

CHAPTER 3—Comments from Individuals

The Service tracked the number of individuals who expressed each type of comment and responded to those that were substantive and of strong public interest. This chapter includes general responses to individual comments, which are grouped by topic in table 1. The number of comments received does not include form letters, which are addressed after the table under “Summary of Form Letters.” The Service reviewed all supporting attachments; however, such attachments are not included in this volume.

How to Find Responses to Individual Comments

All of the comment codes and the number of individual comments that contained each code are in table 1.

- Comments are organized by topic in table 1, with each comment assigned a corresponding number.
- Comment code numbers identified with bold text and an asterisk are considered to be substantive and received a response.
- Look up the comment code in table 1 for the comment of interest.
- Find the Service’s responses to substantive comments, each arranged by comment code and followed by a response, beginning on page 315.

Comment codes are not sequential because not all comment codes were used. Some comments have been summarized and paraphrased.

Most Common Concerns or Issues

The 10 most common concerns or issues expressed in the individual comments (not including form letters) were:

1. Support of expanded wilderness designation (comment code number 3402)
2. Opposition to removal of proposed wilderness (3404)
3. Support for managing the refuge for wildlife because the refuge is not intended for multiple use (1106)
4. Editorial suggestions or errors in the document (5205)
5. Support of general wildlife restoration and protection (3247)
6. Support of alternative B (3021)
7. Support of expansion of prescriptive grazing and reduction in livestock (3112)
8. Advocacy for road closures and reduced motorized vehicle access (3322)
9. Support of the no-action alternative (3011)
10. General habitat and wildlife management (3102)

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
Purpose and need—national and regional mandates and plans			
<i>1101</i>	Comment about conformance with existing policies, mandates, or plans	4	<1%
<i>1102*</i>	Specific substantive comment about existing policies, mandates, and plans	3	<1%
<i>1103</i>	Comment about the authority and responsibilities of the Service	8	<1%
<i>1105</i>	Comment that the refuge should be managed as a multiuse resource	7	<1%
<i>1106</i>	Comment that the refuge should be managed for wildlife and is not intended for multiple use	85	9%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
1107*	Comment that the Service is allowing Service policies to be influenced by other agencies and stakeholders	3	<1%
Scope of the analysis and issues not addressed			
1222*	Comment that the CCP and EIS should analyze the effects of mineral withdrawal	1	<1%
1224	Comment supporting mineral withdrawal and prohibition of mineral activity on the refuge	27	3%
1225*	Comment that mineral rights on the refuge should be opened to leasing	3	<1%
1226*	Comment that the EIS should analyze the economic effects of mineral withdrawal	2	<1%
1232	General comment about the management of water levels on Fort Peck Lake	1	<1%
1241*	Specific substantive comment about grazing fees, permits, and AUMs	2	<1%
1242	General comment opposing Service grazing policies	8	<1%
1243	Comment opposing increases in grazing fees	4	<1%
1244	Comment opposing livestock grazing on public land	2	<1%
1245	Comment supporting elimination of all grazing in the Charles M. Russell Refuge	5	<1%
1246	Comment supporting historical AUMs for grazing	1	<1%
1247*	Comment that grazing fees should be part of the CCP process	1	<1%
1248	Comment supporting grazing at current levels	6	<1%
1253	Comment opposing the Service's revenue sharing practices	2	<1%
1262*	Comment that the CCP and EIS should address and validate R.S. 2447 and petitioned roads	4	<1%
Refuge history			
2001	General comment about refuge history	6	<1%
2002*	Specific substantive comment about refuge history	1	<1%
2003	Comment about management history	6	<1%
Refuge vision and goals			
2101	General comment about refuge vision and goals	3	<1%
2102*	Specific substantive comment about vision and goals	1	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
Alternatives			
3001	General comment about alternatives	5	<1%
3002*	Specific substantive comment about alternatives	4	<1%
3003	Comment that the range of alternatives is too narrow	4	<1%
3004	Comment suggesting a new alternative	2	<1%
3005	Comment opposed to all alternatives	5	<1%
Alternative A—no-action			
3011	Comment in support of the no-action alternative	31	3%
3012	Comment opposed to the no-action alternative	3	<1%
Alternative B—wildlife and habitat emphasis			
3021	Comment in support of alternative B	39	4%
3022	Comment opposed to alternative B	1	<1%
3023	Comment in support of alternative B with modifications	1	<1%
Alternative C—public use and economic use emphasis			
3031	Comment in support of alternative C	8	<1%
3032	Comment opposed to alternative C	4	<1%
Alternative D—ecological processes emphasis			
3041	Comment in support of alternative D	20	2%
3042	Comment opposed to alternative D	6	<1%
3043	Comment in support of alternative D with modifications	12	1%
Alternative objective preferences			
3051	Comment preferring upland habitat and grazing objectives in alternative D	2	<1%
3052	Comment preferring wilderness objectives in alternative B	24	3%
3053	Comment preferring road closure and access objectives in alternative B	18	2%
3056	Comment preferring the mineral development objectives from alternative A	2	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
Habitat management objectives			
3101*	Specific substantive comment about habitat and wildlife management	10	1%
3102	General comment about habitat and wildlife management	28	3%
3103	General comment opposing the Service's habitat and wildlife management	7	<1%
3104	General comment supporting plant and habitat diversity	10	1%
3105	Comment supporting plant and habitat restoration	1	<1%
3110	Comment about upland habitat management	3	<1%
3111*	Specific substantive comment about proposed upland habitat management	15	2%
3112	Comment supporting expansion of prescriptive grazing and reduction in livestock	38	4%
3113	Comment opposed to the expansion of prescriptive grazing	14	2%
3114	Comment that reduced grazing will result in additional large-scale wildfires	1	<1%
3115	Comment that it will be difficult to secure and maintain prescriptive grazing lessees	3	<1%
3116*	Comment that the scientific evidence to support proposed management changes is insufficient	9	<1%
3117	Comment supporting the removal of interior fences	21	2%
3118	Comment opposed to the removal of interior fences	6	<1%
3119*	Comment questioning the validity of sentinel plant assumptions	5	<1%
3120	Comment supporting the sentinel species approach to management	3	<1%
3121	Specific suggestion regarding upland habitat management	7	<1%
3131	General comment about river bottom habitat management	1	<1%
3133	Comment supporting river bottom restoration	1	<1%
3141	General comment about riparian and wetland habitat management	2	<1%
3142*	Specific substantive comment about riparian and wetland habitat management	4	<1%
3143	Comment supporting the removal of upland reservoirs and stock ponds	1	<1%
3144	Comment opposed to the removal of upland reservoirs and stock ponds	1	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
3145	Comment supporting fencing to exclude livestock from riparian habitats	1	<1%
3160	Comment about fire management	1	<1%
3161*	Specific substantive comment about fire management	16	2%
3162	Comment supporting the use of fire (prescribed or otherwise) as a management tool	27	3%
3163	Comment opposing use of fire (prescribed or otherwise) as a management tool	11	<1%
3164	Comment that grazing is important in limiting wildfires	7	<1%
3165	Comment opposed to prescribed fire because of air quality and climate change concerns	5	<1%
3166*	Comment that the CCP and EIS is lacking detailed information about the impacts of fire management.	1	<1%
3171	General comment about noxious weed management	5	<1%
3173	Comment that the proposed noxious weed management approaches are insufficient	5	<1%
3174	Comment that the Service should coordinate with ranchers on noxious weed management	1	<1%
3175	Comment that the use of prescribed fire will result in the spread of noxious weeds	3	<1%
Wildlife management objectives			
3211	General comment about big game management	5	<1%
3212*	Specific substantive comment about big game management	6	<1%
3215	Comment supporting bighorn sheep restoration	5	<1%
3216*	Specific suggestion regarding big game management	21	2%
3231*	Specific substantive comment about furbearer and predator management	2	<1%
3232	Comment supporting predator control or hunting on the refuge	7	<1%
3233	Comment opposing predator control or hunting on the refuge	10	1%
3234	Comment supporting swift fox reintroduction	1	<1%
3235	Specific suggestion regarding furbearer or predator management	4	<1%
3240	Comment about species reintroduction	1	<1%
3241*	Specific substantive comment about wildlife species restoration	4	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
3242	Comment opposed to any species reintroduction on the refuge	4	<1%
3243	Comment supporting bison restoration on the refuge	21	2%
3244	Comment opposed to bison restoration on the refuge	12	1%
3245	Comment opposed to wolf populations on the refuge	5	<1%
3246	Comment supporting wolf populations on the refuge	2	<1%
3247	Comment supporting general wildlife restoration and protection	58	6%
3248*	Comment opposed to the Service deferring to the State on bison restoration	5	<1%
3249	Comment concerned about reintroduction of wolves and grizzly bears	1	<1%
3250	Comment concerned about bison restoration on the refuge	3	<1%
3251*	Specific substantive comment about bird or other wildlife management	8	<1%
3252	Comment supporting proposed sage-grouse management	2	<1%
3261*	Specific substantive comment about TES and species of concern management	1	<1%
3264	Comment supporting efforts to enhance black-footed ferret populations	1	<1%
Public use and education objectives			
3330	Comment about seasonal road closures	1	<1%
3311*	Specific substantive comment about hunting management and opportunities	4	<1%
3312	General comment about hunting management and opportunities	13	1%
3313	Comment opposed to hunting on the refuge	3	<1%
3321*	Specific substantive comment about access management	9	<1%
3322*	Comment advocating for road closures and reduced motorized vehicle access	31	3%
3324*	Comment supporting road closures to improve habitat security for wildlife	19	2%
3325	Comment opposing road access from adjacent private lands	1	<1%
3326	Comment that refuge roads should be better maintained	1	<1%
3327*	Comment that bicycle access should be further considered and described	2	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
3328	Comment opposing road closures on the refuge	23	3%
3329	Comment supporting more access to river and lake	1	<1%
3331*	Specific substantive comment about recreational use	4	<1%
3332	Comment supporting proposed camping management	1	<1%
3333	Comment opposing proposed camping management	1	<1%
3334*	Comment that road closures limiting access for the elderly and disabled violates ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and other policies	5	<1%
Wilderness objectives			
3401*	Specific substantive comment about wilderness management	3	<1%
3402*	Comment supporting expanded wilderness designation	117	13%
3403*	Comment opposing expanded wilderness designation	14	2%
3404	Comment opposed to removal of proposed wilderness	87	9%
3405	Comment that the Service should implement the 1974 wilderness proposal	4	<1%
3406*	Comment supporting East and West Beachamp and East Hell Creek as wilderness	24	3%
3407	General comment supporting protection of wilderness qualities and values	23	3%
3408	Comment about specific “roadless wilderness” management and administrative closure	1	<1%
3409	Comment about criteria used to determine miles of roads closed	1	<1%
3410	Comment about wilderness management	4	<1%
Refuge operations and partnerships objectives			
3601*	Specific substantive comment about refuge operations and partnerships	10	1%
3602	Comment opposed to additional staff on the refuge	1	<1%
3603	Comment supporting additional staff on the refuge	1	<1%
3604	Comment opposed to the expected costs of CCP implementation	3	<1%
3902	Comment opposing the rationale for eliminating alternatives from further analysis	1	<1%
3905*	Comment that management should be limited to Executive Order 7509 objectives pertaining to sharp-tailed grouse, pronghorn, and livestock	2	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
Affected environment and environmental consequences—elements considered but eliminated from further consideration			
4001*	Specific substantive comment about the affected environment or environmental consequences	1	<1%
4002	General comment about the affected environment and resource values	8	<1%
Physical environment			
4112	Comment supporting strategic plan addressing climate change	4	<1%
4113	Comment about Service policies on climate change	1	<1%
4120	Comment about air quality	1	<1%
4121*	Specific substantive comment about air quality	1	<1%
4131*	Specific substantive comment about visual resources	1	<1%
4160	Comment about water resources management	1	<1%
4161*	Specific substantive comment about water resources	1	<1%
4162	Comment opposing the validity of Federal water rights on the refuge	1	<1%
4163	Comment about the effects of removing water impoundments on private water rights	2	<1%
Biological resources			
4201*	Specific substantive comment about biological resources	7	<1%
4202	Comment about the need for long-term monitoring on the refuge	1	<1%
4203	Comment about the need for additional surveys and studies to establish a baseline of existing conditions	1	<1%
4205	Comment about disturbance factors affecting ecological processes	2	<1%
4206	Comment about the ecological effects of livestock grazing	4	<1%
4207	Comment about the ecological effects of roads and vehicles	7	<1%
4211*	Specific substantive comment about upland habitat resources and analysis	6	1%
4212*	Comment that the Service should use the same methods as other agencies to assess rangeland health	2	<1%
4213	Comment that the implementation of prescriptive grazing will eliminate any livestock grazing	1	<1%
4221*	Specific substantive comment and riparian and wetland habitat resources and analysis	2	<1%
4232	General comment about the effects of noxious weeds	1	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
4233	Comment about the spread of noxious weeds from the refuge onto adjacent lands	6	<1%
4251	Comment about the importance of large habitat blocks for wildlife	2	<1%
4252	Comment about the effects of wildlife depredation on adjacent private lands	4	<1%
4261	Comment that increased predators adversely affect other wildlife populations on and off the refuge	9	1%
4266	Comment supporting free-ranging bison in the refuge	3	<1%
4267	Comment opposing free-ranging bison in the refuge	2	<1%
4271	Comment supporting efforts to protect grassland birds	1	<1%
4272	Comment supporting bird conservation	3	<1%
4280	Comment about threatened and endangered species and species of concern	2	<1%
4281	Comment about need for more protection for sensitive species	1	<1%
4282	Comment supporting biological goals for priority species populations	1	<1%
Special management areas			
4310	Comment about wilderness analysis or effects	2	<1%
Visitor services			
4401*	Specific substantive comment about visitor services	2	<1%
4410	Comment about hunting	1	<1%
4430	Comment about commercial uses on the refuge	2	<1%
4431	Comment opposing commercial uses on the refuge	1	<1%
4456	Comment about need to expand recreation opportunities for visitors with disabilities	1	<1%
4457	Comment about refuge facilities	1	<1%
Human history and cultural resources			
4501*	Specific substantive comment about human history and cultural resources	1	<1%
4510	Comment about prehistoric history	1	<1%
4520	Comment about historical period	1	<1%
Paleontological resources			
4601*	Specific substantive comment about paleontological resources	1	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
4602	Comment about paleontological resources	1	<1%
4603	Comment supporting protecting paleontological resources	1	<1%
Socioeconomics			
4701*	Specific substantive comment about socioeconomics	4	<1%
4702*	Comment that the economic analysis does not accurately represent local conditions and the analysis is flawed	8	<1%
4703	Comment about the economic value of wildlife	7	<1%
4710	Comment about the regional economic setting	3	<1%
4750	Comment about land use and ownership changes surrounding the refuge	5	<1%
4741	Comment that grazing management changes will create an economic hardship for ranchers	10	1%
4742	Comment about lost revenue due to reduced livestock grazing	6	<1%
4743	Comment about the effects of reduced livestock grazing on the local tax base	7	<1%
Refuge operations and partnerships			
4801*	Specific substantive comment about effects from refuge operations, partnerships, or adjacent lands	6	<1%
4802	Comment about the negative effects of refuge management on adjacent State lands	3	<1%
4804	Comment about the negative effects of refuge management on adjacent private lands	6	<1%
4805	Comment advocating for better collaboration between Federal and State land managers in the region	1	<1%
4806	Comment advocating for land swaps with the State to consolidate the refuge	1	<1%
Planning and NEPA processes			
5001*	Specific substantive comment about the planning and NEPA process	2	<1%
5002	General comment about planning and NEPA process	2	<1%
5003*	Comment that the NEPA process has not been adequately followed	3	<1%
5004	General comment that more studies and analysis should be completed	1	<1%
5020	Comment that the Service appears to have already made its decision	1	<1%
Public involvement process			
5101	Comment on the format of public meetings	3	<1%
5104*	Comment that the public involvement process has been inadequate	6	<1%

