

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment

Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge

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Abbreviations

Administration Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966
BSFW	Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CCP	comprehensive conservation plan
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
cfs	cubic feet per second
CRP	conservation reserve program
EA	environmental assessment
EO	executive order
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
FMP	fire management plan
FONSI	finding of no significant impact
FTE	full-time equivalent
GIS	geographic information system
GPS	global positioning system
GS	general schedule (employment)
Improvement Act	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
LPP	Land Protection Plan
NABCI	North American Bird Conservation Initiative
NAWMP	North American Waterfowl Management Plan
NAWCA	North American Wetlands Conservation Act
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NOI	notice of intent
NWR	national wildlife refuge
NWRS	National Wildlife Refuge System
PFW	Partners for Fish and Wildlife
Refuge System	National Wildlife Refuge System
Region 6	Mountain–Prairie Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
RONs	Refuge Operating Needs System
SAMMS	Service Asset Maintenance Management System
Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
SUP	special use permit
SWG	State Wildlife Grant
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
WG	wage grade (employment)
WGFD	Wyoming Game and Fish Department
WUI	wildland–urban interface

Summary



Mark Ely/USFWS

Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge, Wyoming

This is a summary of the draft comprehensive conservation plan for the Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge in Carbon and Natrona counties, Wyoming. This plan, when approved, will guide management of the refuge for the next 15 years.

Assessing the refuge's ability to provide quality wildlife habitat for migratory bird species and actively managing the refuge to achieve this end, along with identifying and providing appropriate public uses on the refuge, were key factors driving the development of this plan.

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 unit in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

THE REFUGE

Located in central Wyoming in a high plains basin near the headwaters of the "Platte-Kansas Rivers" ecosystem, Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge lies approximately 47 miles southwest of the city of Casper.

Pathfinder Dam construction was completed in 1909, creating the first reservoir on the North Platte River. At the same time, Pathfinder Wildlife Refuge (later renamed "Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge") was established as an overlay refuge on Bureau of

Reclamation lands on the reservoir. This large body of water was very attractive to waterbirds, and where the refuge once offered a unique environment in this semiarid region of Wyoming, the reservoir on which it is situated is now part of a larger system of reservoirs including Alcova to the north and Seminoe to the south.

Major habitat types of Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge include open water wetlands, uplands consisting of shrub and grasslands, and alkali flats.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The comprehensive conservation plan process consists of a series of steps including environmental analysis. Public and partner involvement are encouraged and valued throughout the process. Management alternatives are developed to meet the purposes, vision, and goals of the refuge. Implementation of the final comprehensive conservation plan will be monitored throughout its 15-year effective period.

ISSUES

Public scoping for the Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge initiated in May 2006, along with refuge information, identified nine major areas of concern regarding management of the refuge.

Refuge Management

Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge is part of the Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Refuge staff are headquartered near Walden, Colorado, approximately a four-hour drive from the refuge. The complex's small staff size (four full-time employees), limited resources, and remote headquarters create management challenges for the refuge, including a lack of day-to-day oversight and minimal opportunities for law enforcement. Degrading infrastructure (specifically, roads, fences, and signs) and litter occur on the refuge due to lack of active management.

Management of Pathfinder Reservoir and refuge lands by multiple agencies creates additional management challenges. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently has memorandums of agreement and understanding with a number of agencies in the Casper region including the Bureau of Reclamation, the Bureau of Land Management, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, and Natrona County.

The Bureau of Reclamation has a withdrawal on Pathfinder Reservoir project lands to support project purposes (i.e., flood control, irrigation, and hydroelectric power generation). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a withdrawal on refuge lands for wildlife management purposes. The roles and responsibilities of each agency should be clearly defined, evaluated, and simplified where possible during the comprehensive conservation plan process.

Refuge Uses

Refuge uses (grazing and recreation) need to be evaluated to ensure existing and proposed uses are compatible with the purpose of the refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Refuge uses have not been actively evaluated over time due to minimal staff presence. Through the development of this comprehensive conservation plan, refuge uses and management activities will be evaluated to ensure the best, most informed decisions are made for proper management of refuge lands. For a use to be deemed compatible, appropriate staff and resources must be available to manage the use.

Water Resources

Water and water availability are vital in semiarid regions. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not own water rights for the refuge, which can result in poor wildlife habitat for trust species.

