

1 Introduction

This document presents an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates alternatives for, and expected consequences of, management of the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex. Alternative B is the proposed action of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service, USFWS), and is presented in chapter 6 as the draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the refuge complex. This chapter provides an introduction to the CCP process and describes the involvement of the Service, the State of Montana, the public, and others, as well as conservation issues and plans that affect the refuge complex.

The Service has developed this draft CCP to provide a foundation for the management and use of the Medicine Lake NWR Complex. The refuge complex consists of Medicine Lake NWR, a Wetland Management District (WMD), and Lamesteer National Wildlife Refuge, located in northeast Montana. The CCP is intended as a working guide for management programs and actions over the next 15 years (see figure 1).

The CCP was developed in compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) (16 USC 668dd et seq.) and Part 602 (National Wildlife Refuge System Planning) of the Fish and Wildlife Service Manual (USFWS 2000a). The actions described within this CCP also meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Compliance with NEPA is being achieved by involving the public and including an integrated environmental assessment (EA).

When fully implemented, this CCP will strive to achieve the vision, goals, and purpose of each refuge. Fish and wildlife are the first priority in refuge management, and public use (wildlife-dependent recreation) is encouraged as long as it is compatible with a refuge's purpose.

The CCP has been prepared by a planning team composed of representatives from various Service programs and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP). In developing this plan, the planning team incorporated comments and suggestions from local residents and organizations. Public involvement and the planning process itself are described in this chapter in a section entitled "The Planning Process."

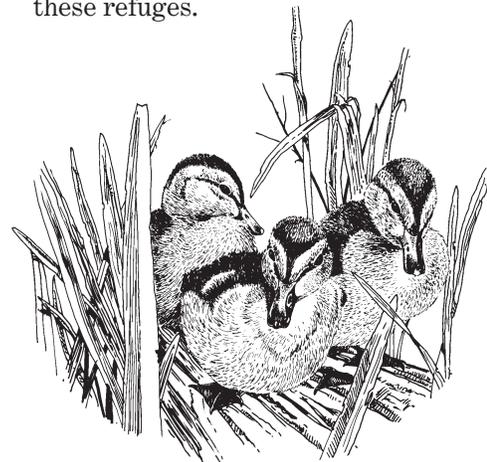
After reviewing a wide range of public comments and management needs, the planning team developed a proposed alternative. This alternative attempts to address all significant issues while

determining how best to achieve the intent and purpose of the refuge complex. The proposed alternative is the Service's recommended course of action for the future management of these refuges, and is embodied in this draft document.

1.1 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR PLAN

The purpose of this CCP is to identify the role the refuge complex, including Medicine Lake NWR, the Wetland Management District, and Lamesteer NWR, will play to support the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), and to provide long-term guidance for managing refuge programs and activities. The CCP is needed

- to provide a clear statement of direction for the future management of the refuge complex;
- to ensure that the Service's management actions are consistent with the mandates of the Improvement Act;
- to ensure that the management of the refuge complex is consistent with federal, state, and county plans;
- to provide a basis for the development of budget requests for the refuge complex's operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs; and
- to provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials an understanding of the Service's management actions in and around these refuges.



