

CHAPTER 1—Introduction

We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), have developed this draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and Environmental assessment (EA) to provide a foundation for the management and use of Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (Cokeville Meadows Refuge or refuge) in Wyoming for at least the next 15 years.

This chapter introduces the CCP with descriptions of the steps in the CCP planning process; our involvement and that of the State of Wyoming, the tribes, the public, and others; and other plans that may be affected or supported by the future management of the refuge.

Located in Lincoln County in southwestern Wyoming near where the Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming borders meet (figure 1), Cokeville Meadows Refuge lies directly south of the town of Cokeville. Both were named for the coal located in the vicinity. The refuge now consists of 9,259 acres within a 26,657-acre acquisition boundary. The refuge lies in the Bear River Basin, which has a drainage area of about 4.8 million acres including parts of Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming.

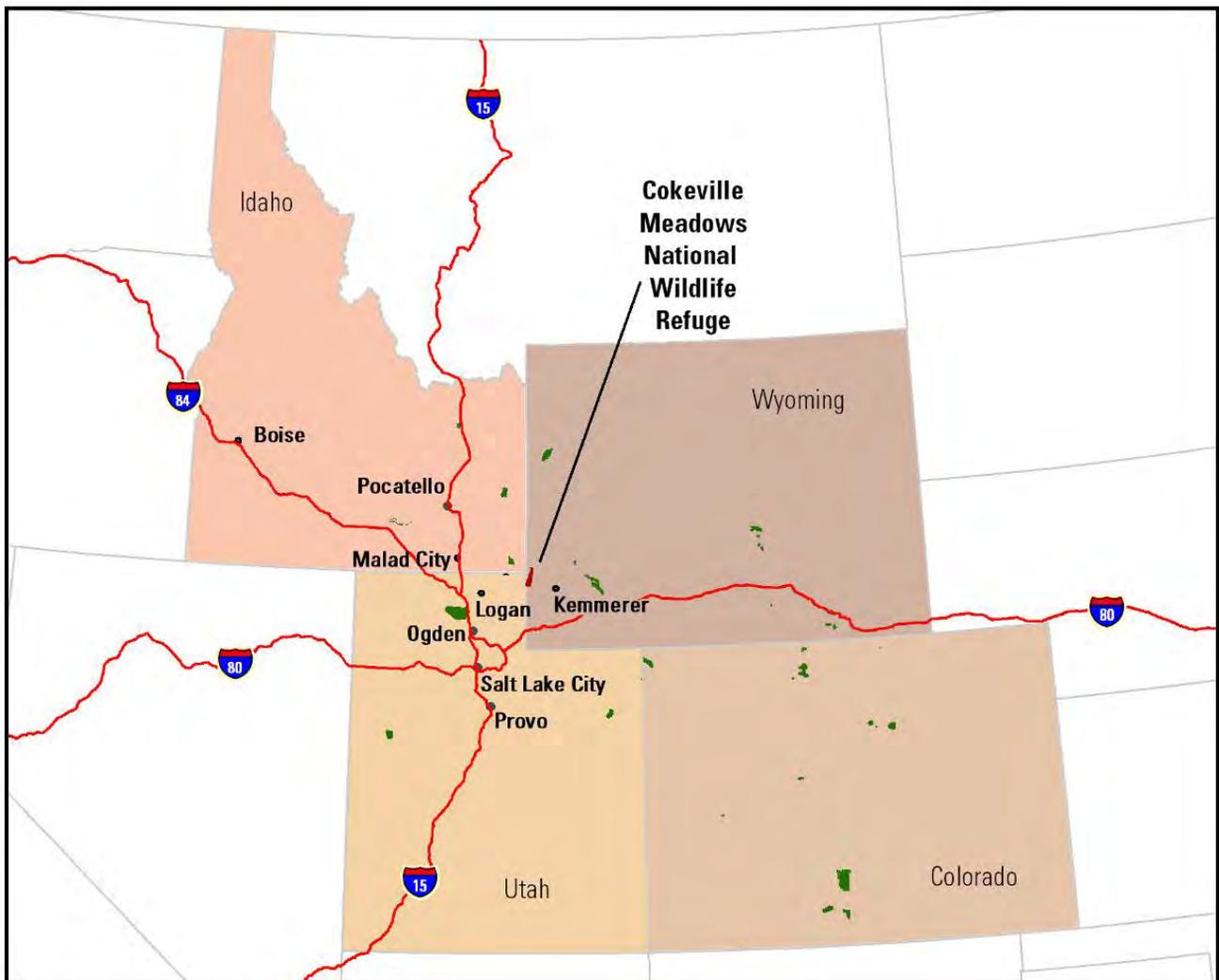


Figure 1. Vicinity map of Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Wyoming.

This draft CCP was developed in compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) and Part 602 (National Wildlife Refuge System Planning) of “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.” The actions described within this draft CCP and EA meet the needs of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA).

The draft CCP and the EA have been prepared by a planning team made up of representatives from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD), Cokeville Meadows Refuge staff, various Service programs, the city of Cokeville, the Lincoln County Planning Department, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and other cooperating agencies. Compliance with NEPA requires public involvement, and so the planning team incorporated public input as described in Section 1.6 The Planning Process.

After reviewing a wide range of public comments and management needs, our planning team developed alternatives for refuge management and now recommends one alternative to be our proposed action. This action addresses all substantive issues while also determining how best to achieve the purposes of the refuge. It is summarized in “Chapter 3—Alternatives,” and its predicted effects are described in “Chapter 5—Environmental Consequences.” The details of the proposed action can be found in “Chapter 6—Implementation of the Proposed Action.”

The final CCP will specify the necessary actions to achieve the vision and purposes of the Cokeville Meadows Refuge. When completed, the CCP will serve as a working guide for management programs and actions for this refuge over the next 15 years.

