

# Comprehensive Conservation Plan

## *Sullys Hill National Game Preserve*

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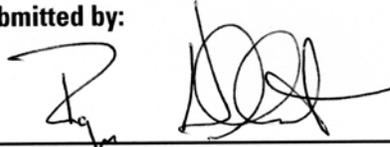
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# Comprehensive Conservation Plan Approval

*Sullys Hill National Game Preserve*

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# Summary

This is a summary of the comprehensive conservation plan developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the Sullys Hill National Game Preserve in Benson County, North Dakota. This plan, approved in 2008, will guide management of the refuge for the next 15 years. 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 national wildlife refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System. This brief summary describes the refuge and its purposes, the planning process, and the comprehensive conservation plan.

## THE REFUGE AND ITS PURPOSE

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is a 1,675-acre national wildlife refuge sitting on the south shores of Devils Lake, about 10 miles south of the city of Devils Lake, North Dakota. The refuge was first established on April 27, 1904, as a national park, but was later transferred to the Service in 1921 as a national wildlife refuge. This refuge supports a unique community of habitats such as an oak, ash, basswood, and aspen woodland; and mixed-grass prairie, interspersed with some natural and created wetlands. These diverse habitats create a large ecotone that provides “edge” habitat for over 250 species of migratory birds, plains bison, Rocky Mountain elk, white-tailed deer, turkeys, and prairie dogs.

The refuge is 1 of only 19 designated natural areas in North Dakota, of which only 4 are national wildlife refuges. It is also one of only four refuges established for national bison conservation.

Sullys Hill National Game Preserve has a long history of visitation with over 60,000 annual visitors, making it the most visited refuge in North Dakota. The refuge is becoming a progressive regional conservation learning center, promoting the conservation role of the National Wildlife Refuge System while educating visitors about the functions and benefits of the refuge and the surrounding prairie wetlands and grasslands. The refuge uses both indoor and outdoor education with a focus on the sciences, biodiversity, and human dimensions in the environment, providing area educators a unique tool to make learning exciting, interesting, and effective. According to the refuge’s legislative purposes, there is no hunting permitted.

Every refuge has a purpose for which it was established. These purposes, found in legislative acts or administrative orders, are the foundation upon which to build all refuge programs, from biology and public use, to maintenance and facilities. No action that the Service or public takes may conflict with these purposes.

The purposes for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve are described in the following legislation and public land orders:

- “All the lands that are now reserved or may hereafter be included within the boundaries of the ... Sullys Hill National Park Game Preserve ... are hereby further reserved and set apart for the use ... as refuges and breeding grounds for birds.” (Executive Order 3596, December 21, 1921)
- “As a big game preserve, refuge, and breeding grounds for wild animals and birds ... provided, that the said game preserve is to be made available to the public for recreational purposes in so far as consistent with the use of this area as a game preserve ... provided further, that hunting shall not be permitted on said game preserve.” (46 Stat. 1509, Act of March 3, 1931)

## VISION STATEMENT

The vision for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is based on the establishing purposes of the refuge, resource conditions and potential, and the issues.



Entrance sign for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve.

*Overlooking North Dakota's largest natural lake and riding the tops of a glacial thrust block formation, Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is dressed in undulating native woodlands and prairie. Teddy Roosevelt's vision and broad community support are largely responsible for the successful conservation of these habitats ensuring the preservation of the refuge's plains bison and Rocky Mountain elk while supporting migrating waves of warblers and other native bird species.*

*Sullys Hill National Game Preserve is renowned as a regional conservation learning center—greeting families, students, and outdoor enthusiasts of all abilities. Children are able to learn about their natural world using all their senses, which fosters their own environmental ethics. Each visitor's experience not only enriches their personal lives, but instills a unique understanding and appreciation for preserving native prairie and wetland habitats, the natural resources of the Devils Lake Basin, and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System to preserve America's wildlife heritage.*

## GOALS

The goals described below reflect the vision for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve.

### **PRAIRIE HABITAT GOAL**

Maintain prairie plant communities representative of the historical mixed-grass prairies to support healthy populations of grassland-dependent migratory birds in balance with bison, elk, and other indigenous wildlife.

### **WOODLAND HABITAT GOAL**

Manage for healthy native woodlands of various age classes and structure to provide habitat for migratory birds in balance with bison, elk, and other indigenous wildlife.

### **WILDLIFE POPULATION MANAGEMENT GOAL**

Carry out management practices that ensure healthy populations of Rocky Mountain elk, plains bison, and other indigenous wildlife species that exemplify the genetic integrity of historical prairie wildlife.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION, INTERPRETATION, AND OUTREACH GOAL**

Deliver quality, interactive environmental education programming to regional schools, communities, organizations, Spirit Lake Nation, and local governments to garner support and appreciation for Sullys Hill National Game Preserve, North Dakota's wetland and grassland resources, and the conservation role of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

## **VISITOR SERVICES GOAL**

Provide captivating visitor services facilities and activities for visitors of all abilities, community groups, youth groups, and the members of Spirit Lake Nation to provide enjoyment that results in a greater understanding and support of the preservation of native habitats and landscapes of North Dakota's Prairie Pothole Region and the mission of the Refuge System.

## **PROTECTION AND MAINTENANCE GOAL**

Refuge visitors, staff, and volunteers will have a safe, protected, and well-maintained environment in which to learn about, work with, understand, and appreciate the importance of protecting the unique natural and cultural resources of Sullys Hill National Game Preserve.