A new brood in the wetlands.
USFWS

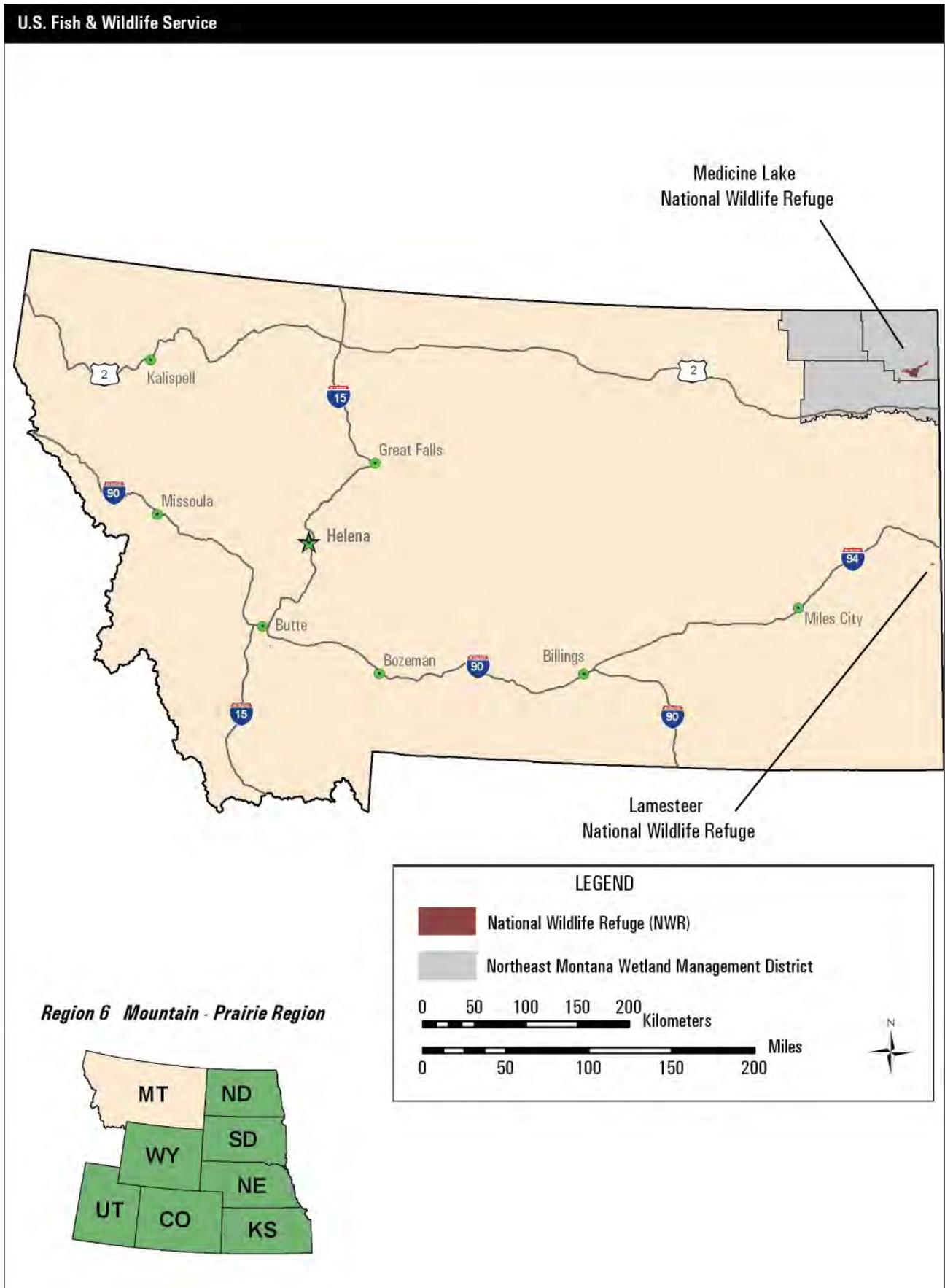


Figure 1. Vicinity map for Medicine Lake refuges, Montana.

Sustaining the nation's fish and wildlife resources can be accomplished only through the combined efforts of governments, businesses, and private citizens.

1.2 THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

The Service is the principal federal agency responsible for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

“The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working with others, is to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

Over a hundred years ago, America's fish and wildlife resources were declining at an alarming rate. Concerned citizens, scientists, and hunting and angling groups joined together to restore and sustain our national wildlife heritage. This was the genesis of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Today, the Service enforces federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores vital wildlife habitat, protects and recovers endangered species, and helps other governments with conservation efforts. It also administers a federal aid program that distributes to states hundreds of millions of dollars for fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, and related programs across America.

The Service is the managing agency of the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex, along with the rest of the Refuge System, thousands of waterfowl production areas, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations.

Service Activities in Montana

Service activities in Montana contribute to the state's economy, ecosystems, and education programs. The Service and state-related services in Montana (USFWS 2000b) provide the following:

- employment for 196 people
- over 25,246 hours donated by 432 volunteers for Service projects
- management of two National Fish Hatcheries, one Fisheries Technology Center, one Fish Health Center, and one

Fish and Wildlife Management Assistance Office

- contribution of 700,000 fish for stocking and 20 million eggs to other hatcheries to support recreational fishing
- management of 22 National Wildlife Refuges encompassing 1,186,384 acres (USFWS 2006a)
- administration of 5 wetland management districts totaling over 173,897 acres (USFWS 2006a)
- more than 506,000 visitors annually to Service-managed lands
- environmental education for more than 8,700 schoolchildren
- hunting access on refuges for 61,000 people
- 43,000 people fishing opportunities on refuges
- \$5.6 million for sport-fishing restoration and \$5.6 million for wildlife restoration
- \$336,726 (2006) in funds under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act for Montana schools and roads (USFWS 2006b).

The National Wildlife Refuge System

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt designated the 5.5-acre Pelican Island in Florida as the nation's first wildlife refuge for the protection of brown pelicans and other native nesting birds. This was the first time the federal government set aside land for the sake of wildlife. This small but significant designation was the beginning of the Refuge System.

One hundred years later, the Refuge System has become the largest collection of lands in the world specifically managed for wildlife, encompassing over 96 million acres within 544 refuges and over 3,000 small areas for waterfowl breeding and nesting. Today, there is at least one refuge in every state in the nation, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In 1997, the Improvement Act established a mission for the Refuge System:

“... to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

The Improvement Act states that each refuge shall be managed:

- to fulfill the mission of the Refuge System;
- to fulfill the individual purpose of each refuge;
- to consider the needs of fish and wildlife first;
- to fulfill the requirement of developing a CCP for each unit of the Refuge System, and fully involve the public in the preparation of these plans;
- to maintain the biological integrity, biological diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System;
- to recognize that wildlife-dependent recreation activities, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation, are legitimate and priority public uses; and
- to retain the authority of refuge managers to determine compatible public uses.

The wildlife and habitat vision for each national wildlife refuge emphasizes the following principles:

- Wildlife comes first.
- Ecosystems, biodiversity, and wilderness are vital concepts in refuge management.
- Refuges must be healthy.
- Growth of refuges must be strategic.
- The Refuge System serves as a model for habitat management with broad participation from others.

Following passage of the Improvement Act, the Service began to implement the new legislation, including preparing CCPs for all refuges. These plans are now being developed nationwide. Consistent with the Improvement Act, all refuge CCPs are being prepared with public involvement. Every refuge is required to complete a CCP by 2012.

People and the National Wildlife Refuge System

The U.S. fish and wildlife heritage contributes to the quality of peoples' lives and is an integral part of the nation's greatness. Wildlife and wild places have always given people special opportunities to have fun, relax, and appreciate the natural world.

Wildlife recreation also contributes millions of dollars to local economies through birdwatching, fishing, hunting, photography, and other wildlife pursuits. In 2002, approximately 35.5 million people visited a national wildlife refuge, mostly to observe wildlife in their natural habitats. Visitors most often are accommodated through nature trails, auto tours, interpretive programs, and hunting and fishing opportunities. Significant economic benefits are generated for the communities that surround the refuges. Economists have reported that national wildlife refuge visitors contribute more than \$792 million annually to local economies.

1.3 NATIONAL AND REGIONAL MANDATES

This section presents hierarchically, from the national level to the local level, highlights of legal mandates, Service policy, and existing resource plans that directly influenced development of this CCP.

Refuges are managed to achieve the mission and goals of the Refuge System and the designated purpose of the refuge unit as described in establishing legislation or executive orders, or other establishing documents. Key concepts and guidance of the System are provided in the Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (P.L. 87-714), Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations, the Fish and Wildlife Service Manual and, most recently, through the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-57).