1.1 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PLAN

The purpose of this draft CCP is to provide long-term guidance for management of refuge programs and activities so that Cokeville Meadows Refuge can fulfill the purposes for which it was created and to define the role that the refuge will play in support of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). The CCP is needed to:

- communicate to the public and other partners of the refuge’s efforts to carry out the mission of the Refuge System;
- provide a clear statement of direction for management of the refuge;
- provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of our management actions on and around the refuge;
- make sure that the refuge’s management actions are consistent with the mandates of the Improvement Act;
- make sure that management of the refuge is consistent with Federal, State, and county plans;
- provide a basis for development of budget requests for the refuge’s operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

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

We are the principal Federal agency responsible for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation, and the Refuge System is one of our major programs.

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.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, America's fish and wildlife resources were declining at an alarming rate, largely because of unrestricted market hunting. Concerned citizens, scientists, and hunting and angling groups joined and generated the political will for the first significant conservation measures taken by the Federal Government. These actions included the establishment of the Bureau of Fisheries in the 1870s and, in 1900, passage of the first Federal wildlife law—the Lacey Act—which prohibited interstate transportation of wildlife taken in violation of State laws. Beginning in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt established more than 50 wildlife refuges across the Nation.

Over the next three decades, the United States ratified the Migratory Bird Treaty with Great Britain, and Congress passed laws to protect migratory birds, establish new refuges, and create a money source for refuge land acquisition. In 1940, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service was created within the U.S. Department of the Interior, and existing Federal wildlife functions, including law enforcement, fish management, animal damage control, and wildlife refuge management, were combined into a single organization for the first time.

Today, we administer the Refuge System, enforce Federal wildlife laws, manage migratory bird populations, restore nationally significant fisheries, conserve and restore vital wildlife habitat, protect and recover endangered species, and help other governments with conservation efforts. We also administer a Federal aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars to States for fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, and related programs across the United States.

Service Activities in Wyoming

Our activities in Wyoming contribute to the State's economy, ecosystems, and education programs. The following lists the most recent information on our presence and activities:

- As of May 2013, we have 55 employees throughout Wyoming.
- More than 12,586 hours were donated by 675 volunteers to help complete projects on refuge lands in Wyoming.
- We also manage two fish hatcheries totaling 121 acres and six coordination areas totaling 16,291 acres (USFWS 2013b), one ecological services field office, and one Fish and Wildlife Management Assistance Office in Wyoming.
- We manage 7 national wildlife refuges totaling 86,427 acres (figure 2) (USFWS 2013b).
- On average, more than 857,000 persons visit the lands we manage in Wyoming every year:

- More than 2,000 of these visitors engage in hunting.
 - More than 5,300 of these visitors take part in fishing.
 - More than 583,700 visitors take part in wildlife observation.
 - Nearly 1,000 (576 in onsite programs) students take part in environmental education programs.
- We provided \$4.5 million to WGFD for sport fish restoration and \$4.2 million for wildlife restoration and hunter education.
 - We paid Wyoming counties \$744,583 under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act.

Our activities in Wyoming contribute to the State’s economy, ecosystems, and education programs. The following list describes our presence and activities:

- Between 1987 and 2011, our Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program helped private landowners to enhance or restore 5,427 acres of wetlands, 294 miles of riparian and instream habitats, and 282,568 acres of upland habitats in Wyoming (USFWS 2013c).
- In 2011, we paid Wyoming counties \$362,318 under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act for use in schools and for roads (USFWS 2012).

