1 Introduction

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The mallard is one of the featured waterfowl species at the North Dakota refuges.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) developed this comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) to provide the foundation for the management and use of 12 national wildlife refuges in North Dakota (see figure 1, vicinity map):

- Audubon National Wildlife Refuge
- Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Kellys Slough National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Alice National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Ilo National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Nettie National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Zahl National Wildlife Refuge
- McLean National Wildlife Refuge
- Shell Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Stewart Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Stump Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- White Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Based on the results of an environmental analysis and public involvement, the Service's director of region 6 made the decision, on September 30, 2008, to implement this CCP to guide the 12 refuges for the next 15 years. Chapter 4, Management Direction, specifies the actions necessary to achieve the purposes and vision for the 12 national wildlife refuges. Wildlife is the first priority in refuge management, and the Service allows and encourages wildlife-dependent recreational use as long as it is compatible with the refuges' purposes.

The Service developed the CCP in compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) and Part 602 (National Wildlife Refuge System Planning) of The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual. The actions described in this CCP meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Compliance with NEPA included the involvement of the public. The planning process and public involvement are further described in this chapter, under 1.6, The Planning Process.

1.1 Purpose and Need for the Plan

The purpose of this CCP is to identify the role that the refuges play in support of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) and to provide long-term guidance for management of the refuges' programs and activities.

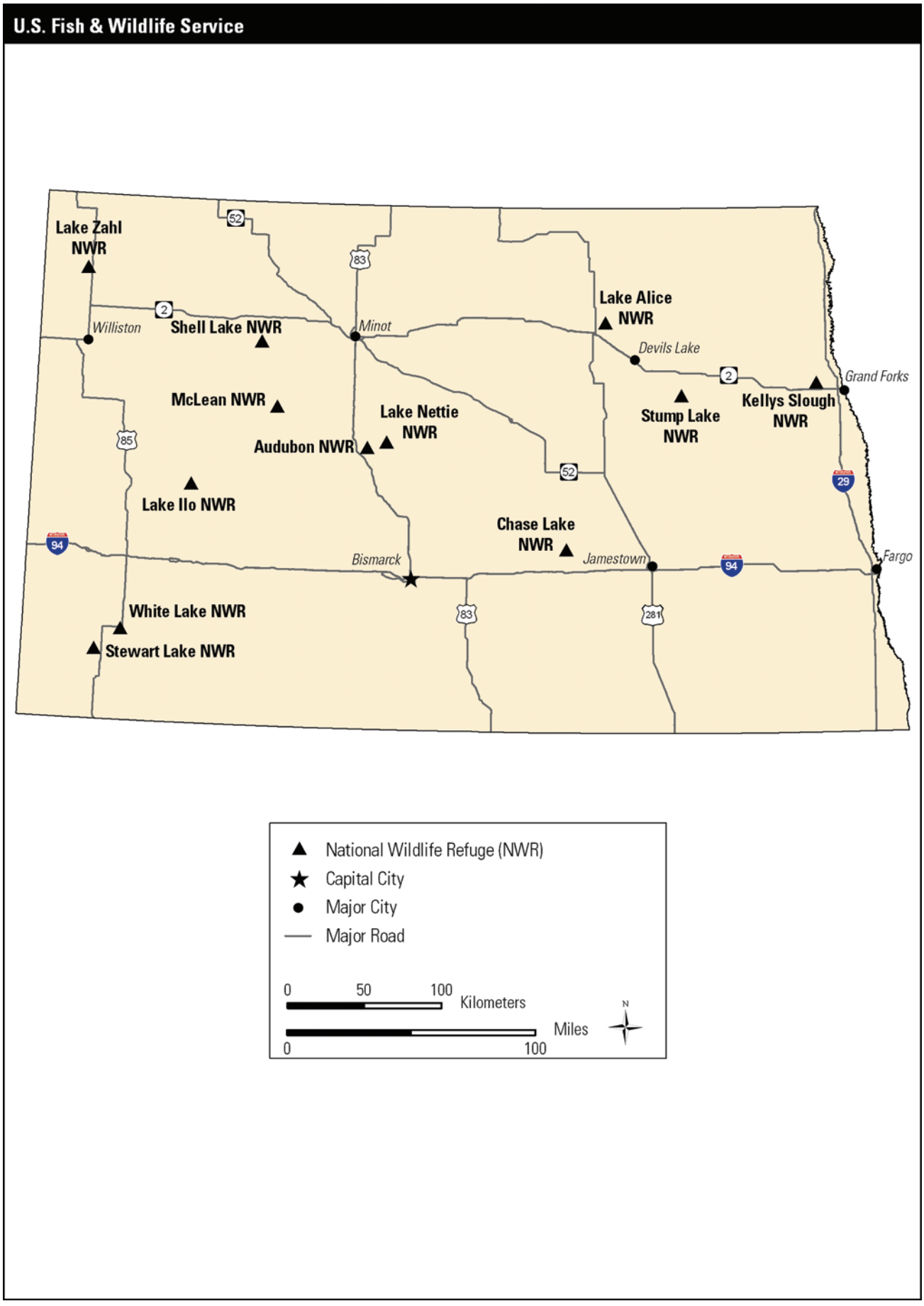

Figure 1. Vicinity map for the 12 refuges, North Dakota.

The CCP is needed

> to communicate with the public and other partners in efforts to carry out the mission of the Refuge System;
>
> to provide a clear statement of direction for management of the refuges;
>
> to provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of the Service's management actions on and around the refuges;
>
> to ensure that the Service's management actions are consistent with the mandates of the Improvement Act;
>
> to ensure that management of the refuges is consistent with federal, state, and county plans;
>
> to provide a basis for development of budget requests for the refuges' operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

Sustaining the nation's fish and wildlife resources is a task that can be accomplished only through the combined efforts of governments, businesses, and private citizens.