Table 1. Number of individual comments by grouped comment codes and comment descriptions.

<i>Comment code</i>	<i>Comment description</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>	<i>Percentage of comments</i>
5105	Comment that the public involvement process has been positive and sufficient	1	<1%
5107*	Comment that local and State government coordination has been inadequate	5	<1%
5110	Request that the comment period be extended	9	<1%
Draft CCP and EIS			
5201*	Specific substantive comment about the draft CCP and EIS document	3	<1%
5202	Comment about draft CCP and EIS document	4	<1%
5204*	Comment that the analysis in the draft CCP and EIS is inadequate	4	<1%
5205*	Comment detailing specific editorial suggestions or errors in the document	60	7%
Other comments			
6001	Comment that the Service is unduly influenced by outside interest groups	22	3%
6002	Comment that refuge management should be determined by local communities	7	<1%
6003	Comment that outside organizations do not represent local interests	3	<1%
6100	No comment included	144	16%

Summary of Form Letters

The Service received five types of mass correspondence (form letters) commenting on the DEIS:

- nonaffiliated local communities
- National Wildlife Federation
- The Wilderness Society
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Concerned Citizens for Garfield County

The correspondence received from each source and the comments contained in each are described below. Comments that were added to the standard form letter text were recorded as individual comments. Comments contained in this correspondence that received a response (indicated with bold text and an asterisk in table 1) are described and responded to below under “Responses to Individual Comments.” Some of the comments do not meet the definition of “substantive” (as defined in chapter 1). However, the Service has opted to respond to specific nonsubstantive comments where the public displayed a strong interest.

NONAFFILIATED LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The Service received 120 copies of a form letter with the following comments:

- comment in support of the no-action alternative (comment code number 3011)
- comment supporting expanded wilderness designation (3042)
- comment opposed to bison restoration on the refuge (3244)
- comment concerned about reintroduction of wolves and grizzly bears (3249)
- comment about specific “roadless wilderness” management and administrative closure (3408)
- comment that increased predators adversely affect other wildlife populations on and off the refuge (4261)
- comment about lost revenue due to reduced live-stock grazing (4742)
- comment about the negative effects of refuge management on adjacent private lands (4804)
- comment that the Service is unduly influenced by outside interest groups (6001)

NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

The Service received 11,278 copies of a form letter with the following comments:

- comment in support of alternative D (3041)
- comment supporting expansion of prescriptive grazing and reduction in livestock (3112)
- comment supporting bison restoration on the refuge (3243)
- comment opposed to the Service deferring to the State on bison restoration (3248)
- comment about the ecological effects of livestock grazing (4206)
- general comment opposing Service grazing policies (1242)
- comment opposing increases in grazing fees (1243)
- comment opposing the Service's revenue sharing practices (1253)
- comment in support of the no-action alternative (3011)
- comment opposed to the expansion of prescriptive grazing (3113)
- comment that it will be difficult to secure and maintain prescriptive grazing lessees (3115)
- comment that the scientific evidence to support proposed management changes is insufficient (3116)

THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

The Service received 7,503 copies of a form letter with the following comments:

- comment supporting expanded wilderness designation (3402)
- comment opposed to removal of proposed wilderness (3404)
- general comment supporting protection of wilderness qualities and values (3407)
- comment opposed to the removal of interior fences (3118)
- comment opposed to the removal of upland reservoirs and stock ponds (3144)
- comment that the proposed noxious weed management approaches are insufficient (3173)
- comment opposed to any species reintroduction on the refuge (3242)

DEFENDERS of WILDLIFE

The Service received 694 copies of a form letter with the following comments:

- specific substantive comment about alternatives (3002)
- comment supporting expansion of prescriptive grazing and reduction in livestock (3112)
- comment opposing predator control or hunting on the refuge (3233)
- comment supporting bison restoration on the refuge (3243)
- comment supporting expanded wilderness designation (3402)
- comment opposed to removal of proposed wilderness (3404)
- comment about the historical ecological role of bison in eastern Montana (4268)
- comment opposing expansion of black-tailed prairie dogs (3263)
- comment opposing road closures on the refuge (3328)
- comment opposed to the expected costs of CCP implementation (3604)
- comment about the effects of removing water impoundments on private water rights (4163)
- comment that the Service should use the same methods as other agencies to assess rangeland health (4212)
- comment that increased predators adversely affect other wildlife populations on and off the refuge (4261)
- comment that grazing management changes will create an economic hardship for ranchers (4741)
- comment about the negative effects of refuge management on adjacent State lands (4802)
- comment about the negative effects of refuge management on adjacent BLM lands (4803)
- comment about the negative effects of refuge management on adjacent private lands (4804)
- comment that the Service is unduly influenced by outside interest groups (6001)

CONCERNED CITIZENS for GARFIELD COUNTY

The Service received 32 copies of a form letter with the following comments:

- comment that the refuge should be managed as a multiuse resource (1105)

Responses to Individual Comments

1000—Purpose and Need

COMMENT 1102: Specific substantive comment about existing policies, mandates, and plans (specific text)

Comment 1102a. *If the biologic integrity policy and improvement act of 1997 supersedes EO 7509, why do you list the details of EO 7509 under the refuge purposes?*

Response 1102a. As described in the DEIS (pages 2–5, Section 1.1. and 1.2), the purpose for any national wildlife refuge may come from one or more authorities. Each national wildlife refuge shall be managed to fulfill the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, as well as the specific purposes of the refuges. The biological integrity was a policy document that stemmed from passage of the Improvement Act.

Comment 1102b. *All the enabling documents in the game range and the wildlife refuge contain the savings provision...which says, “Subject to valid pre-existing rights, (FWS) has historically ignored and continues to ignore the existence of private rights.” That would include grazing rights.*

Response 1102b. Executive Order 7509 allowed a provision for forage resources to be available for domestic livestock grazing only to the extent it remains “compatible with the utilization of said lands for the purposes for which they were acquired.” The Service has never taken a privately held right nor is there any intention to do so. On refuge lands, livestock grazing is a privilege and not a property right.

Comment 1102c. *Regarding the Federal Land Policy Management Act: You must report any management decision or action...to both houses of Congress, and it is debated with no amendments allowed if any multiple uses are taken away in the new EIS/RMP for the CMR.*

Response 1102c. Unlike the BLM, national wildlife refuges are not managed for multiple uses and are not subject to the Federal Land Policy Management Act. The Service manages the refuge, and this CCP planning process is pursuant to the Improvement Act and other laws and policies.

COMMENT 1107: Comment that the Service is allowing Service policies to be influenced by other agencies and stakeholders

Response 1107. The Service is governed by legal mandates on how each refuge is managed. While we strive to work in cooperation with other agencies and stakeholders for the conservation of public lands, proposed actions and decisions made by us are made in accordance with these legal mandates.

COMMENT 1222: Comment that the CCP and EIS should analyze the effects of mineral withdrawal

Response 1222. As stated in the DEIS (page 173), the mineral estate was withdrawn for 20 years on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and permanently on UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge. The Service is seeking another 20-year mineral withdrawal for locatable minerals on the Russell Refuge and we clarified this in the FEIS. It does not apply to leaseable minerals.

Although we are seeking a permanent withdrawal, only the U.S. Congress can make this determination. We have articulated the benefits for the refuge’s biological resources and special area designations through a permanent withdrawal in the FEIS. Since there has never been any mining on the refuge, it would be speculative to describe any impacts to the economy by making the current withdrawal permanent.

COMMENT 1225: Comment that mineral rights on the refuge should be opened to leasing

Response 1225. See response 1222. To our knowledge, there has never been a mineral lease or patented resource on the refuge.

COMMENT 1226: Comment that the EIS should analyze the economic effects of mineral withdrawal

Response 1226. See response 1222.