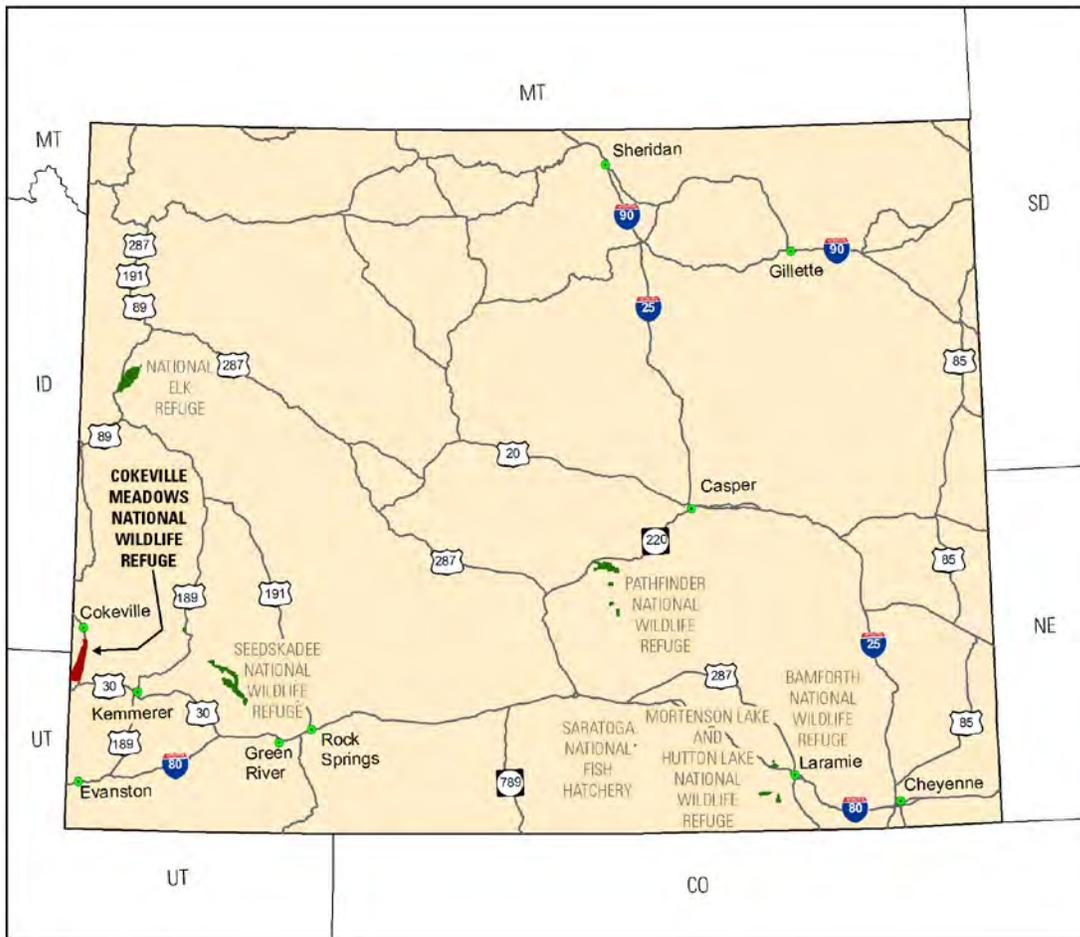


Figure 2. Location of Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge and other national wildlife refuges in Wyoming.

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 native nesting birds. This was the first time the Federal Government set aside land for 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 more than 150 million acres within 553 refuges and more than 3,000 waterfowl production areas providing breeding and nesting habitat for migratory birds. Today, there is at least one refuge in every State as well as in Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and the other Pacific Territories.

Individual units of the Refuge System were established under a wide variety of statutes and executive orders. Before 1966, each refuge was managed to meet its individual establishment purpose, but there was no law requiring the refuges to be managed as a cohesive system of lands. Passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Administration Act) changed that and created the Refuge System. In 1997, Congress significantly amended the Administration Act with the Improvement Act, which is the organic legislation of, and has a clear mission statement for, the Refuge System.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is 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 national wildlife refuge (that is, each unit of the Refuge System, which has wetland management districts) must be managed to:

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

Besides the mission for the Refuge System, the wildlife and habitat vision for each unit of the Refuge System stresses the following principles:

- Wildlife comes first.
- Ecosystems, biodiversity, and wilderness are vital concepts in refuge and district management.
- Habitats must be healthy.
- Growth of refuges and wetland management districts must be strategic.

- The Refuge System serves as a model for habitat management with broad participation from others.

The following goals of the Refuge System (601 FW 1) will help guide the development of CCPs and the administration, management, and growth of the Refuge System:

- Conserve a variety of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats, including species that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- Develop and support a network of habitats for migratory birds, anadromous and inter-jurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations that is strategically distributed and carefully managed to meet important life history needs of these species across their ranges.
- Conserve those ecosystems, plant communities, wetlands of national or international significance, and landscapes and seascapes that are unique, rare, declining, or underrepresented in existing protection efforts.
- Provide and enhance opportunities to take part in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation).
- Foster understanding and instill appreciation of the diversity and interconnectedness of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

Following passage of the Improvement Act, we immediately began to carry out the direction of the new legislation, including preparation of CCPs for all national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts. Consistent with the Improvement Act, we prepare all CCPs through public involvement.

1.3 NATIONAL AND REGIONAL MANDATES

Refuge System units are managed to achieve the designated purpose of the refuges and wetland management districts (as described in establishing legislation, Executive orders, or other establishing documents), and the mission and goals of the Refuge System. Key guidance for administration of the Refuge System is found in the Administration Act, as amended, Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.”

Descriptions of the laws and Executive Orders that may affect this CCP and the management of Cokeville Meadows Refuge can be found in appendix D. Policies on planning and management of refuges are found in the “Refuge System Manual” and “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual” as well as in various Director’s orders, Regional Director’s Orders, and Service Handbooks.

1.4 REFUGE CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PLANS

The Cokeville Meadows Refuge contributes to the conservation efforts described below.

Fulfilling the Promise

A 1999 report, “Fulfilling the Promise, The National Wildlife Refuge System” (USFWS 1999), is the culmination of a yearlong process by teams of our employees to evaluate the Refuge System nationwide. This report was the focus of the first national Refuge System conference in 1998, which was attended by refuge managers, other Service employees, and representatives from leading conservation organizations.

The report contains 42 recommendations packaged with 3 vision statements that address wildlife and habitat, people, and leadership. This draft CCP also addresses these three topics, and our planning team looked to the recommendations in the report for guidance during CCP planning.

Bird Conservation

Over the past few decades, there has been growing interest in conserving birds and their habitats. This trend has led to the development of partnership-based bird conservation initiatives that have produced international, national, and regional conservation plans. “All-bird” conservation planning in North America is being achieved through the North American Bird Conservation Initiative. Formed in 1999, the North American Bird Conservation Initiative committee is a coalition of government agencies, private organizations, and bird initiatives in the United States that is working to advance integrated bird conservation based on sound science and cost-effective management to help all birds in all habitats.

Conservation of all birds is being accomplished under four planning initiatives: the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, the North American Landbird Conservation Plan by Partners in Flight, the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan, and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan

Partners from State and Federal agencies and nongovernment organizations from across the country pooled their resources and expertise to develop a conservation strategy for migratory shorebirds and the habitats on which they depend. The resulting document, completed in 2000, is the “U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan.” It provides a scientific framework to find species, sites, and habitats that most urgently need conservation action.

The main goals of the plan are to make sure that adequate quantities and qualities of shorebird habitat are supported at local levels and to support or restore shorebird populations at the continental and hemispheric levels. Separate technical reports were developed that focused on a conservation assessment, comprehensive monitoring strategy, research needs, and education and outreach. These national assessments were used to step down goals and objectives into 11 regional conservation plans.