1.2 The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Refuge System

The Service is the principal federal agency responsible for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation. The Refuge System is one of the Service's major programs.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working with others, is to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Over a century ago, America's fish and wildlife resources were declining at an alarming rate. Concerned citizens, scientists, and hunting and angling groups joined together to restore and sustain America's national wildlife heritage. This was the genesis of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Today, the Service enforces federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores vital wildlife habitat, protects and recovers endangered species, and helps other governments with conservation efforts. In addition, the Service administers a federal aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars to states for fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, and related programs across America.

Service Activities in North Dakota

Service activities in North Dakota contribute to the state's economy, ecosystems, and education programs. The following list describes the Service's presence and activities:

- Employs 170 people in North Dakota.
- Helped by 539 volunteers who donated more than 10,200 hours with Service projects.
- Manages two national fish hatcheries and one fish and wildlife management assistance office.
- Manages 65 national wildlife refuges encompassing 343,145 acres (0.8% of the state).
- Manages 11 wetland management districts.
  - 284,660 acres of fee waterfowl production areas (0.6% of the state)
  - 1,080,636 wetland acres under various leases or easements (2.4% of the state)
- Hosts more than 385,300 annual visitors to Service-managed lands.
  - 166,908 hunting visits
  - 59,500 fishing visits
  - 26,346 photography visits
- Provided $3.8 million to the NDGF for sport fish restoration and $3.9 million for wildlife restoration and hunter education.
- Helped private landowners restore, create, and enhance more than 214,000 acres on 8,400 sites and restore 17 miles of river since 1987 through the Partners for Wildlife Program.
- Employs 11 Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program biologists.
- Paid North Dakota counties $435,325 under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (funds used for schools and roads).

National Wildlife Refuge System

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt designated the 5.5-acre Pelican Island in Florida as the nation's first wildlife refuge for the protection of brown pelicans and other native, nesting birds. This was the first time the federal government set aside land for wildlife. This small but significant designation was the beginning of the Refuge System.

One hundred years later, the Refuge System has become the largest collection of lands in the world specifically managed for wildlife, encompassing more than 96 million acres within 546 refuges and more than 3,000 small areas for waterfowl breeding and nesting. Today, there is at least one refuge in every state including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In 1997, the Improvement Act established a clear mission for the Refuge System.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

The Improvement Act states that each national wildlife refuge shall be managed

to fulfill the mission of the Refuge System;

to fulfill the individual purposes of each refuge;

to consider the needs of fish and wildlife first;

to fulfill the requirement of developing a CCP for each unit of the Refuge System and fully involve the public in the preparation of these plans;

to maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System;

to recognize that wildlife-dependent recreational uses including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education and interpretation are legitimate and priority public uses;

to retain the authority of refuge managers to determine compatible public uses.

In addition to the mission for the Refuge System, the wildlife and habitat vision for each unit of the Refuge System stresses the following principles:

- Wildlife comes first.
- Ecosystems, biodiversity, and wilderness are vital concepts in refuge management.
- Habitats must be healthy.
- Growth of refuges must be strategic.
- The Refuge System serves as a model for habitat management with broad participation from others.

Following passage of the Improvement Act, the Service immediately began to carry out the direction of the new legislation, including preparation of CCPs for all national wildlife refuges. Consistent with the Improvement Act, the Service prepares CCPs in conjunction with public involvement. Each refuge is required to complete its CCP within the 15-year schedule (by 2012).

People and the Refuge System

The nation's fish and wildlife heritage contributes to the quality of American lives and is an integral part of the country's greatness. Wildlife and wild places have always given people special opportunities to have fun, relax, and appreciate the natural world.

Whether through bird watching, fishing, hunting, photography, or other wildlife pursuits, wildlife recreation contributes millions of dollars to local economies. In 2002, approximately 35.5 million people visited the Refuge System, mostly to observe wildlife in their natural habitats. Visitors are most often accommodated through nature trails, auto tours, interpretive programs, and hunting and fishing opportunities. Significant economic benefits are generated in the local communities that surround refuges. Economists report that Refuge System visitors contribute more than $792 million annually to local economies.

1.3 National and Regional Mandates

Refuge System units are managed to achieve the mission and goals of the Refuge System, along with the designated purpose of the refuges (as described in establishing legislation, executive orders, or other establishing documents). Key concepts and guidance of the Refuge System are in the Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Administration Act), Title 50 of the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFRs), The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, and the Improvement Act.

The Improvement Act amends the Administration Act by providing a unifying mission for the Refuge System, a new process for determining compatible public uses at refuges, and a requirement that each refuge be managed under a CCP. The Improvement Act states that wildlife conservation is the priority for Refuge System lands and that the Secretary of the Interior will ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of refuge lands are maintained. Each refuge must be managed to fulfill the Refuge System's mission and the specific purposes for which it was established. The Improvement Act requires the Service to monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

A detailed description of these and other laws and executive orders that may affect the CCP or the Service's implementation of the CCP is in Appendix A, Key Legislation and Policy. Service policies on planning and day-to-day management of refuges are in the Refuge System Manual and The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.

1.4 Refuge Contributions to National and Regional Plans

The North Dakota refuges contribute to the conservation efforts described in this section.

Fulfilling the Promise

A 1999 report, Fulfilling the Promise—The National Wildlife Refuge System (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS] 1999a), is the culmination of a yearlong process by teams of Service employees to evaluate the Refuge System nationwide. This report was the focus of the first national Refuge System conference (in 1998)—attended by refuge managers, other Service employees, and representatives from leading conservation organizations.

