing blinds, and associated access and parking facilities. The Service will work closely with surrounding jurisdictions to coordinate natural resource management, public use, and the regional protection of wildlife movement corridors.

Other Alternatives Considered

The Final CCP/EIS evaluated three other alternatives for the management of the Refuge. These alternatives are summarized below, along with an explanation of why the alternative was not selected.

Alternative A: No Action

In the No Action Alternative, the Service would not develop any public use facilities and would not implement any new management, restoration, or education programs at Rocky Flats. In this alternative, the Service would continue to manage the 1,800-acre Rock Creek Reserve in accordance with the 2001 *Rock Creek Reserve Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan*. Management activities within the Rock Creek Reserve would

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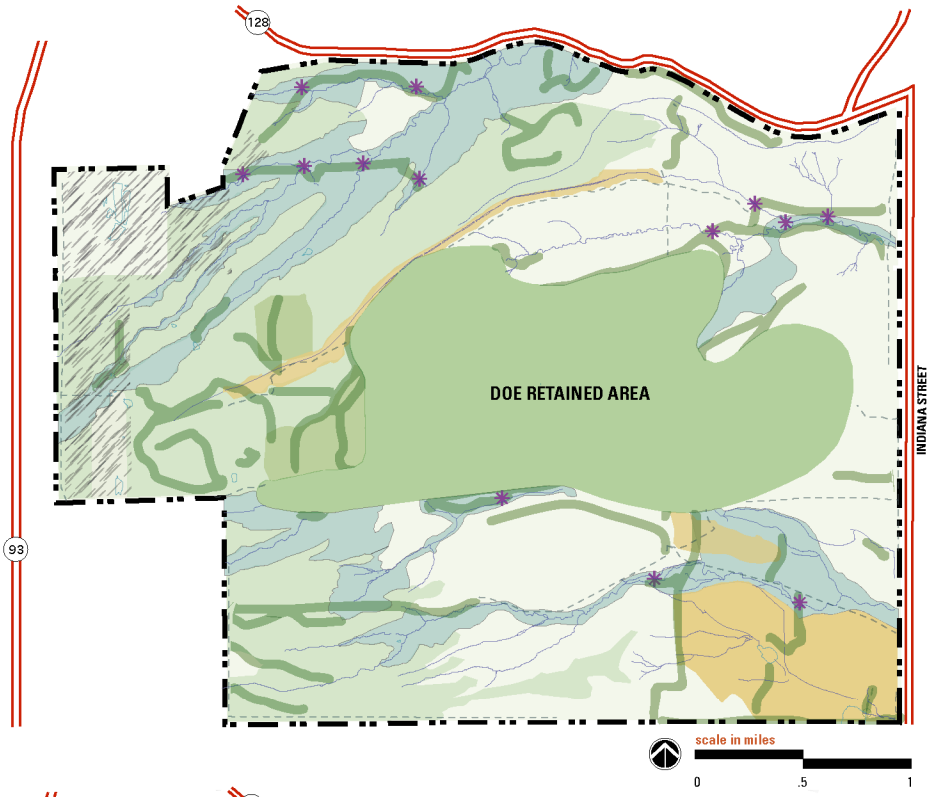
CCP / "Wildlife, Habitat & Public Use"

Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge



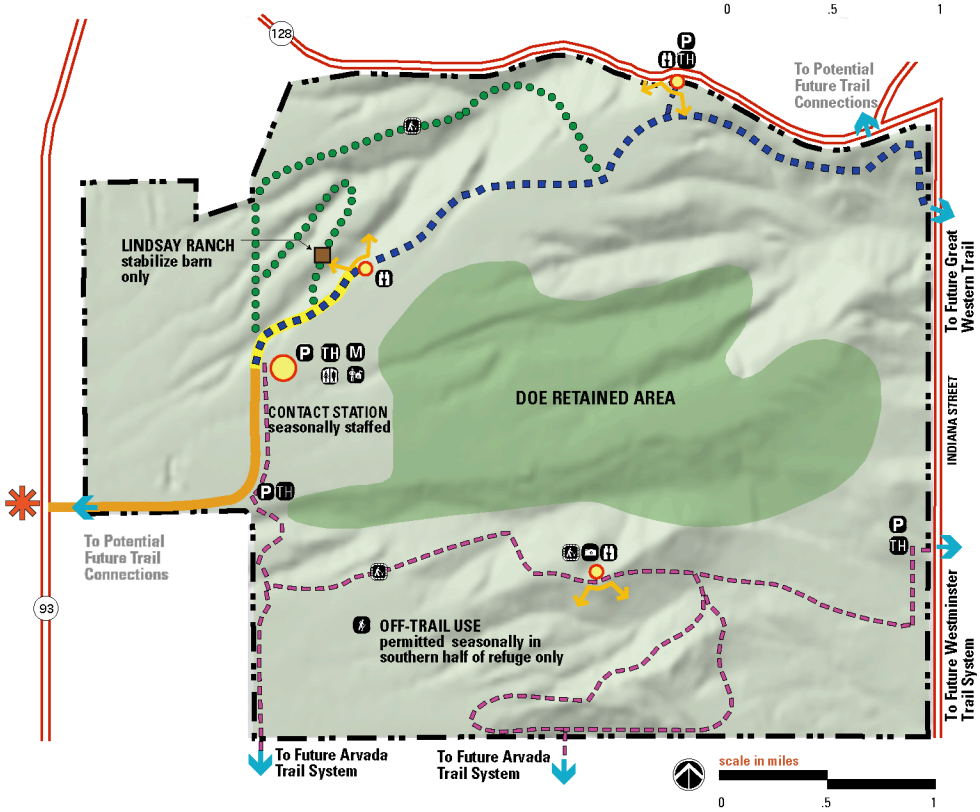
Restoration Map

Resource Management Zones
- Xeric Tallgrass Prairie
- Riparian Corridor and Wetlands
- Mixed Prairie Grasslands

Targeted Restoration Areas
- Removed & Revegetated Road*
- Restored Stream Crossing
- Restored to Xeric Tallgrass
- Disturbed Area

Other Areas
- DOE Retained Area
- Permitted Mining Use
- Unpaved Maintenance Road (retained for administrative, easement & fire access)
- Rocky Flats Site Boundary

**Only primary road corridors are mapped; additional removal and revegetation may occur on secondary roads. Vegetation may cover portions of roads before USFWS begins active restoration.*



Visitor Use Map

Public Uses
- Multiple Use Trail (hiking & biking)
- Multiple Use Trail (equestrian, hiking & biking)
- Pedestrian Trail
- ADA Accessible Trail
- Off Trail Use (seasonally, in southern half of site only)
- Service Refuge Lands
- Area Retained by DOE

Public Use Facilities
- Interpretation & Environmental Education Facility
- Photography Facility
- Observation Facility
- Regional Trail Connection
- Visitor Contact Station
- Developed Area
- Overlook

Other Facilities
- Refuge Entrance
- Maintenance
- Gravel Road
- Trailhead
- Parking *
- Restrooms

**Main parking area by Rock Creek/Lindsay Ranch trailhead will accommodate horse trailers.*

include ongoing resource inventories and monitoring, habitat restoration, weed control and road removal and revegetation. Public use opportunities would be limited to guided tours.

Alternative A was not selected for implementation because it would allow only a limited amount of habitat restoration and could result in long-term impacts to Refuge resources due to erosion, expanded noxious weed infestations, and secondary impacts to wildlife habitat. The very limited public use opportunities offered in Alternative A are not consistent with the Refuge Act and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, which direct the Service to provide wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities whenever those uses are found to be compatible with the purposes of the refuge and the mission of the Refuge System.

Alternative C: Ecological Restoration

Alternative C emphasizes Refuge-wide conservation and restoration of large areas of wildlife habitat. Restoration and management activities would strive to replicate pre-settlement conditions. Restoration efforts would focus on disturbed areas such as road corridors, stream crossings, cultivated fields and developed areas.