The Improvement Act amends the Refuge System Administration Act by providing a unifying mission for the Refuge System, a new process for determining compatible public uses on refuges, and a requirement that each refuge will be managed under a CCP. The Improvement Act states that wildlife conservation is the priority of Refuge System lands, and that the Secretary of the Interior will ensure that the biological integrity, biological diversity, and environmental health of refuge lands are maintained. Each refuge must be managed to fulfill the Refuge System mission and the specific purposes for which it was established. The Improvement Act requires the Service to monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 declares that compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are legitimate and appropriate, priority, general public uses of the Refuge System. Six uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation) are to receive enhanced consideration, in planning and management, over all other general public uses of the Refuge System.

A list of other laws and executive orders that may affect the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex CCP or the Service's implementation of the CCP is provided in appendix A. Service policies providing guidance on planning and the day-to-day management of a refuge are contained within the Refuge System Manual and the Service Manual.

1.4 REFUGE CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PLANS

Fulfilling the Promise

A 1999 report entitled “Fulfilling the Promise, The National Wildlife Refuge System: Visions for Wildlife, Habitat, People and Leadership” (Service 1999a) is the culmination of a year-long process by teams of Service employees to evaluate the Refuge System nationwide. This report was the focus of the first National Refuge System Conference, held in October 1998 and attended by refuge managers, other Service employees, and representatives from leading conservation organizations. The report contains 42 recommendations packaged with three vision statements dealing with wildlife and habitat, people, and leadership. This CCP deals with all three major topics, and the recommendations in the report provided guidance throughout the CCP process.

Bird Conservation

All bird conservation planning in North America is being achieved through the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI). Started in 1999, the NABCI Committee is a coalition of government agencies, private organizations, and bird initiatives in the United States working to advance integrated bird conservation. The committee's conservation work is based on sound science and cost-effective management that will benefit all birds in all habitats. Conservation of all birds is being accomplished under four planning initiatives: the North American Landbird Conservation Plan (Partners in Flight), the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan, and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Partners in Flight

Partners in Flight began in 1990 with the recognition of the decline of many migratory bird species. The challenge, according to the Partners in Flight (PIF) Program, is managing human population growth while maintaining functional natural ecosystems. To meet this challenge, PIF began working to identify priority land-bird species and habitat types. PIF activity has resulted in the

production of 52 bird conservation plans covering all of the continental United States.

The primary goal of PIF is to provide for the long-term health of the bird life on this continent. The first priority is to prevent the rarest species from becoming extinct. The second is to prevent uncommon species from declining to threatened status. The third priority is to “keep common birds common.”

PIF splits North America into seven avifaunal biomes (birds of an ecological regional area) and 37 bird conservation regions (BCRs) for planning purposes (figure 2). Medicine Lake NWR Complex is within the prairie avifaunal biome in BCR 11, the Prairie Pothole Region.

Twenty-nine land birds are considered “species of regional importance” in the Prairie Pothole BCR (table 10, chapter 4). Birds within the refuge complex are discussed in greater detail in “Chapter 4, Affected Environment.” All of these species breed in the refuge complex, except for greater sage grouse. Nine of these species are on the PIF watch list, considered the most imperiled land birds in North America.

PIF conservation priorities in the prairie avifaunal biome focus on protecting remaining prairies, managing existing grasslands with fire and grazing, and controlling exotic and woody plant encroachment. Regionally, the refuge complex falls under the Montana PIF Bird Conservation Plan. This plan calls for protecting remaining native prairie from conversion to agriculture, improving management of grasslands through grazing and fire, and using partnerships to improve habitat conservation

U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan

The refuge complex also lies within the Northern Plains Prairie Pothole Region of the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan (Skagen et al. 2006). Nine shorebird species are identified within the region as species of conservation concern: piping plover, mountain plover, American avocet, upland sandpiper, long-billed curlew, Hudsonian godwit, marbled godwit, American woodcock, and Wilson's phalarope (table 9, chapter 4). This region is also important to 10 shorebird species during migration.

North American Water Bird Conservation Plan

Medicine Lake NWR Complex falls within the Northern Prairie and Parkland Region (NPPR) for purposes of waterbird conservation. Canadian and U.S. partners developed the Northern Prairie and Parkland Waterbird Conservation Plan

(Beyersbergen et al. 2004) under the auspices of the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan (Kushlan et al. 2002) to provide an overview of the status and current knowledge of waterbirds and waterbird habitat in the region and to outline strategies and priorities for monitoring, research, and management.

Much wetland and upland habitat in the NPPR has been lost or degraded, primarily due to agriculture. Populations of many species of waterbirds thus are considered at risk. Least tern and whooping crane are listed as endangered species, and the least bittern is listed as threatened in portions of the NPPR. The plan identifies western grebe, Franklin's

gull, black tern, horned grebe, American bittern, yellow rail, and king rail as species of high concern (table 9, chapter 4). All these species except king rail and least bittern are found in the refuge complex.

North American Waterfowl Management Plan

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), written in 1986 and revised several times (DOI and Environment Canada 1986), envisioned a 15-year effort to achieve landscape conditions that could sustain waterfowl populations.

