

2 Planning Process

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 directs the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to manage refuges in accordance with an approved CCP.

This section describes the planning process and issues specific to Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge.



Birdwatching is popular on many national wildlife refuges, including Sand Lake.

THE PROCESS

The Service is following the planning steps listed below to determine the future management of the refuge, in a thorough manner that meets requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Service policy.

The CCP process consists of a series of steps that are displayed sequentially; however, CCP planning, along with NEPA analysis and documentation, occur simultaneously. Although public involvement is listed as part of two steps, the Service will take public input at any point in the planning process.

- Preplan—form a planning team, review available data, organize efforts.
- Initiate public involvement and scoping—gather public input on issues.
- Develop draft vision and goal statements.
- Develop and analyze draft alternatives, including a proposed action—includes developing draft objectives.
- Prepare documentation of the NEPA analysis, including the draft plan (proposed action alternative).
- Conduct internal review (Service, state and tribal partners) and gather public input on draft document.
- Analyze and respond to public comments.
- Select one of the alternatives, which becomes the CCP.
- Make revisions as necessary and prepare the final CCP.
- Approve and implement the CCP.
- Monitor and evaluate actions and results.

The planning team for the CCP (appendix F) is carrying out the process and has prepared this draft CCP and EA.

Coordination with the public, local groups, and other agencies has been essential in developing a realistic, meaningful plan.

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

Based on the analysis documented in this EA, the following decisions will be made by the Service's regional director for region 6 (Mountain–Prairie Region), headquartered in Lakewood, Colorado.

- the type and extent of management and public access that will occur on the Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- whether or not the management and public access on the Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge would have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment

DOCUMENTATION

As part of the decision-making process of the Service, this document has been developed in accordance with the NEPA. Three alternatives provide options for addressing management concerns and for resolving issues. The draft CCP is described in alternative 3 (the Service's proposed action) of this EA.

This document displays the results of planning to date to develop the CCP for the refuge. It includes a description of the existing environment, the alternatives for management, and an assessment of the effects of carrying out the alternatives.

STEP-DOWN MANAGEMENT PLANS

The CCP is intended as a broad umbrella plan that provides general concepts and specific wildlife, habitat, endangered species, public use, and partnership objectives. The purpose of step-down management plans is to provide greater detail than what is in the CCP to managers and employees who will implement the strategies described in the CCP.

Step-down management plans describe strategies, procedures, methods, and tasks for specific resources or functions. Often these plans require their own compatibility determinations, environmental assessments, or other justification before they can be implemented.

The preparation and execution of these plans is dependent on funding and the availability of staff or technical expertise. Additional step-down plans will need to be developed, revised, or amended as a result of this CCP (table 1). Plans will be completed or revised, as needed, within 2 years of funding and necessary staff becoming available.

Table 1. Step-down management plans for Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge, South Dakota

<i>Step-down Management Plan</i>	<i>Completed Plan, Year Approved</i>	<i>New or Revised Plan, Completion Year</i>
Deer management plan	—	2006
Fire management plan	1999	—
Habitat management plan	—	2010
Integrated pest management plan	1996 (obsolete)	2005
Law enforcement plan	—	2010
Predator management plan	1992	—
Safety plan	2003	2010
Visitor services plan	1990 (obsolete)	2010
Water management plan	2001	—

PLAN REVISION

Plans are dynamic—management strategies need to be reviewed and updated periodically. The CCP will be reviewed at least annually to determine if it requires any revisions.

Monitoring and evaluation will determine whether management activities are achieving the refuge purposes, vision, and goals. When significant new information becomes available, ecological conditions change, major refuge expansions occur, or other needs are identified, the CCP can be revised.

Revision will occur, at a minimum, every 15 years. If the plan requires a major revision, the CCP process starts anew. Plan revisions require NEPA compliance. The public will continue to be informed of, and involved with, any revision to the CCP.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The NEPA process is being used by the Service to engage the public in refuge planning, while determining whether the proposed action for management of the refuge would have significant effects.

“Scoping” is the term for requesting input from the public, in this case, regarding management of a refuge. The primary thrust for the planning process is to provide a forum for ideas and issues to be shared, reviewed, and evaluated among agency staff and the public.

Comments are reviewed to identify issues and public concerns about, or advocacies for, future management of the refuge. These issues are addressed in the EA and draft CCP, other plans, and decision documents.

Public scoping was initiated in a Notice of Intent published in the Federal Register (August 1, 2001), announcing the availability of an issue workbook and dates for open houses to be held for public input on management of the refuge. The open houses were held in October 2001. A summary of the public involvement is in appendix G.