COMMENT 1241: Specific substantive comment about grazing fees, permits, and animal unit months (AUMs) (specific text)

Comment 1241a. *The FWS fails to understand carrying capacity...The forage requirement of the big game animals greatly exceeds the forage allocation established in the 1986 record of decision. Based on the above relationships, the ability of the FWS to analyze forage production and establish grazing capacities is highly suspect. I strongly recommend that FWS seek outside assistance in conducting rangeland inventories, establishing carrying capacities, and regulating wildlife populations.*

Response 1241a. See response 3116. The refuge is managed for wildlife and not a range. The Service strives to manage the refuge for biological integrity, diversity, and function, rather than rangeland carrying capacity. Monitoring for range health involves looking at the dominant community plants and determining their viability. We work closely with MFWP, who has the primary responsibility in regulating wildlife populations in the State.

COMMENT 1247: Comment that grazing fees should be part of the CCP process

Response 1247. As noted in the DEIS (page 14), grazing fees are determined by Service policy across all States. The fees are based on U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) statistics and are outside the scope of the CCP and EIS.

COMMENT 1262: Comment that the CCP and EIS should address and validate R.S. 2447 and petitioned roads

Response 1262. The role of this CCP is to identify the roads that are necessary for habitat, wildlife management, and public uses. This is consistent with the guidance found in the Improvement Act and the Service's planning policy. While we agree that RS 2447 and petitioned roads are important issues, the CCP is not the tool for resolving them.

2000–Refuge History, Vision, and Goals

COMMENT 2002: Specific substantive comment about Refuge history (specific text)

Comment 2002a. *In Summary on page xvi under Refuge Purposes you state, "In 1936, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order 7509..." EO No. 7509 did not establish CMR NWR. It established the Fort Peck Game Range. There is a vast difference in a game range and a refuge. On Feb. 25, 1963, Fort Peck Game Range became Charles M. Russell Game Range.*

Response 2002a. The Service described the history of the Fort Peck Game Range and its eventual change to a national wildlife refuge in the summary page xvi of the DEIS. The CCP is about managing Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge. Like many national wildlife refuges, it has different authorities.

COMMENT 2102: Specific substantive comment about vision and goals (specific text)

Comment 2102a. *The Vision Statement does not comply with the guidelines, in Part 602 NWRS Planning Handbook.*

Response 2102a. The Service disagrees. The vision statement is consistent with existing policies and guidelines.

3000–Alternatives and Objectives

COMMENT 3002: Specific substantive comment about alternatives (specific text)

Comment 3002a. *This alternative [Alternative P] has been given the letter P because it focuses on partnerships to achieve preservation...Before making radical changes, the Service would first take an inventory of the diversity of habitats on the refuge. This inventory would identify which areas are in need of radical change and which areas need to be protected from change. Working with a variety of partners, but especially with the ranches that have traditionally used the land, the Service would develop management plans that remedy problems without removing ranches from the ecosystem.*

Response 3002a. The singular mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is wildlife conservation, rather than range management, and the habitat objectives are designed to ensure the biological diversity, integrity, and health of the refuge is maintained. We have no intention of removing ranches from the ecosystem, but in order to comply with our legal mandates, we must emphasize the use of prescriptive grazing that is compatible with wildlife habitat conservation. The DEIS does provide substantial detail on refuge issues, goals, objectives, strategies, and the actions we would take in each of the alternative scenarios. We agree that partnerships are important in carrying out the CCP, which is why we discussed the topic in depth (DEIS pages 131–133 and 139). Although we appreciate the ideas that went into outlining alternative P, it does not provide a substantially different alternative to analyze.

Comment 3002b. *There are several thousand acres of DNRC and private land within the boundaries of the refuge. There is no mention of any plan to try and acquire these parcels. Doing a land swap with the DNRC, for a single parcel of land within the refuge would allow the public access to the DNRC land and alleviate the current checker boarding. There should be a goal to accomplish this.*

Response 3002b. The Service buys inholdings from willing sellers, and this would not change in any of the alternatives. Additionally, the actions outlined in the Enhancement Act already provide us with the mechanism for acquiring or exchanging other lands with greater wildlife and public value. Therefore, the

CCP planning process did not need to add a land protection planning component.

Comment 3002c. *The Service could turn over management of the range resource to a committee of agencies with experience and competency in range management. This group would coordinate with the counties. A pilot project could be implemented with one half of each side of the river participating. Trends would be measured after 15 years to determine which group has been most successful. The management of the entire resource would be determined accordingly.*

Response 3002c. The Service has a singular mission based on wildlife and not multiple-use management of rangeland. Turning over management of the wildlife forage resources is not an option for us based on laws, policies, and Federal mandates. Based on the Improvement Act, biological integrity policy (FWS 2001), and the compatibility policy (FWS 2000a), any livestock grazing must be compatible with the refuge's wildlife purposes. Furthermore, it must be a prescriptive grazing program and not simply a continuation of the annual grazing program.

COMMENT 3101: Specific substantive comment about habitat and wildlife management (specific text)

Comment 3101a. *B1–B8 Rationale. Why use station boundaries as Habitat Management Plan (HMP) boundaries' use the reverse (HMP boundaries for station boundaries).*

Response 3101a. Several factors would be used in determining boundaries of the habitat management units. This could include soil characteristics, historical fire occurrence, hunting districts, and station boundaries.

Comment 3101b. *C7. It needs to be stated that these huge tracts of vegetation will be monitored using reliable (statistical) sampling.*

Response 3101b. The Service is in the process of working with ecologists, statisticians, and other scientific disciplines (DEIS page 67) to develop monitoring protocols. In the FEIS, we clarified that monitoring protocols would be peer reviewed in accordance with our information quality guidelines.

Comment 3101c. *The discussion of habitat should include an explanation of how rested pastures, fire treated areas, and other techniques will foster an improved plant composition, vigor, density, and soil production.*

Response 3101c. The Service revised the habitat objectives and provided more detail about the use of prescriptive grazing in the FEIS.

Comment 3101d. *Page 51 Wildlife. The discussion of livestock needs is putting wildlife in less than first priority. This action isn't legal. The discussion needs to be subject to the compatibility of all activities. This is not stated.*

Response 3101d. The CCP does have a discussion about compatibility, and in the FEIS, we strengthened the discussion. Although the referenced description of alternative C seeks to balance big game and livestock, it would still be subject to the Improvement Act, and other laws and policies. Alternative C also includes a transition to prescriptive grazing on the refuge.

Comment 3101e. *I would like to say that I believe in the ecological value of conservation grazing—I would like to suggest that for the CMR's benefit from this type of [prescriptive] grazing the rancher must also, and the rancher must clearly not support prescriptive grazing...why not come up with the range that supports your goal and then help the rancher meet that and let the rancher have some stability.*

Response 3101e. Livestock grazing is a secondary use on a national wildlife refuge and must be compatible with refuge purposes, as well as accomplish the mission of the Refuge System. The refuge manager has decided that for livestock grazing to be compatible on the refuge, it must be a prescriptive program that meets wildlife and habitat objectives (DEIS page 372 and updated in the FEIS). The Service recognizes that some individual ranchers may be adversely affected as we move to a greater emphasis on prescriptive grazing in all of the alternatives. However, these changes would be carried out over time, and we would work with willing permittees to develop and carry out appropriate grazing management plans.

Comment 3101f. *Prescribed grazing, in close lockstep with judicious use of prescribed fire, will be more beneficial to climate management than will be a full-scale shift from grazing to fire as a habitat management tool.*

Response 3101f. The proposed plan, which incorporates prescriptive grazing and prescribed fire, will have many ecological benefits.

COMMENT 3111: Specific substantive comment about proposed upland habitat management (specific text)

Comment 3111a. *Page 264. Expansion of livestock grazing discussion would be improved if explained that the adverse effects on grazed plants is mitigated by rest, thus allowing the composition to change in favor of desirable plants which can dominate over time and treatment. Class of livestock, species of*

livestock, and season of use also change plant composition of vegetative communities.

Response 3111a. In the FEIS, the Service clarified and added more information on our legal mandates and the data collected on various sites of the refuge, as well as information about how prescriptive grazing would work. The use of prescriptive grazing would be detailed in stepdown habitat management plans and would differ depending on the wildlife species, weed species, native plant species, or specific habitat conditions the prescription is designed to affect. Long periods of rest would also be a condition that is prescribed to benefit wildlife.

Comment 3111b. *Based on my 17 years of experience in developing, monitoring, and administering prescribed grazing programs, they are costly, complex and not feasible in some situations. Outcomes and costs of prescribed grazing are highly variable based on the particular circumstances of people, environment, yearly conditions, and other aspects... It is incredibly foolhardy to move forward on such an incomplete and tenuous basis of knowledge.*

Response 3111b. See response 3116. The proposed plan entails prescriptive grazing on the refuge and we will adapt management prescriptions based on monitoring, scientific literature, and ongoing managerial experience.

Comment 3111c. *MFWP has indicated that less than 50% of the wildlife habitat is within the CMR NWR boundary. With wildlife numbers at current levels the majority of these animals are going to be on private and BLM land which have substantially higher AUMs than CMR NWR land. It is clear then that the management on both private and BLM land is maintaining range and habitat conditions without prescriptive grazing.*

Response 3111c. All land can be considered "wildlife habitat," depending on its characteristics. The comment seems to suggest that the refuge comprises a relatively small proportion of administrative hunting district boundaries as established by MFWP. Those hunting districts contain continuous wildlife habitat on and next to the refuge. Wildlife distribution is variable over time as native ungulates are mobile and respond to habitat conditions, weather, seasons, and other factors. Managing lands within the refuge for native wildlife should result in fewer impacts to adjacent lands. The commenter is correct in that more AUMs per unit are grazed by livestock on lands next to the refuge, which may be a factor contributing to the relatively high proportion of elk found on the refuge compared to the relatively small proportion of the total elk habitat on the refuge.

Comment 3111d. *Page 271 Alt C. The discussions of wildlife grazing and livestock grazing center around*

forage consumption; the very real and significant social intolerance of elk for cattle also needs to be considered and addressed in management activities.

Response 3111d. It is not clear what the commenter thinks should be added to the discussion (DEIS page 271) or in the objectives and strategies. The Service has a mission of managing for the benefit of wildlife habitat.

Comment 3111e. *The document is based on an incomplete representation of the range of scientific literature pertaining to wildlife habitat preferences of key wildlife species. Throughout the document the ubiquitous underlying presumption that grazing my livestock is detrimental to wildlife habitat, and that rest from livestock grazing will improve wildlife habitat. This is directly contrary to a sizable library of published, peer-reviewed literature over the last 30 years.*

Response 3111e. See response 3116.

Comment 3111f. *What would the impact be if a reduction in livestock grazing in sensitive areas...were to occur? Could other areas sustain increased grazing to offset the reductions?*

Response 3111f. To increase grazing in other areas for the purpose of offsetting reduced grazing in riparian areas would not meet our compatibility requirements. Prescribed grazing can only be used to improve wildlife habitat and this cannot be accomplished through wildlife grazing or other natural means, such as fire.

Comment 3111g. *Page 75. With all the monitoring suggested it seems in strategies for C1–C8 that annual monitoring is not practical if done to detect small changes year to year.*

Response 3111g. As stated in the DEIS (page 75), utilization of riparian areas would be monitored annually. Reaching long-term resource objectives would be monitored over a longer period.

Comment 3111h. *Page 72. The watering of planted shrubs may be possible but it seems too costly and not practical on a large scale.*

Response 3111h. We agree, but it would not be done on a large scale.

Comment 3111i. *Sentinel species: It must be noted, though, that these species are quite compatible with sound management of livestock grazing. Many of the species decline with extended rest and exclusion from grazing, just as they will with improper grazing use. It is also critical to note that these species are responsive to climate...and other variables.*

Response 3111i. Sentinel plant species are early warning signs for ecosystems and are more sensitive to changes in management or environmental conditions

than general plant communities. The Service agrees that sentinel species may be responsive to grazing management, climate, and other variables. The purpose of sentinel species monitoring is not to presume future grazing management prescriptions, but instead provide an indicator of the effectiveness and implications of current or future management.