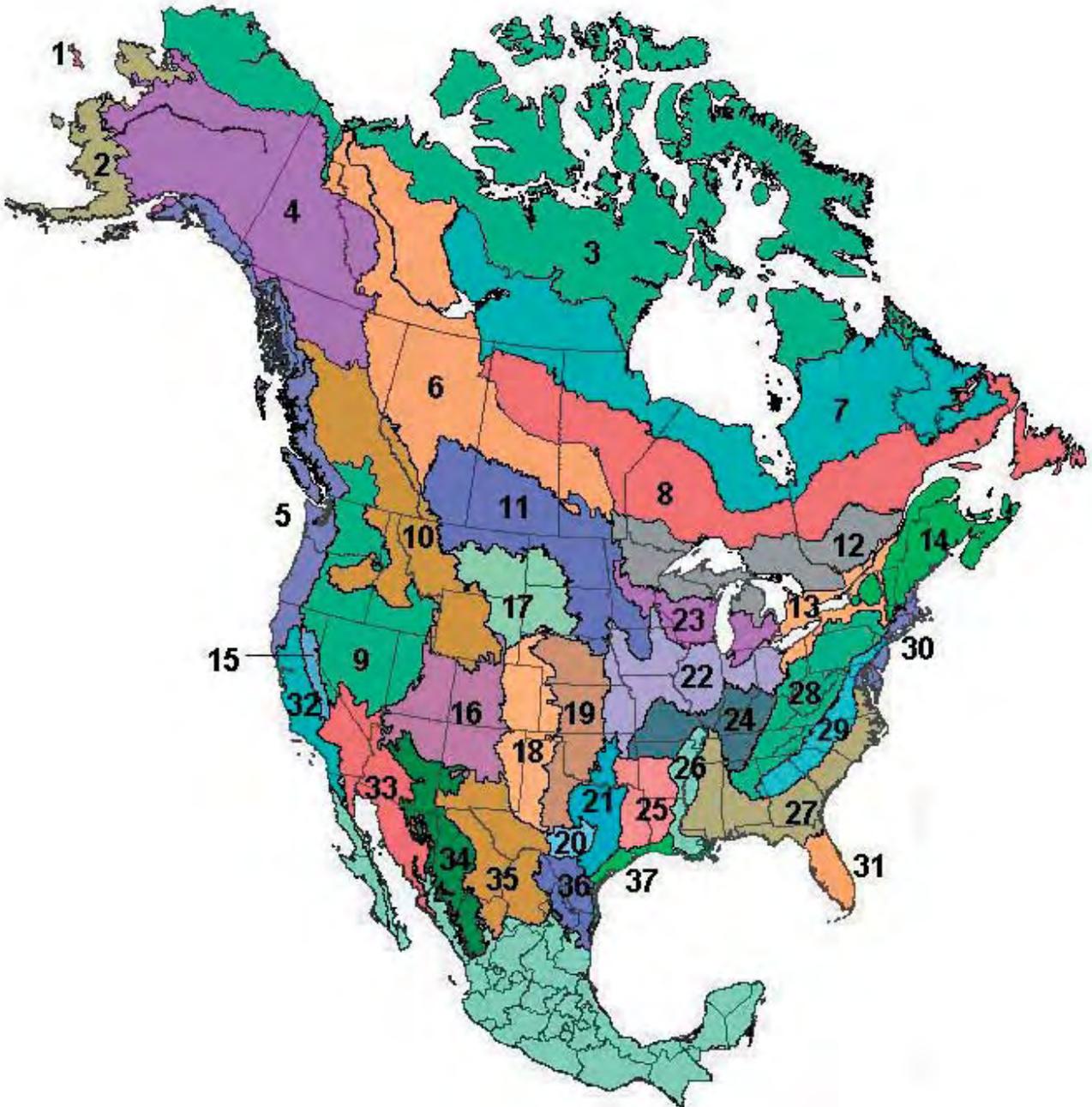


Figure 2. Bird conservation regions of the United States.

In 1985, waterfowl populations had plummeted to record lows. The habitat that waterfowl depend on for survival was disappearing at a rate of 60 acres per hour.

Recognizing the importance of waterfowl and wetlands to North Americans, and the need for international cooperation to help in the recovery of a shared resource, the U.S. and Canadian governments developed a strategy to restore waterfowl populations through habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement.

Specific NAWMP objectives are to increase and restore duck populations to the average levels of the 1970s—for examples, 62 million breeding ducks, and a fall flight of 100 million birds. In 1994, Mexico became a signatory of the plan.

Although the plan is international in scope, its implementation functions at the regional level. Its success is dependent upon the strength of partnerships, called “joint ventures,” involving federal, state, provincial, tribal, and local governments, businesses, conservation organizations, and individual citizens.

Joint ventures are regionally based, self-directed partnerships that carry out science-based conservation with extensive community participation. Joint ventures develop implementation plans focusing on areas of concern identified in the plan.

The NAWMP contains 11 habitat joint ventures in the United States and two in Canada with a wide variety of public and private partners. As of 2006, plan partners had invested more than \$4.5 billion to protect, restore, and enhance more than 15.7 million acres of habitat. The Medicine Lake NWR complex lies within the “Prairie Pothole Joint Venture” (PPJV). Lesser scaup, mallard, and northern pintail are the highest-priority waterfowl species for the PPJV.

Prairie Pothole Joint Venture Implementation Plan

The Prairie Pothole Region remains the most important waterfowl-producing region on the continent, generating more than half of North America’s ducks. Nearly 15 percent of the continental waterfowl population comes from the PPJV region (Montana, the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Iowa) (see figure 3).

As many as 10 million ducks and 2 million geese use the PPJV region during migration or for nesting. The wetlands and associated grassland habitat in the PPJV region provide breeding habitat to over 200 species of migratory birds. Bald eagles, peregrine falcons, whooping cranes, piping plovers, and

interior least terns frequent the PPJV region during migration and breeding periods.

The PPJV Implementation Plan (USFWS et. al, 2005) outlined a mission, goals, objectives, and strategies for joint venture activities. State action groups and steering committees prepared action plans that “stepped down,” or offered more specific direction, for joint venture activities at the state and local level.

The goal of the PPJV is to increase waterfowl populations through habitat conservation projects that improve natural diversity across the Prairie Pothole landscape of the United States. The joint venture attempts to implement landscape-level habitat projects so that waterfowl populations increase during the wet years and stabilize under moderate conditions. Since little can be done to stabilize breeding populations across the Prairie Pothole Region during extended drought, joint venture strategies are designed to carry out actions that take advantage of years when precipitation is at least normal.

