

1 Purpose and Need

This document presents an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates alternatives for, as well as expected consequences of, management of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Montana (figure 1).

The draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the refuge is described in alternative A (chapter 4).

Although the refuge currently manages McGregor Meadows Waterfowl Production Area (WPA), the draft plan does not address management of the WPA.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act), requires that CCPs be in place for all national wildlife refuges within 15 years of enactment (2012).

A CCP is needed to guide the conservation and use of resources on the newly established (1999) Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge for the next 10–15 years.



Ray Washtrak/USFWS

Wetlands along the tour route at Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge.

In general, a CCP serves to do the following:

- Ensure that the purpose of the refuge and mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System are being fulfilled.
- Ensure that national policy direction is incorporated into refuge management.
- Ensure that opportunities are available for interested parties to participate in the development of management direction.
- Provide a systematic process for making and documenting refuge decisions.

- Establish broad strategies for refuge programs and activities.
- Provide a basis for evaluating accomplishments.

AGENCY GUIDANCE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service, USFWS) is the principal agency responsible for conservation of our Nation's fish, wildlife, and plant resources. This responsibility is shared with other federal agencies and state and tribal governments.

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

The Service manages a diverse network of more than 540 national wildlife refuges within the National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 95 million acres of lands and waters. Lost Trail is 1 of 22 national wildlife refuges in Montana.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a 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.

Operation and management of national wildlife refuges are influenced by a wide array of laws, treaties, and executive orders (see appendix A). The primary guidance comes from these laws:

- National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended
- National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act)

All national wildlife refuges are established with the following goals (Service Director's Order No. 132):

- Fulfill our statutory duty to achieve refuge purpose(s) and further the Refuge System mission.

