

# Planning Update

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

Issue 4, January 2009



Last fall, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service held seven meetings across Montana to gather input on the draft alternatives.

USFWS

## Comment Period Concludes

Thanks to all of you who participated in the September 2008 public workshops and to those who submitted written comments on the draft alternatives. Although the National Environmental Policy Act did not require us to hold public meetings during this stage of planning, we felt it was important to keep everyone informed on our progress and to solicit feedback on the draft alternatives. We value the public input that we received, and we will consider your suggestions as we start writing the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental impact statement (CCP and EIS) for managing Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) including UL Bend NWR (a refuge within a refuge).

In this issue, we briefly summarize the meetings and comments. We look forward to the next round of discussions, which will occur when the draft CCP and EIS is published in 2010.

## Qualities of the Refuge

Many people shared their heartfelt thoughts and opinions, including criticisms and praise of the Service. While too numerous to print all of them, we noted two that spoke about the value of habitat and wildlife and the importance of the refuge in their lives:

*“We as ranchers also note the importance of the beauty and the wildlife. We spend more time on the refuge than any other people. We enjoy hunting, wildlife viewing, photographing wildlife, and recreating as well. We invite friends and family from all locations throughout the U.S. to see the wildlife and other beauties of the refuge.”*

*“I support the Service for extending and maintaining the integrity of the wilderness areas within the refuge. The prairie, especially the refuge, is a jewel among wilderness areas and deserves protection for present and future generations. As a Montanan, I value the natural habitats that offer refuge, not for just the wildlife, but for the citizenship that visit and revel in its beauty. It is a sanctuary that deserves to be maintained, protected, and shared.”*

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# Summary of Public Outreach and Response

## Presentation of the Alternatives

In early August, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service presented four draft management alternatives as part of the development of the CCP and EIS. The alternatives had different approaches for addressing wildlife and habitat management and for providing for public use. The Service used a number of ways to inform the public including mailing more than 700 planning updates, sending a press release to 270 media outlets, advertising in local newspapers, and holding public meetings. A complete description of the actions in the alternatives can be found on the project website ([www.fws.gov/cmrr/planning](http://www.fws.gov/cmrr/planning) [planning update, August 2008]). The following narratives describe the emphasis of each of the alternatives.

### *Alternative A—No Action*

Maintain existing wildlife population goals, wildlife habitat management wildlife-dependent public uses, and economic uses (those uses having economic benefits such as grazing, ecotourism, and outfitting).

### *Alternative B—Wildlife and Habitat Emphasis*

Manage the landscape, in cooperation with our partners, to emphasize the abundance and diversity of wildlife populations using both balanced natural ecological processes such as fire and grazing and browsing by wildlife, and responsible active management such as farming or tree planting. Encourage wildlife-dependent public uses, and limit economic uses when they compete with wildlife for habitat resources.



Brian Haugen/USFWS

*The Service received many comments about public access and hunting.*

### *Alternative C—Public Use and Economic Emphasis*

In cooperation with our partners, manage the landscape to emphasize and promote maximum compatible wildlife-dependent public uses and economic uses while protecting wildlife populations and habitats to the extent possible. Minimize damaging impacts to wildlife habitats while using a variety of management tools to enhance diverse public and economic opportunities.

### *Alternative D—Ecological Processes Emphasis (Draft Proposed Action)*

In cooperation with our partners, use natural dynamic ecological processes and active management in a balanced, responsible manner to restore and maintain the biological diversity, biological integrity, and environmental health. Once natural processes are restored, a passive management approach is adopted. Provide for quality

wildlife-dependent public uses and experiences. Manage (or limit) economic uses when they are injurious to ecological processes.

## Public Response

In September 2008, 188 people attended one or more of the seven public meetings held across Montana. In addition, 284 agencies, organizations, and stakeholders submitted written responses (letters, form letters, emails, and comment sheets provided at the meetings). The Service received 123 form letters similar in content from two sources. An action alert by the Montana Wilderness Association generated many individual letters and emails. In addition, 26 agencies and organizations submitted written letters. A summary of the public comments can be downloaded from the project website ([www.fws.gov/cmrr/planning](http://www.fws.gov/cmrr/planning)).



*Clouds settle into the forested coulees of the refuge.*

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# Summary of Comments

Commenters expressed highly varied opinions in support of or opposition to a range of topics including alternative preferences, habitat and wildlife management, prescriptive livestock grazing, wilderness, wildlife reintroductions, public access, roads, commercial recreation, interior fencing, water development, and prescribed fire. The Service considers all opinions, but we have highlighted a small sampling of the comments by topic that provided ideas for changing the alternatives, suggested a different alternative, and raised questions.

## Alternatives

- Perceptions about the alternatives could be based on the alternative labels even though the alternative themes are not mutually exclusive.
- Passive and active management approaches need to be better described.
- The term “manage for ecological processes” is difficult to comprehend, and on a watershed basis, the refuge should recognize the limits of its management area.
- An alternative is needed that focuses only on sharp-tailed grouse, pronghorn, and cattle grazing in accordance with the executive order.
- Only alternative C addresses constructed water sources for livestock. How will water be managed under all alternatives?