Although some outreach, education, research, monitoring, and habitat conservation programs are being carried out, the accomplishment of conservation objectives for all shorebird species will require a coordinated effort among existing and new partners.

North American Landbird Conservation Plan by Partners in Flight

The “North American Landbird Conservation Plan,” developed by Partners in Flight, began in 1990 with the recognition that the population levels of many migratory bird species were declining. The challenge, according to the program, is to manage human population growth while supporting functional natural ecosystems.

Partners in Flight is a cooperative effort involving partnerships among Federal, State, and local government agencies, philanthropic foundations, professional organizations, conservation groups, industries, the academic community, and private individuals. The goals of the Partners In Flight program (Rich et al, 2004) are:

- Make sure that there is an active, scientifically based conservation design process that identifies and develops solutions to threats and risks to landbird populations.
- Create a coordinated network of conservation partners to carry out the objectives of the landbird conservation plans at multiple scales.
- Secure sufficient commitment and resources to support vigorous implementation of landbird conservation objectives.

The main goal of Partners in Flight is to provide for the long-term health of landbird life on this continent. The first priority is to prevent the rarest species from going extinct. The second priority is to prevent uncommon species from descending into threatened status. The third priority is to “keep common birds common.”

Partners in Flight worked to name priority landbird species and habitat types and developed 52 bird conservation plans covering the continental United States. For planning purposes, they split North America into seven groups of birds by ecological area—avifaunal biomes—and 37 bird conservation regions (figure 3). The Cokeville Meadows Refuge lies within Bird Conservation Region 10, the Northern Rockies Region. This region includes the Northern Rocky Mountains and outlying ranges in both the United States and Canada, and the intermontane Wyoming Basin and Fraser Basin.

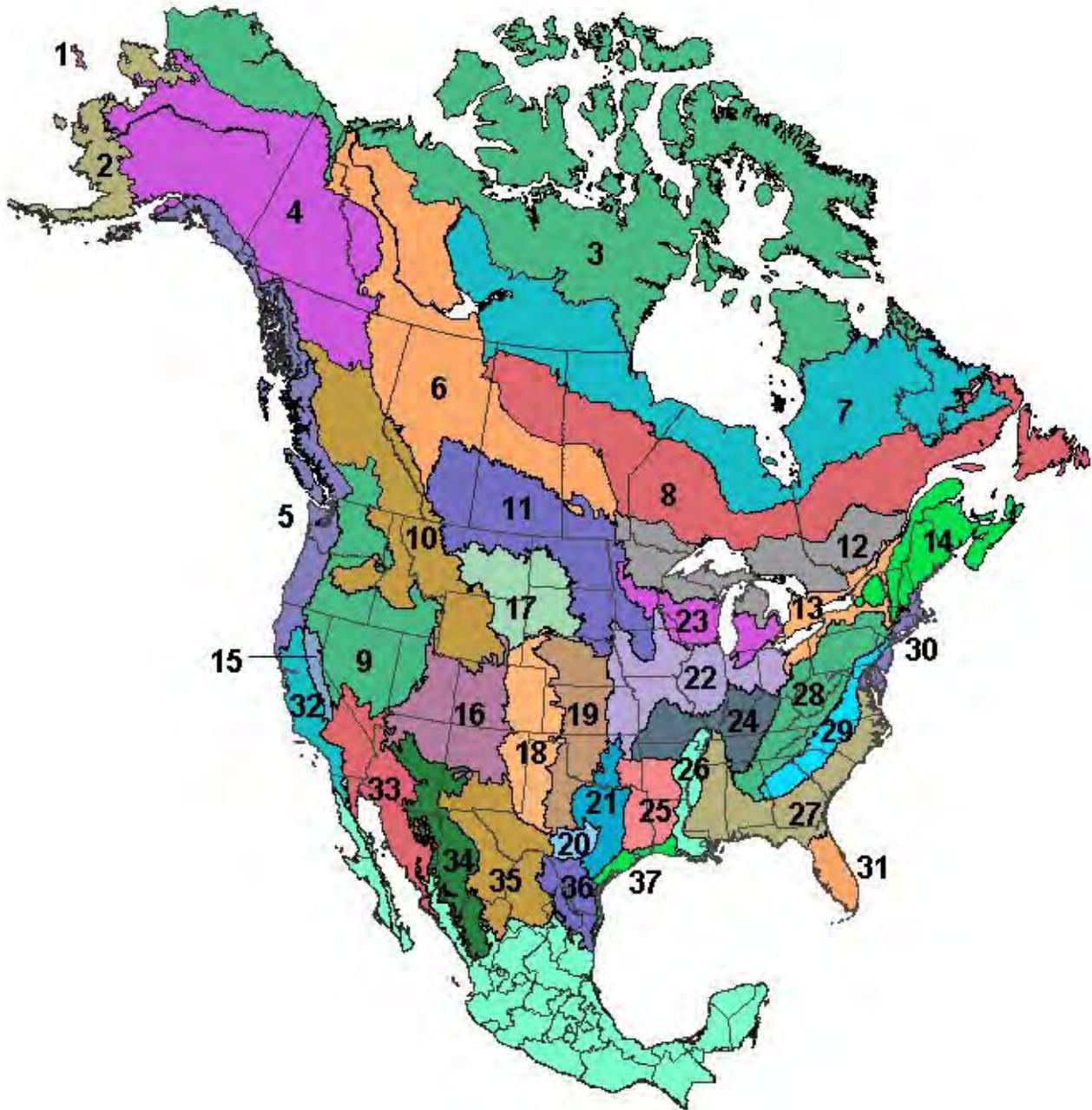


Figure 3. Map of the bird conservation regions of North America.