Comment 3111j. *All alternatives call for continued reduction (or elimination) of annual grazing leases. It is stated at multiple points in the CCP that annual grazing has resulted in widespread deleterious effects to environments and native wildlife. This may perhaps be true in the past, but that outcome is not inherent in the annual grazing lease option, but instead it is the result of CMR staff's lack of understanding of grazing alternatives, partnership administration, and adaptive management.*

Response 3111j. Livestock grazing is a secondary use on a national wildlife refuge. As such, it must be compatible with refuge purposes, and assist the Service in accomplishing the mission of the Refuge System. In addition, it must conform to the Improvement Act and other policies (DEIS page 372 and updated in the FEIS). See response 3116.

Comment 3111k. *The interrelationship of sagebrush communities, threatened and endangered species and rangeland health are not adequately analyzed in the EIS.*

Response 3111k. The Service manages for wildlife habitat and not rangeland health, which traditionally focuses on plant communities under a multiple-use mandate. It is not clear what specific threatened endangered species were not analyzed adequately, but all information on the species was updated in the FEIS.

COMMENT 3116: Comment that the scientific evidence to support proposed management changes is insufficient

Response 3116. The Service disagrees that there is no scientific basis for the proposed management objectives, particularly prescriptive grazing and sentinel species monitoring. The current authorized grazing program fails to meet established wildlife habitat objectives. There is considerable science on the use of prescriptive grazing and fire, and we added more discussion on this topic in the FEIS. Similarly, the concept of sentinel, indicator species or diagnostic species is not unique in scientific journals. We are working with ecologists, statisticians, and other scientific disciplines (DEIS page 67) to develop monitoring protocols. In the FEIS, we clarified that monitoring protocols would be peer reviewed in accordance with our information quality guidelines.

COMMENT 3119: Comment questioning the validity of sentinel plant assumptions

Response 3119. See response 3116. The Service is involved in wildlife management and not range management. Even though the disciplines of range management and wildlife management have commonalities, we do not have goals that reference the provision of forage for domestic animals. Sentinel species monitoring provides early warning indicators for ecosystems. We have been monitoring the health of sentinel species on the refuge since 2003 and have found that some are beginning to diminish due to the changes to natural processes. A combination of sentinel plant species are used to evaluate landscapes. Because each species of plant is associated with a portion of the landscape rather than the entire landscape, we use several species of sentinel plants that occupy different positions with respect to soils and topography when evaluating landscapes. The description of sentinel species and their monitoring has been expanded in the FEIS.

COMMENT 3121: Specific suggestion regarding upland habitat management

Response 3121. The Service appreciates the suggestions identified in the comments received. Each of these suggested changes was reviewed, and where appropriate, has been incorporated into the FEIS.

COMMENT 3142: Specific substantive comment about riparian and wetland habitat management (specific text)

Comment 3142a. *Different riparian areas provide habitat for different ranges of animals... Each riparian habitat has different priorities and should be managed differently.*

Response 3142a. The Service agrees with this statement. The CCP is intended to provide guidance for future management. Specific management prescriptions for specific locations will be determined through stepdown habitat management plans.

COMMENT 3161: Specific substantive comment about fire management (specific text)

Comment 3161a. *I am very concerned on the issue of prescriptive burning. There are certain pockets in the refuge that if you were to destroy that area and those travel ways, you would cut the movement of the elk. There was a fire in the early 2000's on the CK Ridge coming out the Nicholls Coulee. Prior to that fire, there were elk everywhere on that area. Since that fire, there's no elk on that area...*

Response 3161a. The CK Creek fire was a large wildland fire that made a run of 6 miles in one afternoon and burned more than 11,000 acres before burning sparse vegetation (DEIS page 188). Large catastrophic fires can result in a loss of vegetation, among other consequences for many years. A prescribed fire is conducted under a project specific prescription of requirements for conditions, such as weather, fuel moisture, and soil moisture. The prescription is designed to confine the fire to a predetermined area and produce the intensity of heat and rate of spread required for the fuel consumption that would accomplish the objectives. To date, no prescribed fire has escaped its prescription on the refuge.

Comment 3161b. *Page 77. The discussion of fire management should reference areas where no fire or managed wildfire will be used. Limited suppression is not mentioned.*

Response 3161b. The objectives, rationale, and strategies in the DEIS (pages 77–79) address areas where prescribed fire would not be used. Limited suppression activities would apply to wildfires and be based on an approved fire management plan. Wildfire objectives and management actions were detailed in the DEIS (pages 80–82).

Comment 3161c. *Page 80 Wildfire. This discussion seems lacking the role of managed wildfire to reduce fire size and intensity and to encourage the vegetative mosaic that would exist in the breaks if suppression had not altered the way in which fire operates today. This management is very similar for all alternatives. Suggest this section be shortened.*

Response 3161c. There is a different approach toward fire management in all of the alternatives. Alternatives B and D are essentially combined, but alternative C would have less emphasis on the role of natural fire.

Comment 3161d. *The authors of the EIS (page 177) indicate that 15 prescriptive burns were ignited since 1992, treating 3,077 acres. In addition, wildfires have burnt 180,230 acres on the refuge during the past 28 years (page 188). While these records indicate that about 6,450 acres burn annually, simple math indicates that if 1/10 of the landscape burnt once every 10 years, 100,000 acres would burn annually. Even if fire occurred once every 20 years, then about 50,000 acres would burn annually. Clearly, these acreages are significantly greater than the 171 (3077/18=years) that the FWS has treated annually during the last 18 years, and significantly greater than the 6,450 acres of wildfire that occurred annually during the last 28 years.*

Response 3161d. Comment noted. The CCP and EIS provides broad estimates on the number of acres that could be prescriptively burned each year. Very spe-

cific details about exact acreage, location, and vegetation objectives will be detailed in the stepdown fire management plan. There are about 250,000 acres of lake and river in addition to areas that do not burn. See response 3161e.

Comment 3161e. *Frost's 1998 article indicates that fires occurred at intervals of 5–7 years in this region. This estimate is consistent with other published research. Therefore, the relationships depicted in Figure 18 are highly suspect.*

Response 3161e. Figure 18 in the DEIS was produced by Dr. Cecil Frost in 2008, where he focused on the refuge instead of just the region. In addition to researching refuge wildfire data, soils, vegetation, historical photographs, climate patterns, and other relevant data, Dr. Frost has spent time looking at sites. His work will continue to be refined as more is learned about the refuge's fire history. Currently, it presents the best picture of fire frequency intervals for the refuge.

Comment 3161f. *The contention projected in the EIS that fires in riparian areas and woody draws were infrequent (as depicted in Fig. 18) is not supported by published literature, and the strategy to target uplands for burning is ecologically unjustified.*

Response 3161f. Many of the woody draws depicted in figure 18 of the DEIS hold water throughout the fire season and tend to be natural barriers to fire spread. Many of the large fires on the refuge are a result of strong northwest winds following a cold front passage, which subsequently can be the source of lightning strikes. The flanking fire burns up to the woody, moist draws and tends to go out. This is not always the case and fires do burn over these woody draws, but as figure 18 indicates, this is highly variable.

Comment 3161g. *Page 269, Alt A Paragraph 3. The 15 year total for prescribed fire is 7,875 acres. This amount if done in conjunction with managed wildfire could be a positive measurable action. The use of prescribed fire in high density stands of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine would destroy the habitat that Bruce Campbell and Robert Watts discovered were important security cover for elk and actually contributed to the carrying capacity of the areas for elk. Suggest that managed wildfire be used to treat these areas. Often fire fuels carry breaks fire, making grazing an important regulating action.*

Response 3161g. The Service is proposing to use prescribed fire in the dense stands of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine for some of the reasons suggested. Many wildfires are intense and have eliminated valuable security cover. This is due to aggressive fire suppression strategies that have allowed large, unnatural buildups of fuel. Managed wildfire will be used to treat some of these areas, but wildfires do

not always occur where the habitat needs are greatest. Thus, there is a need to treat more areas outside the high fire occurrence zones of the refuge.

Comment 3161h. *The key to soil productivity is organic matter. Fire leaves ashes which have a temporary fertilization effect, but most of the carbon-based (organic) compounds enter the atmosphere...Carbon sequestration in healthy prairie soils is considered extremely beneficial.*

Response 3161h. A significant amount of larger diameter vegetation (twigs, brush, branches, and trees) are not completely consumed by wildfire or prescribed fire and are converted to charcoal, which is stored in the soil and above ground for many decades. Literature has shown fire can be an effective means for carbon sequestration (DeLuca et al 2008).

COMMENT 3166: Comment that the CCP and EIS is lacking detailed information about the impacts of fire management

Response 3166. The Service addressed wildfire under a number of impact topics. It is not clear from the comment what specific detailed information is lacking and how it might add to the analysis of the actions.

COMMENT 3175: Comment that the use of prescribed fire will result in the spread of noxious weeds

Response 3175. Where possible, management of naturally occurring fires for ecological benefits will continue. The Service has found that there is not an abundance of noxious weeds in the first new regrowth after fire unless the land has a history of overgrazing by livestock or other disturbance resulting in high populations of weeds already present. Japanese brome, for example, decreases for a few years after fire on most sites when a healthy and diverse native collection of plants occurs on the site. It is not possible to generalize on the response of weeds to wildfire or prescribed fire. It depends on the species of weed, species of native plants present, soil, moisture conditions before and after a fire, time of year, and intensity of a fire. Invasive species management includes education, prevention and control to the extent funding and labor permit. The DEIS lists 27 strategies (pages 83–84) on how to address invasive species problems and many of them emphasize communication and coordination with other entities. We will continue to work with our partners to address invasive species management both on and off the refuge.

COMMENT 3212: Specific substantive comment about big game management (specific text)

Comment 3212a. *It doesn't seem logical to manage mule deer to a standard dictated by the MFWP when the CMR has the professional staff, habitat and ability to manage to a higher standard.*

Response 3212a. In response to public and agency comments on the DEIS, the big game objectives were adjusted in the FEIS to assure that big game management on the refuge meets or exceeds objectives in approved State of Montana conservation plans. In accordance with national policy striving to the extent practicable to achieve consistency with State management objectives and regulations, refuge-specific abundance and population composition objectives may be established through stepdown habitat management plans and will be tailored to regional habitat conditions, productivity, and other considerations. Those objectives will consider naturally functioning ecosystem processes, biological integrity, hunting opportunities, and quality of recreational experiences.

Comment 3212b. *Values for ages of harvested deer (objectives) are not the same in all sections and need to be explained as do bighorn sheep ram ages.*

Response 3212b. There are no specific age-related objectives for harvested mule deer or elk in any of the alternatives in the DEIS, only male-to-female ratio and density objectives. See responses 3212a, 3212d and 3212f. There are specific age-based objectives for harvested bighorn sheep with an objective of 7.5 years old in alternative A. There are no specified age-based objective in alternatives B and C, but implied with management to resemble a “lightly harvested” population (DEIS page 88); the average age of harvested rams would be expected to be at least 7.5 years old. In alternative D, there was an error. The objective was supposed to be an average age of at least 6.5 years old, the same as described in MFWP Bighorn Sheep Conservation Plan.

Comment 3212c. *How will big game populations be managed during the next 5 years? Would the population objectives for elk and mule deer as described on page 86, obj. A1 (elk 2.5 per sq. mi.) and A2 (mule deer 10 per sq. mi.) under current management be continued until HMP's are completed? If so, it should be stated here.*

Response 3212c. Comment noted. Big game populations will be managed as described in alternative A until the stepdown habitat management plans are completed. See response 3212a.

Comment 3212d. *Page 203, Elk and Mule Deer: Recommend including the elk and mule deer survey information you sent us following our inquiry about survey information. This would provide a better description of recent population conditions which allows for a better comparison and evaluation of the alternatives.*

Response 3212d. We revised the big game objectives and discussion in the FEIS.

