Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

North Dakota Wetland Management Districts

August 2008

Prepared by

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Arrowwood Wetland Management District
Audubon Wetland Management District
Chase Lake Wetland Management District
Crosby Wetland Management District
Devils Lake Wetland Management District
J. Clark Salyer Wetland Management District
Kulm Wetland Management District
Lostwood Wetland Management District
Valley City Wetland Management District

and

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Abbreviations

Administration Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966
APHIS	Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
CCP	comprehensive conservation plan
CFR	*Code of Federal Regulations*
cfs	cubic feet per second
CWCS	comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy
CWD	chronic wasting disease
district	wetland management district
DNC	dense nesting cover
DOI	U.S. Department of the Interior
EA	environmental assessment
EO	executive order
FmHA	Farmers Home Administration
FMP	fire management plan
FTE	full-time equivalent
GIS	geographic information system
gpm	gallons per minute
GPS	global positioning system
GS	general schedule (employment)
HAPET	Habitat and Population Evaluation Team
HPAI	highly pathogenic avian influenza
Improvement Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
IPM	integrated pest management
ISST	invasive species strike team
NABCI	North American Bird Conservation Initiative
NAWCA	North American Wetlands Conservation Act
ND	North Dakota
NDGF	North Dakota Game and Fish Department
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
PIF	Partners in Flight program
PL	public law
PPJV	Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
RAPP	Refuge Annual Performance Plan
Reclamation	Bureau of Reclamation
Refuge System	National Wildlife Refuge System
region 6	Mountain-Prairie Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
RLGIS	refuge lands geographic information system

Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
SWG	State Wildlife Grant
USC	United States Code
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
VOR	visual obstruction reading
WDA	wildlife development area
WG	wage grade (employment)
WMD	wetland management district
WPA	waterfowl production area
WUI	wildland–urban interface

Summary

USFWS

Blue-winged teal nest within the uplands in district lands.

This is a summary of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment for nine of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's wetland management districts in North Dakota: Arrowwood, Audubon, Chase Lake, Crosby, Devils Lake, J. Clark Salyer, Kulm, Lostwood, and Valley City.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a comprehensive conservation plan by 2012 for each wetland management district. Chapter 6 contains the draft plan for the nine districts; the final plan is scheduled for completion in 2008 and will guide management of the districts for the next 15 years.

The prairies of North Dakota have become an ecological treasure of biological importance for waterfowl and other migratory birds. The prairie potholes of North Dakota support a wide diversity of wildlife, but they are most famous for their role in waterfowl production. Complexes of wetlands scattered throughout the nine wetland management districts attract breeding duck pairs.

The Districts

A wetland management district provides oversight for all of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's small land tracts in a multicounty area. These nine wetland management districts in North Dakota manage 1,208 waterfowl production areas, tens of thousands of conservation easements, and 37 wildlife development areas in 34 counties. These district lands, totaling 1,125,084 acres, are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, a network of lands set aside to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitat.

(Note: Management of the limited-interest refuge is covered by a separate plan—"Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the North Dakota Limited-interest Refuges.")

The Planning Process

The planning process for a comprehensive conservation plan consists of a series of steps including environmental analysis. Public and partner involvement are encouraged and valued throughout the process. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's planning team developed management alternatives to meet the purposes, vision, and goals of the districts.

Issues

Public scoping for the wetland management districts that the Service started in 2007, along with district information, identified five major areas of concern about management of the districts.

Wetland and Upland Habitats

Aggressive management of wetland and upland habitats must be conducted to achieve goals and objectives. Habitat protection needs to be evaluated through a priority system so that different means of protection, through either fee title or conservation easement, can be evaluated.

Invasive Plants

Previously farmed uplands have since been restored, the bulk of which have the native vegetation character but are compromised by invading species such as leafy spurge, Canada thistle, absinth wormwood, Kentucky bluegrass, and smooth brome. These invasive plants substantially diminish the suitability of upland habitat for many native wildlife species. Western snowberry and silverberry are native shrubs that have greatly expanded their coverage in some areas where natural regimes of fire and grazing have been altered.

Energy Development

The physical structure of wind power turbines has unknown effects on birds. In addition, it is unknown if wind power would affect the potential for future habitat protection through conservation easements. Effects on waterfowl production areas—including salt-water contamination, filling of wetlands, and road development—have been increasing as additional oil and gas exploration takes place in North Dakota.

Prairie Conversion

The loss of native prairie is occurring at an alarming rate. Prairie is being converted for corn production to produce ethanol, which also has additional needs for irrigation water. An active role by the agricultural community, in partnership with conservation groups, would need to be taken to protect the federal Farm Bill and its conservation provisions.

Wildlife Management

Threatened and endangered species, predators, and wildlife disease are issues for the districts.

Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

The whooping crane is an endangered species.

Threatened and Endangered Species

The piping plover is a threatened shorebird that occurs in small numbers on alkali wetlands in the Audubon, Crosby, and Lostwood wetland management districts. Endangered whooping cranes can be observed in the marshes across the districts. The primary issues related to threatened and endangered species are as follows: (1) monitoring populations and habitat use; and (2) providing essential habitat and developing conditions that promote increased recruitment or population protection.