The report contains 42 recommendations packaged with three vision statements dealing with wildlife and habitat, people, and leadership. This CCP deals with all three of these major topics. The planning team looked to the recommendations in the document for guidance during CCP planning.

Partners in Flight

The Partners in Flight program (PIF) began in 1990 with the recognition of declining population levels of many migratory bird species. The challenge, according to the program, is managing human population growth while maintaining functional natural ecosystems. To meet this challenge, PIF worked to identify priority, land bird species and habitat types. PIF activity has resulted in 52 bird conservation plans covering the continental United States.

The primary goal of PIF is to provide for the long-term health of the bird life of this continent. The first priority is to prevent the rarest species from going extinct. The second priority is to prevent uncommon species from descending into threatened status. The third priority is to "keep common birds common."

PIF splits North America into seven avifaunal biomes (birds of an ecological regional area) and 37 bird conservation regions (BCRs) for planning purposes (see figure 2, map of BCRs). The 12 national wildlife refuges are within the prairie avifaunal biome in BCRs 11 and 17.

BCR 11 is the most important waterfowl production area on the North American continent, despite extensive wetland drainage and tillage of native grasslands. The density of breeding dabbling ducks commonly exceeds 100 pairs per square mile in some areas during years with favorable wetland conditions. The area comprises the core of the breeding range of most dabbling duck and several diving duck species. BCR 11 provides critical breeding and migration habitat for more than 200 other bird species, including such species of concern as Franklin's gull and yellow rail and a threatened species, the piping plover. In addition, Baird's sparrow, Sprague's pipit, chestnut-collared longspur, Wilson's phalarope, marbled godwit, and American avocet are among the many priority nonwaterfowl species that breed in BCR 11. According to the NABCI, wetland areas also provide key spring migration sites for Hudsonian godwit, American golden-plover, white-rumped sandpiper, and buff-breasted sandpiper (NABCI 2007).

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Baird's sparrow is a priority species that breeds in BCR 11.

BCR 17 is dominated by mixed-grass prairie that lies west and south of the glaciated Prairie Pothole Region (see figure 3, map of the Prairie Pothole Region), east of the Rocky Mountains, and north of the true short-grass prairie. Mostly due to the continued dominance of ranching, many contiguous grassland tracts of significant size persist. As a result, this area is habitat for some of the healthiest populations of high-priority, dry-grassland birds on the continent including mountain plover, McCown's longspur, and long-billed curlew. The relatively small number of wetlands—including small impoundments created to serve as livestock water sources—receives intensive use by upland-nesting waterfowl and broods (NABCI 2007).

PIF conservation priorities in the prairie avifaunal biome focus on protection of remaining prairies, management of existing grasslands with fire and grazing, and control of invasive plants including woody plant encroachment.

North American Waterfowl Management Plan

Written in 1986, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan envisioned a 15-year effort to achieve landscape conditions that could sustain waterfowl populations. Specific objectives of the plan are to increase and restore duck populations to the average levels of the 1970s—62 million breeding ducks and a fall flight of 100 million birds.

