

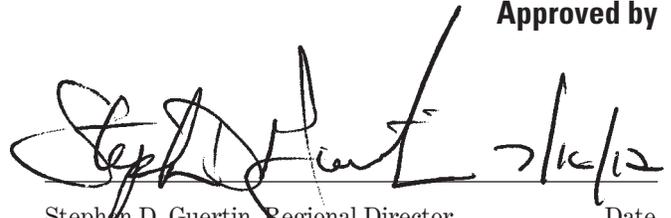
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

*Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge
UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge*

Montana

July 2012

Approved by



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UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge*

Submitted by



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Contents

<i>Summary</i>	XI
<i>Abbreviations</i>	XVII
CHAPTER 1—Introduction	1
1.1 Purpose and Need for Action	2
1.2 The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Refuge System	2
<i>U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service</i>	5
<i>National Wildlife Refuge System</i>	5
1.3 National and Regional Mandates	8
1.4 Refuge Contributions to National and Regional Plans	8
<i>Fulfilling the Promise</i>	8
<i>Bird Conservation</i>	8
<i>Recovery Plans for Threatened and Endangered Species</i>	10
<i>State Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy</i>	10
1.5 Strategic Habitat Conservation	10
<i>Climate Change</i>	11
1.6 Planning Process	12
<i>Draft CCP and EIS</i>	14
<i>Final CCP and EIS</i>	14
<i>Record of Decision</i>	14
1.7 Public Involvement	14
<i>Cooperating Agencies</i>	15
<i>Tribal Coordination</i>	15
<i>Involvement of Interested Groups and the Public</i>	15
1.8 Significant Issues Addressed	15
<i>Habitat and Wildlife</i>	15
<i>Water Resources</i>	16
<i>Public Use and Access</i>	16
<i>Wilderness</i>	16
<i>Socioeconomics</i>	16
<i>Partnerships and Collaboration</i>	17
<i>Cultural Values, Traditions, and Resources</i>	17
1.9 Issues Not Addressed	17
<i>Enhancement Act</i>	17
<i>Exercise of Private Property Rights for Mineral Extraction</i>	17
<i>Fort Peck Lake Levels</i>	18
<i>Livestock Grazing Fees, Transfer of Grazing Permits, and Animal-Unit Months</i>	18
<i>Refuge Revenue-Sharing Payments and Payments in Lieu of Taxes</i>	18
<i>Roads under Revised Statute 2477 and Petitioned Roads</i>	18
<i>Federal Reserved Water Rights</i>	19
<i>Military Overflights</i>	19
CHAPTER 2—Refuge History and Vision	21
2.1 Establishment, Acquisition, and Management History	21
<i>Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge</i>	22
<i>UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge</i>	24
<i>Overall Management History</i>	29
2.2 Special Values	30