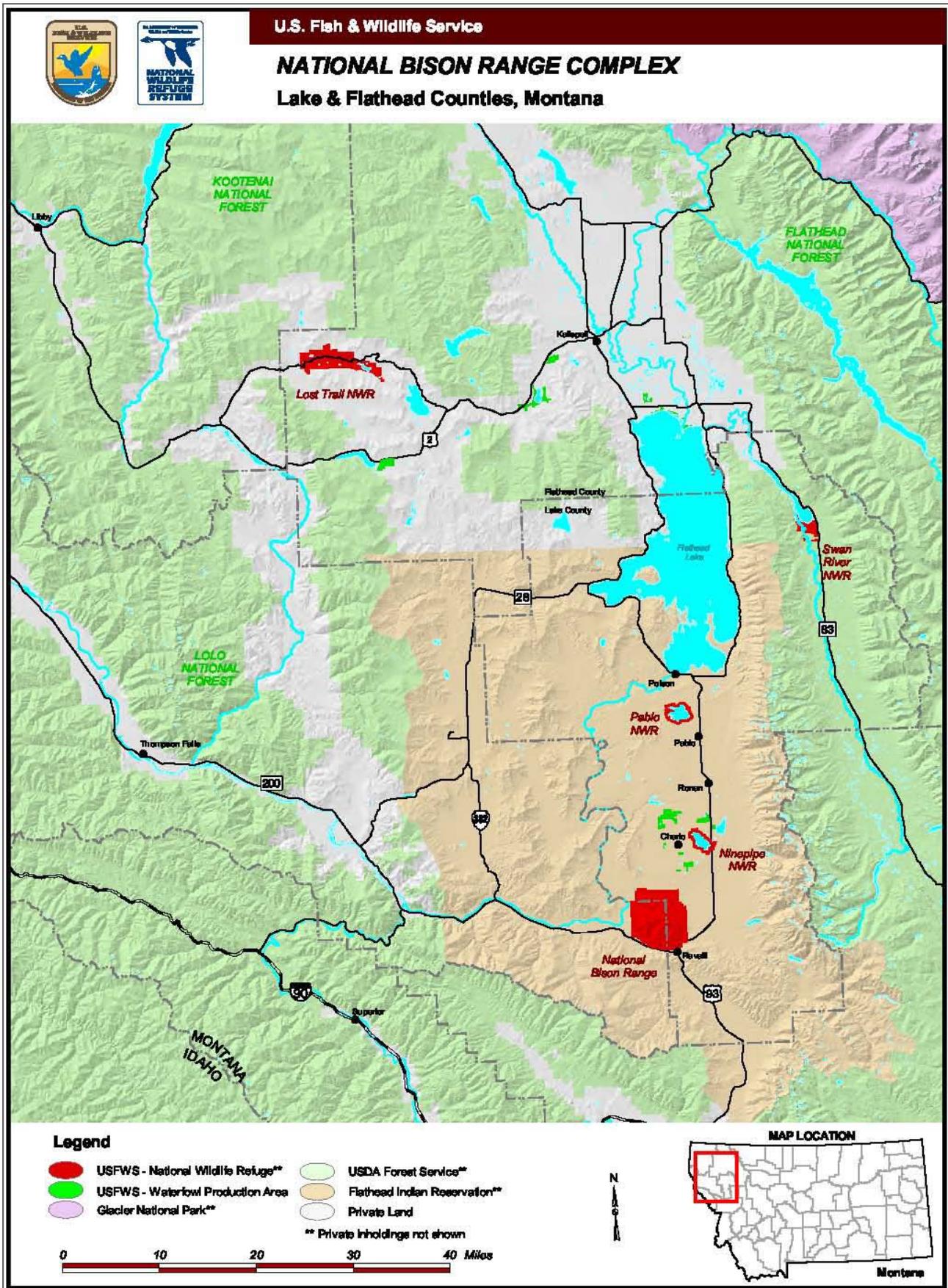


Figure 1. Vicinity map for Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, Montana

- Conserve, restore where appropriate, and enhance all species of fish, wildlife, and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- Perpetuate migratory bird, inter-jurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations.
- Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants.
- Conserve and restore, where appropriate, representative ecosystems of the United States, including the ecological processes characteristic of those ecosystems.
- Foster understanding and instill appreciation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their conservation, by providing the public with safe, quality, and compatible wildlife-dependent public use. Such use includes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

These goals help step-down the Refuge System mission and principles of the 1997 amendments to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act. These goals articulate the foundation for stewardship of the Refuge System and define the unique niche it occupies among various federal land systems.

The Improvement Act calls for making opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation, as long as they are compatibly managed with other purposes and do not conflict with other use. Service policy allows use if it is appropriate (appendix A).

An appropriate use:

- contributes to the Refuge System mission, the refuge's major purposes, or refuge goals or objectives;
- is a priority wildlife-dependent public use (fishing, hunting, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation); or
- supports the safe and effective conduct of a priority public use.

It is the policy of the federal government—in cooperation with other nations and in partnership with states, local governments, Indian tribes, and private organizations and individuals—to administer federally owned, administered, or controlled prehistoric and historic resources in a spirit of stewardship for the benefit of present and future generations.

To maintain the health of individual national wildlife refuges, and the Refuge System as a whole, managers must anticipate future conditions—to avoid adverse effects and take positive actions to conserve and protect refuge resources. Effective management also depends on knowledge of larger systems and resource relationships.

REFUGE OVERVIEW

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge was established on August 24, 1999, and became the 519th refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

PURPOSES

The purposes for the refuge are set out in the authorities for acquisition (below), as summarized here.

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge was established for...

use by migratory birds, with emphasis on waterfowl and other water birds

the conservation of fish and wildlife resources

fish- and wildlife-oriented recreation

the conservation of endangered or threatened species

Management is dictated, in large part, by legislation that created the refuge and defines the purposes for which the refuge was established. Four authorities exist for the acquisition and establishment of the refuge:

- Migratory Bird Conservation Act "...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.

Habitat management needs to maintain a mosaic of plant communities for a diversity of foraging and nesting migratory birds. Plant communities need to be managed for a variety of cover conditions and water levels, with areas of disturbance minimized.

- The Fish and Wildlife Act, "...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources..."
- The Refuge Recreation Act, "...for (1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species..."
- The Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, "...for the conservation and enhancement of fish and wildlife."

