

# Planning Update

## *Comprehensive Conservation Plan Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge*

Issue 2, March 2012

This planning update describes the progress the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has made in developing a comprehensive conservation plan for Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, Montana. It contains the following:

- A summary of the alternatives the Service considered for achieving the draft vision and goals for the refuge
- Information about how to comment on the draft plan

### The Refuge

Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, established on February 4, 1964, is a 2,800-acre refuge located in the Bitterroot River Valley of southwest Montana in Ravalli County. The refuge encompasses a portion of the Bitterroot River and is located between the scenic Bitterroot and Sapphire Mountains. This floodplain refuge provides a diverse mosaic of western mountain valley habitats including gallery and riverfront forest, wet meadow, and wetland and grassland benches.

The refuge provides opportunities for the public to enjoy compatible wildlife-dependent public use activities including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation. The refuge is a very popular community and tourist destination with more than 143,000 visitors annually.

Above Photo Credit:  
Bob Danley/USFWS

### Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. This legislation provided clear guidance for the management of the Refuge System. To implement this guidance, the act also requires that, by 2012, the Service will have developed a comprehensive conservation plan for each unit in the Refuge System. Consequently, the Service has been preparing a comprehensive conservation plan and associated environmental assessment for the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge. The plan will guide management for all refuge programs and be updated, as needed, every 15 years.

### Draft Goals

#### **Bitterroot River Floodplain**

Manage and, where appropriate, restore the natural topography, water movements, and physical integrity of surface water flow patterns across the Bitterroot River floodplain to provide healthy riparian habitats for target native species and to educate visitors about the benefits of sustaining a more natural floodplain.

#### **Wetland Impoundments**

Where appropriate, manage wetland impoundments to create a diversity of habitats for target waterfowl, shorebirds, and other associated native wetland-dependent species.

### Draft Vision Statement

*Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge is a representation of the diverse native wildlife habitat once found abundantly between the Bitterroot and Sapphire Mountains and along the ever-changing Bitterroot River. This floodplain refuge, fed by mountain snow, is a diverse mosaic of forest, grassland, and riparian habitat that provides protected lands and waters for migratory and resident wildlife.*

*The refuge, in partnership with its neighbors, friends, and the community, is a conservation leader in the valley, ensuring that the biological integrity of this refuge and other valley habitats remains intact or, where appropriate, is restored.*

*These protected lands and waters are a place of discovery for visitors to experience fish and wildlife firsthand and where children can experience nature with all their senses. Visitors to the refuge can appreciate the beauty of the setting and experience a sense of wonder and pride to be preserving this part of the Bitterroot Valley and the National Wildlife Refuge System.*

## Grassland and Shrubland

Create the conditions that will allow for the restoration, maintenance, and distribution of native grassland and shrubland species (such as rabbitbrush, needle and thread grass, Junegrass, and hairy golden aster) to provide healthy lands for a diverse group of target native resident and migratory wildlife species and to educate visitors about the historical plant and animal diversity of the valley.

## Invasive and Nonnative Species

Prevent, reduce, and contain the introduction and spread of noxious, invasive, and harmful nonnative species within the refuge while working with partners to address off-refuge infestations within the surrounding landscape.

## Research

Pursue and maintain compatible research projects that would provide information on refuge resources and address refuge issues to assist management in making decisions based on the best available information and science.

## Cultural Resources

Provide opportunities for visitors to learn about the unique glacial, Native American, and Euro-American history of the Bitterroot Valley while maintaining and protecting the integrity of the refuge's cultural and historical resources.

## Visitor Services

Provide visitors of all abilities with opportunities to participate in and enjoy quality, compatible wildlife-dependent

recreation, environmental education, and interpretation programs that foster an awareness and appreciation of the importance of protecting the natural and cultural resources of the refuge, the Bitterroot Valley, and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

## Partnerships

Maintain and cultivate partnerships that help achieve the vision and supporting goals and objectives of the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan and support other initiatives designed to protect and restore habitats for Federal trust species within the Bitterroot River Valley.

## Operations and Facilities

Prioritize wildlife first and emphasize the protection of trust resources in the utilization of staff, volunteers, funding, and facilities.

## Alternatives

The Service developed three different alternatives for managing the refuge in the future. Below are summaries of these alternatives, including the planning team's proposed action, alternative B. After public review and comment, the draft proposed action will be presented to the Regional Director of the Service's Mountain-Prairie Region, who will make the final determination to accept it or request further analysis. More detailed descriptions and consequences are in the environmental assessment and draft plan.

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

Alternative A is the no-action alternative, which represents the current management of the refuge. This alternative provides the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives. It also fulfills the requirement in the National Environmental Policy Act that a no-action alternative be addressed in the analysis process.

Under alternative A, management activity currently conducted by the Service would remain the same. The Service would continue to manage and monitor refuge habitats at current levels. The Bitterroot River would continue to migrate through the refuge, eroding some levees and trails. Invasive species would be treated primarily with mechanical and chemical methods as resources become available. Water supply and management structures and



Bob Danley/USFWS

*Environmental education is one of many visitor services offered at the refuge.*

supply would be inadequate to properly manage many of the wetland impoundments. Cattail monocultures would be treated and wetlands would be drained periodically to restore the health and function of these impoundments. The current staff of five would perform issue-driven research and monitor only long-term wildlife and vegetation changes. Visitor services programs and facilities would be maintained or expanded as resources become available. Funding and staff levels would follow annual budget allocations provided for refuge operations on Service lands.