More specifically, the refuge sits within the physiographic area known as the Wyoming Basin (figure 4). This area is primarily in Wyoming but also extends into northern Colorado, southern Montana, and small parts of northeast Utah and southeast Idaho. The area consists of broad intermountain basins interrupted by isolated hills and low mountains that merge to the south into a dissected plateau. The Wyoming Basin is primarily shrub–steppe habitat, dominated by sagebrush and shadscale, interspersed with areas of shortgrass prairie. Higher elevations are in mountain shrub vegetation, with coniferous forest atop the highest areas. Partners in Flight priority bird populations and habitats of the Wyoming Basin are listed in table 1.

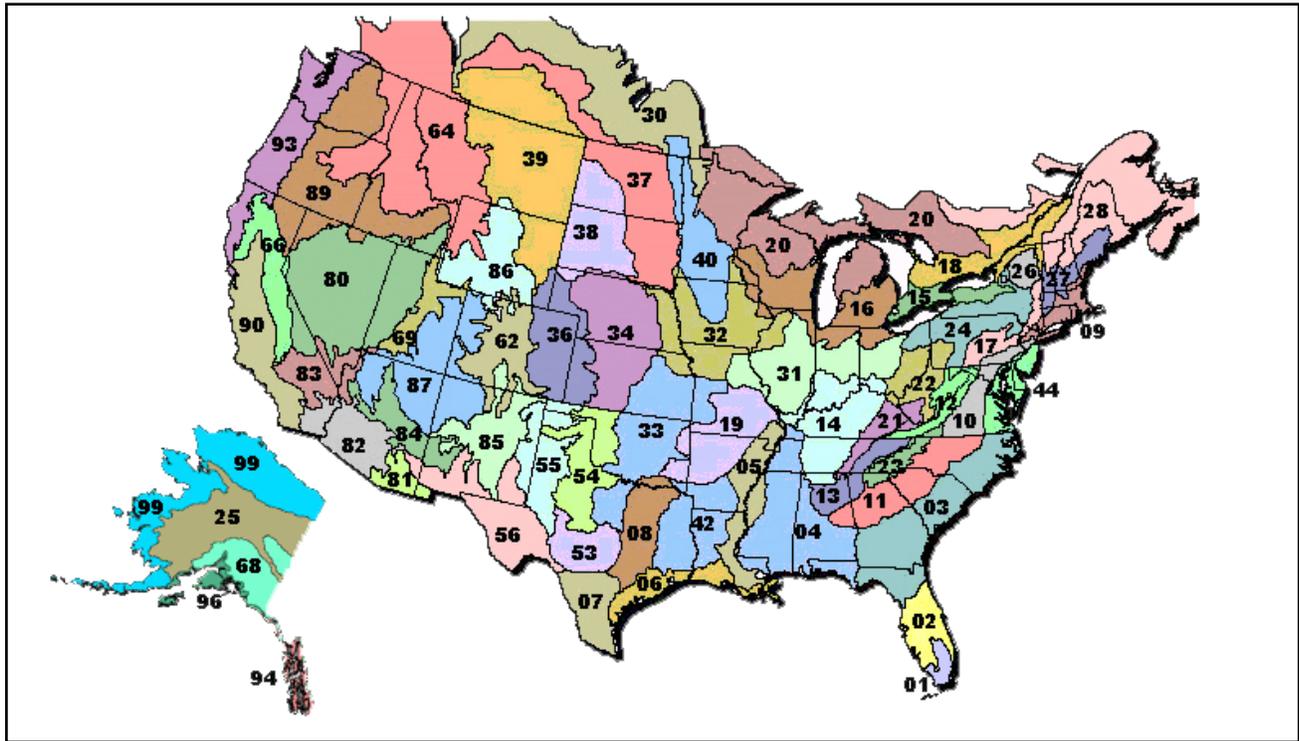


Figure 4. Map of physiographic areas of the United States, including area 86, the Wyoming Basin, which contains Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Wyoming.

Table 1. Priority bird populations by habitat at Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Wyoming.

<i>Shrub–steppe</i>	<i>Sagebrush grasslands</i>	<i>Wetlands</i>
greater sage-grouse	short-eared owl	American bittern
ferruginous hawk	Swainson’s hawk	Wilson’s phalarope
sage thrasher	mountain plover	white-faced ibis
sage sparrow		American avocet
Brewer’s sparrow		American white pelican

Source: USFWS 2013a.

North American Waterbird Conservation Plan

The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan is carried out by a waterbird partnership consisting of Federal, State, and Provincial wildlife agencies; individuals; and nonprofit conservation organizations covering 28 countries from Canada to Panama as well as islands and near-shore areas of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. It provides a contiguous framework for conserving and managing colonial-nesting waterbirds,

including 209 species of seabirds, coastal waterbirds (gulls, terns, and pelicans), wadingbirds (herons and ibises), and marshbirds (certain grebes and bitterns).

The overall goal of this conservation plan is to make sure that the following are sustained or restored throughout the waterbirds' ranges in North America: (1) the distribution, diversity, and abundance of waterbird populations; (2) waterbird habitats (breeding, migratory, and nonbreeding); and (3) important sites for waterbirds.

Political considerations and ecological factors influenced the drafting of waterbird planning region boundaries. Sixteen planning regions are identified in the Western Hemisphere, and Cokeville Meadows Refuge is located within the Intermountain West Waterbird Conservation Region. This Region's dispersed high-mountain lakes; large, terminal, hypersaline lakes; marshes; playas; rivers; streams; riparian zones; and fresh and brackish wetlands host about 40 waterbird species, including many, or most, of the world's California gulls, eared grebes, white-faced ibises, and American white pelicans.