Parts of the refuge are mitigative properties [obtained from the Montana Power Company (MPC) in lieu of losses to Flathead WPA attributed to past and future operations of Kerr Dam). The purpose is to protect and maintain wetland habitat for migratory birds, other animals, and plants; to

restore flood plain acreage to its historic role; and to enhance the survival prospects of endangered and threatened species.

VISION

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge is an integral part of the Columbia River ecosystem and the Pleasant Valley community.

The refuge is a place where wetlands, streams, native grasslands, and forests have been conserved, enhanced, and restored. These habitats support a variety of migratory birds, species of concern, and other associated wildlife and plants.

People learn about and appreciate the natural and cultural environment of the refuge and enjoy opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation.

Partnering with others fosters natural and cultural resource conservation for the benefit of present and future generations.

GOALS

A goal is a descriptive, broad statement of desired future conditions that conveys a purpose, but does not define measurable units. Goals for the refuge will direct work at carrying out the refuge's mandates and achieving the purposes.

These goals are derived from the vision statement and the refuge's purposes to reflect the refuge's contribution to the Refuge System.

The following goals for the refuge reflect the core mission of the Service to protect fish, wildlife, and plant resources while providing compatible opportunities for the public to appreciate and enjoy the natural environment of the region.

RIPARIAN HABITAT GOAL

Restore, enhance, and maintain a mixed deciduous and coniferous riparian habitat to support indigenous wildlife species and perpetuate the ecological integrity of the Fisher River watershed.

WETLAND HABITAT GOAL

Provide breeding, resting, and feeding habitat for wetland-dependent species of northwestern Montana by restoring, maintaining, and enhancing a mosaic of lake, semipermanent, seasonal, temporary, and saturated wetlands.

GRASSLAND HABITAT GOAL

Restore, enhance, and maintain Intermountain grasslands, with an emphasis on native bunchgrass prairie to provide habitat for migratory birds, species of concern, and associated wildlife species.

FOREST HABITAT GOAL

Enhance and maintain Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, aspen, and cottonwood forested habitats within the context of the Fisher River watershed for migratory birds, species of concern, and other associated wildlife species.

INVASIVE PLANT GOAL

Native plant communities, composition, occurrence, and density exist without degradation by invasive plants, and support associated wildlife.

MIGRATORY BIRD GOAL

Preserve, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity and abundance of migratory birds of the Intermountain West forest, wetland complexes, riparian habitat, and bunchgrass prairie.

OTHER WILDLIFE GOAL

Restore and maintain resident and endemic wildlife populations of northwestern Montana to maintain and enhance species diversity of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge and Pleasant Valley.

SPECIES OF CONCERN GOAL

Contribute to the conservation, enhancement, and recovery of endangered, threatened, and species of concern populations in Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge and Fisher River watershed.

CULTURAL RESOURCE GOAL

Protect, manage, and interpret archaeological, cultural, and historical resources present at Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge for the benefit of present and future generations.

PUBLIC USE GOAL

Provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational and educational opportunities for persons of all abilities to learn, understand, and enjoy the Intermountain ecosystem of northwestern Montana; its associated fish, wildlife, and plants of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge; and the National Wildlife Refuge System in a safe and compatible manner.

ADMINISTRATION GOAL

Provide staffing, funding, and facilities to maintain the long-term integrity of habitats and wildlife resources of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge in supporting the achievement of ecosystem and National Wildlife Refuge System goals.

PARTNERSHIP GOAL

Promote and develop partnerships with adjacent landowners, public and private organizations, and other interested individuals to preserve, restore, and enhance a diverse and productive ecosystem of which Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge is an integral part.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

This section describes other management considerations for habitats, wildlife, and administration of the refuge.

HABITATS

The wetland reserve program (WRP) project has the following goals that relate to Pleasant Valley Creek:

- Address habitat needs for a diversity of fish and wildlife with a priority for species most impacted by degraded condition; beaver; moose; and species of concern such as bull, westslope cutthroat, and redband trout.
- Restore wetland hydrology and vegetation to historic conditions.
- Restore streams to historic channels and/or function, where feasible.
- Restore fisheries habitat and aid fish passage to tributary channels, where feasible.