Recovery Plans for Federally Listed Threatened or Endangered Species

Where federally listed threatened or endangered species occur on the Medicine Lake NWR complex, the management goals and strategies laid out in their respective recovery plans will be followed. The list of threatened or endangered species will change as new species are listed, delisted (or removed from the list), or discovered on refuge lands

At the time of plan approval, the refuge complex follows the 1994 Piping Plover (Great Plains) Recovery Plan (USFWS 1994a). It is currently within the area designated critical habitat for the federally listed piping plover.

State Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy

Montana’s Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CFWCS) includes all vertebrate species known to exist in Montana, including both game and nongame species, as well as some invertebrate species, such as freshwater mussels and crayfish. From the early years of fish and wildlife management, the focus has been placed on game animals and their related habitats because most of the agency’s funding has been provided by hunters and anglers.

MFWP does not intend to reduce its focus on important game species, and maintains that conserving particular types of habitats will benefit a variety of game and nongame species. With this new funding mechanism and conservation

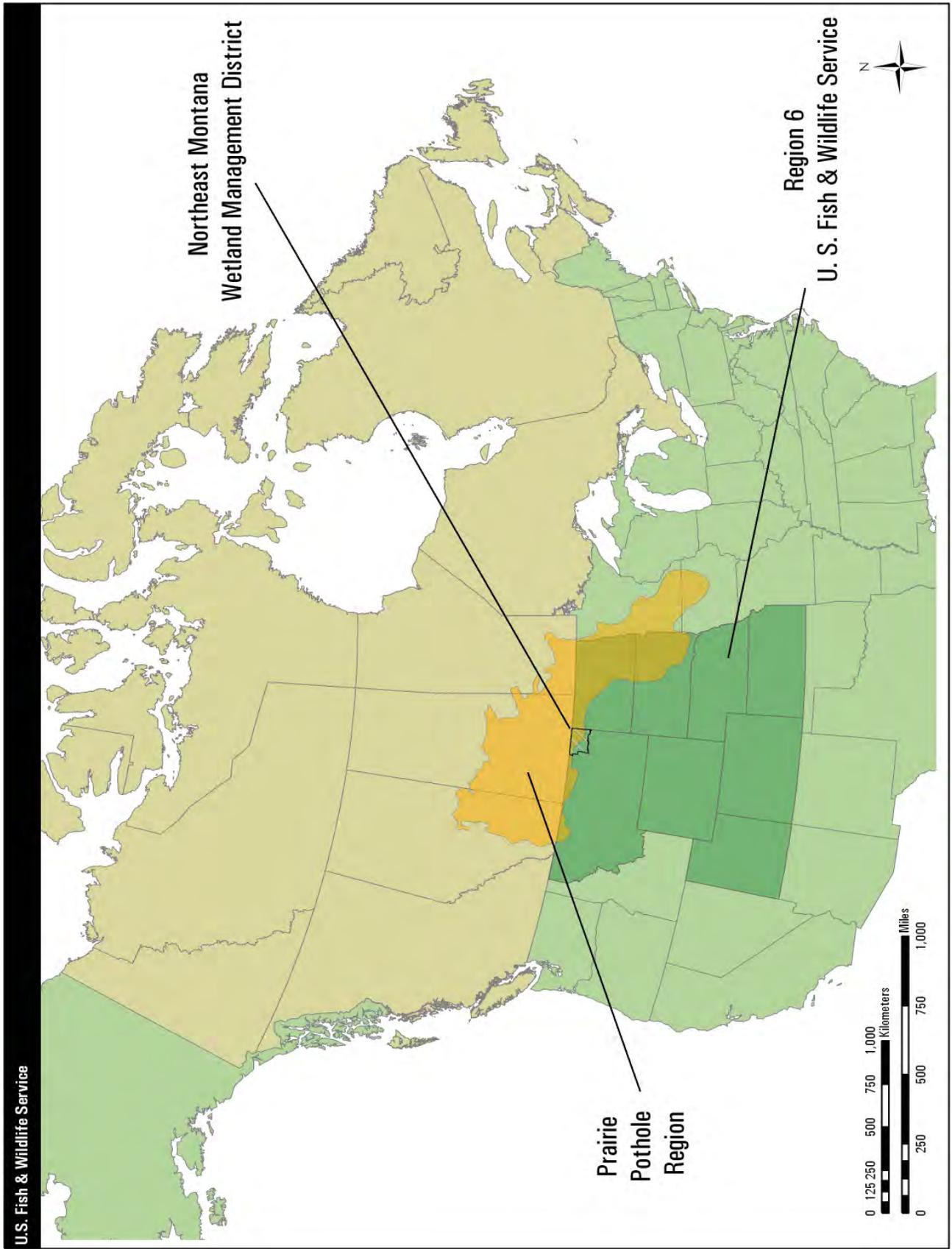


Figure 3. Prairie Pothole Region.

strategy in place, MFWP believes that managing fish and wildlife more comprehensively is a natural progression in the effective conservation of Montana’s remarkable fish and wildlife resources (Montana CFWCS 2005).

Although game species are included in MFWP’s conservation strategy, the priority is species and their related habitats “in greatest conservation need.” This means focus areas, community types, and species that are significantly degraded or declining, federally listed, or where important distribution and occurrence information used to assess the status of individuals and groups of species is lacking. Because management of game species has been largely successful over the last 100 years, most species have populations that are stable or increasing, and fewer were identified as in greatest conservation need (49 nongame, 11 game).