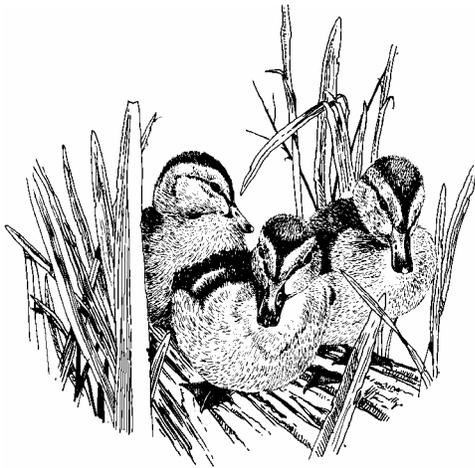
PLANNING ISSUES

The public scoping meetings, issues workbooks, and refuge information indicated that there are four major issues of concern regarding refuge management. This document uses these issues to describe what was addressed during the planning process, as well as for the format to display environmental consequences of the alternatives (chapter 5).

WILDLIFE AND HABITAT

The quality of upland grassland habitats is important for providing the needs of migratory birds and meeting the establishment purposes of the refuge. Prior to the refuge’s establishment, the

native prairie within the vicinity of Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge was almost entirely broken up and converted to cropland.



Today, the uplands largely consist of smooth brome, a cool-season grass that lacks structural diversity and tends to form a less vigorous species monoculture as the stand ages. Dense nesting cover (DNC)—tame, introduced cool-season grasses with sweetclover and alfalfa—was planted on the uplands as nesting cover for migratory birds. Grazing has been the primary tool used to manage these stands. Eventually DNC needs intensive management to restore the best wildlife habitat. Either these uplands are replanted to DNC or native grass can be reestablished.

Refuge users want a great diversity of wildlife, including game species, supported by a variety of habitats. Game species, especially waterfowl and deer, are important recreational resources. Maintaining the farm program would help maintain resident game species (white-tailed deer and pheasant). Some refuge neighbors are losing crops of corn and alfalfa to foraging deer.

WATER MANAGEMENT

The refuge must use, maintain, and protect its water rights for the use of James River water. Refuge management strategies are impacted by the extremely low gradient of the James River in northern South Dakota. Water levels are manipulated on Sand and Mud lakes and five subimpoundments to modify emergent vegetation to help meet wetland objectives. During the nesting period, the refuge attempts to hold water levels steady to protect the nests of colonial, overwater-nesting birds. The critical period is May 15–August 1, during which sudden changes place nesters at risk.

With the refuge being located on the James River, control of water levels to manage wetlands is extremely dependent on river flows. Demands on the water resources of the James River require

collaboration between a diversity of stakeholders including the Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, Arrowwood National Wildlife Refuge, Kulm Wetland Management District, Oakes Test Area, Garrison Diversion District, North Dakota State Water Commission, South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources, James River Water Development District, and many private irrigation interests.

The water cycle affects the wildlife and the fishery and subsequent recreational opportunities. There was some public concern that water management for waterfowl may have a detrimental impact on the fishery. For example, water drawdowns to winterkill rough fish also kill game fish.

Water levels on the refuge may affect water tables on neighboring lands. Salt is surfacing on lands within Brown County. It was asserted that water should be moved through the system as quickly as possible.

PUBLIC USE

Recreational opportunities on the refuge and the James River are very important to local residents.

Hunting is a priority public use to be considered on national wildlife refuges, when determined compatible with the refuge's establishment purposes. Hunting, especially of deer, waterfowl, and pheasant, is very popular on Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

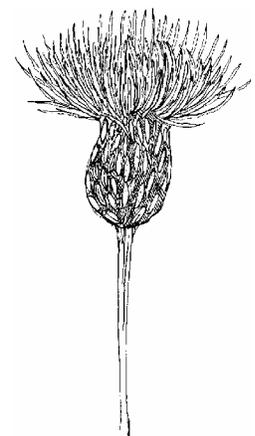
There is demand for fishing, particularly ice fishing. People want more fishing opportunities, but the ability of the refuge to provide fishing that is compatible with the purposes of the refuge (i.e., migratory wetland birds) is very limited. Insufficient fishing access occasionally creates minor traffic congestion at one access point when anglers use the road right-of-way for fishing.

There is public support for an education center. In addition, there is some public interest in camping and recreational trapping.

INVASIVE PLANTS

Invasive plants, especially Canada thistle, are dominating plant communities and impacting habitats in some areas.

Canada thistle is a serious invasive species problem on the refuge. This plant tends to form monocultures in the absence of management actions such as herbicide application, haying, or replanting.



Canada Thistle
© Cindie Brunner

Without intensive management, the refuge would become a sea of smooth brome and Canada thistle, incapable of providing habitat for a diversity of grassland-dependent wildlife.

Invasive plants on the refuge are particularly troublesome for neighbors who are required by state and local laws to control invasive species on their

lands and view the refuge as a source of invasive plant expansion onto their lands.

Chemicals used to control invasive plants are of concern from the standpoint of environmental contamination and negative impacts on desirable plant species.