Comment 3212e. *It is difficult to understand how Alt D was selected when it does not meet current conditions on the CMR. There is some indication that it was an attempt to compromise with the MFWP in how they are managing mule deer populations on other Federal land in eastern Montana.*

Response 3212e. See responses 3212a, 3212d, and 3212f.

Comment 3212f. *In Alternative A, the objective discusses mature bucks; however, when a person moves onto Alternative B the discussion switches to adult bucks and in the final and preferred Alternative D, only total bucks per 100 does is discussed. It seems that population dynamics and composition would be totally different for each of these alternatives and this makes it difficult to determine just exactly what the plan is trying to attain.*

Response 3212f. In response to public and agency comments on the DEIS, big game objectives were adjusted in the FEIS to assure that big game management on the refuge meets or exceeds objectives in approved State of Montana conservation plans. In accordance with national policy striving to the extent practicable to achieve consistency with State management objectives and regulations, refuge-specific abundance and population composition objectives may be established through stepdown habitat management plans and will be tailored to regional habitat conditions, productivity and other considerations. Those objectives will consider naturally functioning ecosystem processes, biological integrity, hunting opportunities, and quality of recreational experiences.

COMMENT 3216: Specific suggestion regarding big game management (specific text)

Comment 3216a. *Recommend replacing the objective of 25 total bucks per 100 does to a ratio of at least 33 bucks per does.*

Comment 3216b. *Page 89. Suggest indepth analysis of grasslands and forb stands in northern Garfield County to determine presence of long worm parasites.*

Comment 3216c. *I would like to see all mule deer tags in the breaks be a trophy draw area.*

Comment 3216d. *Page 89, Big Game D4: Restate the first sentence of this objective to read a minimum of 6.5 years rather than an average age of 6.5 years...*

Comment 3216e. *Recommend replacing the "20-3- bull to cow post hunting season ratio" to at least 29 brown-tined bulls (or a total bull equivalent) per 100 cows...*

Comment 3216f. *I strongly support closing the mule deer buck season two weeks before the end of the Montana deer season, retaining a good number of mature bucks as opposed to allowing maximum buck kill during the rut.*

Comment 3216g. *Population objectives should be based on long-term habitat productivity which I believe is best performed when HMP's are completed. I view establishing sex and age composition targets and harvest strategies as a non-HMP function. I recommend establishing sex and age composition targets separately and in accordance with 605 FW 1.6 on obtaining quality.*

Comment 3216h. *I would like to see the Breaks returned to great trophy mule deer hunting. This could be achieved by having a trophy draw system or by not allowing 2 points to be shot and given a chance to mature.*

Comment 3216i. *A4. The average age of 7.5 is good but other figures & measurements must be used to pull together the different harvest notes of the 3 MFWP regional staffs.*

Comment 3216j. *B1. FWS must base the aging on tooth annuli not horn growth.*

Comment 3216k. *I would like to see all mule deer tags go to a trophy status on a draw system instead of it being a general deer tag area.*

Comment 3216l. *B6. FWS should set the number of sheet tags based on FWS harvest data and not try to combine all the various harvest ideas of MFWP in nearby sheep populations.*

Comment 3216m. *D2. The bull ratio is too low: should be 35 observed branch-antlered bulls post-hunt, based on reporting of lightly hunted elk herds in western U.S. Now the total bull ratio in the western sections of the refuge are 32:100. This is way below the goal. Suggest lowering hunting pressure on bulls.*

Comment 3216n. *Page 86 A1. Suggest using the same measurement of animal density with MFWP so good comparison is possible.*

Comment 3216o. *Page 90. The objectives for big game are acceptable for antelope, mule deer, and sheep but elk bull ratios are too low. The need for reducing hazardous fuels for wintering pronghorn is not necessary.*

Comment 3216p. *Page 279 Alt B. Under this alternative the increased wildlife populations over the long term would require increased harvest rates to balance forage use with wildlife numbers. The number of hunters would increase with a larger harvest as would numbers of other visitors.*

Comment 3216q. *I hope that big game populations are maintained as large and diverse in age class as possible. I support the continuation of a hunting district*

specifically for trophy mule deer buck hunting on the refuge. I would be against policies which could alter this.

Comment 3216r. *Page 120 D1–D4 Rationale. The meeting of MFWP harvest objectives should be deleted to say providing for FWS harvest objectives (which may or may not agree with MFWP).*

Comment 3216s. *Page 111 B2. Combine this with harvest surveys.*

Comment 3216t. *Page 120 Strategies D1–D4. Item 2 indicates that game retrieval is a habitat objective, which it is not. It is a hunting harvest technique. Wildlife values are harmed by extensive motorized game retrieval.*

Comment 3216u. *I do not support a policy of not permitting antler harvesting on the refuge. I hope that this can be revised such that antler harvesting is allowed in places and in seasons in which there would be no deleterious effects on wildlife.*

Response 3216a–u. The Service appreciates the suggestions identified in the comments received. Each of these suggested changes was reviewed and, where appropriate, has been incorporated into the FEIS.

COMMENT 3231: Specific substantive comment about furbearer and predator management (specific text)

Comment 3231a. *The CCP document systematically excludes predators from other species of interest as not being hunted unless “monitoring verified that population levels could be sustained.” As employed in the text this statement is contradictory to the stated purposes of both Alternative B and Alternative D. None of the game species on the NWR, prey or predator, should be hunted unless monitoring verifies that populations can be sustained! ... CMR should simply manage predator species as part of the ecosystem. If ecosystem health will be served by hunting them then allow a hunt and vice versa.*

Response 3231a. Prior to any new species being approved for hunting on a national wildlife refuge, a hunt plan must be developed and approved by the Washington office, and then new regulations are issued. Monitoring would be required to show that population levels could be sustained before approving a new hunt plan. Currently, there is a hunt plan in place for many species like deer and elk. Hunting is one of the six priority public uses that are to be considered on a national wildlife refuge, and it is not contradictory to the emphasis of alternative B and D. Mountain lion hunting would not be proposed in alternative B.

Comment 3231b. *Since publication of the DEIS, the gray wolf was delisted under the Endangered Species Act. The FEIS was updated to reflect the wolf’s current status and future management should wolves migrate to the refuge.*

Response 3231b. As described in the DEIS (page 99), the Service intends to develop refuge management plans for wolf and grizzly bear, and would do so in cooperation with MFWP and with Federal and State plans and policies.

COMMENT 3235: Specific suggestion regarding furbearer or predator management

Comment 3235a. *B10. The investigation of the CMR lion population is just starting. Before considering a season this work should be finished.*

Comment 3235b. *Page 92. The monitoring of populations of furbearers & small predators should be basic and not intensive to keep down the costs of data gathering.*

Comment 3235c. *Remove 20 lions, close the CMR to all deer hunting for 2 years and we will have big numbers again. Maybe a special lion draw area would peak interest.*

Comment 3235d. *Page 280 Paragraph 2. The curtailment of grazing in “B” would result in more forage, more wildlife, and more deer & elk prey for lions; thus more lions. The populations of lions would be significantly larger.*

Response 3235a–d. The Service appreciates the suggestions identified in the comments received. Each of these suggested changes was reviewed, and where appropriate, has been incorporated into the FEIS.

COMMENT 3241: Specific substantive comment about wildlife species restoration (specific text)

Comment 3241a. *Please reword the paragraph on p. 284 to clearly state that FWS has the obligation to restore native species to the refuge (unless deemed “inappropriate”).*

Response 3241a. The Service is not obligated to restore all native species. Bison restoration has generated significant interest in this planning process. Any initiative to restore bison as a wildlife species in Montana will be a collaborative, multi-agency, and private land management effort with ample opportunity for public input. We recognize management actions on the refuge may have effects outside the refuge and we will consider such effects; we cannot act alone as there are complex and multijurisdictional issues involved.

Comment 3241b. *The term “free-roaming” is often applied indiscriminately when discussing management of bison as wildlife. This is an error the CCP should correct. Much precedent exists for management of “wild” ungulates, and predators, in which the range of these animals is constrained by human action.*

Response 3241b. Comment noted.

Comment 3241c. *Any significant bison numbers could quite easily result in herds spending the entire summer and fall on limited river bottom areas with good grazing and water, resulting in damage to those riparian areas.*

Response 3241c. See response 3248.

Comment 3241d. *Regarding fencing concerns, if surrounding ranchers do not want bison on their property, it is not unreasonable for them to bear the responsibility to construct fences to accomplish that, just as CMR must construct fences to block private cattle from entering CMR lands.*

Response 3241d. Currently, the refuge is not devoting considerable refuge habitat to bison, although there is one permittee on the south side of the refuge that has grazed bison for years. Any initiative to restore bison as a wildlife species in Montana will be a collaborative, multi-agency, and private land management effort with ample opportunity for public input. Any fencing considerations would be discussed at that time and are not within the scope of this CCP.

COMMENT 3248: Comment opposed to the Service deferring to the State on bison restoration

Response 3248. The Service received several comments about bison restoration. Some were very supportive, while others were opposed to having any bison on the refuge. We cannot act alone in a bison restoration effort as there are complex and multi-jurisdictional issues involved. In addition, we recognize management actions on the refuge may have effects outside the refuge and we will consider such effects.

COMMENT 3251: Specific substantive comment about bird or other wildlife management (specific text)

Comment 3251a. *Page 287 Public Use and Access. This section states sharp-tail and sage grouse populations are stable. (The monitoring is for a very recent period). The historical records indicate that both these species enjoyed much higher numbers, which should be considered in setting population goals.*

Response 3251a. While the Service recognizes the historic fluctuations in various species of birds and other wildlife on the refuge, our goal is to manage the ecosystem. The intention is not to return to historical conditions, but to improve biological integrity, diversity, heterogeneity, and resilience.

Comment 3251b. *P. 97, other wildlife D: Recommend including another strategy to identify and delineate important or critical seasonal habitats for greater sage grouse and sharp-tailed grouse.*

Response 3251b. In the FEIS, the Service has identified focal bird species, which include greater sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse.

Comment 3251c. *Page 286 Grazing. The heavy grazing by elk referred to is most often small local sites, and it is doubtful if this would be measurable in terms of adverse impacts to birds.*

Response 3251c. Comment noted.

Comment 3251d. *Page 94. A2. The cost of determining density of sharp tailed grouse over large blocks of grassland is huge. Why cite 2005?*

Response 3251d. Comment noted. The Service agrees that measuring sharp-tailed grouse density over large areas is challenging and cost prohibitive, rendering the objective of 30 sharp-tailed grouse per square mile unmeasurable. The last three lines of bird objective A2 on page 94 of the DEIS were deleted in the FEIS.

Because Executive Order 7509 specifies management for a maximum of 400,000 sharp-tailed grouse, the Service uses over 300 listening stations to monitor their presence each spring. Trends from this broad distribution and abundance index are also supplemented with counts of birds on leks, but such data can be problematic to meaningfully interpret over large areas.

Comment 3251e. *Page 268 Alt B. Most sharp-tailed grouse investigations I reviewed in college found grazing was detrimental to this species.*

Response 3251e. Comment noted.

Comment 3251f. *A5. Suggest selecting only a few ponds for waterfowl management...all is including a lot of mud holes.*

Response 3251f. Comment noted.

Comment 3251g. *A2. Include attention for osprey and geese.*

Response 3251g. Comment noted.

Comment 3251h. *B1, Item 5. These conditions are almost nonexistent on CMR. Stocking of “livestock ponds” is generally not practical since most don’t have adequate depth, a primary spillway, or meaningful life expectancies.*

Response 3251h. Comment noted.

COMMENT 3261: Specific substantive comment about threatened and endangered species (TES) and species of concern management (specific text)

Comment 3261a. *The expansion of prairie dogs should be allowed to occur naturally without intervention through livestock grazing or mechanical treatment.*

Response 3261a. Comment noted.