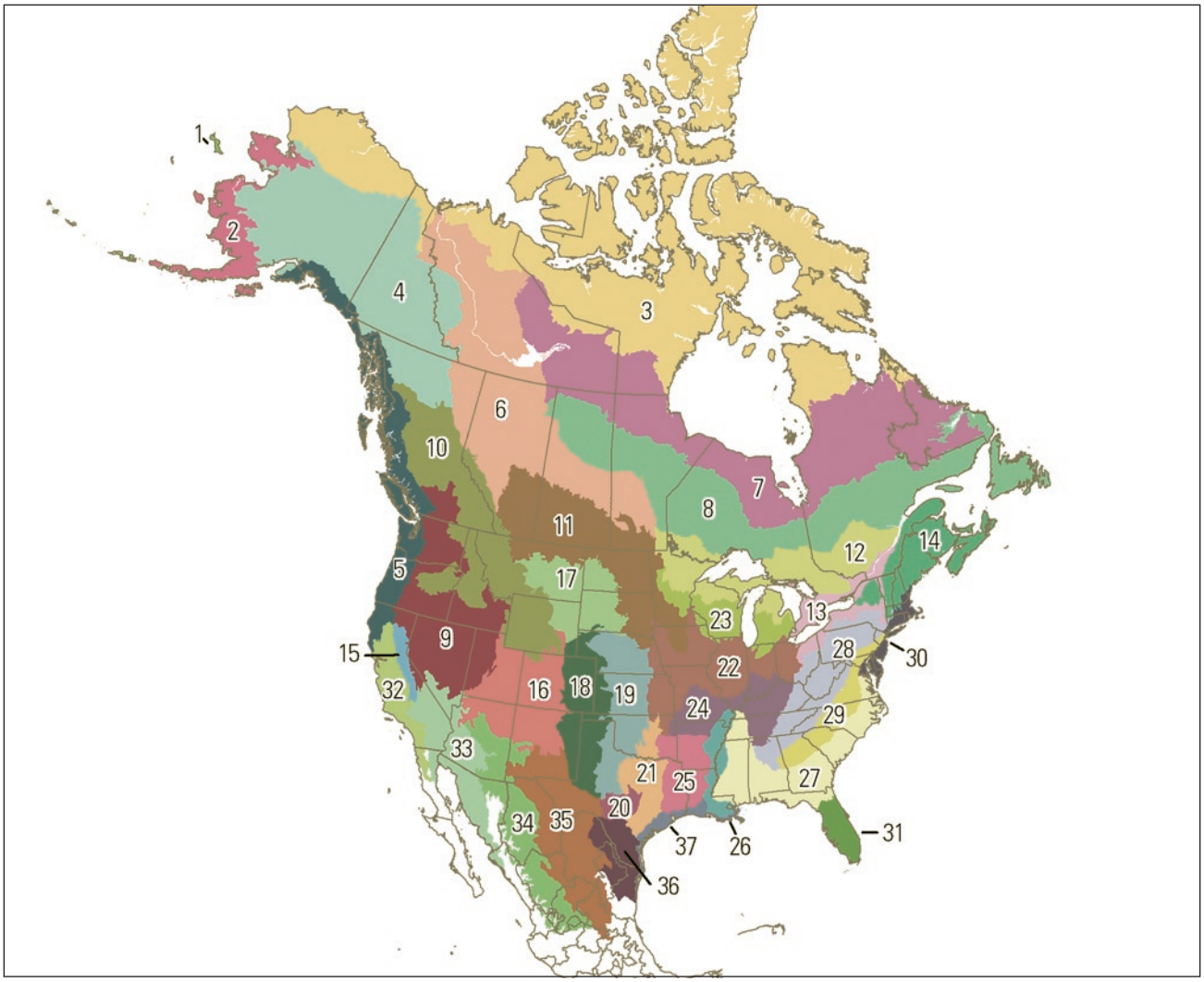


Figure 2. Map of the bird conservation regions of North America.

By 1985, waterfowl populations had plummeted to record lows. Habitat that waterfowl depend on was disappearing at a rate of 60 acres per hour. Recognizing the importance of waterfowl and wetlands to North Americans and the need for international cooperation to help in the recovery of a shared resource, the United States and Canada governments developed a strategy to restore waterfowl populations through habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement. Mexico became a signatory to the plan in 1994.

The plan is innovative because of its international scope, plus its implementation at the regional level. Its success depends on the strength of partnerships called joint ventures, which involve federal, state, provincial, tribal, and local governments; businesses; conservation organizations; and individual citizens.

Joint ventures are regional, self-directed partnerships that carry out science-based conservation through community participation. Joint ventures develop implementation plans that focus on areas of concern identified in the plan.

The 9 of the 12 refuges lie within the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV), which covers the Prairie Pothole Region of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa:

- Audubon National Wildlife Refuge
- Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Kellys Slough National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Alice National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Nettie National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Zahl National Wildlife Refuge
- McLean National Wildlife Refuge
- Shell Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Stump Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Established in 1987, the PPJV is one of the original six priority joint ventures under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The joint venture protects, restores, and enhances high-priority wetland and grassland habitat to help sustain populations of

Figure 3. Map of the Prairie Pothole Region of the United States and Canada.

waterfowl, shorebirds, waterbirds, and prairie land birds. The PPJV includes one-third (100,000 square miles) of North America's Prairie Pothole Region. The remaining 200,000 acres is located in the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. This unique area contains millions of depressional wetlands (potholes) that constitute one of the richest wetland systems in the world. These glacially formed prairie potholes and their surrounding grasslands are highly productive and support an incredible diversity of bird life.

PPJV Implementation Plan

The Prairie Pothole Region remains the most important waterfowl-producing region on the continent, generating more than half of North America's ducks. Nearly 15% of the continental waterfowl population comes from the PPJV region (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa). As many as 10 million ducks and 2 million geese use the PPJV region during migration or for nesting. The wetlands and associated grassland habitat in the PPJV region provide breeding habitat to more than 200 species of migratory birds. Bald eagles, peregrine falcons, whooping cranes, piping plovers, and interior least terns frequent the PPJV region during migration and breeding periods.

The PPJV implementation plan was prepared in 2005 and outlined a mission, goals, objectives, and strategies for joint venture activities. Individual state action groups and steering committees prepared state action plans that "stepped down" joint venture activities to the state and local level.

The goal of the PPJV is to increase waterfowl populations through habitat conservation projects that improve natural diversity across the prairie pothole landscape of the United States. The joint venture attempts to carry out landscape-level habitat projects so that waterfowl populations increase during the wet years and stabilize under moderate conditions. Since little can be done to stabilize the breeding populations across the Prairie Pothole Region during extended drought, joint venture strategies are designed to carry out actions that take advantage of years when precipitation is at least normal.

Northern Great Plains Joint Venture Implementation Plan

The Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (NGPJV) project area lies between the Missouri River on the east and north, the foothills of the Rocky Mountains on the west, and the sand hills and playa lakes of Wyoming and Nebraska on the south. Three of the 12 refuges are in the NGPJV:

- Lake Ilo National Wildlife Refuge
- Stewart Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- White Lake National Wildlife Refuge

The primary purpose of the NGPJV is to contribute to the attainment of continental population goals (developed under the NABCI) by strategically conserving habitat within the northern Great Plains ecosystem. The NGPJV partnership embraces the goals of NABCI "to deliver the full spectrum of bird conservation through regionally based, biologically driven, landscape-oriented partnerships." The goal of the NGPJV is to maintain and increase populations of the high-priority bird species in the grassland, wetland, riparian, and forest habitats within the NGPJV.

The uniqueness of the northern Great Plains is its arid climate and relatively intact, grassland-dominated landscape. Within this landscape are habitats that have significant value to species of the northern Great Plains; these habitats include big sagebrush areas in Wyoming and Montana, short-grass prairie of the Conata Basin in South Dakota, and riparian corridors in the badlands of North Dakota and South Dakota. It is this variety of habitat types within the larger grassland context that supports such a diversity of birds—from raptors such as the ferruginous hawk and golden eagle, to waterfowl and shorebirds like the northern pintail and piping plover, and declining grassland birds such as Baird's sparrow and McCown's longspur.

The NGPJV implementation plan (Pool and Austin 2006) has a mission to seek new opportunities and foster new partnerships while strengthening existing alliances for the protection, enhancement, and restoration of prairie, wetland, riparian, and forest ecosystems. These conservation actions will place an emphasis on sustaining and increasing populations of migratory birds and resident birds, consistent with bird conservation objectives in regional, national, and international plans.

