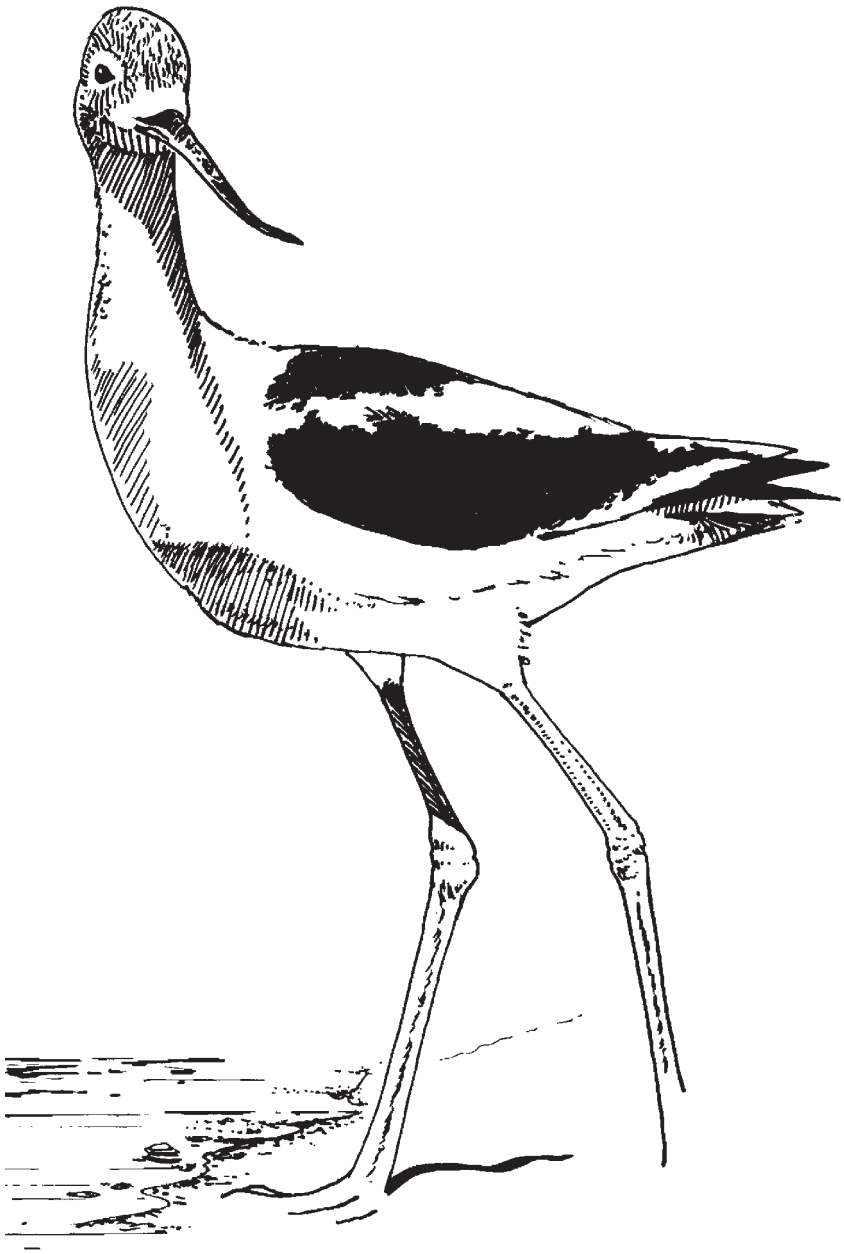
2 Planning Process



American Avocet
Bob Hines/USFWS

2 Planning Process

THE PLANNING PROCESS

This CCP is intended to comply with the Improvement Act and NEPA and their implementing regulations. The Service issued a final refuge planning policy in 2000 that established requirements and guidance for Refuge System planning, including CCPs and step-down management plans, ensuring that planning efforts comply with the provisions of the Improvement Act. The planning policy identified several steps of the CCP and EA process (see figure 8):

- Form a planning team and conduct preplanning;
- Initiate public involvement and scoping;
- Draft vision statement and goals;
- Develop and analyze alternatives, including proposed action;
- Prepare draft CCP and EA;
- Prepare and adopt final CCP and EA and issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) or determine if an environmental impact statement is needed;
- Implement plan, monitor and evaluate.
- Review plan (every 5 years) and revise (every 15 years).

The Service began the preplanning process for the refuge complex in November 2003 (see appendix E). A planning team comprised of Service personnel from the refuge complex and the regional office, as well as from the NDGF (appendix C), was developed during the kickoff meeting in February 2004.

A notice of intent was published in the *Federal Register* on May 21, 2004. Notification of a public open house was distributed through press releases.