MFWP’s conservation strategy uses 5 ecotypes to describe the broad areas of Montana’s landscape that have similar characteristics. Within each of the ecotypes, Tier 1 (greatest need of conservation) geographic focus areas were identified for all terrestrial and aquatic areas of the state. The Missouri Coteau Focus Area is a Tier 1 area that encompasses 5.3 million acres and includes the refuge complex. This portion of Montana’s Prairie Pothole Region contains the highest density of natural wetlands. A total of 318 terrestrial vertebrate species are found within the Missouri Coteau Focus Area. Tier I wildlife species are: northern leopard frog, snapping turtle, spiny softshell, western hog-nosed snake, smooth greensnake, common loon, trumpeter swan, bald eagle, yellow rail, whooping crane, piping plover, long-billed curlew, interior least tern, black tern, burrowing owl, sedge wren, Nelson’s sharp-tailed sparrow, Townsend’s big-eared bat, and meadow jumping mouse.

The Montana CFWCS outlines 5 conservation concerns and strategies for the Missouri Coteau Focus Area. The key concerns are:

- loss of habitat due to conversion of native prairie to small grain crops
- drainage of natural wetlands
- invasive or exotic plant species
- disruption of natural disturbance processes, especially fire
- fragmentation of habitat due to fossil fuel exploration and development activities.

1.5 ECOSYSTEM DESCRIPTION AND THREATS

The Service has adopted an ecosystem approach to natural resource management and has identified 52 ecosystems in the United States. The refuge

complex lies within the main stem Missouri River (main stem) ecosystem and the Upper Missouri/ Yellowstone/ Upper Columbia rivers (MOYOCO) ecosystem (USFWS 2000c) (figure 4).

The main stem ecosystem is located primarily in South Dakota, with sections extending into southern North Dakota, northern Nebraska, northeastern Wyoming, and eastern Montana. Prairie potholes, a major land feature, were formed during the Pleistocene glaciations, a period 2 million years ago when glaciers swept through the region, scraping the landscape and creating depressions, or “potholes.” The glaciated prairies of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana cover approximately 60 million acres.

Historically, the landscape of the main stem consisted of a vast expanse of tall and mixed grass prairie with numerous shallow and deep wetlands. A rich assortment of native plants and wildlife evolved with and were maintained by fire, periodic defoliation by large herds of grazing animals, and climate.

Numerous wetland basins are a prominent feature of this ecosystem, and are essential for producing the majority of game ducks in the country. Four flyways throughout the area denote major migration pathways that funnel waterfowl from wintering to breeding habitat and back. Canada geese and snow geese pass through the area every fall and spring, as do many other migratory birds that use the Central Flyway.

Native prairie and forests, woodlands, and savanna are the ecosystem’s predominant vegetation habitats. Native prairie plant communities are dominated by grasses such as little bluestem, porcupine grass, sideouts grama, and western wheatgrass. Common forbs include leadplant, rigid goldenrod, and purple and prairie coneflowers.

Prairie insectivores and native mice common to prairie ecosystems are very abundant. Riparian areas make up a small portion of the ecosystem, but are more important than other focus areas to fish and wildlife resources. Riparian habitats provide for much of the biological diversity in the ecosystem, and many species occurring here would be eliminated without healthy riparian areas.

The original prairie grasslands have been rapidly dwindling as agriculture has come to dominate the landscape. Nonnative grasses were planted for pastures and hay, large portions of native prairie were plowed up for crop land, and wetlands were drained to make farming operations easier and more profitable.

Originating in the Rocky Mountains of south-central Montana, the Missouri River is vastly different from the “untamed” floodplain system of even 50 years ago. The river flows 2,300 miles, passing through 7

