

# Planning Update

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

Issue 6, May 2012

### Final Plan Available

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is pleased to release the final comprehensive conservation plan and environmental impact statement (CCP and EIS) for the Charles M. Russell and UL Bend National Wildlife Refuges (together referred to as “the refuge”). Volume 1 is the final CCP and EIS, and volume 2 contains comments and responses on the draft CCP and EIS. To find out how you can get a copy of these documents, refer to “Contact Information” on the last page of this update.

Thank you to all who submitted comments on the draft CCP and EIS. The Service appreciated that many of you attended the public meetings we held in fall 2010. We left the meetings with a better understanding of your concerns. After evaluating the comments, we made some changes in the final CCP and EIS.

For a refresher on what we proposed in the draft CCP and EIS, please visit our Web site to find the complete document or a summary in Planning



*The public meetings about the draft plan were well attended and lively.*

Update 5 (refer to “Contact Information” on the last page of this update).

This planning update summarizes the public comment process, the four alternatives considered for management of the refuge, the significant changes made in the final plan, and the next steps of the planning process.

### Public Comment Overview

The draft CCP and EIS was released to the public September 7, 2010, for a 60-day comment period, which was extended to December 10, 2010. In late September and early October 2010, we held seven public meetings across Montana, which were attended by 312 people. Court reporters recorded the meetings, and transcripts from those meetings are in volume 2 of the final CCP and EIS.

During the comment period, we received nearly 20,600 comments from individuals, organizations, and agencies.

#### Issues

The public’s key concerns and issues centered on the following topics:

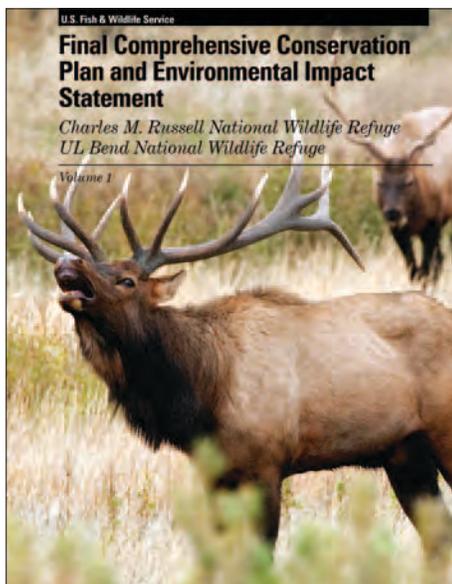
- Wilderness designation
- Bison restoration

- Roads
- Big game hunting objectives
- Prescriptive grazing
- Minerals and land acquisition
- Water, air quality, and climate change
- Legal mandates

#### Responses to Comments

We evaluated all of the comments and developed responses to the substantive comments. As defined by the National Environmental Policy Act, substantive issues are those that (1) question, with reasonable basis, the accuracy of the information in the document or the adequacy of the environmental analysis; (2) present reasonable alternatives other than those presented in the EIS; or (3) cause changes or revisions to the proposal. In some instances, we opted to respond to nonsubstantive comments where the public displayed a strong interest.

The Service responses to the comments are in volume 2 of the final CCP and EIS. This volume has (1) copies of letters submitted by Federal, State, and local agencies and nonprofit organizations with Service responses; (2) a summary of comments made by individuals followed by Service responses; and (3) the public meeting transcripts.



## Alternatives

The Service developed four alternatives during the planning process and analyzed them in detail in the environmental impact statement. Key actions for each alternative are briefly described below.

### *Alternative A—No Action*

Few changes would occur in the management of existing wildlife populations and habitat. Wildlife-dependent public uses and economic uses would continue at current levels. There would be a continued emphasis on big game management, annual livestock grazing, using fencing for pastures, control of invasive species, and water development.

- Big game would be managed to achieve target levels found in the 1986 environmental impact statement and record of decision.
- Habitats would continue to be managed in the 65 habitat units that were established by the Bureau of Land Management for grazing. Prescriptive grazing would be implemented gradually as units became available and habitat evaluations were completed.
- Select stock ponds would be maintained and rehabilitated.
- Riparian habitat would be restored where possible and standard watershed management practices would be enforced.
- Access would be allowed on 670 miles of roads.
- About 155,288 acres of proposed wilderness within 15 units of the Charles M. Russell Refuge would be managed in accordance with Service policies. The UL Bend Wilderness would remain protected.

### *Alternative B—Wildlife Population Emphasis*

The Service would manage the landscape, in cooperation with our partners, to emphasize the abundance of wildlife populations using balance natural ecological processes such as fire, herbivory by wild ungulates, responsible farming practices, and tree planting. Wildlife-dependent public uses would be encouraged, and economic uses would be limited when they compete for habitat resources.

- The Service would actively manage and manipulate habitat, thus creating a diverse plant community of highly productive wildlife food and cover plants. The management emphasis would be on habitat for targeted wildlife species, including focal bird species, in separate parts of the refuge.
- The Service would consolidate the 65 habitat units. Subsequently, the refuge staff would write new habitat management plans based on field station boundaries and habitat evaluation for target species.
- About 106 miles of roads would be closed to reduce habitat fragmentation and increase wildlife security.
- The Service would expand wilderness protection on 25,869 acres of existing wilderness units.



*Black-footed Ferret*

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

The Service would manage the landscape, in cooperation with our partners, to emphasize and promote maximum, compatible levels of wildlife-dependent uses and economic uses while protecting wildlife populations and habitat to the extent possible. Damaging effects on wildlife habitats would be minimized while using a variety of management tools to enhance and diversify public and economic opportunities.