Recovery Plans for Federally Listed Threatened or Endangered Species

Where federally listed threatened or endangered species occur at the 12 refuges, the Service will follow management goals and strategies in the species' recovery plans. The list of threatened or endangered species that occur at the refuges will change as species are listed or delisted, or as listed species are discovered on refuge lands.

The refuges are following the recovery plans for the following species:

- piping plover (threatened) in the northern Great Plains (USFWS 1994a)
- whooping crane (endangered) (USFWS 1994b)
- interior least tern (endangered) (USFWS 1990)
- western prairie fringed orchid (threatened) (USFWS 1996)

State Comprehensive Conservation Wildlife Strategy

Over the past several decades, documented declines of wildlife populations have occurred nationwide. Congress created the state wildlife grant (SWG) program in 2001. This program provides states and territories with federal dollars to support conservation aimed at preventing wildlife from becoming endangered and in need of protection under the Endangered Species Act. The SWG program represents an ambitious endeavor to take an active hand in keeping species from becoming threatened or endangered in the future.

According to the SWG program, each state, territory, and the District of Columbia must complete a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy (CWCS) by October 1, 2005, to receive future funding.

These strategies will help define an integrated approach to the stewardship of all wildlife species, with additional emphasis on species of concern and habitats at risk. The goal is to shift focus from single-species management and highly specialized individual efforts to a geographically based, landscape-oriented, fish and wildlife conservation effort. The Service approves these plans and administers SWG program funding.

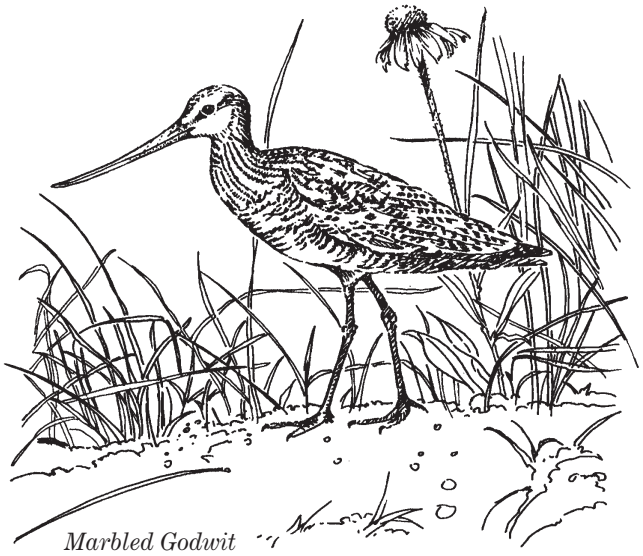
North Dakota's CWCS is a strategic vision with the goal of preserving the state's wildlife diversity. It is intended to identify species of greatest conservation need, provide fundamental background information, strategic guidance, and a framework for developing and coordinating conservation actions to safeguard all fish and wildlife resources.

The state of North Dakota has taken a landscape approach to conservation planning, which has numerous advantages. It allows the state to link species requiring conservation to a key landscape and habitat, often within a specific geographic area. This approach also provides a comprehensive listing of all other fish and wildlife using the landscape, while providing relative plant and soil conditions applicable to the landscape. A landscape approach helps to identify corresponding conservation actions needed across the landscape, along with the potential partners who are or could be addressing them. Three tools are used to identify landscape components: land cover information, ecoregions, and statistical models. Ecoregions were defined based on general similarity of geology, physiography, vegetation, climate, soils, land use, wildlife, and hydrology. The CWCS recognizes four ecoregions commonly referred to as the Red River Valley, Drift Prairie, Missouri Coteau, and Missouri Slope.

The CWCS identified conservation problems encountered in North Dakota that apply to all four of the ecoregions. Direct loss of habitat is a key issue because very little, native, tall-grass prairie remains in the state. The conservation action will be to protect native tall-grass prairie where possible.

Habitat fragmentation is occurring throughout the state due to construction of roads, shelterbelts, and agricultural practices. Actions will include the removal of dilapidated shelterbelts or stands of trees within grasslands. Habitat degradation occurring from improper grazing practices and loss of the historical fire regime can be fixed by carrying out grazing systems to benefit tall-grass species and promoting the use of fire. Other actions include extending the time between haying and grazing, promoting mid-term required management, and providing incentives to defer or idle cutting of tame grass (cultivated, nonnative grass such as smooth brome). Invasive plants, including noxious weeds such as leafy spurge, will be controlled through biological and chemical methods.

The CWCS for the state of North Dakota was reviewed and information was used during development of the CCP. Carrying out CCP habitat goals and objectives will support the goals and objectives of the CWCS.



Marbled Godwit

1.5 Ecosystem Description and Threats

The Service has adopted watersheds as the basic building blocks for carrying out ecosystem conservation. The refuges span two Service-designated ecosystems —the Missouri River main stem ecosystem and the Hudson Bay ecosystem—with the majority falling within the former (see figure 4, map of ecosystems).

Major threats identified for these ecosystems include native prairie conversion to cropland, expansion of invasive plant species, and wetland drainage and degradation. The refuges play a major role in (1) continued leadership and support of regional initiatives such as the PPJV, and (2) continued support of our conservation partners including the NDGF and private organizations such as Ducks Unlimited.