COMMENT 3311: Specific substantive comment about hunting management and opportunities (specific text)

Comment 3311a. *I am skeptical about the numbers for hunting days. Certain allotments must be visited more than others. I do not believe 7th Point Allotment is visited as heavily as the numbers would indicate.*

Response 3311a. Comment noted.

Comment 3311b. *Page 122 C2. The use of motorized game retrieval methods in WSAs isn't compatible with protecting WSAs. Foot or horseback are the only legal means.*

Response 3311b. The use of motorized game retrieval methods in WSAs was not considered.

Comment 3311c. *Page 122 Rationale for C1–C2. Use of commercial guiding to extract extra cows (elk) from the WSAs should be attempted ONLY when the cow elk numbers in the WSAs are under harvested by other means.*

Response 3311c. Comment noted.

Comment 3311d. *I support the continuation of special seasons and permits for juvenile hunters and permits for hunters with disabilities. I would support the expansion of such programs, specifically a limited number of either-sex elk permits for our younger and disabled hunters.*

Response 3311d. Comment noted.

COMMENT 3321: Specific substantive comment about access management (specific text)

Comment 3321a. *Page 51 Fishing. Access to shoreline for fishing in winter would need to be authorized by both COE and FWS.*

Response 3321a. The Service works with the USACE on winter access.

Comment 3321b. *Access. The closure of 23 miles of roads may encourage wildlife movements but it does not result in significant benefits for fire management and game harvest. Retrieval of downed game on closed roads damages vegetation and disturbs wildlife and would disqualify areas for wilderness.*

Response 3321b. See response 3322. The Service modified the preferred alternative to include the conversion of several roads on the north side for game retrieval, as shown in the FEIS. This is an effective first step in reducing wildlife disturbance off ridge lines and also allowing access for retrieval during limited hours.

Comment 3321c. *Page 272 Alt B. The shifting of vehicle use from 106 miles of roads & trails now open to other routes would result in damage to the remaining open roads; thus only providing a very small benefit to vegetation. The main benefit to wildlife is lack of disturbance in areas where roads are closed.*

Response 3321c. Many of the roads identified in DEIS for closure would occur because a landowner has already closed off access, the road is unsafe, duplicative, of little use, or there are wildlife security issues. The closure of less than 5 percent of the roads, many of which are already impassable or duplicative, would have a negligible impact on refuge visitation (DEIS page 04).

Comment 3321d. *Page 118 B5. Allow no landing of aircraft anywhere on the refuge except in dive emergencies. Require aircraft to maintain 1500ft AGL [above ground level] when over the refuge and in primitive areas, e.g. wilderness.*

Response 3321d. Comment noted.

Comment 3321e. *Under alternatives D and C the upgrading of Knox Ridge Road would cost millions with very little benefit to the management of CMR.*

Response 3321e. There has been interest expressed by BLM and others to improve access along the Knox Ridge road. There are pros and cons to any decision to improve access. Improving the Knox Ridge road would result in some localized impacts to vegetation (3.6 acres), but most impacts could be minimized. Graveling the Knox Ridge Road could also detract from the Wild and Scenic River designation values of the Missouri River. Traffic, including dust and noise from vehicle use, would be visible from the river in some places. Graveling the road does not equate to all season access, and during the winter months, access could remain limited. Any road project that was funded under the Service's refuge road program would need to meet prioritization and eligibility criteria.

Comment 3321f. *Page 120 item 2. The adverse impacts to vegetation, soils, the view shed, and other non-wildlife resources should also regulate access NOT just wildlife considerations.*

Response 3321f. The Service's first priority is protection and conservation of wildlife within the refuge; however, impacts to other natural resources are also a priority and will receive full consideration as the health of these resources directly impacts the health of the wildlife.

Comment 3321g. *I would ask that you consider minimizing motor craft traffic on the Missouri River within the proposed wilderness boundaries.*

Response 3321g. Comment noted. The Missouri River lies outside of any proposed wilderness boundary.

COMMENT 3322: Comment advocating for road closures and reduced motorized vehicle access

Response 3322. Road management on the refuge received considerable public comment on the DEIS. Many people expressed a desire to see fewer open roads, while others expressed a desire to maintain status quo or to open additional roads, primarily for hunting access and game retrieval. Others, however, expressed the view that any closure was unacceptable. The Service considered all perspectives on road management in preparing the Final CCP and EIS and the balance for vehicular access was a hybrid version that incorporated elements from each alternative.

COMMENT 3324: Comment supporting road closures to improve habitat security for wildlife

Response 3324. See response 3322.

COMMENT 3327: Comment that bicycle access should be further considered and described

Response 3327. Bicycle access for hunting is an appropriate use on a national wildlife refuge. Alternatives A, B, and D allow bicycles on all numbered roads, including seasonally closed roads, while alternative C would evaluate more bicycle trails. The FEIS was revised to clarify the difference between the alternatives. There are several numbered routes on the refuge that are open to bicycles, and the vast majority of them see little use except for during hunting season.

COMMENT 3331: Specific substantive comment about recreational use (specific text)

Comment 3331a. *Page 107 A1–A2. The existing and potential fishing reservoirs are next to nil. Poor sites, high siltation & erosive soil render this opportunity next to zero.*

Response 3331a. Comment noted.

Comment 3331b. *The popularity of the Slippery Ann Elk Viewing Area reveals a demand to see more and know more about this region and its wildlife. I recommend creating three more such areas—one in each quadrant of the NWR with emphasis on both aquatic and avian wildlife as well as ungulates etc.*

Response 3331b. Comment noted. The Service agrees that the Slippery Ann Elk Viewing Area provides a valuable opportunity for access and education. Alternatives C and D include strategies to work with our partners to improve the viewing area and potentially establish additional viewing areas.

Comment 3331c. *Public camping is one of the more ecologically destructive human activities. The popularity of large RV [recreational vehicle] campers and trailers leads to high-impact scars to terrain where campers frequent. I recommend a system of rules which limit unrestricted dispersed camping to tents. Establish a system of camping areas for wheeled or hard-sided camping vehicles.*

Response 3331c. The refuge does enforce camping restrictions outside of the established recreation areas managed by USACE. Many of the routes on the refuge prevent the use of a large campers or trailers due to rough terrain.

Comment 3331d. *Page 107, Hunting D1–D6: Recommend deleting the statement “continue to restrict all camping to within 100 yards of a numbered route” and replace it with the compatibility determination stipulation for camping on page 366 which states “Except where designated as closed, camping (other than backpacking) must take place within 100 yards (of the Missouri River or refuge numbered roads) that are designated as open to use.”*

Response 3331d. Comment noted. The FEIS was modified to be consistent between alternative D and the first compatibility determination stipulation.

COMMENT 3334: Comment that road closures limiting access for the elderly and disabled violates ADA and other policies

Response 3334. See response 3322. There are currently about 670 miles of roads open on the refuge, which, combined with boat access from the lake and river, provide close access to most of the refuge. The closure of less than 5 percent of the roads, many of which are already impassable or duplicative, would have a negligible impact on refuge visitation and the quality of visitor experiences, and would not violate the letter or spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

COMMENT 3401: Specific substantive comment about wilderness management (specific text)

Comment 3401a. *Page 307, wilderness. Since the goal for visitors is to experience a “quality” experience, the consideration of WSAs 2, 3, 5, 9, 12, 13, and 15 should be done in addition to those units already proposed. The inholdings can be exempted or traded*

out of the units. Facility maintenance is now essentially done without wilderness conflicts.

Response 3401a. Comment noted. See response 3402.

Comment 3401b. *The wilderness review process is clear in only one section and unclear in several others. It seems that the second review process should take place after the CCP record of decision is final. Then, given refuge requirements, the remaining refuge lands not needed for nonwilderness activities can be reviewed.*

Response 3401b. The wilderness review in appendix E was revised for the Final CCP and EIS.

Comment 3401c. *Add to all alternatives your strategies for how you will be removing all roads and structures from all 15 WSAs and the UL Bend Wilderness Area. The existence of these roads and structures within the WSA and WA boundaries is against Federal law and it is your duty to see to their immediate removal.*

Response 3401c. In 2002, all roads in proposed wilderness units that did not provide historical access to private or State land were closed to comply with Service policy. With the exception of a few historical homesites and old fences, there are no structures within the proposed wilderness or designated wilderness.

COMMENT 3402: Comment supporting expanded wilderness designation

Response 3402. The Service received considerable comments on expanding, contracting, or eliminating existing proposed wilderness areas). We considered all perspectives on wilderness management in preparing the FEIS, including clarifying and enhancing the wilderness review.

COMMENT 3403: Comment opposing expanded wilderness designation

Response 3403. See response 3402.

COMMENT 3406: Comment supporting East and West Beachamp and East Hell Creek as wilderness

Response 3406. See response 3402.

COMMENT 3601: Specific substantive comment about refuge operations and partnerships (specific text)

Comment 3601a. *The anti-livestock bias of recent management of CMR, as well as the portent for that to continue and increase if this CCP is implemented,*

precludes widespread, creative, and effective partnerships necessary to bring forth huge strides for prairie wildlife throughout a six county region surrounding CMR.

Response 3601a. The Services disagrees that recent management of the refuge has an “anti-livestock bias.” In spite of opposition to livestock grazing expressed by a number of stakeholders, including some who commented on the DEIS, we rejected this suggestion from further consideration (DEIS page 137). The Great Plains evolved through a complex interaction of fire and grazing, and to eliminate it from a manager’s toolbox is not realistic or desired. However, as stated throughout the document, we need to manage the refuge in a manner that achieves our wildlife objectives and legal mandates. The direction provided by the Improvement Act and our policies is that livestock grazing needs to be done prescriptively for the benefit of wildlife resources (FWS 2000a, FWS 2001).

Comment 3601b. *CMR should move forward with creating a community services organization to provide visitor support and logistical assistance to the NWR.*

Response 3601b. Comment noted. Alternatives B, C, and D direct the Service to develop a volunteer program and friends group.

Comment 3601c. *Personnel. In addition to the personnel in Alternative D, the refuge would need personnel to assess and inventory habitat, negotiate and design grazing plans, and perform range monitoring...Alternative P requires annual vegetation monitoring in every pasture. Where it is not financially feasible to add staff, the Service would need research partners from universities, from other agencies, and from the community.*

Response 3601c. The Service agrees that partnerships are important and looks forward to continued partnerships with researchers, other agencies, and the community.

Comment 3601d. *Page 131 Partnerships B4. Suggest MOAs with other agencies. Use advisory boards for NGOs & private individual input.*

Response 3601d. Comment noted.

Comment 3601e. *Page 59. The required staff for “D” seems to be smaller than for a public use alternative. Why have all the I&R staff with lower visits?*

Response 3601e. The staff requirements for alternative D is based on all refuge management activities not just visitation. The emphasis would be to restore ecological processes, while providing for quality wildlife-dependent public uses and experiences. Currently, there is not a dedicated full-time staff person for managing public use. Alternative D would strive for two positions, one for Fort Peck and another for

the rest of the refuge. Two positions would enable the Service to program and provide for quality opportunities for wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and environmental education.

Comment 3601f. *I think you need to consider how you would use citizen volunteers to accomplish some of your work in the future, what kind of things the public could help you on, and to get more volunteer involvement on carrying out refuge programs.*

Response 3601f. The Service agrees. Alternatives B, C, and D direct us to develop a volunteer program and friends group.

COMMENT 3905: Comment that management should be limited to Executive Order 7509 objectives, pertaining to sharp-tailed grouse, pronghorn, and livestock

Response 3905. The Service considered, but eliminated this as an alternative in the DEIS. Refer to DEIS (page 138). Since the refuge was established, there have been several executive orders, laws, and policies that have provided guidance on refuge management. Furthermore, not all lands within the refuge were set aside or acquired under Executive Order 7509. We are now managed under the provisions of the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act, as amended by the Improvement Act. Livestock grazing is a provision only if it remains compatible with the primary purposes, which are sharp-tailed grouse, pronghorn, and other wildlife populations.