## PLANNING PROCESS

In 2006, a planning team of refuge and other Service staff gathered to begin planning the future direction of Sullys Hill National Game Preserve. The planning process included designing a vision for the refuge, along with goals to reach that vision. The team invited the public to participate in the



planning process. A mailing list of about 320 names was created which included private citizens; local, regional, and state government representatives and legislators; other federal agencies; tribal governments; and nonprofit organizations. Key issues (habitat, wildlife, public outreach, public use, and refuge operations) were identified during analysis of the concerns raised by refuge staff, partners, and the public. The unique qualities and values of the refuge were also determined. The team identified which of these qualities and issues were crucial to achieving the vision and goals. These were addressed throughout the planning process and in the comprehensive conservation plan. Three alternatives were developed for addressing substantive issues and managing refuge programs. Through the environmental analysis process, the Service has selected alternative C from the draft conservation plan and environmental assessment, published in June 2008. This alternative is now the final comprehensive conservation plan. Implementation of this plan will be monitored throughout its 15-year effective period.

## **ISSUES**

Because of its location, serving as a conservation learning center is an important designation and direction for this refuge. Yet, even though the refuge hosts 60,000 visitors annually, there is minimal law enforcement presence. There has been some vandalism, including fires set on refuge lands. Given the small staff size and budget, numerous habitat needs have not been addressed, including promoting forest regeneration, plant inventories, habitat health, invasive species, and disease management. Invasive species such as brome and bluegrass need to be reduced and native species restored. Also, there needs to be a better understanding of the carrying capacity of the area to support the populations of bison, elk, and white-tailed deer to ensure that forest and prairie management can improve migratory bird production.

## **EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF THE PLAN**

This comprehensive conservation plan is designed to optimize the biological potential for big game and migratory birds while creating an inviting place for visitors to enjoy and learn about the refuge's resources, the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the importance of conserving prairie wetlands and grasslands. This refuge will serve as an outreach tool for the Devils Lake Wetland Management District and its habitat protection programs, while serving as a conservation learning center in this region.

## **HABITAT AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT**

Habitat management will address enhancing and restoring native prairie habitat, and promoting forest regeneration. Ungulate populations will be maintained at lower levels ( $\leq 20$  bison,  $\leq 18$  elk, and  $\leq 18$  white-tailed deer) to control the overgrazing and overbrowsing that has impacted refuge habitats in the past. Management tools, including exclusion fences and other appropriate methods such as chemical, biological, and mechanical techniques (including prescribed fire), will be used to restore and enhance habitat for the benefit of forest interior breeding and grassland nesting birds. Selected hayland acres will be restored to native vegetation. Fuels treatment (including prescribed fire or other mechanical means) will also be used to reduce hazardous fuels, minimizing the threat to life and property. Invasive species will be treated and areas restored. The ungulate herd health program will take a more active disease surveillance and treatment approach, including timely introduction of ungulates to maintain genetic health, particularly for the refuge's plains bison. A biologist trainee will be recruited to conduct the refuge's biological, management, and restoration programs.

## **VISITOR SERVICES**

There will be an increase in delivery of both on- and off-site programming of youth environmental education programs. In cooperation with local teachers, a formal wetland and grassland conservation curriculum will be designed for targeted grade levels and will meet local and state standards. Emphasis will be placed on developing education partnerships with Spirit Lake Nation schools and agencies and recruiting students for careers in refuge management. The refuge's limited fishery will be used for environmental education programs only. A comprehensive cultural resource survey of the refuge will be completed in partnership with other agencies and organizations, and the area's cultural history will be interpreted in a visitor center display. One additional staff person, an environmental education specialist, will be recruited to assist with the design and implementation of these expanded programs.

## **PROTECTION AND MAINTENANCE**

Visitor, staff, facility, and wildlife safety will be improved through year-round patrols by a full-time law enforcement officer. Facilities will be maintained and the refuge roads will remain open all year through the addition of a full-time maintenance worker.

# Abbreviations

<b>Administration Act</b>	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act
<b>amsl</b>	above mean sea level
<b>CCP</b>	comprehensive conservation plan
<b>CO<sub>2</sub></b>	carbon dioxide
<b>CFR</b>	Code of Federal Regulations
<b>CWCS</b>	comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy
<b>CWD</b>	chronic wasting disease
<b>DNC</b>	dense nesting cover
<b>EA</b>	environmental assessment
<b>EPA</b>	Environmental Protection Agency
<b>F</b>	Fahrenheit
<b>FMP</b>	fire management plan
<b>GIS</b>	Geographic Information System
<b>Improvement Act</b>	National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
<b>IPM</b>	integrated pest management
<b>NAWMP</b>	North American Waterfowl Management Plan
<b>ND</b>	North Dakota
<b>NDGF</b>	North Dakota Game and Fish Department
<b>NDSU</b>	North Dakota State University
<b>NEPA</b>	National Environmental Policy Act
<b>NHPA</b>	National Historic Preservation Act
<b>NOA</b>	notice of availability
<b>NOI</b>	notice of intent
<b>NRCS</b>	Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA)
<b>PL</b>	public law
<b>refuge</b>	Sullys Hill National Game Preserve
<b>Refuge System</b>	National Wildlife Refuge System
<b>Service</b>	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
<b>spp.</b>	species (plural)
<b>SWG</b>	state wildlife grant
<b>UND</b>	University of North Dakota
<b>USC</b>	United States Code
<b>USDA</b>	U.S. Department of Agriculture
<b>USFWS</b>	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
<b>USGS</b>	U.S. Geological Survey
<b>VOR</b>	visual obstruction reading
<b>WG</b>	wage grade pay schedule (civil service employees)
<b>WPA</b>	wetlands production area
<b>WUI</b>	wildland-urban interface
<b>YCC</b>	Youth Conservation Corps

*Definitions of these and other terms are in the glossary, located after Chapter 4.*