Water Level Fluctuation

During the past 20 years (from 1987 to 2007), the average fluctuation of the reservoir water level was 20 feet per year with a range of 8–40 feet, resulting in a lack of shoreline vegetation and food source for migratory birds and nesting cover for waterfowl. The Bureau of Reclamation is responsible for managing reservoir water levels.

Separated Land Parcels

The refuge consists of four separate units. Separated land parcels are generally more difficult to access and manage than contiguous parcels of land, and generally of less value to wildlife.

Invasive Species

Invasive species are a threat to quality habitat. If not contained early, they can also drain resources. Tamarisk and Canada thistle have been identified on the refuge. An increase in monitoring, management, and control of these and other invasive species is needed.

Research and Science

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service needs to obtain good baseline data for the refuge. Monitoring programs need to be implemented for species that use the refuge. Audubon Wyoming could be a partner in gathering quality research data on the refuge.

Partnerships

Cooperation with other agencies is needed to address issues of common concern. Opportunities for the public to assist in the protection and management of the refuge should be identified and provided. Local conservation groups could help raise funds for the refuge either directly or by lobbying state and federal representatives.

Staffing

The refuge should be managed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff stationed in Wyoming. This issue was raised frequently in public meetings. The managing staff is currently headquartered at Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge in Walden, Colorado, approximately 240 miles away from the refuge. The remote location of staff prevents active, consistent oversight of the refuge.

THE FUTURE OF THE REFUGE

The issues, along with resource conditions, were important considerations during the development of the vision and goals for the refuge.

THE VISION OF THE REFUGE

The vision describes what the refuge will be and what the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hopes to do, and is based primarily on the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and specific purposes of the refuge.

Pathfinder Reservoir and surrounding public lands supply life-cycle needs for a multitude of wildlife adapted to this semiarid region of central Wyoming. The wetland complexes, upland sagebrush habitats, and open waters of the reservoir provide feeding, breeding, staging, resting, and nesting areas for migratory birds and resident wildlife. Management decisions will be directed toward maintaining or improving wildlife habitat values. Appropriate public use opportunities will be identified, and provided where possible.

GOALS

The following goals were developed to meet the vision of the Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge.

Natural Resources Goal

Conserve the ecological diversity of uplands and wetlands to support healthy populations of native wildlife, with an emphasis on migratory birds.

Visitor Services Goal

Provide wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities to a diverse audience when the administration of these programs does not adversely affect habitat management objectives.

Partnerships Goal

Work with partners to support healthy populations of native wildlife and to increase understanding of wildlife needs as well as the benefits wildlife offer to local communities.

Cultural Resources Goal

Identify and evaluate the cultural resources on the refuge and protect those that are determined to be significant.

Administrative Goal

Obtain administrative capabilities that will result in efficient strategies to manage the landscape to achieve habitat and public management goals.

ALTERNATIVES

The planning team developed the following three alternatives as management options for addressing the key issues.

Alternative A—Current Management (No Action)

This no-action alternative reflects the current management of the Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge. It provides the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives.

Refuge habitats would continue to be minimally managed on an opportunistic schedule that may maintain—or most likely would result in further decline in—the diversity of vegetation and wildlife species. Only limited data collection and monitoring of habitats and wildlife species would occur on the refuge.

Outreach and partnerships would continue at present minimal levels.

Alternative B—Enhanced Refuge Management

Management activities under alternative B would be increased. Upland habitats would be evaluated and managed for the benefit of migratory bird species. Monitoring and management of invasive species on the refuge would be increased.

With additional staffing, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would collect baseline biological information for wildlife and habitats. Wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities would be provided and enhanced where compatible with refuge purposes. Efforts would be increased in the operations and maintenance of natural resources on the refuge and to maintain and develop partnerships that promote wildlife and habitat research and management.

Alternative C—Modify Refuge Boundary (Proposed Action)

Alternative C is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposed action and basis for the draft comprehensive conservation plan.

Under Alternative C, the refuge boundary would be modified to remove areas from the refuge that provide minimal opportunity to improve wildlife habitat and are difficult to manage. Remaining refuge areas would be managed similar to those actions described in alternative B. Modifying the refuge's boundary would enable the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to focus efforts on manageable lands, thereby enhancing refuge management and efficiently directing refuge resources toward accomplishing the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System

