

Planning Update

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan National Elk Refuge

Issue 3, September 2014

Draft Plan Available for Review

We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are excited to announce that the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment for the National Elk Refuge is ready for your review and comment. Public involvement has been important, and we are now turning to you to talk about the significant issues we have heard about during the planning process and that are addressed in this draft plan.

The Refuge

The National Elk Refuge was established in response to severe elk starvation in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, during the winters of 1909 and 1910. Established in 1912 as a “winter game (elk) reserve,” it is one of the oldest national wildlife refuges. Over the years, its purpose has been broadened to include “refuges and breeding grounds for birds, other big game animals, the conservation of fish and wildlife, and the protection of natural resources and conservation of threatened or endangered species.”

The refuge lies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, one of the last remaining nearly intact ecosystems in the northern temperate zone.

The Planning Process

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 requires us to develop a comprehensive conservation plan for each national wildlife refuge. The final plan for the National Elk Refuge is scheduled for completion in 2014 and will guide the management of the refuge for the next 15 years.



Elk

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The planning process for a comprehensive conservation plan is a series of steps including environmental analysis. We encourage and value public involvement throughout the process. Our planning team compiled a list of issues to consider and analyzed management alternatives for the comprehensive conservation plan that would not only address these issues but also meet the purposes, vision, and goals of the refuge.

There are four alternatives analyzed within the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment for the refuge.

After the planning team prepares the final comprehensive conservation plan for publication, a notice of availability will be published in the Federal Register, and copies of the final com-

prehensive conservation plan or accompanying summary will be sent to those on our mailing list.

Issues

The issues for the National Elk Refuge are a compilation of concerns and comments raised by Service staff and the public.

Climate Change and Landscape-Scale Conservation

A broad issue is that the effects of climate change are unknown and may affect habitats throughout landscape, or geographic area. Furthermore, to successfully and effectively manage habitat and wildlife on the refuge, we need to work within a framework of



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Bison Cow and Calf

conservation efforts throughout the landscape—at the level of Jackson Hole and even larger.

Habitat and Wildlife

The refuge supports the preservation of large landscapes that many species require. Browsing by elk and bison, however, has reduced the spatial extent and structural complexity of some woody plant communities, and invasive plants are replacing native habitat in some areas.

A balance among the needs of all species must be struck. Our ability to make effective management decisions for the refuge requires more information about the condition of habitat and wildlife, their interactions, and their responses to climate, humans, and management activity.

Visitor Services

The outstanding scenery, natural resources, and easily visible herds of elk and bison bring multitudes of visitors to Jackson Hole. There is a high and increasing public demand for experiences on the refuge, as well as the adjacent Grand Teton National Park and Bridger-Teton National Forest. We have an increasing need for more outreach, education, and interpretation with the public to explain our “wildlife first” mission and associated management, along with the opportunities a national wildlife refuge brings. Hunting and fishing are not only compatible public uses, they

are important management activities that help us meet elk and bison herd objectives and reduce nonnative fish. As refuge staff continues to work closely with the other land management agencies, managing public access onto and through the refuge continues to be a challenge.

Administration and Partnerships

With an increasing demand for services, we find that we lack the staff, facilities, and money to safely and effectively meet the demand while carrying out critical habitat and wildlife management. We need to set up the interagency visitor center operation to function more efficiently. The refuge could not provide many of the visitor services we do without our dedicated volunteers and strong partnerships with nongovernmental groups and other government agencies.

Goals

The draft plan and environmental assessment gives the public a chance to review and comment on our evaluation of management alternatives to meet the following refuge goals.

Habitat and Wildlife Management

Adaptively manage bison, elk, and other wildlife populations and habitats as outlined in the Bison and Elk Management Plan. Contribute to the conservation of healthy native wildlife

populations and their habitats. Restore and sustain a native fishery that provides quality fishing opportunities.

Cultural Resources

Preserve and interpret cultural resources in a way that allows visitors to connect to the area’s rich history and conservation heritage.