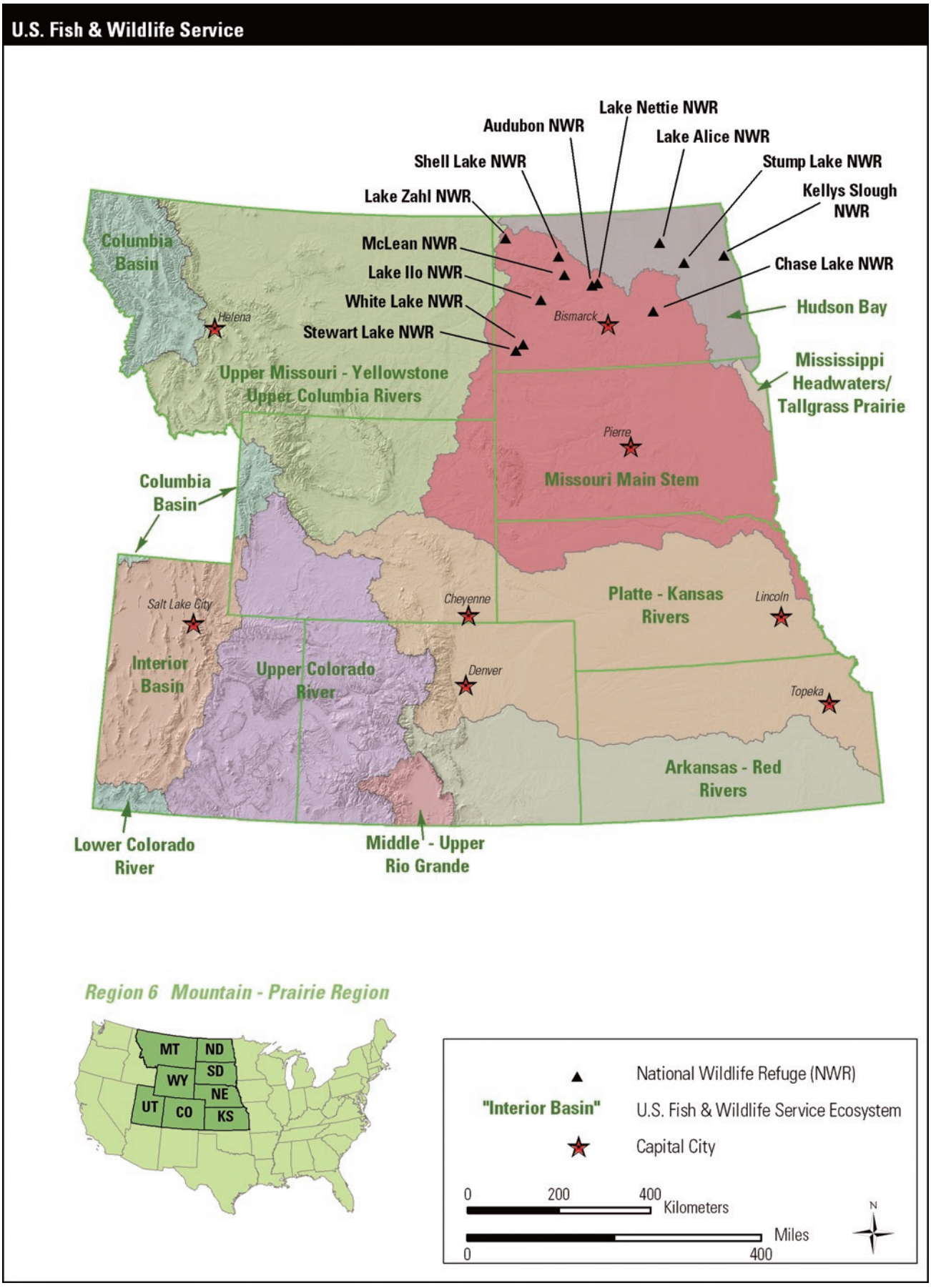


Figure 4. Map of ecosystems in region 6 of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Table 2. Land Information for the 12 Refuges, North Dakota.

National Wildlife Refuge	*Acres Reserved from the Public Domain*	*Fee-title Acres from Other Agencies*	*Gift Acres*	*Purchased Fee-title Acres*	*Easement Acres*	*Total Acres*
Audubon	0	14,739.19	0	0	0	14,739.19
Chase Lake	0	0	0	4,449.47	0	4,449.47
Kellys Slough	0	680.00	0	0	589.50	1,269.50
Lake Alice	0	160.00	2.18	8,349.86	3,583.50	12,095.54
Lake Ilo	0	0	10.71	3,186.50	835.91	4,033.12
Lake Nettie	0	0	0	2,420.60	634.30	3,054.90
Lake Zahl	40.00	0	0	3,178.98	604.21	3,823.19
McLean	0	0	0	344.00	416.00	760.00
Shell Lake	0	0	0	785.20	1,049.90	1,835.10
Stewart Lake	0	0	3.99	636.01	1,590.40	2,230.40
Stump Lake	27.39	0	0	0	0	27.39
White Lake	0	0	0	1,040.00	0	1,040.00

Refuge Summary

Table 2 provides a summary of acreages of protected habitat managed by each refuge.

2.2 Special Values

Early in the planning process, the planning team and public identified the outstanding qualities of the 12 refuges. Refuge qualities are the characteristics and features of each refuge that makes it special, valuable for wildlife, and worthy of refuge status. It was important to identify the special values of each refuge to recognize its worth and to ensure that the special values of the refuges are preserved, protected, and enhanced through the planning process. Refuge qualities can be unique biological values, as well as something as simple as, "a quiet place to see a variety of birds and enjoy nature."

The following summarizes the qualities that make the refuges unique and valued:

- The refuges provide critical spring breeding grounds and staging areas for millions of migratory birds that gather from Mexico and South America.
- The refuges are comprised of and provide protection to two ecosystems: tall- and mixed-grass prairie with an abundance of permanent and seasonal wetlands.
- Wildlife is abundant and highly visible because of varied habitat types and relatively low disturbance levels.
- Visitors can still find wide-open spaces that remain relatively undisturbed.
- Refuges provide for high-quality environmental education.