Draft issues and qualities lists were developed during a workshop held at the Service's Bismarck office in late September 2004. Over the course of preplanning and scoping, the planning team collected available information about the resources of the refuge complex and the surrounding areas. This information is summarized in chapter 3: Refuge Resources and Description.

This CCP provides long-term guidance for management decisions; sets forth goals, objectives, and strategies needed to accomplish the refuge complex's purposes; and identifies the Service's best estimate of future needs. This CCP details program planning levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and, as such, are primarily for Service strategic planning and program prioritization purposes. This CCP does

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Godwits over the lake at sunset.

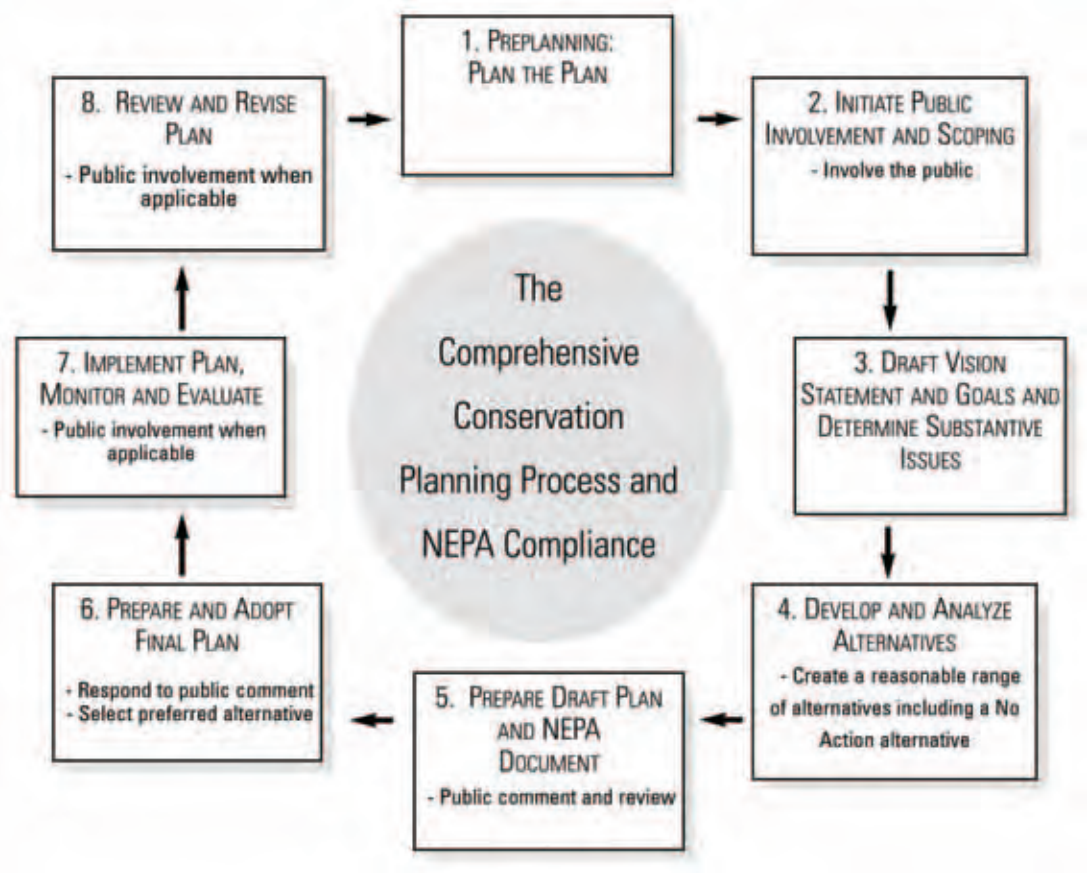

Figure 8. The steps in the CCP process

not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

PLANNING ISSUES

Upland Habitat Management

The refuge complex's primary purpose is to provide optimal habitat conditions for the needs of a suite of migratory birds and, to a lesser extent, native, resident wildlife. To achieve the refuge complex's goals and objectives, aggressive upland habitat management must be conducted. The refuge complex includes uplands that were previously farmed and have since been restored to various mixes of tame and native grasses interspersed with native prairie areas, the bulk of which have the native vegetation character but are compromised by invading species. For the purpose of this CCP, native upland habitat is considered previously unbroken (virgin) sod. Soil composition is generally intact, although the vegetative community is often altered substantially due to a host of environmental factors. Vegetation typically has a native component, but often has become invaded by nonnative plant species.

Primary invasive forb species include leafy spurge, Canada thistle, and absinth wormwood. Kentucky bluegrass and smooth brome are primary invasive grass species. Western snowberry and silverberry are native shrubs that have greatly expanded their coverage in some areas where the natural regimes of fire and grazing have been altered.