Visitor Services

Enable a diverse audience to understand and appreciate the refuge’s wildlife conservation role in Jackson Hole, while safely enjoying year-round opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation.

Visitor and Employee Safety and Resource Protection

Provide for the safety, security, and protection of visitors, employees, natural and cultural resources, and facilities throughout the refuge.

Administration

Provide facilities and effectively use and develop staff resources, funding, partnerships, and volunteer opportunities to maintain the long-term integrity of habitats and wildlife resources of the refuge.

Alternatives

The draft plan and environmental assessment contains four alternatives, including alternative A, the no-action alternative, which describes current management and serves as the basis for comparison with the other alternatives. The others are as follows:

- Alternative B (enhanced public use and intensive resource management) increases wildlife-dependent opportunities in hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation. Wildlife and habitat management would enhance the quantity and quality of forage for elk and bison, manage sagebrush habitat to support sage-grouse, improve habitat for trumpeter swans, and improve riparian and stream habitat for aquatic species.

- Alternative C (promote intact ecosystems and natural processes) would focus management efforts on enhancing natural processes and supporting the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, one of the largest relatively intact ecosystems on the planet. Public use would emphasize education and outreach programs that occur off of the refuge over direct recreational opportunities on the refuge.

- Alternative D (proposed action) is a blended alternative that contains elements from alternatives B and C. It emphasizes expanding wildlife-dependent public uses similar to alternative B. Wildlife and habitat management would return some

areas to their natural state to preserve intact native plant communities, though not to the extent as under alternative C.

Proposed Action

Of the four alternatives considered in the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment, alternative D was found to best serve refuge goals.

With the proposed action we would strike a balance between promoting natural processes, as featured in alternative C, and conducting planned management actions, as featured in alternative B. Keeping some areas undeveloped, we would increase development in other areas to enhance visitor services, which would emphasize