2.3 Purposes

For this CCP process, the Service combined the 12 national wildlife refuges for evaluation as a group and program. The purposes and management capabilities and challenges are similar for all 12 refuges. The refuges were established under several authorities to provide breeding grounds for migratory birds and other wildlife.

The Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act of March 16, 1934, and the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of February 18, 1929, have been used to increase the acreage of the refuges for migratory bird habitat protection:

- The Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act provides for the conservation, protection, and propagation of native species of fish and wildlife, including migratory birds threatened with extinction.
- The Migratory Bird Conservation Act provides for meeting the obligations of the United States under a migratory bird treaty with Great Britain by the following:
  - lessening the dangers threatening migratory game birds from drainage and other causes
  - acquisition of areas of land and water for the adequate protection of migratory birds
  - authorizing appropriations for the establishment of such areas, their maintenance and improvement, and for other purposes

In addition, Audubon and Lake Nettie national wildlife refuges increased their area for migratory bird habitat protection through the Garrison Diversion Unit Reformulation Act of 1986. This act required mitigation for Service lands flooded as a result of the construction of the Garrison Dam and Audubon Lake.

In addition, the Service is continually working with private landowners through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to restore and improve grassland and wetland habitats on private lands.

1.6 Planning Process

This CCP for the refuges is intended to comply with the Improvement Act, NEPA, and the implementing regulations of these acts.

The Service issued its Refuge System planning policy in 2000. This policy established requirements and guidance for refuge plans—including CCPs and step-down management plans—to ensure that planning efforts comply with the Improvement Act. The planning policy identified several steps of the CCP and environmental analysis process (see figure 5, steps in the planning process). Table 1 summarizes accomplishment of the main planning steps for this CCP effort.

The Service began "preplanning" in August 2006. The planning team was Service personnel from the affected North Dakota refuges; the regional divisions of refuge planning, realty, and education and visitor services; and the NDGF (see Appendix B, Preparers and Contributors). During preplanning, the team developed a mailing list, internal issues, and a special qualities list. The planning team identified the current status of refuge programs, compiled and analyzed relevant data, and determined the purposes of the refuges.

A notice of intent to prepare the CCP was published in the *Federal Register* on February 28, 2007. Public scoping began in April 2007, after a planning update and comment form was mailed to interested parties in March 2007.

The Service complied with NEPA through public involvement and environmental analysis (see Appendix C, Public Involvement).

Scoping

The notice of intent started scoping for the CCP. Scoping is the process of obtaining information from the public for input into the planning process. Table 1 summarizes all scoping activities.

The Service received 25 written comments throughout the scoping process. The planning team used the comments collected from scoping meetings and correspondence in the development of a final list of issues addressed in this CCP (see chapter 2, 2.6, Planning Issues). In addition, over the course of preplanning and scoping, the planning team collected available information about the resources of the refuges and surrounding areas. Chapter 3, Refuge Resources and Descriptions, summarizes this information.