Limited public use and minimal facility development would occur in this alternative. Any facilities on the Refuge would be built for specific resource protection and management purposes. A single, 3,700-foot long trail would provide access to the Rock Creek drainage, but access would be limited to guided tours only. Environmental education programs would be limited to local distribution of educational materials about the Refuge and its ecological resources.

In Alternative C, the Service would facilitate increased opportunities for applied research relating to long-term habitat changes and species of special concern. Partnerships would be expanded with governmental agencies, educational institutions and others to assist in wildlife and habitat protection, resource stewardship and the preservation of contiguous lands.

Alternative C was not selected for implementation because it does not provide the level of compatible wildlife-dependent public use opportunities that is desired by many members of the public and some nearby county and city governments. In addition, the estimated expense of additional resource management and monitoring activities is cost prohibitive.

Alternative D: Public Use

In Alternative D, the Service would emphasize wildlife-dependent public uses. Wildlife and habitat management would focus on the restoration of select plant communities and ongoing conservation and management of existing native plant and wildlife species. Certain roads and other disturbed areas not used for trails or public use facilities would be restored with native vegetation.

A broad range of public use opportunities would be provided, including wildlife observation and photography, interpretation, environmental education and a limited hunting program. Access through the Refuge would be provided by a 21-mile trail system that would accommodate hiking, bicycling and equestrian use. Most of the trails would be constructed along existing roads. A visitor center would be constructed at the Refuge. Environmental education efforts would include on- and off-site programs for kindergarten through college age students.

Research opportunities would focus on the integration of public use into the Refuge environment and interactions between

wildlife and visitors. Partnerships would be sought with various public agencies to help sustain Refuge goals and preserve contiguous lands. The Service also would work with local communities and tourism organizations to promote wildlife-dependent public uses on the Refuge.

Alternative D was not selected for implementation because the Service believes that the cost and extent of public use programs and facilities would be unnecessarily large, would preclude some habitat restoration and monitoring efforts, and would result in more extensive environmental impacts.

Public Involvement

Project Scoping

The scoping process began with informal public agency consultations in February 2002. The formal scoping period for the general public began on August 23, 2002, with the publication of a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register (67 FR 54667). The scoping period ended on October 31, 2002. The Notice of Intent notified the public of the Service's intent to begin the CCP/EIS process, set the dates for public scoping meetings, and solicited public comments. The public scoping process included four public scoping meetings held in September 2002 in Broomfield, Arvada, Westminster, and Boulder. Other scoping materials included the distribution of the Planning Update newsletter, a press release sent to 23 local and national media organizations, advertisements in seven newspapers, flyers posted in public buildings, and the posting of project information on the project website (http://rockyflats.fws.gov).

On August 19, 2002, the Service hosted a meeting for representatives from various state and federal agencies interested in the future management of the Rocky Flats site. The following agencies were represented:

- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
- City of Westminster
- Colorado Attorney General's Office
- Colorado Department of Agriculture
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- Colorado Division of Minerals and Geology
- Colorado Division of Wildlife
- Colorado Geological Society
- Colorado Historical Society
- Colorado State Parks
- Denver Regional Council of Governments
- Federal Aviation Administration
- Governor Owens' Office
- Rocky Flats Coalition of Local Governments
- State Land Board
- Senator Allard's Office
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- U.S. Department of Energy
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Urban Drainage and Flood Control District
- Xcel Energy

Six focus group meetings were held on October 28, 29, and 30, 2002. The purpose of the focus groups was to convene a forum to better explore key issues, as well as potential management alternatives and their potential implications. Participants were invited because of their knowledge of a particular subject. Focus groups addressed the following topics: recreation, environmental education, public perception/public information, managing a

NWR in the context of remediation and contamination, trails, vegetation management, and wildlife management.

The Service also contacted representatives from the Arapaho Tribe, Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, Northern Cheyenne Tribe, the Ute Indian Tribe Business Council, Southern Ute Tribe, and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe to solicit their input for the scoping process.