- In addition to the habitat elements found in alternative A, the Service would generally manage habitats to provide more opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation. In places, management of plant communities could require some compromises between providing for wildlife food and cover and livestock needs (more focus on grasses).
- Where needed, fencing and water gaps would be used to manage livestock use and prevent further degradation of riparian habitat.
- No roads would be closed, and several existing roads could be improved (gravelled).
- Wilderness units would not be expanded.

### *Alternative D—Ecological Processes Emphasis (Preferred Alternative)*

In cooperation with our partners, the Service would use natural, dynamic, ecological processes and management activities in a balanced, responsible manner to restore and maintain the biological diversity, biological integrity, and environmental health of the refuge. Once natural processes were restored, a more passive approach (less human assistance) would be favored. There would be quality wildlife-dependent public uses and experiences. Economic uses would be limited when they were injurious to ecological processes.

- Where feasible the Service would apply management practices that mimic and restore natural processes, managing for a diversity of plant and wildlife species in uplands and riparian areas.
- About 21 miles of roads would be closed, and 15 miles of roads would be seasonally closed including 13 miles on the north side that would be designated as game-retrieval roads during hunting season. Other considerations would be improvements to road 209 (Knox Ridge), winter fishing access, and other wildlife-viewing opportunities.
- The Service would expand wilderness protection on 19,942 acres of existing wilderness.

## Changes Made in the Final CCP and EIS

As a result of public comment on the draft CCP and EIS, we made the following significant changes in final CCP and EIS.

### *Wilderness*

We clarified that the proposed additions to the existing proposed wilderness areas would become wilderness study areas.

In addition, we determined that there is not sufficient justification for recommending the removal of any existing proposed wilderness as previously considered in alternatives C and D. As a result, the acreage for the wilderness study areas in alternative B was changed to 25,869 acres and in alternative D to 19,942 acres.

### *Roads*

We made several changes to alternative D including changing road 315 in Petroleum County to a seasonal closure (from a permanent closure as identified in the draft EIS).

We also identified 13 miles of roads to be closed seasonally during hunting season in Valley County (roads 331, 332, 333, and 440). These roads would be opened for several hours each day for game retrieval only. This would encourage free movement of wildlife and permit effective harvest of ungulates while allowing access for hunters who are not physically able to carry out their game over the rugged terrain found on the refuge.



*Mountain Lion*

### *Wildlife Objectives*

We adjusted and clarified that the objectives for big game in alternative D would meet or exceed the objectives approved in State plans. Refuge-specific objectives for abundance and population composition would be tailored to regional habitat conditions, productivity, and other considerations including functioning ecosystem processes, biological integrity, and high-quality hunting opportunities and experiences.

### *Habitat Objectives and Strategies*

We expanded our discussion about the use of prescriptive grazing. Under all alternatives, we will continue to tran-

sition toward implementing prescriptive grazing and reducing annual grazing. This transition has been occurring over 20 years and is consistent with Service policy. The alternatives vary on how quickly this would occur.

We expanded the discussion on our plant monitoring efforts.

We also clarified the number of miles of streams that would be improved as a result of restoration efforts.

### *Focal Bird Species*

We identified focal bird species for three of the refuge's broad habitat categories—uplands, river bottoms, and riparian areas. We would tie the plant monitoring in alternative D, and to a lesser extent in alternative B, to monitoring of focal bird species on the refuge.

Previously, we identified several birds as potential sentinel bird species. To be more consistent with the terminology used by other Service programs, we have changed “sentinel” to “focal” bird species and expanded our discussion about the importance of these species on the refuge.

### *Other Topics*

We made several clarifications or expanded the discussion on other topics including minerals, land acquisition, water, air quality, climate change, and our legal mandates.



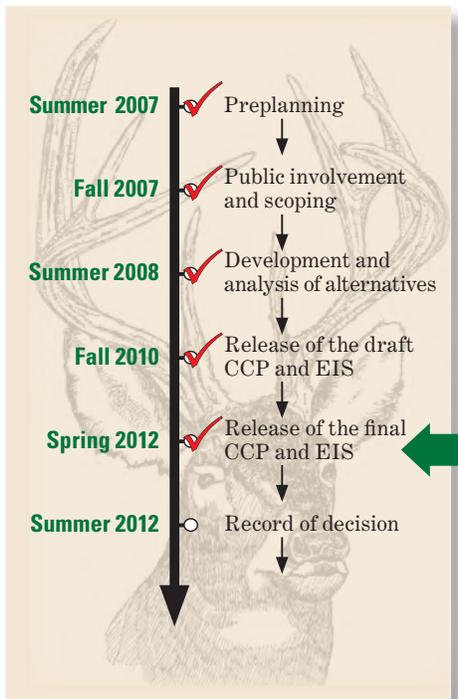
*Greater sage-grouse is a focal bird species for the refuge.*

## Next Steps

There is not a formal comment period for the final CCP and EIS. The Service's final decision will be documented in a record of decision published in the Federal Register no sooner than 30 days after filing the final EIS and CCP with the Environmental Protection Agency.

A final standalone CCP (including the record of decision), will then be published. This final plan does not constitute a commitment for funding, and future budgets could influence implementation priorities.

## Project Timeline



## Contact Information

### *For a Copy of the Plan*

- Download the final CCP and EIS from our Web site:  
[www.fws.gov/cmr/planning](http://www.fws.gov/cmr/planning)
- Request a compact disc of the plan, a paper copy of the executive summary, or a paper copy of the plan (quantities limited):  
[www.fws.gov/cmr/planning](http://www.fws.gov/cmr/planning)
- Send an email: [cmrplanning@fws.gov](mailto:cmrplanning@fws.gov)
- Contact the planning team leader:  
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### *Refuge Information*

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**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**



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