2.3 Vision	31
2.4 Goals	31
<i>Goal for Habitat and Wildlife Management</i>	32
<i>Goal for Threatened and Endangered Species and Species of Concern</i>	32
<i>Goal for Research and Science</i>	32
<i>Goal for Fire Management</i>	32
<i>Goal for Public Use and Education</i>	32
<i>Goal for Wilderness</i>	32
<i>Goal for Cultural and Paleontological Resources</i>	32
<i>Goal for Refuge Operations and Partnerships</i>	32
CHAPTER 3—Refuge Resources and Description	33
3.1 Physical Environment	33
<i>Climate</i>	33
<i>Air Quality</i>	34
<i>Visual Resources</i>	35
<i>Soundscapes</i>	45
<i>Land Features, Soils, and Geology</i>	46
<i>Water Resources</i>	47
3.2 Biological Resources	51
<i>Disturbance Factors Affecting Major Ecological Processes</i>	52
<i>Uplands</i>	61
<i>River Bottoms</i>	70
<i>Riparian Areas and Wetlands</i>	71
<i>Shoreline</i>	75
<i>Invasive Species</i>	77
<i>Birds</i>	78
<i>Threatened and Endangered Species and Species of Concern</i>	84
<i>Furbearers and Small Predators</i>	93
<i>American Bison</i>	93
<i>Northern Gray Wolf</i>	93
<i>Big Game</i>	94
<i>Other Wildlife</i>	100
3.3 Special Management Areas	102
<i>Wilderness</i>	103
<i>Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail</i>	103
<i>Hell Creek and Bug Creek National Natural Landmarks</i>	103
<i>Research Natural Areas</i>	103
<i>Upper Missouri Breaks Wild and Scenic River</i>	104
<i>Missouri Breaks Back Country Byway</i>	104
<i>Lands Where USACE has Primary Jurisdiction</i>	104
<i>Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument</i>	104
3.4 Visitor Services	104
<i>Hunting</i>	105
<i>Fishing</i>	106
<i>Wildlife Observation and Photography</i>	107
<i>Interpretation</i>	107
<i>Environmental Education</i>	108
<i>Outreach</i>	108
<i>Access</i>	108
<i>Recreation Sites</i>	110
<i>Commercial Recreation</i>	111
<i>Refuge Headquarters and Field Stations</i>	111
3.5 Human History and Cultural Resources	111
<i>Prehistoric History</i>	111
<i>Historical Period</i>	112

<i>Known Cultural Resources</i>	116
<i>Refuge Resources Important to Tribes</i>	117
3.6 Paleontological Resources	117
3.7 Socioeconomics	118
<i>Regional Economic Setting</i>	118
<i>Population and Demographics</i>	118
<i>Employment and Income</i>	120
<i>Key Refuge Activities that Affect the Local Economy</i>	123
<i>Land Use and Ownership Changes Surrounding the Refuge</i>	129
<i>Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs</i>	130
CHAPTER 4—Management Direction	133
4.1 Management Overview	133
<i>Ecological Processes Emphasis</i>	133
<i>Legal Compliance and Resource Protection</i>	134
<i>Introduction to the Goals, Objectives, and Strategies</i>	134
4.2 Goal for Habitat and Wildlife Management	139
HABITAT MANAGEMENT	141
<i>Upland Objectives</i>	141
<i>River Bottom Objectives</i>	145
<i>Riparian Area and Wetland Objectives</i>	147
<i>Shoreline Objectives</i>	149
<i>Invasive Species Objectives</i>	150
<i>Climate Change Objectives</i>	152
WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT	156
<i>Bird Objectives</i>	156
<i>Furbearer and Small Predator Objectives</i>	163
<i>American Bison Restoration Objectives</i>	164
<i>Northern Gray Wolf Objective</i>	165
<i>Big Game Objectives</i>	166
<i>Other Wildlife Objective</i>	168
4.3 Goal for Threatened and Endangered Species and Species of Concern	170
4.4 Goal for Research and Science	176
4.5 Goal for Fire Management	177
<i>Prescribed Fire Objectives</i>	177
<i>Wildfire Objectives</i>	179
4.6 Goal for Public Use and Education	182
<i>Hunting Objectives</i>	182
<i>Fishing Objectives</i>	185
<i>Wildlife Observation, Photography, and Interpretation Objectives</i>	187
<i>Environmental Education Objective</i>	189
<i>Outreach Objectives</i>	191
<i>Access Objectives</i>	191
<i>Recreation Site Objective</i>	194
<i>Commercial Recreation Objective</i>	194
4.7 Goal for Wilderness	196
4.8 Goal for Cultural and Paleontological Resources	197
<i>Cultural Resource Objectives</i>	197
<i>Paleontological Resource Objectives</i>	198
4.9 Goal for Refuge Operations and Partnerships	200
<i>Refuge Operations Objectives</i>	200
<i>Partnership Objectives</i>	201