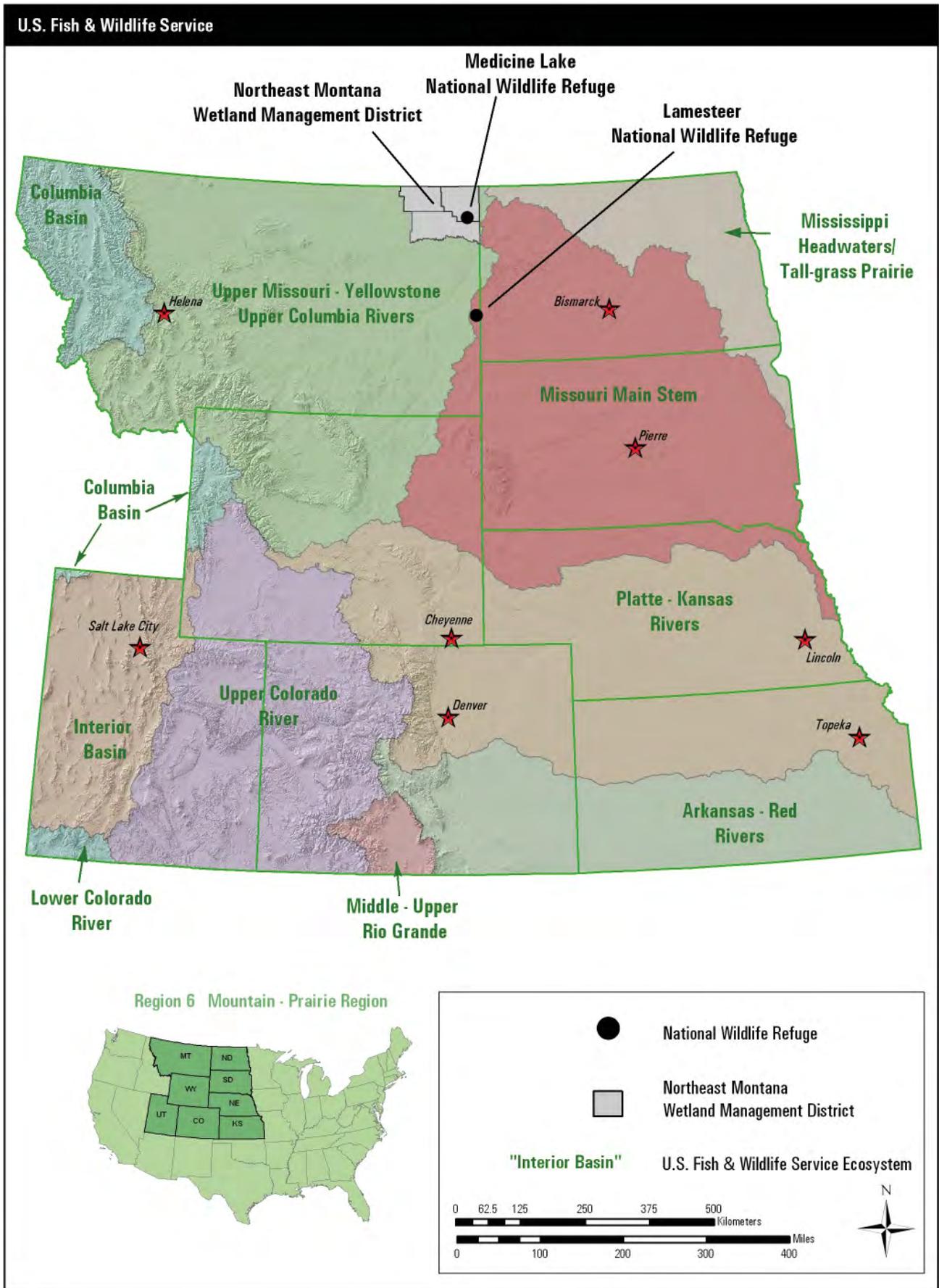


Figure 4. Ecosystem map.

main stem dams. Nearly 60 percent of what formerly was the upper river now lies under permanent multipurpose reservoirs.

As the Missouri River changed, so did the wildlife communities that depend on it. Currently 8 fishes, 15 birds, 6 mammals, 4 reptiles, 6 insects, 4 mollusks, and 7 plants native to the ecosystem are listed as either threatened or endangered. Sedimentation, contamination, invasive species, and development threaten the health of this diverse habitat.

The MOYOCO ecosystem encompasses parts of Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota, and lies within the Rocky Mountain and Great Plains physiographic (or physical geographic) provinces. As the name implies, the ecosystem includes the Upper Missouri, Yellowstone, and Upper Columbia River basins. To the east of the Continental Divide, it encompasses the Upper Missouri and Yellowstone River drainages from their headwaters in the high mountains of western Montana and Wyoming to their confluence in western North Dakota. To the west of the Continental Divide in western Montana and northwestern Wyoming, the ecosystem includes the Upper Columbia River drainage from the mountain headwaters to the border with Idaho. This ecosystem is bounded on the north by the Canadian provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan; on the east by North Dakota; on the south by southern Wyoming and Idaho.

The proposed management vision and goals for the main stem and MOYOCO ecosystems focus on “national trust resources,” or endangered or threatened species, migratory birds, and habitat for trust species. Further, recreation is recognized as a high priority where conflicts with native species and their habitats do not occur.

A major priority for the main stem and MOYOCO ecosystems will be to ensure that future economic development complements environmental protection. Another goal will be to create healthy habitats that provide an abundance and diversity of native flora and fauna in the ecosystems. Key threats to the ecosystems include invasive species, conversion of native prairie to agriculture, and habitat fragmentation from development and population growth.

1.6 THE PLANNING PROCESS

This draft CCP and EA for the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex is intended to comply with the Improvement Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Service issued a final refuge planning policy in 2000 (USFWS 2000a) that established requirements and guidance for Refuge System planning, including CCPs and step-down (or more specific) management

plans, ensuring that planning efforts comply with the provisions of the Improvement Act. The planning policy identified several steps of the CCP and EA process (figure 5):

- Form a planning team and conduct pre-planning activities such as creating a work plan.
- Initiate public involvement and scoping.
- Draft a vision statement and goals.
- Develop and analyze alternatives, including a proposed action.
- Prepare a draft CCP and EA.
- Prepare and adopt a final CCP and EA, and issue a “finding of no significant impact” (FONSI), or determine if an environmental impact statement (EIS) is needed.
- Implement the CCP, and monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of actions.
- Review the CCP every 5 years, and revise it every 15 years.

Early Planning Process

In 1998, the Service began the planning process for the Medicine Lake NWR Complex. A notice of intent (NOI) was published in the Federal Register on August 6, 1998, with a public meeting held at the refuge headquarters on October 17, 1998. In 2001, the process stalled for several years while the Service considered a preliminary land-acquisition proposal for the CCP. During the same time period, there were several staff changes at the refuge, including a new project leader who came on duty in 2005.

In October 2006, the planning process (see table 1) was restarted, and a planning team consisting of Service personnel from the refuge complex, the Division of Refuge Planning, and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks was formed. Because of the extensive delay in the planning process, the planning effort essentially was started over. The planning team developed a new draft vision and set of goals, a planning schedule, and a public involvement plan. The team began an internal scoping process by identifying refuge qualities and issues over the course of several meetings and electronic correspondence.

Recent Planning Efforts

Prescoping and scoping began in November 2006. A notice of intent (NOI) was published in the Federal Register announcing the beginning of the CCP process.

During the planning process, the planning team developed a mailing list of over 120 names that included local residents, local, regional, and state government representatives, other federal agencies, and nonprofit organizations. In November 2006, a planning update was mailed to the public and placed on the planning website. The planning update provided a summary of the NWRS and the CCP process, along with an invitation to a public meeting, which was held at the Medicine Lake Fire Hall. The meeting was announced in the local newspapers, flyers were posted at businesses throughout the region, and announcements were made by refuge staff at a variety of meetings and through personal contact.

More than 20 people attended the meeting, despite minus-zero, blustery weather. At the start of the meeting, the CCP planner provided an overview of the process, and the project leader talked about the refuge and current management issues during a presentation and question-and-answer period. The overall response was very positive. People who attended were invited to submit additional comments or questions orally or in writing, and each was given a two-page comment form to complete. There was additional coverage about the planning process in the local newspaper, and by the end of the response deadline on February 8, 2007, the team recorded over 60 comments.

