

# Planning Update

## *Comprehensive Conservation Plan Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge Complex*

Issue 2, October 2012

This planning update describes the progress the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has made in developing a comprehensive conservation plan for the Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge Complex (Complex). It also summarizes the management alternatives considered to achieve the draft vision and goals, and it includes information about how to comment on the draft plan.

### The Complex

The Complex comprises three units: Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge (Lake Andes Refuge), Karl E. Mundt National Wildlife Refuge (Karl E. Mundt Refuge), and the Lake Andes Wetland Management District (Lake Andes District). The Complex lies in southeastern South Dakota within the Prairie Pothole Region, which is an ecological treasure of biological importance for wildlife, particularly waterfowl and other migratory birds. This region alone produces about 50 percent of the continent's waterfowl population. Hunting and wildlife observation are the two most popular public uses on the Complex, followed by fishing and wildlife photography.

#### Lake Andes Refuge

The 5,639-acre Lake Andes Refuge includes a 4,700-acre lake created by the last ice age. The lake's shallow waters and surrounding grasslands provide optimal feeding, resting, nesting, and brooding habitats for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, other waterbirds, and songbirds.

#### Karl E. Mundt Refuge

Karl E. Mundt Refuge was established to protect an area along the eastern bank of the Missouri River in Gregory County, South Dakota, and Boyd County, Nebraska, that was supporting nearly 300 endangered bald eagles each winter. This was the first refuge specifically established for the conservation of bald eagles, and its riparian forest, prairie, and upland habitats provide important resting, feeding, breeding, and nesting sites for a wide array of neotropical migratory birds, indigenous turkeys, and white-tailed deer.

To reduce disturbance to bald eagles, this refuge is currently closed to public use, with the sole exception of occasional guided tours.

#### Lake Andes District

Lake Andes District manages 18,782 acres of grassland and wetland habitats in waterfowl production areas in South Dakota's Aurora, Bon Homme, Brule, Charles Mix, Clay, Davison, Douglas, Hanson, Hutchinson, Lincoln, Turner, Union, and Yankton Counties. All of these waterfowl production areas are open to hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, trapping, and other forms of wildlife-dependent recreation. Approximately 15,000 people visit the district each year to engage in these types of outdoor recreational opportunities.

The district also protects nearly 80,000 acres of grassland and wetland habitats through easements that prevent habitat degradation or loss on private lands.

### Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. This legislation provides clear guidance for the management of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). To implement this guidance, the act requires that, by 2012, the Service will have developed a comprehensive conservation plan for each unit in the Refuge System. To meet this requirement, the Service has been preparing a comprehensive conservation plan for the Complex. The plan will guide management for all the programs of the Complex. The Service will update this "living" document every 15 years.

### Draft Plan Available for Public Review

The Service has completed a draft plan for public review. This plan is based on a draft vision statement, which is supported by five draft goals (inside this update). An environmental assessment, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, accompanies the plan. The assessment describes the three alternatives (also inside this update) that were considered to achieve the draft vision and draft goals, plus their effects on the environment. We selected a proposed action—alternative B—and wrote objectives and strategies (which represent the draft plan) based on this alternative.

## Draft Vision Statements

### Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge

*Migratory birds thrive on wetlands and grasslands composed of native plants. Visitors enjoy walking the foot trails, watching and photographing wildlife, and learning about Plains and Prairie Pothole Region habitat. Teachers bring their students to the refuge's outdoor classroom.*

### Karl E. Mundt National Wildlife Refuge

*Soaring bald eagles hunt, roost, and rear their young in this cottonwood forest where Lewis and Clark ventured up the Missouri River. Booming prairie chickens share the Missouri River bluffs with wild turkey, sharp-tailed grouse, quail, and songbirds. Careful observers, floating downstream along the refuge's portion of the Missouri National Recreational River, may notice hunting bobcats, hovering raptors, or flying bats above placidly feeding deer. Wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities on this refuge foster a greater understanding of the refuge's resources and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.*

### Lake Andes Wetland Management District

*The waterfowl production areas and conservation easements of the Lake Andes Wetland Management District provide a network of wetland and grassland habitats that preserve the integrity of vital nesting and breeding grounds of North America's migratory waterfowl. This mosaic of diverse and vigorous plant communities, interspersed with wetland complexes, supports a variety of marsh birds, shorebirds, songbirds, and colonial birds, as well as prairie grouse, upland plovers, sand pipers, and other resident wildlife species typical of the Plains and Prairie Pothole Region. District staff, landowners, cooperators, neighbors, and other partners work together to promote habitat conservation programs throughout the district and to control invasive plant species on public lands. Both consumptive and non-consumptive compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are allowed on these public lands.*

## Draft Goals

We developed the following draft goals to describe the management focus needed to achieve the draft visions.