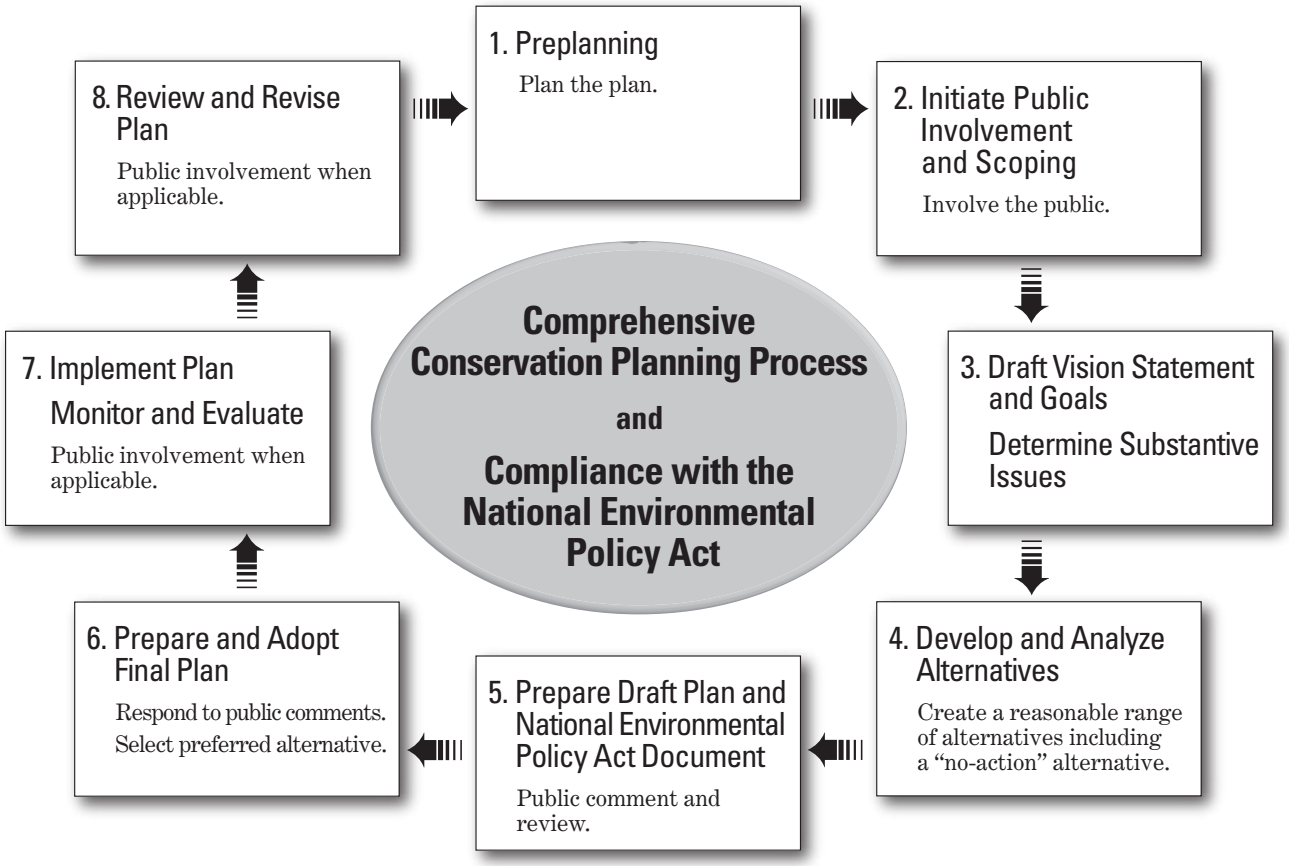


Figure 5. Steps in the planning process.

Table 1. Planning Process Summary for the 12 Refuges, North Dakota.

Date	*Event*	*Outcome*
May 2006	Initial Service meeting.	The project leaders for the North Dakota refuges and other Service staff completed an overview of the CCP process.
August 2006	Service field review.	The Service finalized the planning team. The planning team reviewed biological and visitor services issues.
December 2006	Service kick-off meeting.	The planning team identified the refuge purposes; developed a list of initial issues and qualities; started the mailing list; identified biological and mapping needs; and planned public scoping activities.
February 2007	Publication in the *Federal Register* of the notice of intent to prepare a CCP.	The Service officially notified the public about the CCP to be developed for the refuges.
March 2007	Initial public contact: mailing of planning updates, comment forms, and postage-paid return envelopes.	The planning team offered the public an opportunity to learn about the CCP and provide comments.
March–April 2007	Six public meetings.	The planning team offered the public an opportunity to learn about the CCP and provide comments.
March–April 2007	Development of alternatives.	The planning team developed alternatives for management of the refuges.
February–May 2007	Development of biological objectives.	The planning team developed objectives and strategies for the biological aspects of management at the refuges.
June–July 2007	Development of visitor services objectives.	The planning team developed objectives and strategies for visitor services at the refuges.
May 2008	Service review of the draft CCP and EA.	The Service's regional staff reviewed the draft CCP and EA and provided comments to the planning team.
August 2008	Draft CCP and EA release to the public.	The Service published and distributed the draft CCP and EA. The public had 30 days to review and comment on the document.
September 2008	Nine public meetings.	Refuge staffs presented the draft CCP and EA and collected public comments.
September 2008	Final plan approval.	The planning team addressed the public comments and finalized the CCP. The regional director determined a "finding of no significant impact" and approved the final plan.

Public Coordination

A mailing list of more than 1,025 names includes private citizens; local, regional, and state government representatives and legislators; other federal agencies; and interested organizations (see Appendix C, Public Involvement).

In April 2007, the Service sent the first planning update issue to everyone on the mailing list. The planning update provided information about the history of the refuges and the CCP process, along with an invitation to public scoping meetings. A comment form and postage-paid envelope to gave the public an opportunity to easily provide comments.

In addition, the local media announced the public meetings.

The Service held six public scoping meetings during March–April 2007 (see table 1 for details). Each attendee received a comment form to submit questions or comments in writing.

State Coordination

On September 12, 2006, an invitation letter to participate in the CCP process was sent by the Service's director of region 6 to the director of the NDGF. Two representatives from the NDGF were part of the CCP planning team. Local NDGF wildlife managers and the refuge staffs maintain excellent and ongoing working relations, which preceded the start of the CCP process.

The NDGF's mission is to "protect, conserve, and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive uses." The NDGF is responsible for managing natural resource lands owned by the state, in addition to enforcement responsibilities for the state's migratory birds and endangered species. The state manages more than 78,000 acres in support of wildlife, recreation, and fisheries.

Tribal Coordination

On October 19, 2006, the Service's director of region 6 sent a letter to six Native American tribal governments in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota:

- Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate
- Spirit Lake Tribal Council
- Standing Rock Sioux
- Three Affiliated Tribes
- White Earth Band of Chippewa
- Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa

With information about the upcoming CCP, the letter invited tribal recipients to serve on the planning team. None of the tribes expressed interest in participating in the process.

Draft Plan

The Service considered all input during development of the draft CCP and environmental assessment (EA). This included changes to the refuges' current management that were suggested by the public and other groups. The planning process ensured that issues with the greatest effects on the refuges were resolved or given priority.

After scoping and detailed analysis, the planning team developed three management alternatives that best addressed the issues. The Service identified alternative B as the proposed action.

On August 28, 2008, the Service published a notice of availability in the *Federal Register* to announce that the draft CCP and EA document was available for a 30-day public review. A summary of written comments gathered during the review period, along with the Service's responses, is in Appendix C, Public Involvement.

Final Plan

After an analysis of the public comments, the Service's director of region 6 selected alternative B as the preferred alternative. Subsequently, the planning team produced this final CCP, based on the draft CCP with minor changes. The biological evaluation for the final CCP determined that there would likely be no adverse effect on threatened or endangered species or critical habitats as a result of the actions of the CCP (see Appendix D, Section 7 Biological Evaluation).

The regional director approved the final CCP in September 2008 after a "finding of no significant impact" (see Appendix E, Environmental Compliance).

Chapter 4, Management Direction, outlines the long-term guidance for management decisions, sets forth objectives and strategies to address the purposes for the refuges and meet goals, and identifies the Service's best estimate of future needs. The CCP details program levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and, as such, are primarily for strategic planning purposes.