

# Chapter 3. Alternatives

## 3.1 Introduction

Alternatives are different approaches designed to achieve the refuge purpose(s), vision, and the goals identified in the CCP while helping to fulfill the System's mission.

This chapter describes the two alternatives analyzed in detail for the Program, including alternative A (current management—no action) and alternative B (enhance the program). The following sections describe how the alternatives were developed and how they addressed the substantive issues identified during the scoping process.

This CCP and EA have been completed at the programmatic level, rather than as a management plan for each refuge. This was the most logical approach given the following circumstances:

- 39 limited-interest refuges in the CCP
- Private ownership of 93 percent of the limited-interest refuge lands
- Similarity of purposes, limited-interest refuge agreement language, and management history
- All but two are located east of the Missouri River, scattered from the Canadian to South Dakota borders
- No established guidelines or resources to manage the refuges or the Program

## 3.2 Alternatives Development

In 2004, the Service held several meetings with the landowners, public, and agencies to identify issues and concerns associated with the establishment and management of the Program. The public involvement process is summarized in greater detail in chapter 2. Based on public input, as well as guidance from the Improvement Act, NEPA, and Service planning policy, the planning team selected six substantive issues to be addressed in the alternatives:

1. Wetland Management
2. Upland Management
3. Partnerships
4. Visitor Services
5. Administration
6. Divestiture

A more detailed description of each issue is in section 2.7.

Once the decision was made to prepare a programmatic plan, it was discussed how to develop alternatives for meeting the goals while addressing these substantive issues. Given the circumstances mentioned previously, in particular, the fact that there were no current management guidelines, it was felt that the only alternative other than no action was to “enhance the program.”

*Any proposed actions beyond the uses the Service will regulate (see section 2.3) will not be conducted without the full support of the affected landowners.*

## 3.3 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

When the planning process began and the issues for these refuges and the program were identified, the planning team recognized that there was a great deal of similarity in purposes, habitats, issues, and limited management capabilities (see section 2.3) for all of 39 refuges. Given these facts, there was no added value in developing individual goals, objectives, and strategies for each refuge.

### 3.4 Elements Common to All Alternatives

This section identifies key elements included in the CCP regardless of which alternative was selected. Both alternatives would incorporate the following:

- No alternative would infringe on any landowner rights or commercial uses, beyond the uses the Service would regulate under the authority of the limited-interest refuge agreement (as described in section 2.3), without permission from willing landowners.
- Landowners would have the right to refuse receiving any additional compensation for added protections.
- Activities outside the authority of the limited-interest refuge agreement would not be conducted unless permission is granted from affected, willing landowners.
- Landowners would be provided with information on the Program annually.
- The Service would minimize negative impacts to migratory birds and other wildlife by regulating uses that occur on water.
- The Service would ensure that refuge management complies with all other federal laws and regulations that provide direction for managing units of the System.

Chapter 6 outlines the Service's plan for implementing the Enhancing the Program alternative in the form of goals, objectives, and strategies.

### 3.5 Description of Alternatives

The theme and general management direction for each alternative are described below.

#### Alternative A—Current Management (No Action)

Alternative A, the no-action alternative, describes current and future management of the Program. It provides the baseline against which to compare the preferred alternative. It is also a requirement of NEPA that the no-action alternative be addressed.

#### *General Management Direction*

Management would continue to be incidental to other refuge programs. Visitor services would see few changes due to a lack of funding and staffing to manage additional uses.

Upland and wetland habitat, in particular native prairie, would continue to be lost and landowners would not receive any further compensation for habitat protections. Water management structures would continue to deteriorate. Any repairs to water management structures would be funded through the maintenance and management program.

Current hunting and trapping programs would continue if they are determined to be compatible with the refuge purposes. Only a few refuges are open to hunting while each refuge has been opened to permit-only trapping since they were established. The trapping program is limited, less than one trapper per refuge; however, this program is vital to increasing ground nesting bird survival by reducing unnaturally high populations of small predators (including raccoons and skunks). This permit-only trapping would continue.

Contact with landowners and other partners would be incidental to issues and common interests.

No limited-interest refuges would be divested, further straining limited resources and affecting the integrity of the System due to the retention of refuges that do not support the mission or goals of the System.