Comments from approximately 15 letters and comment sheets during the initial scoping process in 1998 were combined with the comments received during the fall and winter of 2006–2007 to create a list of significant issues to be addressed in this document.

State Coordination

In October 2006, the Service's region 6 director invited the director of the MFWP to participate in the CCP process. Local MFWP wildlife managers and refuge staff have maintained excellent ongoing working relations from before the CCP process. A MFWP representative was part of the core CCP planning team and participated in the planning process.

Coordination with Local Communities

The project leader initially contacted local elected officials in October 2006 and thereafter through planning updates that provided information on the CCP process, outlined the public meeting schedule, and included a summary of public comments received.

Tribal Coordination

In October 2006, the Service's region 6 director sent a letter to the Fort Peck Tribal Council (Assiniboine and Sioux tribes). The letter provided information about the upcoming CCP and invited recipients to serve on the core planning team. The Service did not receive a response from the tribe, but it sent the tribal council planning updates and other documents throughout the process.

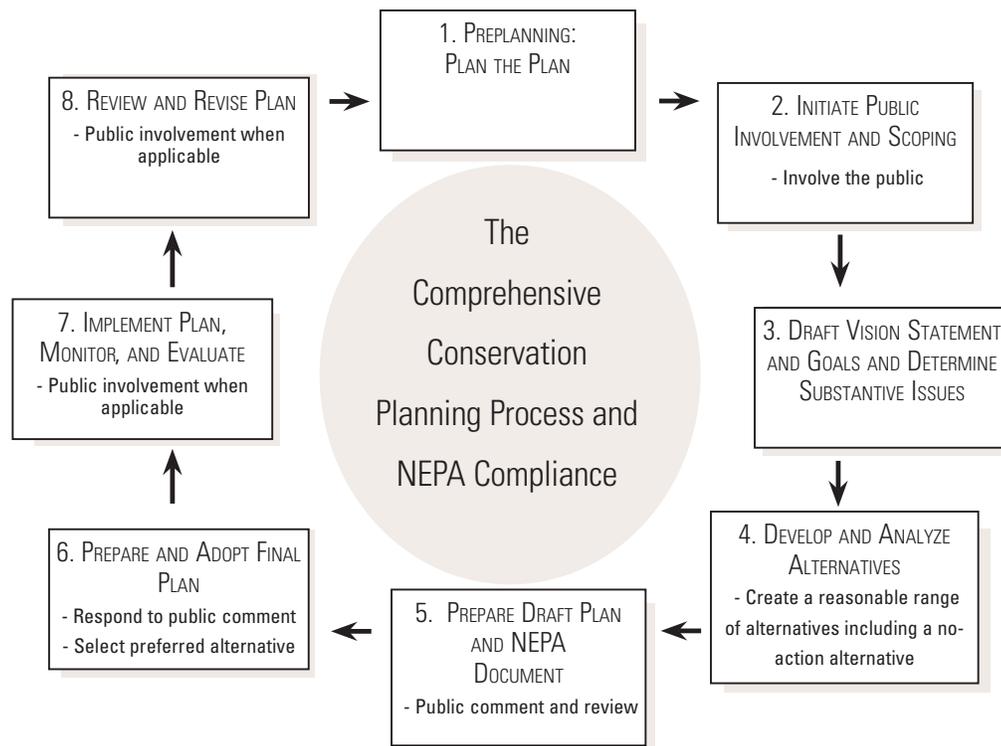


Figure 5. The planning process.

Results of Scoping

The comments collected from scoping meetings and correspondence were used to develop a list of key issues to address in the CCP. The team developed goals, objectives, and strategies and determined which alternatives would best address these issues. A summary of the issues and their impacts is discussed in chapter 2.

Selecting an Alternative

The Service's region 6 director will consider the environmental effects of each alternative and will select an alternative to implement as the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Complex CCP.

The decision will be disclosed in a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) included in the final CCP. Implementation of the CCP will begin with the regional director's signature and publication of the final CCP.

This CCP provides long-term guidance for management decisions. It establishes goals, objectives, and strategies needed to accomplish refuge purposes, and identifies the Service's best estimate of future needs. This CCP details program planning levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and thus are primarily for Service strategic planning purposes. This CCP does not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operation and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisitions.

Table 1. Planning Process Summary for Medicine Lake NWR Complex, 2006–2007

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
August 2006	Initial site meeting	Tour refuge. Discuss CCP process. Set a date for the project kickoff meeting and vision and goals workshop.
October 31- November 1, 2006	Kickoff meeting and vision and goals workshop	The Service develops a CCP overview, finalizes a planning team, and identifies a purposes, initial issues, and qualities list. The Service's regional staff, planning team, and others begin to develop a mailing list. The Service's regional staff, planning team, and others update the issues and qualities list, identify biological and mapping needs, and plan public scoping. They draft a vision statement and develop goals.
November 15, 2006	Scoping initiated	The planning team issues a planning update describing the CCP process, develops comment forms, and mails postage-paid envelopes.
November 29, 2006	Public scoping meeting, Medicine Lake, Montana	The planning team offers the public the opportunity to learn about the CCP and provide comments.
January 9, 2007	Notice of intent (NOI) published	The Service publishes a NOI in the Federal Register and extends scoping comments until February 9, 2007.
February 7-8, 2007	Objectives and strategies workshop	The Service's regional staff, planning team, and others draft objectives and strategies for the proposed action.
March April 2007	Draft CCP and EA preparation	The planning team prepares the first draft of the CCP and EA.
June 2007	Internal Service review of the draft CCP and EA	The Service's regional office staff, planning team, and others conduct a review and receive comments on the draft CCP and EA.
July 2007	Outreach plan preparation	The planning team conducts outreach with partners about issues in the draft CCP and EA.
August 2007	Public meeting, Medicine Lake, Montana	The planning team presents the draft CCP and EA and collects public comments.