Eleven waterbirds are identified as species of high concern in this Bird Conservation Region: yellow rail, Franklin's gull, black tern, eared grebe, western grebe, Clark's grebe, snowy egret, American white pelican, common loon, American bittern, and certain managed populations of the greater and lesser sandhill crane. Cokeville Meadows Refuge provides habitat for several of these species, including American bittern, black tern, western grebe, bittern, and sandhill crane.

The waterbirds that use this region are highly adaptable to constantly changing wetland conditions and depend on a regional-scale association of wetlands to meet habitat and forage needs during the stages of their annual life cycle. The competing demands for water from agriculture, development, and recreation pose the greatest threats to regional waterbird populations. Contaminants such as mercury and dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) and its breakdown products also threaten the region's waterbirds. Because of the West's feast-or-famine water regime, conserving a network of quality wetland habitats with secure water sources to provide choices for waterbirds during drought and flood cycles is stressed (Kushlan et al. 2002).

North American Waterfowl Management Plan

Written in 1986, the "North American Waterfowl Management Plan" envisioned a 15-year effort to achieve landscape conditions that could sustain waterfowl populations. Specific objectives are to increase and restore duck populations to the average levels of the 1970s—62 million breeding ducks and a fall flight of 100 million birds.

In the mid-1980s, waterfowl populations had plummeted to record lows. Duck nesting habitat 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 United States and Canadian Governments developed a strategy to restore waterfowl populations through habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement. Mexico joined the plan in 1994.

The plan is innovative because of its international scope, and its implementation at the regional level. Its success depends on the strength of partnerships, called "joint ventures," involving Federal, State, Provincial, tribal, and local governments; businesses; conservation organizations; and individual citizens.

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

Intermountain West Joint Venture

The Intermountain West Joint Venture was established in June 1994 and serves as the implementation arm of the "North American Waterfowl Management Plan" (Intermountain West Joint Venture 2005) in the Intermountain West region. It focuses on the conservation of wetlands and associated habitats and is comprised of multilevel partnerships among public and private organizations who share common interests in the conservation, maintenance, and management of key ecosystems in the region.

The Intermountain West Joint Venture works on lands that stretch from the Sierra Nevada and Cascades on the west to just east of the Rocky Mountains and from the Mexican border on the south to the Canadian border on the north. This extensive geographic region encompasses portions of eleven western States and includes an enormous variety of avian habitat.

Intermountain West Regional Shorebird Plan

The six bird conservation regions of the Intermountain West include an array of habitats, from saline sinks to alpine streams (Oring et al. 2010). The Cokeville Meadows Refuge offers important breeding habitat for several shorebird species and is of modest importance to many species of migrants.

Recovery Plans for Federally Listed, Threatened, or Endangered Species

No federally listed species have been documented at Cokeville Meadows Refuge; however, one candidate species, greater sage-grouse, does occur on the refuge. If, during the life of this CCP, listed species are discovered on the refuge, or new species are listed, we will take proper action to insure that the refuge plays the right role in any approved recovery plans, and will conduct an Intra-Service Section 7 Consultation on refuge management activities that might affect listed or candidate species.

To make sure that the conservation of candidate species is adequately considered in this document, we conducted a biological evaluation of the actions in this CCP per section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

State Wildlife Action Plan

Congress created the State Wildlife Grants Program and the Tribal Wildlife Grants Program in 2001. These programs provide States, territories, and tribes with Federal dollars to support conservation aimed at preventing wildlife from becoming endangered and in need of protection under the ESA. To take part in the State Wildlife Grants program, each State completed a State Wildlife Action Plan by October 1, 2005.

These plans define integrated approaches to the stewardship of all wildlife species, with added emphasis on species of concern and habitats at risk. The goal is to shift focus from single-species management and highly specialized individual efforts to a geographically based, landscape-oriented, fish and wildlife conservation effort. We approve State Wildlife Action Plans and Tribal Wildlife Grants Programs and administer these programs' monies.

The State Wildlife Action Plan for Wyoming was reviewed and information was used during the development of this CCP. The WGFD State Wildlife Action Plan contains information from the Tribal Wildlife Grants Programs developed by the Wyoming Wind River Indian Reservation and the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Reservation. Implementation of CCP habitat goals and objectives will support the goals and objectives contained in the WGFD State Wildlife Action Plan.

Responding to Accelerating Climate Change

We believe that a rapid acceleration in climate change could affect the Nation's fish, wildlife, and plant resources in profound ways. While many species would continue to thrive, some may decline and in some instances go extinct. Others would survive in the wild only through direct and continuous intervention by managers.

In 2010, we drafted a strategic plan to address climate change for the next 50 years entitled “Rising to the Challenge—Strategic Plan for Responding to Accelerating Climate Change” (USFWS 2010). The strategic plan employs three key strategies: adaptation, mitigation, and engagement. In addition, the plan acknowledges that no single organization or agency can address climate change without allying itself with others across the Nation and around the world (USFWS 2010). This draft plan is an integral part of the U.S. Department of the Interior’s strategy for addressing climate change as expressed in Secretarial Order 3289 (September 14, 2009).

We will use the following guiding principles from the draft strategic plan (USFWS 2010) in responding to climate change:

- *Priorities setting*—Continually evaluate priorities and approaches, make difficult choices, take calculated risks, and adapt to climate change.
- *Partnership*—Commit to a new spirit of coordination, collaboration, and interdependence with others.
- *Best science*—Reflect scientific excellence, professionalism, and integrity in all of our work.
- *Landscape conservation*—Emphasize the conservation of habitats within sustainable landscapes, applying our strategic habitat conservation framework.
- *Technical capacity*—Assemble and use state-of-the-art technical capacity to meet the climate change challenge.
- *Global approach*—Be a leader in national and international efforts to meet the climate change challenge.