Activities outside the authority of the limited-interest refuge agreement would not be conducted unless permission is granted from willing landowners.

#### Alternative B—Preferred Alternative (Enhance the Program)

Alternative B, the preferred alternative, would address these refuges and their identified issues at a programmatic level while assisting the refuges to reach their full potential through greater cooperation and support.

#### *General Management Direction*

Highest priority would be given to ensuring that landowners become true partners in this Program and are involved in future management. A full-time Program manager would be recruited to oversee the Program and

implement this CCP. Landowners would be contacted at least annually through an informational newsletter providing updates on Program changes, opportunities, and limited-interest refuge news. Partnerships with state agencies and other organizations would be actively pursued to achieve common goals that may support and enhance the Program.

Using available habitat data, each managing station would work with the Habitat and Population Evaluation Team to develop a protection priority list for each refuge. Native prairie habitat would be given highest priority as areas are ranked, followed by natural wetlands. This would be the first critical evaluation of the value of each refuge and would assist managers in prioritizing the use of limited funding and staffing.

With assistance from the Regional Engineering Office, existing impoundments would be evaluated to determine needed repairs or replacement of water management structures such as spillways, dams, and water control structures. Following evaluation, repairs, or replacement, impoundments would be managed for wetland-dependent migratory birds under the guidelines of an established water level management plan.

Existing public use programs would continue if they remain compatible and there is a continued demand. Trapping would continue on a permit-only basis focusing efforts on maximizing waterfowl and other grassland nesting bird success through predator control. Public ice fishing would be permitted, where compatible.

The Service would work with willing landowners to determine their interest in providing access to the public for additional hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation programs. As new opportunities arise, each manager would determine the compatibility of such activities based on the refuge purposes and available resources to manage the proposed use. All programs must be made available to the public, but no public uses will occur unless the landowners grant access. Even though these refuges are primarily on private lands, any public programs are governed under the Code of Federal Regulations; therefore, public participation may not be restricted beyond such restrictions as limiting the number of users and seasons.

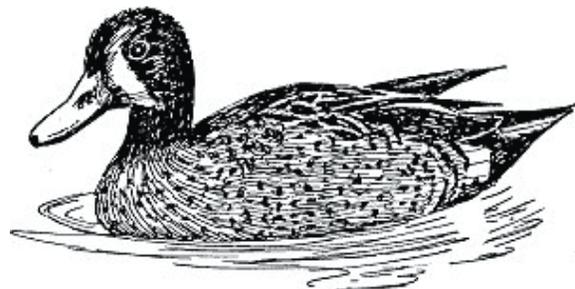
Under this alternative, six refuges would be proposed for divestiture: Camp Lake, Lake Patricia, Sheyenne Lake, School Section Lake, Bone Hill, and Cottonwood Lake. These refuges are being considered for divestiture due to extensive loss of habitat and ownership patterns. In particular, the state currently owns and/or manages three of these refuges (Lake Patricia, Sheyenne Lake, and School Section Lake) and are willing to continue if they are divested. The state has also expressed an interest in the fisheries resources of the remaining three refuges although these refuges uplands have little value to wildlife due to extensive development and commercial operations. The Service does not control these upland uses under the limited-interest refuge agreement; therefore, the uses have expanded over the 70 years. These proposals would ensure that future resources are expended on the remaining refuges that still have the potential to support the mission and goals of the System.

In all cases, activities outside the authority of the limited-interest refuge agreement would not be conducted unless permission is granted from the affected and willing landowners including, but not limited to:

- additional compensation for added protections of wildlife habitat;
- fee-title acquisitions;
- visitor services programs where access is needed from the landowner.

### 3.6 Comparison of Alternatives

The two alternatives evaluated are no action and enhance the program (the preferred alternative). A comparison of these alternatives is shown in table 5.