4.10 Stepdown Management Plans	204
4.11 Monitoring and Evaluation	204
4.12 Plan Amendment and Revision	204
4.13 Funding and Personnel	204
Glossary	207
Appendixes	
Appendix A—Record of Decision	215
Appendix B—List of Preparers and Contributors	225
Appendix C—Public Involvement Summary	229
Appendix D—Compatibility Determinations	239
Appendix E—Key Legislation and Policy	259
Appendix F—Wilderness Review and Summary	263
Appendix G—List of Plant and Animal Species	279
Appendix H—Section 7 Biological Evaluation	301
Bibliography	305

TABLES

1. Planning process summary for the comprehensive conservation plan for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	13
2. History of significant land authorizations for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	22
3. Average daily discharge and peak flows for six U.S. Geological Survey water stations on or near the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	48
4. Historical fire data for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	65
5. Comparison of riparian area health of 82 streams across the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (1995–2009).	76
6. Acreage of treated weeds at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (2008)	77
7. Least tern nest success at Fort Peck Lake, Montana.	86
8. History of stocking pallid sturgeon in the middle Missouri River, Montana (1997–2008).	86
9. Piping plover nest success at Fort Peck Lake, Montana (2004–07).	87
10. Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Park’s elk population objectives, estimates, and needed herd-size reductions for hunting districts covering the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	94
11. Population estimates for the Nation and the counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	119
12. Employment by type for Montana and the counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges.	121
13. Employment by industry for the counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	122
14. Income, earnings, and unemployment for the Nation, Montana, and counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges	123
15. Farm operators whose primary employment is farming in Montana and the counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges	124
16. Animal inventory and animal-unit months (AUMs) of feed needed for the counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	127
17. Total animal-unit months (AUMs) for the counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (2008)	127
18. Seasonal housing in the counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	129
19. Wildlife value orientations and proportions in the western States and Montana	131
20. Focal bird species for uplands at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	159
21. Focal bird species for river bottoms at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	161
22. Focal bird species for riparian areas and wetlands at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	162
23. Stepdown management plans for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	204

24. Cost analysis for implementing the comprehensive conservation plan for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	205
25. Personnel needed to implement the comprehensive conservation plan for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	205

Appendix Tables

A. Timeline for wilderness on the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	263
B. Wilderness inventory for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	268
C. Wilderness study areas recommended in the comprehensive conservation plan for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	276

FIGURES

1. Vicinity map for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	2
2. Map of landownership in and around the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	3
3. Map of the bird conservation regions in North America	9
4. Map of the Plains and Prairie Potholes Geographic Area in North America	11
5. The process for comprehensive conservation planning and environmental analysis	12
6. Topographic base map of the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	26
7. Map of potential visibility of roads at 1 mile along the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	36
8. Map of potential visibility of roads at 3 miles along the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	36
9. Chart of the number of road segments visible across the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges and from proposed wilderness units and wilderness study areas, Montana	37
10. Map of water and geographic features in the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	40
11. Map of habitat units (grazing) in the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	42
12. Map of habitat types for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	54
13. Map of fire frequency for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	56
14. Graph of residual cover after grazing in the East Indian Butte Habitat Unit of the Charles M. Russell Refuge, Montana (1990–2007)	68
15. Bar graph of monitoring results for chokecherry fruit production 4 years after fire at the Charles M. Russell Refuge, Montana.	69
16. Graph of monitoring results for aspen growth at the Charles M. Russell Refuge, Montana (2006–10)	69
17. Bar graph of monitoring results for saltbush growth at the Charles M. Russell Refuge, Montana (2008–10)	70
18. Map of river bottoms in need of restoration at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	71
19. Map of Riparian and Wetland Research Program survey locations at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	74
20. Map of invasive species occurrence at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	79
21. Map of lek locations for sharp-tailed grouse on the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	81
22. Chart of survey results for the listening route for sharp-tailed grouse on the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (1990–2009)	82
23. Graph of data for the black-footed ferret population at the UL Bend Refuge, Montana (1994–2009).	85
24. Map of critical habitat for piping plover at Fort Peck Reservoir, Montana	87
25. Map of the maximum extent of black-tailed prairie dogs at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (1975–2007)	88
26. Map of lek locations for greater sage-grouse on and near the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana.	91
27. Map of leopard frog locations on the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (1996–2009).	92
28. Chart of mule deer densities within six counties covering the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana	95
29. Map of the aerial survey blocks for mule deer and elk at the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (2000–09).	95
30. Chart of the ratios of adult mule deer bucks to does within the six counties covering the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (2000–09).	96