### Alternative B (Proposed Action)

This alternative focuses on the expansion and restoration of native plant communities on the refuge including grasslands, shrublands, and gallery and riverfront forests. Some areas that are currently part of wetland impoundments would be restored to native communities including forest and shrubland. A significant focus of restoration proposals would be controlling invasive species and preventing further spread. Grasses and shrubs native to the uplands would begin to be restored to provide habitat for native wildlife including grassland-dependent migratory birds. Some wetland impoundments and Service (nonpublic) roads would be removed or reduced in size to allow for river migration and to restore native gallery and riverfront forest for riparian-dependent wildlife. The remaining impoundments would be managed to mimic natural conditions for wetland-dependent migratory birds, including periodic drying and treatment of cattail monocultures.

The Service would expand and improve the refuge's compatible wildlife-dependent public use programs, in particular the wildlife observation, environmental education, and interpretation programs.



Bob Danley/USFWS

*Blanket flower*



*Osprey nest on the refuge.*

The visitor contact area would be expanded into a visitor center with new displays and a combination conference room and environmental education classroom. New displays would be professionally planned and produced. The refuge would work with Ravalli County staff to designate the county road in the refuge as an auto tour route, which would include pulloffs and some form of interpretation. A seasonal hiking trail would be added around Pond 8, and current trails would be improved for wildlife observation and photography. Interpretation and environmental education programs would be expanded using added staff and volunteers. All public use programs would provide visitors a consistent message about the purposes and values of the refuge and the mission of the Refuge System. The refuge staff would be expanded by 3.5 individuals to include an assistant refuge manager, two biological science technicians (one full time and one career seasonal), and a visitor services specialist who would also serve as a visitor center manager and volunteer coordinator.

Increased research and monitoring, staff, funding, infrastructure, and partnerships would be required to accomplish the goals, objectives, and strategies associated with this alternative. Additional staff and funding would be added depending on the regional priorities for those funds allocated to the Service for management of lands and waters within the Refuge System.

### Alternative C

Alternative C contains many of the elements found in alternative B related to expanding visitor service programs and facilities. However, habitat management would be focused on maintaining the wetland impoundments and attempting to restrict the movements

of the Bitterroot River throughout the refuge. Habitat efforts would be primarily focused on providing waterfowl and other waterbird habitat.

## Next Steps

- There is a 30-day public review of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment, and this period also includes a public meeting.
- The Service will revise the draft plan as needed based on public comments, and the Regional Director will select the preferred alternative, which will guide the development of the final plan.
- A “notice of availability” published in the Federal Register will let the public know that the Service has completed and approved the final comprehensive conservation plan. The Service will make the final plan available on the planning Web site and as hard copies on request.
- The Service will begin implementation of the approved, final plan.

## Draft Plan Available for Public Review

The Service has completed a draft plan and environmental assessment for public review. The plan is based on a draft vision statement, which is supported by nine goals and numerous objectives and strategies for the proposed action.

### How to Request a Draft Plan

You may view the draft plan and environmental assessment online:

- <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/ccp/mt/lmc/lmc.html>

Or you may request a hard copy of the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment from the office at the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge.

- **Telephone:** 406 / 777 5552
- **Email:** [leemetcalf@fws.gov](mailto:leemetcalf@fws.gov)

### How to Provide Comments

The Service invites you to share your comments about the environmental assessment, including the proposed action, and the draft plan. To be considered, all written comments must be emailed or postmarked by April 30, 2012.

You can use the comment form under “Public Involvement” on the project

Web page. In addition, we will accept emails, letters, and faxes.

- **Online comment form:** [www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/forms/lmc\\_form\\_comments.php](http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/forms/lmc_form_comments.php)
- **Email:** [leemetcalf@fws.gov](mailto:leemetcalf@fws.gov)
- **Postal mail:**  
Laura King  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
58355 Bison Range Road  
Moiese, Montana 59824
- **Fax:** 406/644 2661; Attn: Laura King, Planning Team Leader

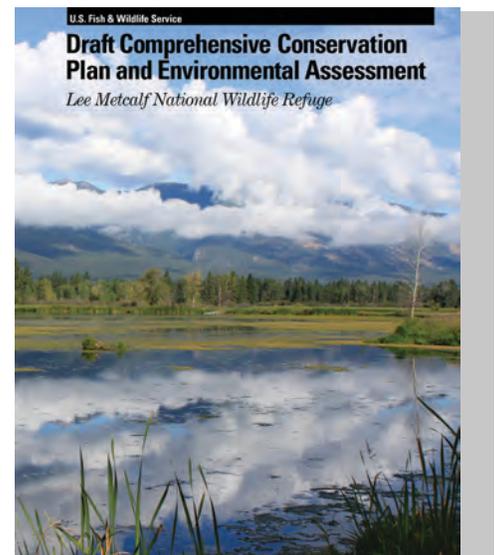
### Public Meeting

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

#### ■ April 9, 2012

Lee Metcalf National Wildlife  
Refuge Visitor Center  
4567 Wildfowl Lane  
Stevensville, Montana  
6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

For directions, please call 406/777 5552.



*The draft plan and environmental assessment is now available for public review and comment.*

## Contact Information

*To learn more about the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, please visit our website: [www.fws.gov/leemetcalf](http://www.fws.gov/leemetcalf). You may also reach refuge staff by telephone at 406 / 777 5552 or by email [leemetcalf@fws.gov](mailto:leemetcalf@fws.gov).*



Bob Damley/USFWS

*A view of the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge from the Bitterroot Mountains.*



*March 2012*

**Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
4567 Wildfowl Lane  
Stevensville, MT 59870**

**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**