These nonnative grasses and forbs and potentially invasive native woody species substantially diminish the quality and suitability of upland habitat for many native wildlife species. Invasives have been an issue throughout the refuge complex for many years. A large portion of the refuge's resources are directed at control of leafy spurge and other invasive species. Integrated pest management (IPM) strategies currently used include: prescribed burning, grazing, mowing, herbicides, insects, interseeding, and farming in combination to provide control.

New invasive species (e.g., salt cedar, purple loosestrife) pose additional threats to lands in the refuge complex. Generally, an immediate control response to new invasive species is most effective in the long-term; however, due to the scattered nature of land holdings in the refuge complex, early detection is a primary issue but is often unachievable.

Tamegrass (i.e., exotic grasses) fields persist, providing sources of seed that invade and degrade adjacent native uplands. These fields need to be restored to native grass.

Public Use

Hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation are all uses currently authorized on lands administered by the refuge complex. A growing demand for public recreation in the area makes the six priority public uses a primary issue of interest.

Water Management

A small number of wetlands in the refuge complex are impounded by earthen dams, most with water control structures (WCSs) that can be used to either create deep and stable water levels or mimic natural wet and dry cycles.

The water management capability at Long Lake NWR is limited and primarily targets single-issue management (i.e., managing water levels to deter botulism outbreaks). The limitations are exacerbated by the "hard sill" elevation of the outlet which limits drawdown capability and subjects water management to interpool regulation of water levels only when nature allows.

Wildlife Disease

The refuge complex administers migratory bird programs and has the lead role in addressing wildlife and in particular avian disease issues. There are 21 sites in the district that have a history of botulism outbreaks.

Success in combating botulism, especially on Long Lake NWR occurs at the expense of other resources. There exists an ongoing issue of striking a balance between providing optimal habitat, maintaining other programs in the refuge complex, and managing botulism. Severe disease years consume substantial staff time, reducing the refuge complex's capacity to attain other goals and objectives.

Disease issues are increasing. Historically, the only disease issue was botulism; however, recently West Nile virus, chronic wasting disease (CWD), chlymidiosis, and avian influenza have created additional issues and concerns.

Long Lake Hydrology and Water Quality

Development of dikes and WCSs to manage waters at increased levels to combat botulism has altered the hydrology of Long Lake and its associated marshes. During the era of refuge development, the area was experiencing severe drought conditions and development of water management facilities focused on conservation of water. This strategy failed to recognize the need to periodically lower and dewater refuge units and thus the capability to do so was never developed. This has severely limited Long Lake NWR's ability to manage water effectively.

There are questions regarding the altered hydrology and the long-term ability of Long Lake NWR to provide beneficial wildlife habitat. The developments have reduced the ability to "flush" the system and have created hypotheses that this situation has accelerated salinification of refuge wetlands, reducing the sustainability of wetland habitats. This creates an obvious need to examine historical data related to past water-quality parameters, and to develop a monitoring program to compare and track Long Lake NWR waters. With this knowledge, staff will be better able to prescribe viable alternatives to address and avoid potential productivity declines of refuge marshes and/or a catastrophic collapse of the system.

Predator Management

Predators on the refuge complex are diverse, ranging from coyotes and short-tailed weasels to bald eagles and American kestrels. This array of predators helps maintain the "biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health" of Service lands. Several species including red fox, coyotes, striped skunks, and raccoons are found at higher than historical levels due to modifications of habitat and other factors. These species can impact migratory bird populations and reduce the likelihood of reaching wildlife population goals and objectives outlined for the refuge complex, primarily by preying upon the nests of numerous grassland-nesting bird species.

Despite a substantial investment in land protection and habitat management, breeding migratory bird recruitment rates that are not high enough to sustain and/or increase populations of trust bird species have been documented on Service lands within the refuge complex. Unacceptable predation

rates must be addressed through management of predator populations.

Additionally, the protection provided by the refuges allows predators that hunt domestic livestock (e.g., coyotes) adjacent to the refuges to continue to grow unchecked, perpetuating depredation problems and economic losses to the refuges' neighbors.

Lake Isabel Recreation Area

The Lake Isabel Recreation Area, which is adjacent to Slade NWR, provides the only public access for Lake Isabel. This recreation area has been managed over the years by Kidder County, and while most of the nontraditional uses occur off-refuge, facilities on the refuge promote uses that are not allowed on refuge lands (e.g., swimming, jet skiing). Recently the facilities have been minimized and converted to promote more traditional and acceptable refuge public uses (e.g., fishing).

Habitat Protection and Acquisition

Urbanization, development, and conversion of native prairies for agricultural crop production continue to threaten this ecosystem and the support capability for native wildlife. Additional grassland and wetland habitat needs to be protected in order to achieve the Service's goals and objectives.

The majority of the wetlands on refuge complex fee lands are natural prairie potholes, which function through dynamic prairie weather cycles. However, privately owned wetlands continue to be lost annually to agricultural drainage and impacts of development.