Alternative Workshops

After the significant issues were identified during the scoping period, the Service developed alternatives for the management of the Refuge. In May 2003, the Service held public workshops in Broomfield, Arvada, Westminster, and Boulder to present four preliminary management alternatives. At each workshop, the participants were encouraged to provide comments on the alternatives, and were specifically asked what they liked or disliked about them.

Comments on the Draft EIS

A Notice of Availability for the Draft CCP/EIS was published in the Federal Register on February 19, 2004 (69 FR 7789). During the Draft CCP/EIS comment period that occurred from February 19, 2004 to April 25, 2004, the Service received over 5,000 comments, received through public hearing testimony, letters, and emails. Comments came from 251 individuals and 34 agencies or organizations. The Service also heard from 933 people through form letters and petitions. All substantive issues raised in the comments were addressed in the Final CCP/EIS. Public comments are available for review at the Front Range Community College Library, Rocky Flats Reading Room or at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center on weekends. Responses to comments are included as an appendix to the Final CCP/EIS.

Controversial Issues

While the comments on the Draft CCP/EIS included a variety of topics, several particular controversial issues became apparent during the comment period. Controversial issues were centered on the following topics:

- Contamination and cleanup
- Public use
- Hunting

Contamination and Cleanup – Concerns about existing contamination levels at the site, DOE's cleanup efforts, and the implications of these issues on all other aspects of future Refuge management overshadowed all other issues during the comment period. Particular issues of concern included whether any public use is safe and appropriate, how the Refuge will be demarcated from the DOE retained lands, and whether certain practices such as prescribed fire and hunting will be safe.

These issues are largely outside of the scope of the EIS. The CCP/EIS was written under the premise that the area to become the Refuge will be certified to be safe prior to the establishment of the Refuge and the implementation of the CCP. The EPA and CDPHE have indicated that all of the proposed Refuge activities will be safe for the Refuge worker and visitor. If post-cleanup conditions change this assumption, the cleanup will not be certified and the Refuge will not be established.

In the DEIS, the Service recommended that the demarcation of the DOE retained area be "seamless" with few obvious visual differences between the Refuge and the DOE retained area. The final configuration of the DOE retained area, as well as the nature of any fencing or structures demarcating its boundary within the Refuge will be decided by the DOE, EPA, and

CDPHE. The Service is not the final decision-maker in these matters. Based on public concerns about the demarcation of the DOE retained area, the FEIS was revised to elaborate that the Service believes that a four-strand barbed-wire agricultural fence with signs and permanent obelisks will effectively demarcate the interior property boundary, keep livestock out of the DOE lands, and clarify that the DOE lands are closed to public access. Such a fence will not adversely affect the movement of wildlife across the site, and will not be visually obtrusive.

Public Use – In addition to contamination concerns (discussed above), the primary issues related to public use are whether the environmental impacts of public use/trail facilities are acceptable. During the planning process, the Service planned trail configurations that avoid and minimize impacts to riparian habitat. Existing roads will be re-used to the greatest extent possible, and trails through riparian habitat areas will be subject to seasonal closures. The overall trail density will be less than many of the other open space areas in the region. Of the 16.5 miles of trails that are planned, only 2 percent of the trails will be within riparian habitat, and most of those are stream crossings that follow existing roads. Overall, the proposed public use facilities, including trails, will directly impact less than 1% of the Refuge area, and the anticipated impacts from the use of those facilities will not significantly detract from wildlife and habitat values. As documented by the Compatibility Determinations in Appendix B of the Final CCP/EIS, the Service found the proposed public uses and facilities to be compatible with the mission of the NWRS and the purposes of the Refuge.

Hunting – Some members of the public were opposed to the general concept of hunting on a National Wildlife Refuge, disagreed with public hunting as a management tool, or had concerns about the safety of hunting at Rocky Flats. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 established hunting as a priority public use if it is compatible with the Refuge purposes and is consistent with public safety. The Service believes that a limited, highly managed hunting program will be an appropriate and compatible form of wildlife dependent recreation on the Refuge, and will complement other tools for managing ungulate populations, if necessary. In order to protect the safety of Refuge visitors and the surrounding communities, the Refuge will be closed to other uses on hunting weekends, and will be limited to short-range weapons such as shotgun slugs and archery.