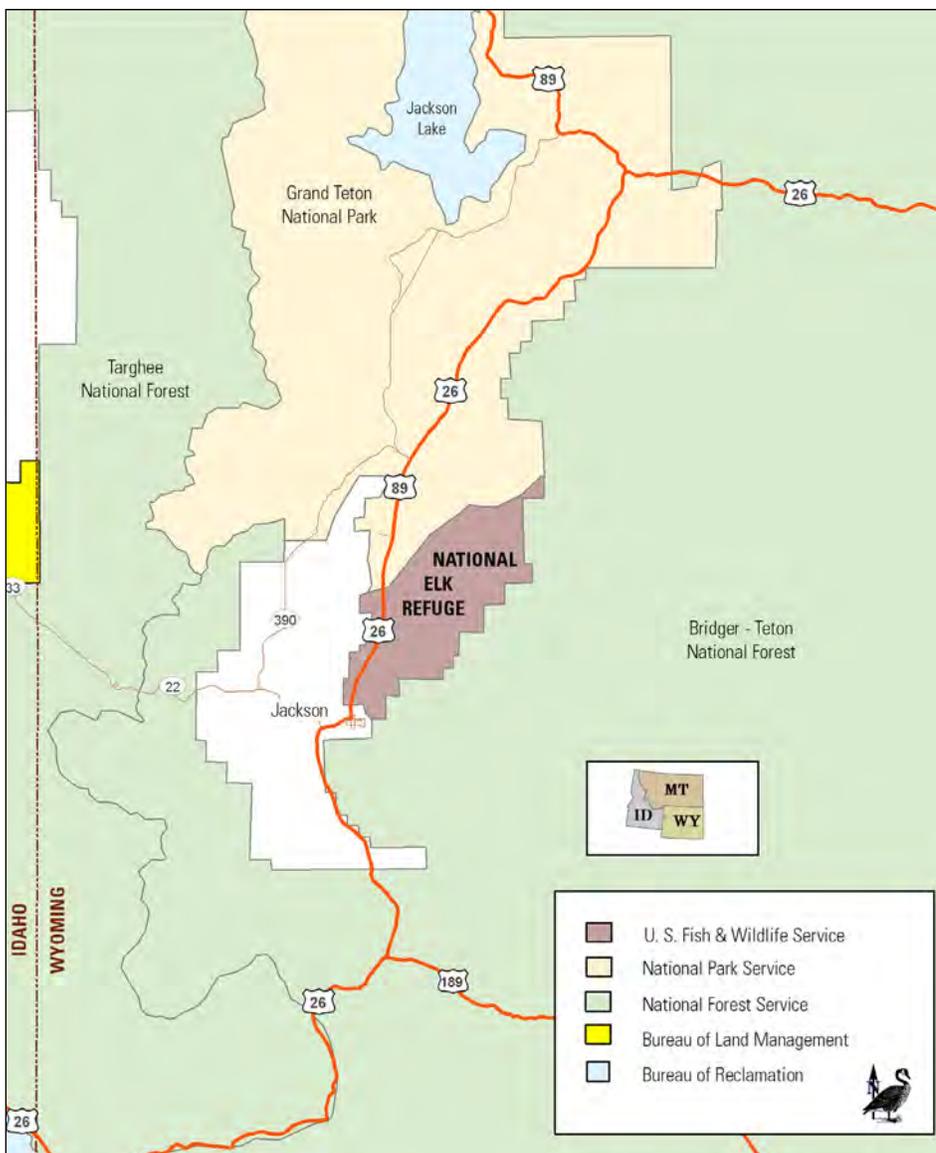
FWS / Ann Hough

Indian Paintbrush

outreach, interpretation, and education.

Key points in the proposed action include:

- Native grasslands and sagebrush shrublands would emphasize a mix of age and structural classes that are representative of historical conditions. Dense mature stands of sagebrush would be protected from fire while prescribed fire may be used to improve adjacent grasslands for brood habitat to benefit greater-sage grouse.
- Wetlands would be managed to enhance habitat for trumpeter swans.
- The Flat Creek Enhancement project, in partnership with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and other conservation partners, would restore channel form and function over 3 stream miles. It would remove inappropriate instream structures and construct stable channel morphology to improve stream processes and increase habitat for Snake River cutthroat trout. The second stage of the project is planned to begin in 2015.





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Elk viewed from sleigh ride on the refuge.

- The Miller Ranch would be maintained and restored to provide interpretation opportunities for the public.
- Hunting and fishing opportunities for youth would be expanded and a hunter mentoring program would be developed. The refuge would increase hunting opportunities which could include a limited bull elk hunt.
- Wildlife observation and photography opportunities would be increased with the development of an accessible boardwalk and photo blind in wetlands near the visitor center, the installation of inter-

pretive panels along the North Highway 89 Pathway, and the development of a self-guided interpretive route on Elk Refuge Road.

- The visitor center would be rehabilitated, expanded, or replaced with a new visitor center.
- Commercial uses such as guiding fishing, wildlife tours via private companies, and horseback riding may be limited or phased out.

400 East Snow King Avenue
Jackson, Wyoming

Submit Comments Online

- <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/ccp/wy/ner/ner.html>

Submit Comments by Email

- refuge_ccps@fws.gov

Submit Comments by Mail

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Attention: Toni Griffin
Division of Refuge Planning
134 Union Blvd., Suite 300
Lakewood, CO 80228

Next Steps and How to Provide Comments

Our next step is to seek out your participation during a public review of the draft plan. There are several ways in which you can participate in the process.

Attend Our Public Meeting

We will hold one public meeting to discuss this plan:

- Thursday, September 25, 2014
6 p.m. to 8 p.m.
Snow King Resort
Summit Room Two

The deadline for submitting comments is October 9, 2014. All comments from the public and interested groups will be placed in the administrative record and will be made available for public viewing.

Contact Information

To learn more about the refuge please visit our Web site:

www.fws.gov/refuge/national_elk_refuge

You may also reach staff by telephone at
307 /733 9212