Although management of forest habitat is not a priority for the refuge, as a wildlife steward, the Service needs to determine what is within refuge boundaries and not impact species of concern and their biological potential.

WILDLIFE

The refuge is challenged with managing for predator species along with other native species. Although predators are of secondary importance after native birds for management to meet refuge purposes, they are critical to maintaining ecosystem health and are popular with refuge visitors.

Specific objectives have not been developed for upland game birds, because it is expected that habitat objectives would benefit these species.

The Service is required to carry out conservation (recovery) programs for listed species and to ensure that agency actions are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or adversely modify or destroy their critical habitat. The grizzly bear is important, but not the primary user of the refuge. The refuge would not be managed exclusively for the grizzly bear at the expense of other priority species.

The refuge contains only marginal habitat for Canada lynx; even intensive management for lynx habitat may not result in lynx using the refuge. When conflicts arise, the needs of lynx may not be the primary consideration in habitat management.

PUBLIC USE

Hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation are

priority public uses of the Refuge System, when compatible with the main mission of wildlife conservation (Improvement Act).

The Service's stewardship responsibilities will ensure that priority uses, when found compatible, will receive enhanced and highest consideration in refuge planning and management over other general public uses.

ADMINISTRATION

House Report 105-106 (accompanying the House of Representatives version of the Improvement Act) encourages refuge managers to take reasonable steps to obtain outside assistance if adequate finances are not available to manage a priority use in a compatible manner.

Refuge staff needs to work closely with state, community, and conservation partners to help obtain resources to manage priority uses.

BACKGROUND

In 1985, the Service evaluated ecosystem and Refuge System needs in Flathead and Lake counties, Montana, and prepared a land acquisition and development plan. The plan identified more than 11,000 acres of wetlands and uplands in Flathead Valley that would be suitable for wetland-dependent wildlife production and management. Dahl Lake and surrounding habitats were identified.



Dave Menke/USFWS

Lesser scaup are common nesters on the refuge.

The establishment of much of the refuge was the result of a mitigative settlement between the MPC, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), and the Service. A summary follows, with details found in appendix A.

The MPC operated Kerr Dam, a hydro-generating facility located on the Flathead River. In 1985, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) identified hydro-project impacts to aquatic and wildlife resources on the Service-administered Flathead WPA at the north end of Flathead Lake.

In 1997, FERC issued a settlement order that required the MPC to acquire 3,911 acres of suitable replacement habitat as mitigation for wildlife losses and impacts on the WPA. The MPC purchased the Lost Trail Ranch with the intent of conveying 3,112 acres to the Service. Two parcels of the ranch were identified as mitigative replacement habitat (figure 2):

- Dahl Lake (160 acres) with 2,452 acres of surrounding habitat
- Restorable wetlands (500 acres) on the west end of the ranch

There is a habitat development plan for the refuge as part of this FERC-approved settlement. The plan addresses habitat enhancements on the refuge for mitigation of habitat and wildlife losses.

After review of the proposed parcels, and in consideration of other wildlife needs, the Service proposed acquisition of the remaining ranch tracts for establishment of a national wildlife refuge. In 1998, a preliminary project proposal, conceptual management plan, and environmental assessment for acquisition were prepared.

The conceptual management plan provided a general description of the operations and management for the newly established refuge, as outlined in the

preferred alternative of the environmental assessment for the creation of the refuge.

During the interim acquisition period (1998–1999), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), in conjunction with the MPC, acquired a WRP easement on 1,770 acres of the ranch (figure 3). This easement allows for the restoration of the hydrology of the area.

The refuge acquisition was completed on August 24, 1999, by the realty division at the Service's region 6 headquarters (Lakewood, Colorado).

The 2001 decision to allow hunting at the refuge followed the completion of an environmental assessment for hunting options, strategies, and effects (details in appendix A).

When considering other uses, the refuge manager will prepare a compatibility determination when necessary. Appendix B displays the compatibility determination for the refuge.