In addition, some members of the public were opposed to hunting on the Refuge because of concerns about the potential uptake of contaminants by wildlife, and the potential health risks that those animals, especially hunted deer, pose to the general public. Tissue samples of deer harvested at Rocky Flats in 2002 were analyzed for contaminants. Radionuclide levels are very low for method detection limits and are well below the risk-based level for consumption of Rocky Flats deer tissue.

Responses to Comments Received on the Final CCP/EIS

The Service received two comments on the Final CCP/EIS, regarding the trail alignment along the southern boundary of the Refuge, and indirect impacts due to development activities near the Refuge.

Trail Alignment – One commentor requested a more extensive trail along the southern boundary of the Refuge. The Service has decided to not make the requested changes to the Final CCP. However, at the time of implementation, the Service will work with adjacent landowners and jurisdictions to coordinate trail

connections between the Refuge and adjacent areas.

Indirect Impacts of Development – One commentor expressed that indirect impacts from proposed development, including management of DOE-retained lands, the potential urban development, and a potential transportation corridor near the Refuge, could have been addressed further. The Service believes that these issues are adequately discussed in the Final CCP/EIS, and will not make changes to the document.

With regard to the management of DOE-retained lands, the Final CCP/EIS notes that these activities have the potential to adversely affect vegetation communities on the Refuge. The Final CCP/EIS also explains that the Service will provide recommendations to DOE on revegetation and resource management, and that the Service does not have decision-making authority on these matters.

The Final CCP/EIS explains that urban development adjacent to the Refuge may adversely affect the Refuge through weed dispersal and impacts to wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors. As new developments are proposed, the Service will work with local jurisdictions during the land use and development planning process to minimize the impact of adjacent urban development on Refuge resources.

As required by the Refuge Act, the Final CCP/EIS addresses and makes recommendations on the land to be made available along Indiana Street for transportation improvements. The Service believes that some transportation improvements in the area surrounding Rocky Flats is a reasonably foreseeable activity, but the specific location of any particular transportation improvement is speculative and is not reasonably foreseeable. In order to meet the requirements of the Refuge Act without speculating on any specific transportation improvement, the Final CCP/EIS includes a section that quantifies resource impacts within three theoretical right-of-way widths along Indiana Street, and outlines potential impacts and mitigation measures that could apply to any transportation improvement near the Refuge.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The environmentally preferable alternative is defined as the "alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's Section 101. Typically, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment. It also means the alternative that best protects, preserves and enhances historic, cultural and natural resources" (*Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning Council of Environmental Quality's National Environmental Policy Act Regulations*, 1981). According to this definition, Alternative C, *Ecological Restoration*, is the environmentally preferable alternative.

Alternative C would emphasize the conservation and restoration of large areas of wildlife habitat, striving to replicate ecological conditions that existed prior to modern use and disturbance of the site. The key components of Alternative C, relative to Alternative B, include more extensive monitoring of Preble's habitat and deer populations, more aggressive weed management, and would include additional staffing with an emphasis on habitat conservation and restoration. Public access would be limited to guided tours, and the Lindsay Ranch structures would be removed to allow the restoration of the site to a pre-settlement condition. The most significant ecological benefits of Alternative C over Alternative B would be the lack of open public access and its potential impacts to wildlife and habitat, and the improved

focus of staffing on habitat restoration and monitoring.

While Alternative C would cause the least damage to the biological and physical environment, removal of the Lindsay Ranch structures would result in some loss of cultural resource values. All of the action alternatives (B, C, and D) would promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's Section 101, and would be preferable to no action. The main distinctions between the action alternatives would be the extent of environmental restoration and monitoring, and the level of public use that would be allowed and facilitated. Most of the habitat restoration and conservation elements of Alternative C are also found in Alternative B. In Alternative B, public access will be allowed and public use facilities will be constructed, but these facilities will have minimal impact on the biological and physical environment at Rocky Flats. Trails and facilities proposed for Alternative B were designed to avoid sensitive habitat areas, and most of trails will be converted from existing roads. (Many of these roads would remain in Alternative C to provide utility and maintenance access.) Trails within or adjacent to sensitive habitat areas are restricted to hiking only, and are subject to seasonal closures. Overall, less than 1 percent of the Refuge area will be directly impacted by visitor use facilities.

Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm

Throughout the planning process, the Service took into account all practicable measures to avoid or minimize environmental impacts that could result from the implementation of Alternative B. These measures include the following:

Public Use Facilities – Most (72 percent) of the trails will be constructed by narrowing the width of existing gravel or dirt roads on the site. All of the trails in the Rock Creek drainage will be restricted to hiking only, and will be subject to seasonal closures. Most of the visitor and maintenance facilities will be located on previously disturbed sites, to the greatest extent possible.

Road Restoration – Over 50 miles of roads currently exist on the portions of Rocky Flats that will become the Refuge. In Alternative B, the Service will remove and revegetate about 28 miles of roads. Thirteen stream crossings will be removed and restored with native riparian vegetation. The remainder of the existing roads will be used for trails and/or access roads. Where necessary, stream crossings to be re-used will be upgraded to reduce potential impacts on sensitive wildlife species such as the Preble's meadow jumping mouse.

Habitat Management – Sensitive habitat areas including the xeric tallgrass prairie, tall upland shrubland, and riparian habitat that support the Preble's meadow jumping mouse will be monitored by Service staff every 2 to 3 years to document the effectiveness of weed control and habitat restoration efforts, and to asses the impacts of disturbance.

Weed Management – An integrated pest management plan will be developed and implemented to control the spread of noxious weeds on the Refuge. The CCP includes a full suite of weed management and restoration tools to ensure that the most effective and efficient methods can be used to control weeds and restore degraded habitat.

Deer and Elk Management – In cooperation with the CDOW, the Service will establish population targets and use public hunting, culling, or other means to achieve those targets. Population management will reduce the potential for

impacts to sensitive habitat areas from overbrowsing or overgrazing and assist in ensuring the health and well being of ungulate populations on the Refuge.

Species Reintroduction – The Service will work with the CDOW to evaluate the suitability of reintroducing the extirpated sharp-tailed grouse to the Refuge, and will continue to monitor native fish that have recently been introduced to Rock Creek.

Conservation – The Service will work with other nearby jurisdictions and natural resource management agencies to coordinate resource management activities and to protect wildlife movement corridors surrounding the Refuge.

Finding and Basis for Decision

The Service has considered the environmental and relevant concerns presented by agencies, organizations and individuals on the proposed action to develop and implement a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge. Alternative B was selected for implementation because it achieves a reasonable balance between wildlife and habitat conservation and compatible wildlife-dependent public use. The Service believes that Alternative B is most consistent with the intent of the Refuge Act, the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1977, and Service planning policies, and is the best way to achieve the vision and goals for the Refuge. While Alternative C provides a higher level of habitat restoration and monitoring and Alternative D provides more extensive public use facilities and programs, Alternative B best balances habitat protection and public use while limiting implementation costs.

All public and agency comments received during the environmental process were reviewed. Most of the issues and comments raised by the public and other stakeholders have been addressed in the Final EIS. Issues related to cleanup and contamination, will be addressed by other agencies prior to Refuge establishment and CCP implementation. Comments and responses on the Final CCP/EIS are presented in Appendix H of the Final CCP/EIS. Based on the above information, the Service has selected Alternative B for implementation.

Ralph Morgenweck

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Regional Director, Region 6
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Lakewood, Colorado

2/16/05
Date

For further information contact the Refuge Manager, Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Building 121, Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, Commerce City, CO 80022. Copies of the Final CCP/EIS and this ROD may be obtained from the above address or through the refuge website at http://rockyflats.fws.gov.

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Comprehensive Conservation Plan
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For Refuge Information
1 800/344 WILD

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