31. Chart of the number of mule deer harvested in hunting districts on and next to the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (1995–2008) 97

32. Map of the aerial bighorn sheep survey at the Charles M. Russell Refuge, Montana (2009) 98

33. Map of areas within 328 yards (300 meters) of escape cover for bighorn sheep at and around the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana 99

34. Map of areas in Montana that are valued by hunters and anglers 105

35. Graph of the total employment index for Montana and the counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges (1975–2006) 122

36. Chart of agriculture employment in the six counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana 124

37. Chart of trends in gross revenues from agriculture in the area surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (1969–2007) 125

38. Chart of the breakdown of gross revenues from agriculture for the six counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (2007) 126

39. Chart of the cattle inventory for the six counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (1950–2009) 126

40. Chart of animal-unit months by agency for the six counties surrounding the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana (2007) 128

41. Map of management direction for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana 136

42. Adaptive management process 204

Appendix Figure

A. Map of designated wilderness, proposed wilderness units (areas), and wilderness study areas for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend Refuges, Montana 265

Summary

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed a comprehensive conservation plan in 2012 to guide management and use of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and the UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge in north-central Montana (these two units are managed cohesively as one refuge).

As part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the refuge is managed for wildlife conservation above all else. In cooperation with partners, the Service will use natural, dynamic, ecological processes and management activities in a balanced, responsible manner to restore and maintain the biological integrity of the refuge. Once natural processes are restored, a more passive approach (less human assistance) will be favored. There will be quality wildlife-dependent public experiences. Economic uses will be limited when they are injurious to ecological processes.

REFUGE OVERVIEW

The refuge was established in 1936 as the Fort Peck Game Range for sustaining large numbers of sharp-tailed grouse, pronghorn, and other wildlife. In 1963, it was designated as the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Range in honor of famous western painter Charlie Russell, and this “range” became a “refuge” in 1976. UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1969 and lies within the boundary of Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge.

Encompassing nearly 1.1 million acres—including Fort Peck Reservoir and UL Bend Refuge—Charles

M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge is one of the largest refuges in the lower 48 States. The refuge extends west about 125 air miles along the Missouri River from Fort Peck Dam to the refuge’s western edge at the boundary of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. A portion of the Missouri River along the refuge’s western boundary is part of Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River. This expansive refuge covers parts of six counties: Fergus, Garfield, McCone, Petroleum, Phillips, and Valley.

Refuge habitat includes native prairie, forested coulees, river bottoms, and badlands. Wildlife is as diverse as the topography and includes elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, sharp-tailed grouse, prairie dogs, and more than 236 species of birds.

UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge contains the 20,819-acre UL Bend Wilderness, and Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge has 15 proposed wilderness units totaling 155,288 acres.

More than 250,000 refuge visitors take part in wildlife-dependent recreational activities every year. In particular, the refuge is renowned for its outstanding hunting opportunities. Other visitors enjoy viewing and photographing wildlife along the refuge’s extensive network of roads. The Fort Peck Interpretive Center showcases an aquarium of native and game fish, other wildlife, and several casts of dinosaur fossils including a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Still other visitors enjoy fishing along the Missouri River or on Fort Peck Reservoir.

VISION

The vision describes the focus of refuge management and portrays a picture of the refuge in 15 years.

Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge’s expansive badlands, cottonwood river bottoms, old-growth forested coulees, sagebrush steppes, and mixed-grass prairies appear out of the sea that is the northern Great Plains.