Predator Management

Several species including red fox, striped skunk, and raccoon are found at higher than historical levels due to modifications of habitat. These species can adversely affect migratory bird populations. Woody vegetation provides habitat for predators and attracts forest-edge bird species that may displace grassland species.

Wildlife Disease

Wetland management districts in North Dakota have a history of botulism outbreaks. Success in combating botulism occurs at the expense of other resources.

Visitor Services

Hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation are uses currently authorized on lands administered by the districts. Some of the commenting public would like to see more opportunities to participate in not only the six priority uses, but also in trapping.

Operations

Funding and staff are not sufficient to fulfill the purposes and meet the goals of the districts. The Service's staff needs to identify and describe unfunded needs to be able to compete effectively for additional money from within the Service and from partners and other sources. District facilities need to be evaluated and upgraded.

Monitoring and Research

Basic data about recruitment, mortality, and habitat use for a representative group of species must be collected and analyzed on a regular basis to make appropriate decisions that affect the habitats these species depend on. The use of the districts as a research field station could make valuable strides in development of new directions in management and expansion of the knowledge of field biologists.

The Future of the Districts

The issues, along with resource conditions, were important considerations during the development of the vision and goals for the nine wetland management districts.

Vision

Wetland management districts conserve an important network of public and private wetland and upland habitat in North Dakota. This network preserves the integrity of the historical and vital resting and breeding grounds of North America's migratory waterfowl.

As part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, these lands benefit ducks, other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and resident wildlife.

The responsible management and protection of this expanding network requires adequate funding, dedicated personnel, and successful partnerships.

District communities and visitors value grasslands and marshes as a beneficial and important component of a diverse, healthy, and productive prairie landscape.

Current and future generations enjoy wildlife-dependent uses of these lands and partners, especially waterfowl hunters, actively support and encourage the districts' habitat conservation programs.

Goals

The following goals were developed to meet the vision for the districts.

Habitat and Wildlife Goal

Protect, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity of grasslands and wetlands of the North Dakota Prairie Pothole Region. Contribute to the production and growth of continental waterfowl populations to meet the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Also, support healthy populations of other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other wildlife.

Monitoring and Research Goal

Use science, monitoring, and applied research to advance the understanding of the Prairie Pothole Region and management within the North Dakota wetland management districts.

Cultural Resources Goal

Identify and evaluate cultural resources in the North Dakota wetland management districts that are on Service-owned lands or are affected by Service undertakings. Protect resources determined to be significant and, when appropriate, interpret resources to connect staff, visitors, and communities to the area's past.

Visitor Services Goal

Provide visitors with quality opportunities to enjoy hunting, fishing, trapping, and other compatible wildlife-dependent recreation on Service-owned lands and expand their knowledge and appreciation of the prairie landscape and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Partnerships Goal

A diverse network of partners joins with the North Dakota wetland management districts to support research; protect, restore, and enhance habitat; and foster awareness and appreciation of the prairie landscape.

Operations Goal

Effectively employ staff, partnerships, and volunteers and secure adequate funding in support of the National Wildlife Refuge System's mission.

Alternatives

The planning team developed the following three alternatives as management options to address the key issues.

Alternative A—Current Management (No Action)

Under alternative A, funding, staff levels, and management activities at the districts would not change. Programs would follow the same direction, emphasis, and intensity as they do at present:

- The Service prioritizes management of wildlife habitat and associated species at the districts' WPAs into high, medium, and low areas. Only high-priority WPAs receive consistent management.
- District staffs conduct limited, issue-driven research and limited monitoring and inventory of birds and vegetation.
- The district staffs monitor all conservation easements; however, only the high-priority easement violations are consistently enforced.
- On a multiyear rotation among districts, the staffs conduct public use events and workshops with such groups as school districts, youth groups, and conservation groups.

Alternative B—Moderately Enhanced Management (Proposed Action)

Under alternative B, wildlife habitat management would enhance wetlands and uplands, where warranted, on district lands:

- Management objectives for habitat types would be based on the habitat preferences of groups of target species such as waterfowl, migratory shorebirds, grassland birds, and threatened and endangered species.
- The district staffs would focus on high-priority tracts and medium-priority tracts. District staffs would carry out compatible techniques to enhance production of targeted migratory bird populations.
- The district staffs would expand existing environmental education and visitor services programs, with additional waterfowl emphases.
- The Service proposes, at a future date, (1) one new administration and visitor center facility each for Audubon and Kulm wetland management districts, and (2) one new visitor contact station each for Arrowwood, Devils Lake, Lostwood, and Valley City wetland management districts.

Alternative C—Enhanced Management

Under alternative C, management by the district staffs would be more intensive and widespread, targeting native prairie and wetland habitat:

- As a priority, district staffs would seek out restoration projects that expand and return native grasslands to quality native prairie.
- This alternative would have potential for additional management options that address habitat requirements and needs of specific groups of water-dependent birds such as waterfowl and shorebirds.
- The staffs would develop new environmental education and visitor services programs.
- The Service proposes, at a future date, (1) one new administration and visitor center facility each for Audubon and Kulm wetland management districts, and (2) one new visitor contact station each for Arrowwood, Devils Lake, Lostwood, and Valley City wetland management districts.