Scientific observations and data suggest that the great northern geographic area in which Cokeville Meadows is located—as defined by Service and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) experts (see Section 1.5 Landscape-Scale Conservation Strategic Habitat Conservation)—may already be undergoing environmental and ecological changes because of climate change trends. Clear patterns in climate change could affect high-mountain ecotypes and lower-elevation, snow melt-dependent watersheds more acutely than they would affect some other geographic areas.

In consideration of possible climatic changes and the resulting potential ecological changes, the following 12 species are now considered to be focal species for the great northern geographic area: bull trout, pacific lamprey, salmon, steelhead, greater sage-grouse, Lewis’s woodpecker, trumpeter swans, willow flycatcher, Columbia spotted frog, cutthroat trout subspecies, Arctic grayling, and wolverine. To address the effects of a possible climactic change, any proposed management strategies must continue to adapt to a dynamic environment.

1.5 LANDSCAPE-SCALE CONSERVATION

In the face of escalating challenges such as land use conversion, invasive species, water scarcity, and complex issues that have been amplified by accelerating climate change, we have broadened our vision from an ecosystem approach to conservation.

Strategic Habitat Conservation

In the early 21st century, we undertook a cooperative effort with the USGS that culminated in a report by the National Ecological Assessment Team (USGS 2006). The report outlines a unifying adaptive resource management approach—integrating planning, design, delivery and evaluation— for conservation on a landscape scale. This approach is strategic habitat conservation—a structured, science-driven approach for making efficient, transparent decisions about where and how to expend Service resources to conserve species, or groups of species, that are limited by the amount or quality of habitat.

Since 2006, we have taken significant steps to turn this vision into reality. Our and USGS experts have defined a framework of 21 geographic areas used an aggregation of bird conservation regions. Cokeville Meadows Refuge lies in geographic area six—the great northern. This geographic area is unique in social values, natural resources, and managerial challenges.

The great northern geographic area six includes one of the largest surface areas of all the geographic areas in North America and spans more than 447,000 square miles in the United States (57 percent) and Canada (43 percent). Ecologically, this area represents one of the most relatively intact and functional ecosystems in the United States with diverse groups of species and important conservation and restoration opportunities. Habitats support plant and animal species with cultural significance to multiple Native American tribes and important societal and conservation value to the United States, Canada, and the world. Cultural traditions are tied closely to the land's natural resources, as are contemporary ways of life, such as ranching, logging, and recreational and subsistence hunting and fishing. The Nation's largest communities of free-roaming bison, elk, deer and other ungulates, wolves, and bears as well as diverse salmon and trout populations are hallmarks of this geographic area.

Landscape Conservation Cooperatives

We used the framework of geographic areas that were developed under strategic habitat planning as the basis to locate the first generation of landscape conservation cooperatives. These cooperatives are conservation–science partnerships between us and other Federal agencies, States, tribes, nongovernment organizations, universities, and other entities. It has been suggested that the cooperatives might help us carry out the elements of strategic habitat conservation—biological planning, conservation design and delivery, and monitoring and research. The resulting coordinated planning and scientific information will strengthen our strategic response to accelerating climate change, land use conversion, invasive species, water scarcity, and a host of other challenges.

Cokeville Meadows Refuge falls within the jurisdiction of the Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative, which administers within the great northern geographic area six (figure 5).



Figure 5. Location of the Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge within geographic area six, the great northern, as administered by the Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative.

1.6 THE PLANNING PROCESS

We prepared this draft CCP and EA in compliance with the Improvement Act and Part 602 (National Wildlife Refuge System Planning) of “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.” The actions described herein meet the needs of the Council on Environmental Quality regulations that carry out NEPA. Added needs and guidance are contained in the Refuge System’s planning policy, issued in 2000. This policy established needs and guidance for refuge and wetland management district plans, including CCPs and stepdown management plans, to make sure that planning efforts follow the Improvement Act. The planning policy identified several steps of the CCP and environmental analysis process (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Process steps for comprehensive planning and associated environmental analysis.

We began the preplanning process in August 2009 by establishing a planning team made up primarily of staff from the refuge and the Mountain-Prairie Region 6 of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Region 6) Division of Refuge Planning. Other teammembers included staff from other Service divisions (Education and Visitor Services, Law Enforcement, Realty, Geographic Information System (GIS), Water Rights, Fire, Fisheries) and WGFD and BLM staff. Later on, the city of Cokeville and Lincoln County, represented by the Lincoln County Planning Department, formally requested to join the planning team and were included through a memorandum of understanding between these local governments and us.

During preplanning, the team developed a mailing list, identified internal issues, and identified the unique qualities of the refuge. (Refer to Section 2.2 Special Values.)

During planning, the team identified and reviewed current programs, compiled and analyzed relevant data, and reviewed establishing authorities to define the purposes of the refuge. An added part of this process was the preparation of a hydrogeomorphic method (HGM) analysis report. This HGM report took almost 2 years to research and prepare and resulted in many sound recommendations for the restoration and future management of the refuge.

Afterwards, a notice of intent to prepare the draft CCP and EA was published in the “Federal Register” on October 30, 2009. Public scoping—the process of obtaining public input to inform the planning process—began soon after in November 2009 and included the mailing of invitation letters, the posted of flyers and press releases and the holding of public scoping meetings. With the publication of this draft CCP and EA and new period of public review begins.

Table 2 lists the specific steps in the planning process to date for the preparation of the Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge draft CCP and EA.