Wildlife-dependent recreational use programs will be offered only to the extent that staff, funds, and facilities are sufficient to develop and operate programs to safe, quality standards.

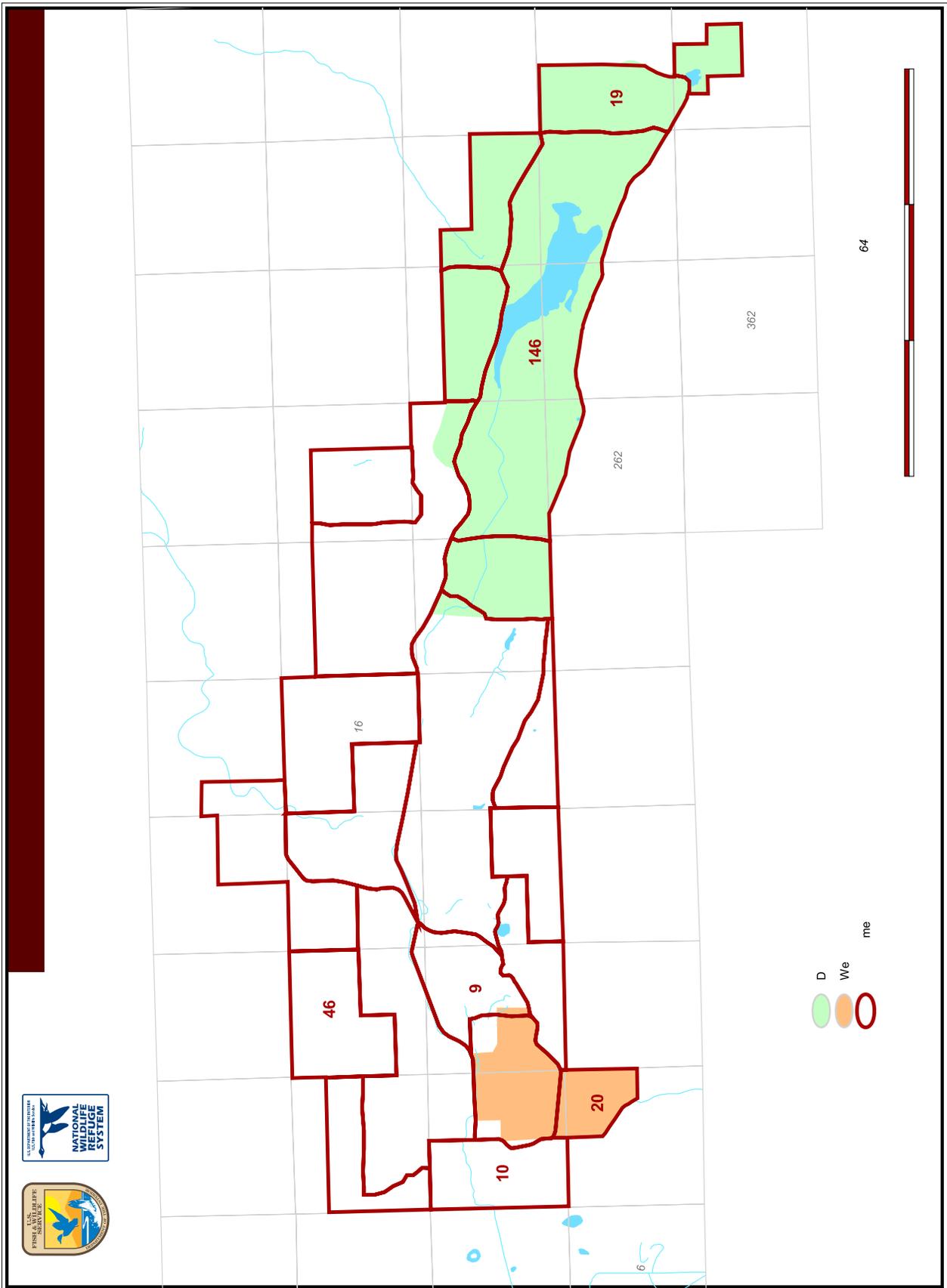


Figure 2. Management units for Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, Montana