4000—Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

COMMENT 4001: Specific substantive comment about the affected environment or environmental consequences (specific text)

Comment 4001a. *On Page XXIV...your degree of effect was based on using quantitative numeric or modeled estimates or qualitative or relative estimates using literature. We would like to see the actual scientific data and not estimates from the literature. We would also like to see a qualified range manager interpret any data that's available.*

Response 4001a. It is unclear from the comment what data needs to be reviewed. The Service's approach for analyzing and disclosing effects is consistent with NEPA and our guidelines, and is appropriate for a CCP, which is intended to provide guidance for future management plans and decisions. As stated in the DEIS (page 67), many of the existing staff that were involved in the plan development have expertise and education in range management. Monitor-

ing for range health involves looking at the dominant community plants, mostly grasses to determine if they are viable. Our mission is wildlife conservation, so the focus is different than what would occur on multiple-use lands.

COMMENT 4121: Specific substantive comment about air quality (specific text)

Comment 4121a. *Page 160, air quality. Include a statement that at times the use of refuge roads by cattlemen and hunters generates dusty conditions for refuge users.*

Response 4121a. Comment noted.

COMMENT 4131: Specific substantive comment about visual resources (specific text)

Comment 4131a. *Page 161, visual resources. This discussion of road visibility should mention that in many years of sweet clover's second year of growth all the two track roads are overgrown and not visible. Like-wise during the winter snow cover and during much of the mid and late summer, these same 2 track roads are not noticeable due to regrowth of grasses/forbs.*

Response 4131a. Comment noted.

COMMENT 4161: Specific substantive comment about water resources (specific text)

Comment 4161a. *Regarding the water resources on ... Page XVII, wildlife populations both on and off the refuge are affected by water quality and access to water. How many water sources off the refuge have you studied and so where is the data?...Again, you blame livestock grazing for degradation of water resources off the refuge for which, one, we believe there is no data and two, it is outside of your jurisdiction.*

Response 4161a. The Service is the downstream receiver of any impacts that occur upstream of the refuge. More information was added to the FEIS about water quality and water impoundments on and off the refuge.

COMMENT 4201: Specific substantive comment about biological resources (specific text)

Comment 4201a. *When was the last time a game count was made on the CMR NWR to determine if populations of antelope and sharp tail grouse, the primary species for which the game range was established, have been achieved?*

Response 4201a. We detailed what is known about sharp-tailed grouse (DEIS page 210–211) and pronghorn (DEIS page 206) on the refuge. Because Executive Order 7509 specifies management for a maximum of 400,000 sharp-tailed grouse, the Service uses over 300 listening stations to monitor their presence each spring. Trends from this broad distribution and abundance index are also supplemented with counts of birds on leks, but such data can be problematic to meaningfully interpret over large areas.

Although large numbers of pronghorn were stranded on the south side of the Missouri River following the heavy snows during the winter of 2011, much of the refuge is not considered pronghorn habitat as the topography is too rough (DEIS page 206). About 15,000 sharp-tailed grouse have been counted on the refuge in recent years. Managing for increased levels of sharp-tailed grouse requires diverse vegetative cover including shrubs, forbs, grasses, and trees. They utilize a variety of leafy materials, buds, and fruits of woody species. Insects also play an important role in their diet. The objectives and strategies outlined in alternatives B and D are consistent with providing for the greatest biological diversity, which should benefit sharp-tailed grouse, among other birds on the refuge. In the Final CCP and EIS, we added a discussion of focal bird species, including sharp-tailed grouse and tied the plant monitoring to the focal bird species.

Comment 4201b. *On page 186, the authors discussing forbs write, “unlike grasses, their growing points are on the tips of their stems.” Their discussion suggests that the authors need to review the location of meristematic stem tissue on native bunch grasses.*

Response 4201b. Apical meristem tissues are located at the tips of roots and the base of shoots in grasses (including native bunch grasses) during vegetative growth. As grass shoots begin to elongate, the growing point moves from the base of the plant to a higher position along the main shoot. Apical meristem is found at the root tips and tip of the main shoot in forbs. These areas of plants are where new growth is initiated. As the discussion on sentinel plant species points out (DEIS page 186), grasses are not considered as the first-to-decline sentinel species.

Comment 4201c. *On page 187, the authors write, “shrubs and trees that are the first to decline due to grazing and browsing by ungulates (herbivory) are usually fire-adapted species.” In contrast to their statement, my experience indicates that fringed sagewort is a fire-adapted species, and it is one of the last plants to decline with grazing. Furthermore, winterfat and saltbush are not generally regarded as fire-adapted species, yet they are some of the first plants to decline due to excessive grazing.*

Response 4201c. The DEIS did not specifically discuss fringed sagewort (page 187) or elsewhere in the document. Depending on the literature, it is often classified as a forb or a subshrub. The Service agrees that it is fire adapted and is one of the last plants to decline from grazing. The comment about shrubs and trees was taken out of context from the discussion in the DEIS, which stated that these species have the ability to resprout after disturbances, such as fire and herbivory. On the refuge, we have found winterfat and saltbush tend to return immediately after fire by sprouting. They tend to be some of the first plants to decline due to excessive grazing.

Comment 4201d. *The recognition of four vegetation types is far inferior to the use of the NRCS ecological site descriptions and state and transition models... There is a protocol for analyzing a plant community, a basis for describing the extent and direction of changes that have taken place, and predicting those that may result from the implementation of a specific treatment or management.*

Response 4201d. As described in the DEIS (page 177), the Service opted to group the complex vegetation on the refuge into four broad categories, rather than plant community designations. The reasoning for these categories was explained in the DEIS. These categories were not intended to describe plant communities. The Service does refer to the NRCS ecological site descriptions and transition models, as well as other literature for specific management applications.

Comment 4201e. *The text calls for many on-going monitoring activities...leaving the reader feeling that most of the time the refuge staff will not get to do anything but study. Some discussion of the ways in which these activities will be carried out in simple and often inexpensive ways should be fully explained.*

Response 4201e. The Service agrees that monitoring activities must be kept in line with available resources. However, the CCP process is also based on the concept of adaptive management, and monitoring is necessary to ensure that we’ve achieved the plan’s objectives or that we can adapt to changing conditions. The sentinel plant monitoring would be based on monitoring specific sites. There needs to be some baseline monitoring of focal bird species or other priority wildlife species. Some of this could be accomplished using university students or volunteers.

Comment 4201f. *Sentinel plant information is interesting. Has the Service conducted any survey on varieties and population densities of sentinel plants in CMR wildlife exclosures?*

Response 4201f. The Service does not have total wildlife exclosures that exclude all wildlife (for example, they do not exclude small mammals or birds). We currently have some exclosures, containing most species of sentinel plants, that exclude large ungulates.

Comment 4201g. *Figure 36 in Ch. 4 is not an appropriate representation of the wildlife in the CMR area. This map, developed by the TRCP [Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership], is based on an unscientific poll and may only reflect TRCP member opinions. This map is inappropriate to use in the CCP or any other NEPA document because it is anecdotal information versus bona fide representation of wildlife in the area. (We feel) this is disingenuous to the NEPA process...*

Response 4201g. Figure 36 in the DEIS is useful at determining the value the public places on the refuge's hunting program, especially since little other data exists about what brings hunters to the refuge. The refuge receives thousands of inquiries annually about its hunting opportunities. In 2010, USGS conducted a survey of refuge visitors, which will be used in a national report about national wildlife refuge visitations. When completed, this report will aid in our understanding why visitors come to the refuge. The more we understand about visitor values and experiences, the more likely we can provide a greater experience for visitors.

COMMENT 4211: Specific substantive comment about upland habitat resources and analysis (specific text)

Comment 4211a. *Livestock numbers are currently lower than any time in the past century, yet throughout the whole DEIS, livestock grazing is the cause of continual deterioration of the refuge. With livestock numbers at such an all time low, why haven't the CMR range conditions improved and wildlife increased? Remember, FWS has had control for the past 34 years.*

Response 4211a. Livestock grazing is not listed as the cause of continual deterioration of the refuge in the DEIS. The total wild ungulate population has grown during the past 34 years, while livestock numbers have dropped. The pressure on grasses has decreased with the lessening of summer livestock use, but the pressures on sentinel shrubs and forbs are still high in many places due to the combination of wild and domestic ungulate use.

Comment 4211b. *Livestock grazing—well-managed, well-monitored, outcome-based—is not only fully compatible with the purposes for which CMR was established, it is a proven cost-effective and flexible tool for management of wildlife habitat. The FEIS fails to fully cover this.*

Response 4211b. Managed livestock grazing may be a useful tool under certain conditions. However, livestock grazing is a secondary use on a national wildlife refuge and it must be compatible with refuge purposes, as well as accomplish the mission of the refuge System. The refuge manager has decided that for livestock grazing to be compatible on the refuge, it must be a prescriptive program that meets wildlife and habitat objectives (DEIS page 372 and updated in the FEIS). Livestock grazing is a useful tool in areas that lack wild ungulates and have high precipitation and good soils that produce abundant vegetation. The refuge has low precipitation, poor soils, sparse vegetation, and high populations of wild ungulates. In some areas, these characteristics severely limit the usefulness of livestock as a wildlife management tool. See response 3116.

Comment 4211c. *There is no basis for objectives such as the one for Upland Habitat (Alternative D)... Apparently the authors of the EIS are not aware that research has not correlated cover of forbs and shrubs to weight units in the northern Great Plains.*

Response 4211c. The Service is not correlating cover to weight units. Cover and weight units (biomass) are both useful measures as are frequency and density, but they do not measure the same characteristics. Each measure is useful for some purposes, but not others. We may use them all, as appropriate, for specific tasks.

Comment 4211d. *Without additional background information, it is impossible to interpret the summary statistics reported in the EIS (for example, Figure 19 on page 192).*

Response 4211d. Summary statistics, such as the referenced figure, are intended to provide an illustrative example of the type of data used in the CCP process and ongoing refuge management. The particular section referenced (Vegetation Monitoring in the Uplands) was revised in the FEIS to emphasize the importance of the example data to refuge management. The transects in figure 19 of the DEIS are matched to the extent possible for soils and topography to provide nonbiased information on grazing intensity and distribution relative to sharp-tailed grouse nesting requirements.

Comment 4211e. *Re: the record from a 1962 inspection (p. 190): As everybody knows by April the country is just coming out of winter and the land looks drab, grass, if any, is dried up and washed out. From July 1957 to early April of 1962, the area surrounding CMR had been suffering from a drought. By mid April in 1962, it started to rain and the country rejuvenated and that year was a very good year.*

Response 4211e. Comment noted.

Comment 4211f. *The document is based on inadequate review and presentation of pertinent scientific information available on habitat management for wildlife, especially in relation to livestock grazing alternatives and effects in prairie and riparian ecosystems.*

Response 4211f. See responses 3116 and 4212.

COMMENT 4212: Comment that the Service should use the same methods as other agencies to assess rangeland health

Response 4212. The Service is not in the range management discipline, but is instead focused on wildlife and habitat management. Even though the disciplines of range management and wildlife management have commonalities, we do not have goals for the provision of forage for domestic animals, as do other agencies. Regarding consistency with range management methodologies, we are familiar with the habitat assessment methods used by other agencies, and may integrate them as appropriate. We are in the process of working with ecologists, statisticians, and other scientific disciplines (DEIS page 67) to develop monitoring protocols. In the FEIS, we clarified that monitoring protocols would be peer reviewed in accordance with our information quality guidelines.