Encompassing more than a million acres, the refuge affords visitors solitude, serenity, and unique opportunities to experience natural settings and wildlife similar to what Native Americans and, later, Lewis and Clark observed.

The diversity of plant and animal communities found on the refuge stretch from the high prairie through the rugged breaks, along the Missouri River, and across Fort Peck Reservoir. The refuge is an outstanding example of a functioning, resilient, and intact landscape in an ever-changing West.

Working together with our neighbors and partners, the Service employs adaptive management rooted in science to protect and improve the biological integrity, biological diversity, and environmental health of the refuge’s wildlife and habitat resources.

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

The comprehensive conservation plan directs the management of Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge to meet the purposes of the refuges, address issues, and guide management to meet the refuge vision. The plan is a broad umbrella of general concepts and goals, with specific objectives for habitat, wildlife, research, fire, public use, wilderness, cultural and paleontological resources, refuge operations, and partnerships for the next 15 years. As the plan is implemented, the Service will develop stepdown plans with details for carrying out the objectives.

The following goals direct work toward achieving the purposes and vision of the refuge. Each goal is followed by the general approach for managing refuge resources to meet the goal.

GOAL for HABITAT and WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Conserve, restore, and improve the biological integrity, environmental health, and ecological diversity of the refuge's plant and animal communities of the Missouri River Breaks and surrounding prairies to support healthy populations of native plants and wildlife in a changing climate. Working with others, reduce and control the spread of nondesirable, non-native, invasive plant and aquatic species for the benefit of native communities on and off the refuge.

Where feasible, the Service will apply management practices that mimic and restore natural processes on the refuge, managing for a diversity of plant spe-



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Big game management includes objectives for mule deer.

cies and wildlife species in upland and riparian areas. This includes a concerted manipulation of habitats or wildlife populations (using prescribed fire and grazing and hunting) through coordinated objectives. Management will evolve toward more passive approaches, allowing natural processes such as fire, grazing, and flooding to occur with less human aid or money. In collaboration with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and others, the Service will maintain the health and diversity of all species' populations including focal birds and other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, species of concern, game species, and nongame species by restoring and maintaining balanced, self-sustaining populations. This could include manipulating livestock grazing and wildlife numbers, or



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Eight goals guide management of the 1.1 million-acre refuge.

both, if habitat monitoring found that conditions were declining or plant species were being affected by overuse.

During the development of habitat management plans, the Service will cooperate with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks to establish population levels, sex and age composition targets, and harvest strategies that are jointly agreed to and tailored to the varied habitat potential on the refuge.

Integrated pest management will be carried out. Predators will be managed to benefit the ecological integrity of the refuge. Limited hunting for mountain lion or other furbearers or predators will be considered only after monitoring verified that population levels could be sustained with a hunt.

The Service will remove interior fences to facilitate management of environmental processes including patch burning and long-distance movement of animals. Generational transfer of permits will continue; however, the Service will implement prescriptive grazing across most of the refuge (50–75 percent within 6–9 years and continue the progression over 15 years). In sensitive areas like river bottoms, fencing would be used to exclude livestock except at designated water gaps (areas where livestock can access water).

Based on climate change predictions and following Service and departmental policies and initiatives, the Service will identify (1) species of plants that are likely to be first to decline, (2) animals that are associated with these plant species including insects, birds, and mammals, and (3) and species of plants and animals that could increase. Additionally, the Service will design science-based, long-term monitoring protocols to document changes in plant and animal composition or health due to climate change. The Service will coordinate with adjoining agencies and partners to immediately alleviate declines, if needed, using tools such as prescriptive grazing, prescribed fire, or flooding. The Service will do the following:

- maintain the small wind turbine and consider installing solar panels or more small wind turbines for offices and field stations
- continue recycling and provide more recycling bins
- replace vehicles with more fuel-efficient vehicles
- increase energy efficiency and adopt other ways to reduce the carbon footprint such as use of teleconferencing instead of meetings, turning off lights, and turning down heat
- consider what conditions precipitated by climate change the refuge may deal with such as increased drought, longer fire seasons, hotter fires, loss or increase of plant and wildlife species, change in migration patterns, and relocation of species
- study and promote the carbon sequestration benefits of the refuge

GOAL for THREATENED and ENDANGERED SPECIES and SPECIES OF CONCERN

Contribute to the identification, preservation, and recovery of threatened and endangered species and species of concern that occur or have historically occurred in the northern Great Plains.