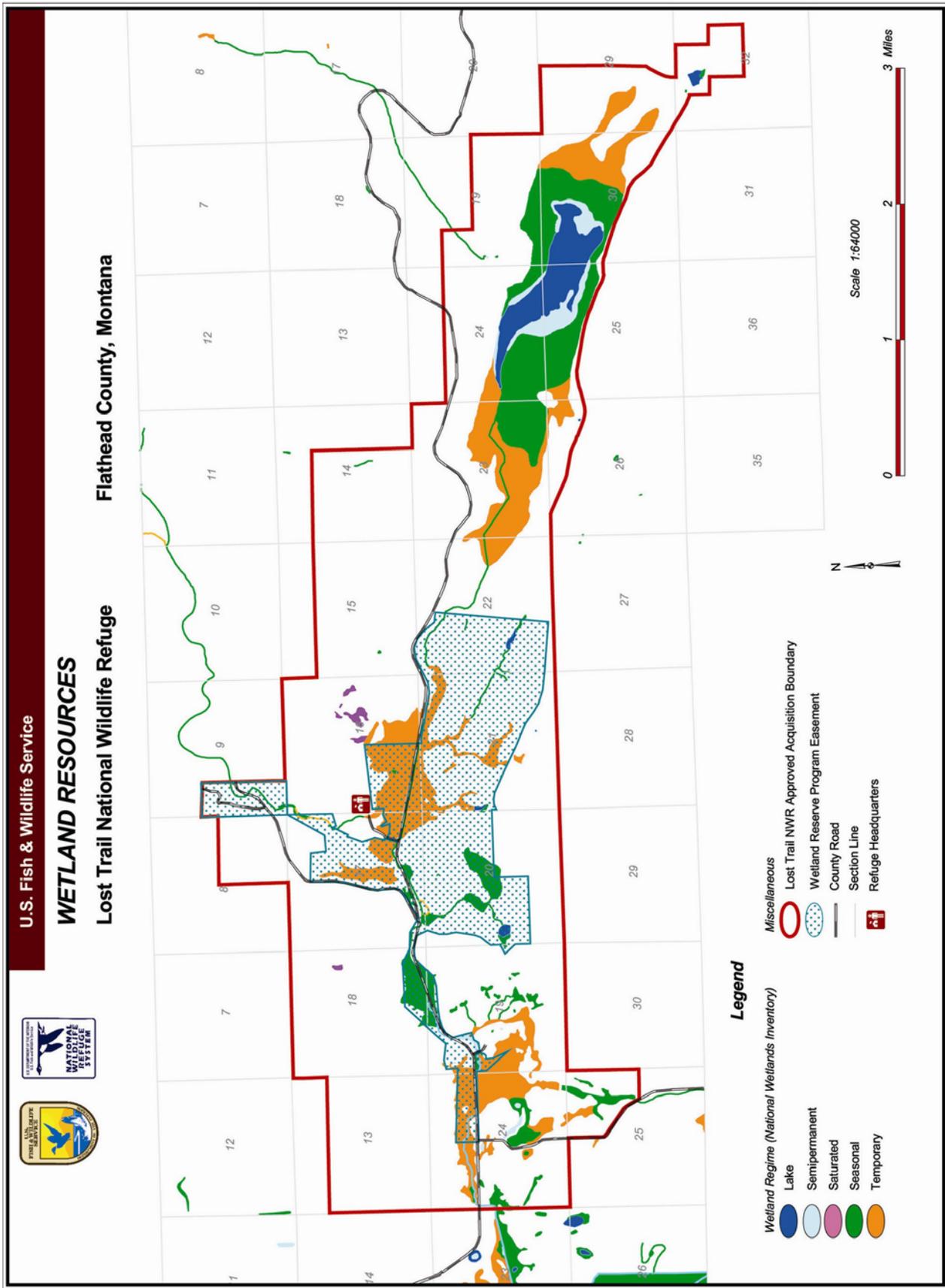


Figure 3. Wetland resources of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, Montana