*Blue-winged Teal*

Tom Kelley/USFWS

**Table 5. Summary comparison of alternatives**

<i>Focus Area</i>	<i>Alternative A (Current Management—No Action)</i>	<i>Alternative B (Enhance the North Dakota Limited-interest Program)</i>
<b>Wetland Management</b>	<p>Retain current structures acquiring funds from the Maintenance Management System program for incidental repair/rehab</p> <p>Little to no water level management of existing impoundments</p> <p>No management or protection of natural wetlands.</p> <p>No actions would be conducted beyond the authority of the current limited-interest refuge agreement (see section 2.3).</p>	<p>Evaluate existing structures, prioritize projects and repair or replace as needed to meet modern water level management standards while not exceeding current water right levels.</p> <p>Actively manage those impoundments with the ability to support migratory birds, particularly waterfowl.</p> <p>Work with willing landowners to protect and enhance naturally occurring wetlands.</p> <p>Monitor wildlife response to management actions.</p> <p>No actions would be conducted beyond the authority of the current limited-interest refuge agreement (see section 2.3) without the permission of willing landowners.</p> <p>Work with willing landowners to restore and enhance riparian habitats.</p>
<b>Upland Management</b>	<p>No management of upland habitat or uses.</p> <p>No actions would be conducted beyond the authority of the current limited-interest refuge agreement (see section 2.3).</p>	<p>Managing stations will work with the HAPET office to prioritize refuges and upland habitat types for added protections, giving priority to native habitats.</p> <p>Provide assistance and compensation to willing landowners for added protections of upland habitat.</p> <p>Monitor wildlife response to management actions.</p> <p>Provide farmers with information through the Department of Agriculture on best management practices to reduce siltation and contaminants.</p> <p>No actions would be conducted beyond the authority of the current limited-interest refuge agreement (see section 2.3) without the permission of willing landowners.</p>

**Table 5. Summary comparison of alternatives**

<i>Focus Area</i>	<i>Alternative A (Current Management—No Action)</i>	<i>Alternative B (Enhance the North Dakota Limited- interest Program)</i>
<b>Partnerships</b>	Annually update landowner mailing list. Contact with landowners and other partners would be incidental to issues and common interests.	Same as alternative A except: Prepare an annual newsletter for the landowners and other interested partners providing information on the Program including compensated programs available to willing landowners and include a postage-paid comment form to provide feedback to the Service. Provide opportunities for landowners to record wildlife sightings on their properties. Highlight sightings in annual newsletters. Notify landowners when management actions have the potential to affect their lands. Work with NDGF to collaborate on refuge evaluations for habitat protection and visitor services programs. Actively develop partnerships to work on common interests that may benefit the Program.
<b>Visitor Services</b>		
Hunting, Trapping, and Fishing	No new hunting or fishing opportunities would be permitted unless compatible with the refuge purposes, resources are available, and landowners provide access. No waterfowl (ducks) hunting would be permitted. Trapping would continue on a permit-only basis focusing all efforts on improving nesting success of waterfowl and other ground nesting birds through a predator management program. Trappers will follow state regulations and annually report species harvested.	Same as alternative A, except: Managing stations would actively work with willing landowners and the NDGF to evaluate each refuge for hunting and fishing opportunities. Depredation issues would be addressed through these programs. Four seasonal law enforcement officers would be recruited to ensure the safety of visitors, landowners, and wildlife. Ice fishing would be permitted, where appropriate and compatible.
Wildlife Observation and Photography	No active watchable wildlife programs.	Managing stations would actively work with landowners to determine their willingness to provide wildlife viewing opportunities. Develop wildlife observation programs.
Environmental Education	No environmental education programs.	Managing stations would actively work with landowners to determine their willingness to provide environmental education opportunities. Work with the Service's Visitor Services Division and local teachers to develop environmental education programs highlighting the Program and its resources.

**Table 5. Summary comparison of alternatives**

<i>Focus Area</i>	<i>Alternative A (Current Management—No Action)</i>	<i>Alternative B (Enhance the North Dakota Limited-interest Program)</i>
<b>Administration</b>	No dedicated resources would be available for the Program.	Recruit one statewide Program manager. Develop Maintenance Management System projects to repair or replace water management structures. Develop project proposals for compensating willing landowners for added protections.
<b>Divestiture</b>	No refuges would be divested.	Six refuges would be divested due to habitat loss and opportunities for state management. Future resources available for the Program would be used on those refuges that have the ability and qualities needed to support the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