The Service will protect or enhance populations of threatened and endangered species such as the black-footed ferret, several bird and fish species, and other species of management concern through research, disease management, population augmentation, or habitat manipulation.

The Service will development management plans for the grizzly bear, in accordance with Federal and State regulations and plans, to address potential immigration of this species to the refuge. With approved Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks plans, and in cooperation with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and others, the Service will consider reintroduction of more black-footed ferrets, swift foxes, and bighorn sheep into the landscape. Predators will be managed as an important component of the wildlife community, and predator management by the U.S. Department of Agriculture will be stopped.

Populations of the black-tailed prairie dog will be expanded to maintain or increase the health and diversity of all species' populations where prairie dogs are a critical component.



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Greater sage-grouse is a species of concern on the refuge.

GOAL for RESEARCH and SCIENCE

Advance the understanding of natural resources, ecological processes, and the effectiveness of management actions in a changing climate in the northern Great Plains through compatible scientific investigations, monitoring, and applied research.

Research and monitoring will be designed to understand the interaction between fire, grazing, plant response, wildlife populations, and other ecological

factors. The Service will adopt an active approach to using livestock grazing as a management tool by shifting from traditional annually permitted grazing to a prescriptive grazing regime for enhancement of wildlife habitats. If monitoring reveals that adequate populations of sentinel plant species are not viable, changes in livestock permitting such as reduced animal unit months or retired permits will be initiated.

The Service will cooperate with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Bureau of Land Management; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; conservation organizations; and others to conduct the necessary biological, social, and economic research to determine the feasibility of restoring wild bison on the surrounding landscape.

GOAL for FIRE MANAGEMENT

Manage wildland fire using a management response that promotes fire's natural role in shaping the landscape while protecting values at risk.

The Service will maintain plant diversity and health using fire in combination with wild ungulate herbivory or prescriptive livestock grazing, or both, to ensure the viability of populations of sentinel plants—those plant species that decline first when management practices are injurious—and in concert with other focal bird species or special status wildlife species.

The Service will restore the natural fire regime through an increased use of prescribed fire to increase the viability of fire-dependent plant species. The Service will burn patches of varying size and within the historical fire-return intervals on a rotational basis. This technique will create a mosaic of habitats that (1) restores heterogeneity (more natural diversity in species) within the landscapes, (2) preserves fire refugia and associated plant species, (3) enhances food resources for wildlife, (4) ensures biological diversity and integrity and environmental health, and (5) promotes ecological resilience. Furthermore, some areas could need intensive manipulation with mechanical and hand restoration tools. The Service will minimize the use of fire in other areas to protect species of concern like the greater sage-grouse.

The Service will work with partners to address wildland–urban interface areas at the Pine Recreation Area and other U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recreation areas. In adherence with an approved fire management plan and using historical fire frequency data and current fire conditions, the Service will evaluate each wildfire to determine the management response and whether the wildfire could be used in the patch-burning program or whether the fire should be suppressed.

GOAL for PUBLIC USE and EDUCATION

Provide all visitors quality education, recreation, and outreach opportunities that are appropriate and compatible with the purpose and goals of the refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System while maintaining the remote and primitive experience unique to the refuge.

The Service will cooperate with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to provide hunting experiences that keep game populations at levels that meet State objectives, sustain ecological health, and provide opportunities not found on other public lands. Hunting regulations will be designed to provide a variety of quality recreational opportunities including populations with diverse male age structures not generally managed for on other public lands. Opportunities for expanding hunting programs will be considered to encourage and facilitate young hunters and mobility-impaired hunters. Limited hunts for furbearers or other predators will be considered only if monitoring verifies that population levels could be sustained.