### Wetlands Goal

Acquire, restore, manage, and protect wetlands for the conservation of migratory birds and other water-dependent species endemic to the Plains and Prairie Pothole Region.

### Riparian Goal

Acquire, restore, manage, and protect riparian habitats endemic to the lower Missouri River for the conservation of bald eagles, other species of concern, and migratory birds.

### Uplands Goal

Acquire, restore, manage, and maintain a diverse mix of native grassland habitats to support migratory birds and resident wildlife found in the northern mixed-grass prairie ecosystem.

### Visitor Services Goal

Provide opportunities for high quality and compatible hunting, fishing, environmental education, environmental interpretation, wildlife photography, and wildlife observation for persons of all abilities and cultural backgrounds by fostering an understanding and appreciation of the Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge Complex and the missions of the Service and Refuge System.

### Operations Goal

Provide funding, staffing, infrastructure, protection of cultural resources, partnerships, and a safe working environment to achieve the purposes and objectives of the Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

## Alternatives

The following is a summary of alternatives A, B, and C, each of which represents a different approach to achieve the draft vision and goals of the Complex. More

detailed descriptions and consequences for these alternatives can be found in the draft plan. We identified alternative B as the proposed action for the plan.

## Alternative A (No Action)

Funding, staff levels, and management activities at the Complex would not change under alternative A.

### Habitat and Wildlife

Under this alternative we would continue to participate in and support the efforts of the Charles Mix County Lake Andes Restoration Organization; such efforts would include sediment removal, soil conservation practices, and control of rough fish population.

We would continue control of invasive plants on infested wetlands, uplands, and riparian lands using chemical, mechanical, and biological control methods once every 3 years on average. We would continue restoration and enhancement of tall and mixed-grass plant communities to create a mosaic of the required elements for waterfowl and other grass-nesting birds. We would restore previously farmed lands back to native prairie.

We would continue limited monitoring of habitat conditions and wildlife populations in wetlands, uplands, and riparian areas. We would continue permitting research activities when deemed compatible with the purposes of the units of the Complex.

### Visitor Services

Under this alternative, we would continue allowing the "Big Six" wildlife-dependent recreational activities (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation) on all waterfowl production areas in the Complex as well as in the Owens Bay and Center Units of Lake Andes. To protect bald eagles, we would need to keep Karl E. Mundt Refuge closed to most activities, with the exception of limited tours guided by staff.

### Staffing and Infrastructure

Under this alternative we would not add any new infrastructure, equipment, or vehicles, which we would only replace when needed. Our current staffing and funding would stay at minimum levels and thus prevent us from being able to pursue new partnerships.

## Alternative B (Modified Management)

### Habitat and Wildlife

This alternative's habitat and wildlife management approaches are similar to those of alternative A. However, we would also investigate the possibility of installing additional fish screens on all lake tributaries and under both dikes as well as a water delivery system to pump more water into the lake's South Unit to improve sport fisheries.

We would treat invasive plant infestations on Lake Andes Refuge, Karl E. Mundt Refuge, and high priority waterfowl production areas yearly; we would treat all other infestations every 3 years on average. Under this alternative, prairie restoration would resemble alternative A, but the main focus would be the restoration of a high diversity of native grasses and forbs. We would purchase equipment for collecting desirable plant seeds and construct related and necessary infrastructure.

Our monitoring and research efforts would be similar to—but more proactive than—those under alternative A. We would expand staff-led monitoring studies and surveys that focused on management issues, and we would actively encourage and pursue habitat restoration research led by universities.

### Visitor Services

Under this alternative, we would allow the same wildlife-dependent public activities as under alternative A. Additionally, we would study and open areas currently closed to hunting, and we would provide special hunts if we deemed them compatible and suitable. We would improve boat launching ramps for the Center and South Units of Lake Andes. The addition of an outdoor recreation planner and the remodeling of the headquarters building to include a visitor center and environmental education classroom would allow us to expand environmental education and interpretation opportunities. We would open currently closed portions of Lake Andes and Karl E. Mundt Refuges to wildlife observation and photography, and we would build and provide to the public observation and photography blinds at appropriate locations on the Complex.