COMMENT 4221: Specific substantive comment about riparian and wetland habitat resources and analysis (specific text)

Comment 4221a. *(Regarding riparian stream assessment data): To be meaningful, the authors of the EIS need to provide information regarding their studies: were the study sites systematically selected, randomly selected, or chosen by the FWS to be sampled because they were believed to be “sore spots.” These data and their respective background information should be made available to reviewers.*

Response 4221a. An information summary on streams selected, reasons for selection, and results is presented in the DEIS (pages 196–199). The CCP and EIS is not the place to provide detailed background on the referenced studies. However, these studies are available for review upon request.

Comment 4221b. *I am also concerned that the riparian assessments are based on one-time observations, some of which were made over 20 years ago.*

Response 4221b. The riparian assessments were not a one-time observation. The Riparian and Wetland Research Program assessed 82 streams from 1995–1997 (DEIS page 196). Ecological Solutions Group (2009) resurveyed most of the same locations in addition to additional survey areas.

COMMENT 4401: Specific substantive comment about visitor services (specific text)

Comment 4401a. *Page 110 A1. Include the upgrading of all signs to service standards.*

Response 4401a. Changed.

Comment 4401b. *Page 106 C2. Suggest vault toilets, not pit type.*

Response 4401b. Changed to toilets.

COMMENT 4501: Specific substantive comment about human history and cultural resources

Comment 4501a. *I feel that your new management plan should focus on preserving both the habitat and the culture and traditions of the CMR including sustainable private ranching.*

Response 4501a. The ranching heritage on the refuge is largely the remains of fencing, homesteads, and corals. Refuge activities would be reviewed for impact to these resources and would avoid adverse impacts where possible. Consideration of the ranching history was included in the objective and rationale for environmental education (DEIS pages 116 and 126), rationale for cultural resources (DEIS B1–8). The ranching era was also discussed in the affected environment. While we understand the importance of ranching to the local communities, there is not a designated ranching heritage area within or next to the refuge.

COMMENT 4601: Specific substantive comment about paleontological resources (specific text)

Comment 4601a. *Page 126 Cultural & Paleontological. This section could be shortened into 2 or 3 paragraphs to treat Alt A, B, & D the same with a slightly expanded protection and education effort in Alternative C.*

Response 4601a. Comment noted.

COMMENT 4701: Specific substantive comment about socioeconomics (specific text)

Comment 4701a. *FWS and the CMR should become more invested in gathering, interpreting and communicating the benefits to people derived from the NWR. The money stream flowing to local economies is the benefit of greatest importance and should get appropriate management attention.*

Response 4701a. Comment noted.

Comment 4701b. *The separate analyses of recreation and livestock activities make it impossible to evaluate the impacts of the alternatives. These activities are not mutually exclusive, and it was economically*

incorrect to analyze them separately. (All activities) and aggregate impacts need to be addressed simultaneously, in a single model.

Response 4701b. The Service stands by the approach used in the analysis. The economic contribution of current recreation and grazing levels were estimated using Impact Analysis for Planning (IMPLAN), a regional input–output modeling system that is used by government agencies, colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations, corporations, and business development and community planning organizations (Minnesota IMPLAN Group, 2011). This approach is consistent with the approach that is typically taken for CCPs on national wildlife refuges. We are able to anticipate changes in wildlife-dependent recreation across management alternatives allowing for the economic impacts to be estimated. However, the number of AUMS used under the action alternatives would be based on habitat needs for wildlife, which cannot be easily predicted nor is the purpose of it to support economic revenue. The impact of refuge grazing on the six adjacent counties is less than 1 percent and negligible, and none of the alternatives would change the overall effect on the six counties (DEIS pages 249 and 330)

Comment 4701c. *Page 329 Conclusion. The relatively smaller local output of 23.3M [million] appears to be too low given the refuge highly productive habitats in this alternative.*

Response 4701c. The Service stands by the economic analysis. See response 4702.

Comment 4701d. *The annual economic contribution of the refuge is greatly embellished by the reported \$20 to \$23 million estimate in the EIS. Carver and Caudill's estimated expenditures per refuge visitor is based on national statistics, and do not accurately reflect conditions in northeastern Montana.*

Response 4701d. The spending estimates from Carver and Caudill are based on regional, not national statistics that were derived from the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. This national survey reports trip-related spending of State residents and nonresidents for several different wildlife recreational activities. For each recreation activity, spending is reported in the categories of lodging, food and drink, transportation, and other expenses. Carver and Caudill (2007) calculated the average per person and per day expenditures by recreation activity for each Fish and Wildlife Service region. The spending profiles developed for the Service's Region 6 (the region the refuge is located in) were used in this study. Region 6 consists of the following States: Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Kansas.

COMMENT 4702: Comment that the economic analysis does not accurately represent local conditions/analysis is flawed

Response 4072. USGS consulted multiple sources in conducting the socioeconomic analysis. The data, which were cited in the document, included sources from other Federal, State, and local agencies, and private landowners. In addition to the meetings with county commissioners and other local organizations, the USGS obtained the most recent demographic and economic county-level data from national and State sources. These data sources were the same as those used in the reports provided by the counties, but more up-to-date. In addition, the socioeconomic analysis went through extensive peer review prior to the release of the DEIS.

The Service disagrees that the economic impacts were not adequately analyzed. We recognize that there could be impacts to some permittees as a result of us carrying out a more aggressive prescriptive grazing program in alternatives B and D (DEIS pages 319, 326, 328–331). However, the economic analysis does not suggest this action would negatively impact the economy (DEIS page 330).

COMMENT 4801: Specific substantive comment about effects from refuge operations, partnerships, or adjacent lands (specific text)

Comment 4801a. *...in the EIS.....it would be helpful to address...these indirect benefits of the protected public lands. I think most of the comments generally agree that protected public lands benefit local communities and to look at that more closely, I think. In areas where you're losing population, I think this is something to consider and that these protected public relations are features that make communities attractive and figure out how to benefit from that.*

Response 4801a. The indirect benefits of the refuge to local communities are addressed in two areas: the economic impacts of refuge staff and visitors are described in the socioeconomic affects section (DEIS page 312), while the attitudes, values, and perceptions of local communities are discussed as part of the socioeconomic affected environment (DEIS page 252).

Comment 4801b. *How do you plan to handle private property within the CMR boundary? Is this where "willing seller-willing buyer" comes in to play? You remove interior fences and use prescriptive grazing which is unbeneficial to ranchers to force them to nonuse and eventually drop their CMR permits, thus squeezing them off the CMR. Will FWS then buy the deeded land for a fair market price? Or a price FWS deems appropriate and compatible?*

Response 4801b. The Service currently buys inholdings from willing sellers, and this would not change in any of the alternatives. We have clarified this in the FEIS. The location and timing of future land acquisitions are based on unforeseen opportunities and market conditions, and all acquisitions go through an appraisal process.

Comment 4801c. *In Chapter 4, under “State and Private Lands,” no mention is made of private land in DEIS page 191.*

Response 4801c. The Service inadvertently left out the acreage for private lands in the DEIS (page 191), and this section was corrected in the FEIS. However, we did identify the acreage of private lands in the DEIS (page 26) and depicted the private lands in the DEIS on pages 168–169.

Comment 4801d. *Another issue that we have is the fact that there is very little mention of State and private lands within the document. On Page 191 you mention the present grazing on DNRC lands but mention nothing about private.*

Response 4801d. See response 4801c.

Comment 4801e. *Every one of these ranchers in here have a land patent, and if they bring that land patent up into their name, that’s proof of our title against the Federal Government, including all apprentices. All enabling documents contain the savings rezinnum, subject to valid, preexisting rights. All ranchers have water rights and grazing rights on the CMR. Lands which have private rights and claims attached are not public lands. Nowhere in this document of this plan that you have do you recognize to protect private rights.*

Response 4801e. On refuge lands, livestock grazing is a privilege and not a property right. As stated in the DEIS (page 174), the United States holds Federal reserved water rights on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge. The United States is in the process of quantifying these reserved rights with the Montana Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission. The CCP makes no mention of taking any privately held right.

5000—Planning and NEPA Processes and the Draft CCP and EIS

COMMENT 5001: Specific substantive comment about the planning and NEPA processes (specific text)

Comment 5001a. *On Page 24 through 25...it states that you have a lot of emphasis on the assessment that was done by Murray of 1935. And I was just wondering why you do not use more recent assessments or monitoring that you have done and were dating clear back to 1935?...And...you didn’t address climate change 6,000 years ago, or even back in 1935, so I would like to see some more research or some more current monitoring to help with this CCP.*

Response 5001a. None of the alternatives rely solely on Olaus Murie’s observations and report. It is true that many things have changed during the last 75 years, many of them to the benefit of wildlife habitat. The Service used his report, based on site visits throughout the refuge and conversations with several residents, as an expert reference. Many sources for assessment and monitoring were used in the development of the CCP.

Comment 5001b. *Page 96 C1–C4. Suggest using the refuge manual for guidance in writing a wildlife inventory plan.*

Response 5001b. Comment noted.

COMMENT 5003: Comment that the NEPA process has not been adequately followed

Response 5003. The Service disagrees. This CCP and NEPA process has consistently met or exceeded the standards set by the Council on Environmental Quality, U.S. Department of the Interior, and our policies, and other applicable policies and guidelines.

COMMENT 5104: Comment that the public involvement process has been inadequate

Response 5104. The Service disagrees. Opportunities for public input and comment have met or exceeded NEPA and our policies. After the release of the Draft CCP and EIS in September 2010, seven public meetings were held and the public comment period was extended to provide ample opportunity for public involvement. See response 5107.

COMMENT 5107: Comment that local and State government coordination has been inadequate

Response 5107. See response to 5104. Cooperating agencies, county, and State representatives attended most of the meetings, workshops, and provided comments on the internal review document. The DEIS (pages 353–359) provides details of the input the counties had in the planning process.

COMMENT 5201: Specific substantive comment about the Draft CCP and EIS document (specific text)

Comment 5201a. *Page 140 Table 3: The time lines set for delivering a workable plan seem drawn out. They should be given a priority rating, based on the issues that are most beneficial to the public and the refuge wildlife, and accomplished in that order.*

Response 5201a. The record of decision on the FEIS will enable the Service to carry out the CCP. Step-down plans are specific, topic-oriented plans that provide us the guidance of carrying out refuges' objectives and strategies. Some stepdown plans are relatively easy to write and would not require further public review, while others are more detailed and could warrant additional public input. The time-lines identified in table 3 of the DEIS take into account the complexities of carrying out the objectives and strategies, including the development of any stepdown plans.

Comment 5201b. *Page 139 Monitoring and Evaluation: The process they would be accomplished with should have been explained and included as part of the Plan/EIS.*

Response 5201b. Existing and proposed monitoring and evaluation methods for specific resources are discussed elsewhere in the DEIS for particular topic areas. The Service is in the process of working with ecologists, statisticians, and other scientific disciplines (DEIS page 67) to refine monitoring protocols. In the FEIS, we clarified that monitoring protocols would be peer reviewed in accordance with our information quality guidelines.

Comment 5201c. *Page 282, Alt. D [Big Game]: Recommend including the quantitative differences between Alternative D and A, to more accurately describe the difference between current management and the proposed action.*

Response 5201c. Differences between the alternatives and their effects on all resources are summarized in the DEIS (page 145, table 7 and page 335, table 56). Quantitative differences between the alternatives are found in the big game objectives (DEIS page 86).

COMMENT 5204: Comment that the analysis in the Draft CCP and EIS is inadequate

Response 5204. The Service recognizes the objections made by some individuals about some of the proposed management objectives, particularly those related to prescriptive grazing, road and access management, wilderness, and bison restoration. Despite these areas of contention, we stand by the analysis of effects described in the DEIS and FEIS. Based on the several comments and suggestions on the DEIS, we made changes to the alternatives and clarified some of the key concepts and analyses. These changes in the FEIS are summarized in appendix B.

COMMENT 5205: Comment detailing specific editorial suggestions or errors in the document

Response 5205. The Service appreciates the editorial suggestions and errors identified in the comments received. Each of these suggested changes was reviewed, and where appropriate, has been incorporated into the FEIS.