Over 60 percent of all grassland area in the refuge complex remains intact (i.e., native sod); however, most of it is in degraded condition due to invasive exotic plants, grasses, and woody vegetation, and annual use for livestock production. Native prairies are also continuously threatened by development and other uses.

While various regulations and programs have provided some temporary relief from broad-scale destruction, the only permanent protection for grassland and wetland habitat is afforded through purchase of perpetual easements by the Service. While these programs afford protection of the habitats, additional issues persist as economic pressure on these private lands provides less than optimum habitat for trust resources, especially those species with narrow habitat requirements (e.g., marbled godwit, chestnut collared longspur).

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Piping Plover

Budget and Staffing

Budget and staffing is not sufficient to fulfill the purposes and goals of the refuge complex. Identifying priorities and directing resources efficiently will always be an issue for the refuge complex. Service staff needs to identify and articulate unfunded needs so that they will be able to compete effectively for additional funds from both within the Service and from partners and other sources.

Monitoring

Monitoring wildlife populations is an essential element in achieving the primary goals and objectives of the refuge complex. Basic data related to recruitment, mortality, and habitat use for a representative group of species must be collected and analyzed on a regular basis in order to make appropriate decisions that will affect the habitats upon which these species depend. Decision making in the absence of resource information is a primary issue for the refuge complex.

Threatened and Endangered Species

Breeding piping plovers occur in small numbers on numerous alkali wetlands, which are characteristic to portions of the refuge complex.

The refuge complex holds habitat, which when enhanced or restored may be suitable for Dakota skippers (a candidate species). Small, isolated populations may exist on certain WPAs, which retain remnant native prairie vegetation. Surveys are planned to determine the status of this species in these areas.

Endangered whooping cranes are regularly observed on portions of Long Lake NWR.

Additionally, throughout the refuge complex, several observations are documented during each spring and fall migration.

The primary issues related to these and other species of concern center on: monitoring their populations; monitoring habitat use; identifying, securing, and maintaining essential habitat; and developing habitat conditions in areas that hold potential for these species and that will promote increased recruitment or population protection to secure and increase their populations.

The Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Heath Policy (published January 16, 2001, effective April 16, 2001) (http://policy. fws. gov/library/ 01fr3809.pdf) guides Refuge System personnel in maintaining the "biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health" of the Refuge System. This policy further guides the Service to consider restoring lost or severely degraded components of the system "where appropriate and in concert with refuge purposes and the Refuge System mission."

Refuge complex staff reviewed all threatened and endangered species with historical ranges on or near lands in the refuge complex to determine if additional actions could be taken to restore or enhance habitat for endangered species. Only the piping plover was determined to be appropriate for restoration actions.

Although the status of the Dakota skipper has not warranted listing, refuge complex staff has consulted with ecological services staff and evaluated habitats as to their present and future potential to support this species. The refuge complex has adopted interim guidelines targeting management for Dakota skippers, resulting from those consultations.

Prioritization of Lands in the Long Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Refuge complex staff is charged with managing habitat and protecting trust resources (e.g., migratory birds, threatened and endangered species) on 82 different tracts of fee-title land, which are scattered throughout a three-county area that spans 7,490 square miles. Limited staff, budgets, and other resources require that lands are prioritized and those with the greatest management potential and/or most vulnerable resources are recognized.

Refuge complex staff used a number of important criteria to classify all fee-title lands in the refuge complex as either: high, moderate, or low priority. The criteria include 1) breeding duck pair density, with a minimum upland acreage; 2) total tract size, with a minimum upland acreage; 3) native prairie acreage, and; 4) proximity to Grassland Bird Conservation Areas (type I), with a minimum upland acreage, and; 5) resource of special concern designation (e.g., piping plover critical habitat).

Based on these criteria, high-priority tracts may be classified as such based on their management potential (e.g., native prairie) or their habitat support potential for priority wildlife populations (e.g., Dakota skippers). Based on the above criteria, all three fee-title refuges qualify as high priority, along with 36 WPAs. Twenty WPAs are classified as moderate priority and 23 WPAs are classified as low priority. Appendix F lists, by priority class, all fee-title lands and their qualifying criteria.

Additionally, due to the high visibility and attraction of the three fee-title refuges to the public, these lands receive staff attention that extends beyond managing habitat and protecting trust resources, with increased focus on these lands for compatible uses described in the Improvement Act (e.g., hunting, wildlife photography, environmental education). Similar priority public use opportunities may be used in the future to help prioritize WPAs because of their location (e.g., close proximity to urban areas and/or Interstate 94) and ability to provide enhanced opportunities for priority public uses, irrespective of an overall tract rating based on habitat or wildlife management potential and/or priority resource criteria.