Table 2. Planning process summary for Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Wyoming.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
August 13, 2009	Cokeville Meadows Refuge CCP meeting for public officials	Overview of the planning and public participation processes, identification of issues, answer questions from officials, and discussion of economic development
September 25, 2009	Initial meeting with the proposed planning team	CCP overview developed; planning team completed; purposes identified; initial issues and qualities list developed; development of mailing list started
November 16–18, 2009	Kickoff meeting, vision, and goals development.	Issues and qualities list updated; biological and mapping needs identified; public scoping planned
October 30, 2009	Public scoping planning	Scoping meeting schedules and formats completed
November 17, 2009	Public scoping meeting, Cokeville, WY	Public opportunity offered (to learn about the CCP and provide comments)
November 18, 2009	Public scoping meeting, Kemmerer, WY	Public opportunity offered (to learn about the CCP and provide comments)
April 20–21, 2010	Alternatives workshop	Vision statement and goals reviewed; alternatives developed.
February 23–25, 2011	Assessment of environmental impacts	Reviewed range of alternatives and decided on environmental consequences.
April 26–28, 2011	Non-biological objectives and strategies workshop	Objectives and strategies for the proposed action drafted
June 21–23, 2011	Biological objectives and strategies workshop	Objectives and strategies for the proposed action drafted
July–December, 2011	First draft CCP and EA preparation	First draft of the CCP and EA prepared
March–April 2012	planning team review of the first draft CCP and EA	First draft of the CCP and EA reviewed and commented on by planning team
May 2012–May 2013	Internal Service review of and editing of the first draft CCP and EA	Draft CCP and EA reviewed and commented on by our regional office staff, planning team, and others
May 2013	planning team review of the second draft CCP and EA	Second draft of the CCP and EA reviewed and commented on by planning team
June–August 2013	Preparation of public review draft CCP and EA	
September 2013	Public review draft CCP and EA distributed	Draft CCP and EA presented; public comments collected
September 2013	Public meetings	Draft CCP and EA presented; Public comments compiled
October 2013	Public comments analyzed	Possible modification of draft CCP and EA to incorporate public comments
October 2013	Briefing of our regional director	Summary of public comments reviewed and addressed by our Regional Director and Deputy Regional Director in Region 6
October 2013	CCP approval	Final CCP approved by our Regional Director
October–December 2013	Production, distribution of final CCP. Begin CCP implementation	To be completed

Coordination with the Public

A mailing list of more than 83 names was compiled during the planning process and includes private citizens; local, regional, and State government representatives and legislators; other Federal agencies; and interested organizations, as described in appendix C.

In November 2009, we held two public scoping meetings near Cokeville Meadows Refuge. The first meeting was in Cokeville, Wyoming, and the second meeting was in Kemmerer, Wyoming. Fifty-two people attended the two meetings. They were primarily local citizens, including ranchers, sportsmen and women, other recreational users, and wildlife management professionals. Following a presentation about the refuge and an overview of the CCP and NEPA processes, attendees were encouraged to ask questions and offer comments. Verbal comments were recorded, and each attendee was given a comment form by which to submit more thoughts or questions in writing.

Twelve other written comment letters were received during the scoping period that ended on December 31, 2009. The planning team reviewed and considered all substantive comments throughout the planning process. Public input obtained from meetings and correspondence was considered in development of this draft CCP and EA.

State Coordination

In November 2009, our Region 6 Director mailed an invitation letter to take part in the CCP planning process to the director of WGFD. As a result, six representatives from WGFD are part of the CCP planning team, though the refuge staff had already established excellent and ongoing working relationships with local WGFD biologists before starting the CCP process.

WGFD is charged with providing “an adequate and flexible system for the control, management, protection, and regulation of all Wyoming wildlife.” WGFD supports 36 wildlife habitat management areas and 96 public access areas, encompassing 410,000 acres of managed lands for wildlife habitat and public recreation. These lands contain 121 miles of stream easements and about 21,014 surface acres of lakes and reservoirs for public access.

Tribal Coordination

In November 2009, our Region 6 Director mailed invitation letters to take part in the CCP planning process to 12 Native American tribal governments: Northern Arapaho, Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, Lower Brule Sioux, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, Cheyenne River Sioux, Oglala Sioux, Standing Rock Sioux, Santee Sioux, Rosebud Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, Eastern Shoshone, and Northwest Band of Shoshone Nation of Utah Tribe. The letters also contained information about the CCP development process.

Although none of the tribal governments chose to take part on the planning team, they remain on the CCP mailing list and will continue to receive CCP-related correspondence.

Results of Scoping

Comments collected from scoping meetings and correspondence, including refuge management recommendations, were used to develop a final list of issues to be addressed in this draft CCP and EA (see chapter 2). The planning team also developed alternatives that best address these issues (see chapter 3).

Selecting an Alternative

Following the public review and comment period for this draft CCP and EA, the planning team will present this document along with a summary of all substantive public comments collected during the public review of the draft to our Regional Director for Region 6, who will then consider the environmental effects of all three alternatives. If the analysis has not identified any significant issues that warrant an environmental impact statement or other added analysis, the Regional Director will select a preferred alternative. The Regional Director's decision will be disclosed in a NEPA decision document—a finding of no significant impact—and will be included in the final CCP.

Once approved, the actions in the preferred alternative will compose the final CCP. After the planning team prepares the final CCP for publication, a notice of availability will be published in the Federal Register and copies of the final CCP will be sent to individuals on the mailing list.

Subsequently, we will carry out the goals, objectives and strategies of the CCP with help from our partner agencies, organizations, and the public. The CCP will provide long-term guidance for management decisions; support achievement of the goals, objectives, and strategies needed to accomplish the purposes of the Cokeville Meadow Refuge; and define our best estimate of future needs.

It is important to note that the CCP will detail program planning levels that may be substantially above budget allocations. These would be used primarily for strategic planning purposes. The CCP does not constitute a commitment for staff increases, operation and maintenance increases, or money for future land acquisitions.