## Livestock Grazing

- How ranchers could plan for the future with a prescriptive grazing program is a concern. The Service needs to work with permittees to establish a 5-year plan.
- What is prescriptive grazing? How will it be used in conjunction with patch burning? How will it affect the local economy, and how will it improve habitat for the core mission of the Service?
- Livestock grazing in riparian areas, and whether areas are meeting habitat objectives, needs to be addressed.

## Habitat and Wildlife Management

- Clarification is needed on what is meant by enhanced and improved habitat and restoring biological diversity and ecological processes.

- Alternatives need to clarify how wildlife management will differ from the state program.
- Are there any totally contained spring creeks within the refuge? How should these mini-watersheds be restored?
- Riparian areas, watersheds, and water supplies need to be mapped, with identification of those that are not functioning.
- Is the use of sentinel plant monitoring a research-based, scientifically approved method for managing the refuge? (A sentinel plant, preferred by wildlife and livestock, receives heavy grazing pressure and is the first species to decline.)
- Key parameters and strategies need to be identified for improving habitat for declining grassland birds.



Randy Matchett/USFWS

Commenters voiced diverse opinions about predator management. This mountain lion was observed at the refuge in 2008.

## Reintroductions

- If bison were reintroduced, how would the refuge manage the spread of disease and control a free-roaming herd? How would this herd fit into a heavily foraged basin?
- Why does alternative C focus on only one reintroduced species (bighorn sheep)?



Neil Kadmas/USFWS

Bighorn sheep graze during late fall. Several alternatives would evaluate expanding the population.

## Public Use and Roads

- Can the refuge afford its road system? There needs to be an evaluation of the arterial system needed to accomplish the objectives.
- There is only one place to launch a boat when it is wet—James Kipp Recreation Area.
- Bicycle use on roads needs to be addressed. Bikes should be allowed, like hand carts, for game retrieval.
- Better all-season roads could be provided in exchange for seasonally closed roads.
- Roads that make loops need to be considered.
- The quality and quantity of roads accessible to the elderly, persons with disabilities, and the general public need to be considered.
- If boats are becoming an issue, the specific issue needs to be determined and reasonable limitations need to be applied.
- Multi-generational use of the refuge is desired. There needs to be designated sites such as waterfowl areas, fishing areas, and boat ramps.

## Wilderness

- The two proposed wildernesses around Beauchamp Creek and Garden Coulee could easily be managed as one if road 201 was rerouted or closed. There may be similar opportunities on other areas of the refuge.

## Changes to the Alternatives

The Service will continue to evaluate the issues and determine if the alternatives should be revised before publication of the draft CCP and EIS.

## Definitions

Many people had questions about terms we used in the alternatives. The actions and implications of these management tools will be detailed in the draft CCP and EIS.

### Prescriptive Grazing

The controlled harvest of vegetation, using grazing or browsing animals with the intent to achieve a desired outcome (objective), is called prescriptive grazing. This could include improving the health and vigor of selected plants to maintain a stable and desired plant community, improve or maintain wildlife health, improve water quality and quantity, reduce erosion, or improve soil conditions.

### Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fire is the skillful application of fire to natural fuels under conditions such as weather, fuel moisture, and soil moisture that allow confinement of the fire to a predetermined area and produce the intensity of heat and rate of spread to accomplish one or more objectives for habitat management, wildlife management, or hazard reduction.

### Passive Management

This approach allows for natural processes such as fire, grazing, and flooding to occur with little human assistance or funding, which conserves limited funds while increasing the likelihood of self-sustaining communities.

### Active Management

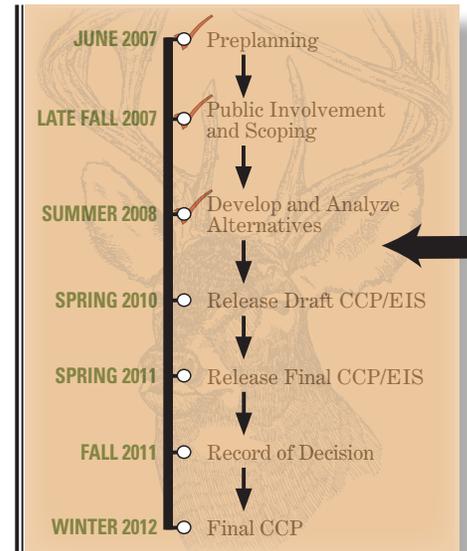
The direct manipulation of habitats or wildlife populations to achieve specific objectives is considered active management. Actions could include planting food plots, managing water levels, grazing, prescribed burns, or wildlife relocations.

### Patch Burning

Patch burning is the use of prescribed fire each year in a different location (patch) within a larger unfenced landscape. With an ecology-driven purpose, patch burning has high potential to increase biodiversity and wildlife habitat. This management practice creates a mosaic of heavily grazed and lightly grazed areas that provide a diverse vegetative structure and increase diversity in the same grazing unit.

## Next Steps

### Project Timeline



The Service is continuing to evaluate the alternatives. The next phase of planning involves writing detailed objectives and strategies, and then analyzing the environmental effects of each alternative. We will provide more information as the process evolves.

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Dan Harrel/USFWS

*Silver buffaloberry is an important plant for many wildlife species.*

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**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**