Refuge access will be managed primarily to benefit natural processes, but some improvements will be made to provide quality visitor experiences. There are special regulations for public access. Access to State lands will be provided to livestock permittees. Boating and landing sites for seaplanes will be allowed.

Initially, the Service will close about 21 miles of roads and implement a seasonal closure along 2.4 miles of road 315. Thirteen miles of roads on the northeast side of the refuge will be designated as motorized-access, game-retrieval roads where seasonal closures are applied to restrict access to sensitive river and road areas. Other closures or modifications could be necessary after further review of the road program. This will encourage free movement of wildlife, permit prescribed fire or wildfire suppression activities, and increase effective harvest of wild ungulates.

Additionally, the Service may upgrade about 5 miles of roads to all-weather access (gravel), allow for more winter fishing access, and expand opportunities for quality wildlife observation, interpretation, and environmental education by adding trails, viewing blinds, and a science interpretive center.

GOAL for WILDERNESS

Conserve, improve, and promote the wilderness character and associated natural processes of designated and proposed wilderness areas and wilderness study areas within the refuge for all generations.



Brett Billings / USFWS

Fishing is a popular activity at the refuge.

The Service will expand or adjust existing proposed wilderness units by 19,942 acres in Alkali Creek, Antelope Creek, Crooked Creek, East Seven Blackfoot, Mickey Butte, Sheep Creek, Wagon Coulee, and West Hell Creek. Additions to these proposed wilderness units are referred to as wilderness study areas. Roads will be closed in proposed wilderness units and in wilderness study areas except roads that provide access to private land within the refuge.

The UL Bend Wilderness will be protected and managed as a class 1 air shed.

GOAL for CULTURAL and PALEONTOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Identify, value, and preserve the significant paleontological and cultural resources of the refuge to connect refuge staff, visitors, and the community to the area's prehistoric and historic past.

The Service will protect and manage significant cultural and paleontological resources found at the refuge.

GOAL for REFUGE OPERATIONS and PARTNERSHIPS

Through effective communication and innovative use of technology and resources, the refuge uses funding, personnel, partnerships, and volunteer programs for the benefit of natural resources while recognizing the social and economic connection of the refuge to adjacent communities.

The Service will protect areas with special designations such as historic trails, landmarks, research areas, and scenic rivers.

For lands not needed by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Service will coordinate a jurisdiction transfer. The Service will adhere to legal obligations of rights-of-way for access to private and State lands. There will be an exchange of State lands within the refuge boundary where feasible. The Service will acquire priority lands within the refuge boundary from willing sellers.

The Service will collaborate with partners to carry out the plan. Accessible opportunities will be provided through partnerships.

Abbreviations

ATV	all-terrain vehicle
AUM	animal-unit month
BCR 17	Badlands and Prairies Bird Conservation Region
BLM	Bureau of Land Management
CCP	comprehensive conservation plan
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CO₂	Carbon dioxide
DNRC	Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
DOI	U.S. Department of the Interior
EIS	environmental impact statement
Enhancement Act	Title VIII of the Water Resources Development Act of 2000
FWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
GIS	Geographic Information System
GPS	Global Positioning System
GS	General Schedule (employment type)
HDP	height–density plot
HMP	Habitat Management Plan
IMPLAN	Impact Analysis for Planning
Improvement Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
MFWP	Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
MIAG	Montana/Idaho Airshed Group
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
Refuge System	National Wildlife Refuge System
region 6	Mountain–Prairie Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
RLGIS	Refuge Land Geographic Information System
Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
TEA–21	1998 Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century
TES	threatened and endangered species
USACE	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
U.S.C.	United States Code
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USFS	USDA Forest Service
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
WG	wage grade (employment type)
WSA	wilderness study area

Definitions of these and other terms are in the glossary, located after chapter 4.