### Staffing and Infrastructure

Under this alternative, we would need to expand current staffing and funding



© John Jave

*Wildlife and their habitats are key considerations under all three alternatives.*

to carry out this plan. We would need to remodel the existing headquarters building to provide a visitor center and educational facilities and to accommodate new employees. Additionally, we would need to remodel the maintenance shop and storage buildings to correct deficiencies and to accommodate expanded staffing and equipment.

## Alternative C (Intensive Management)

### Habitat and Wildlife

Under this alternative, we would undertake the same habitat and wildlife management activities as described under alternative B. However, we would also seek new partnerships with landowners within the Lake Andes watershed to help improve the lake's water and fisheries quality.

We would pursue the formation of an invasive plant species "strike team" to more effectively control invasive plants. We would use prescribed fire in a manner to help decrease cool-season grasses in favor of warm-season native grasses. Our prairie restoration activities would be the same as those under alternative B. However, with increased funding and staffing, we would be able to treat and restore many more acres of land than in alternative B.

Under this alternative, we would take a more proactive approach to the same monitoring and research activities described under alternative B. Furthermore, we would pursue funding and research opportunities with universities to study habitat management and to follow more effective surveying methodologies.

### Visitor Services

Under this alternative, the Complex would allow the same wildlife-dependent

public uses as under alternative B, but we would develop and execute an outreach plan to expand environmental education and interpretation opportunities. We would build an observation tower and develop an auto tour route on Lake Andes Refuge to expand wildlife observation and photography opportunities.

### Staffing and Infrastructure

We would need to expand staffing and funding beyond the levels of alternatives A and B to accomplish this alternative. Instead of remodeling the headquarters building, we would build a visitor center and seed drying and storage facilities.

## Next Steps

1. There is a 30-day public review period (including a public meeting) for the draft plan and environmental assessment.
2. We revise the draft plan as needed based on public comments, and the Regional Director selects the preferred alternative, which guides development of the final plan.
3. A notice of availability published in the Federal Register lets you know that we have completed and approved the final plan. We make copies of the final plan available.
4. We begin implementation of the approved, final plan.

## Contact Information

To learn more about the Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge Complex, please visit our Web site: <http://lakeandes.fws.gov/>. You may reach the refuge staff by telephone at 605/487 7603, or by email at [LakeAndes@fws.gov](mailto:LakeAndes@fws.gov).

## How to Get Involved

### Requesting a Draft Plan

You may request a hard copy of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment from the Complex headquarters:

- *Telephone:* 605/487-7603
- *Email:* LakeAndes@fws.gov
- *Postal mail:* U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Division of Refuge Planning, 134 Union Boulevard, Suite 300 Lakewood, Colorado, 80228

You may also view the draft plan online:

- <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/ccp/sd/lan/documents>

### Providing Comments

We invite you to share your comments about the draft plan (proposed action).

We will accept letters, faxes, and emails. To be considered, all written comments must be emailed or postmarked by November 30, 2012. Include "Lake Andes NWR Complex Draft CCP and EA" in the subject line of the message.

- *Email:* bernardo\_garza@fws.gov
- *Postal mail:* Bernardo Garza, Planning Team Leader, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Division of Refuge Planning, P.O. Box 25486, Denver Federal Center, Denver, Colorado 80225
- *Fax:* 303/236 4792; Attention: Bernardo Garza, Planning Team Leader
- *In-Person Drop-off, Viewing, or Pick-up:* Call 303-236-4377 to make an appointment (necessary

for viewing and pick-up only) during regular business hours at U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Division of Refuge Planning, 134 Union Boulevard, Suite 300, Lakewood, Colorado 80228

### Public Meeting

You may also wish to participate in our public meeting. In this meeting there will be a short presentation on the draft plan, and then we will record any comments you would like to provide.

- October 30, 2012, 7–9 p.m., Lake Andes Community Center, 207 West Main Street, Lake Andes, South Dakota 57356

Cover photograph credit: USFWS



October 2012

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Division of Refuge Planning  
134 Union Boulevard, Suite 300  
Lakewood, CO 80228**

**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**

