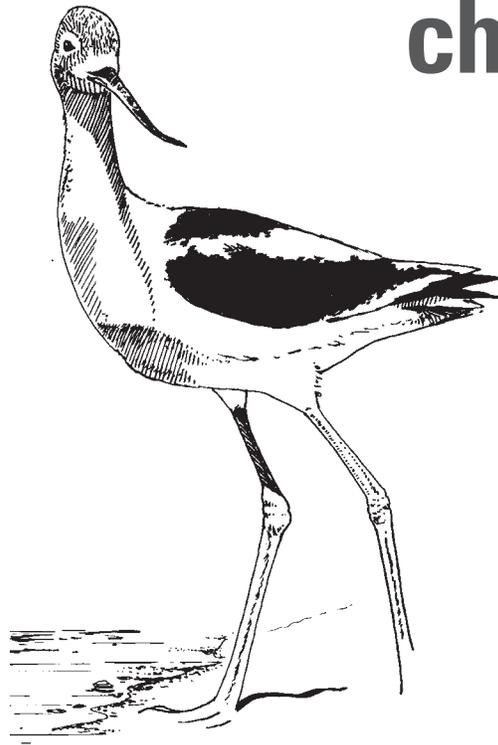


# chapter 2



**PLANNING PROCESS AND KEY ISSUES**

# Chapter 2. Planning Process and Key Issues

## 2.1 DESCRIPTION OF PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process for this CMP began in earnest in early February 2004 with an internal meeting between local field staff, Denver regional office management, and planning staff at Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the new refuge, identify the core team to develop the CMP, outline planning objectives, strategies, and time lines, and identify known issues and data needs. Main issues generated during this meeting fell into two general categories: (1) lack of funding and staff to manage the refuge; and (2) lack of information about resources on the refuge.

On March 17, 2004, a news release was submitted to local and regional newspapers and other venues to notify the public of the Service's intent to host two open-house public meetings. The purpose of these meetings was two-fold: (1) to disseminate information pertaining to the planning process for the refuge to the public; and (2) to gather public comments and concerns about future refuge management. Seven people attended the first meeting held at the Alamosa County courthouse on April 4, 2004. The second meeting was held on April 5, 2004, at the Baca Grande Property Owners Association Hall in Crestone; six people attended this meeting. The main concerns were the expanding elk population, spread of invasive plants, general public access to the refuge, differing regulations between the Park and the refuge, and access to the Park from the north, perhaps through the refuge.

Additional meetings were held by refuge staff with the Saguache and Alamosa County commissioners throughout the summer to update the local governments on the refuge planning efforts and to address questions and concerns. Refuge staff also have participated in Great Sand Dunes Advisory Council meetings, local water conservation district meetings, and San Luis Valley Focus Area Committee meetings throughout 2004. Additional public meetings will be held in the future as new planning efforts are initiated. A discussion of the primary issues raised during the planning process are listed below.

## 2.2 PRIMARY PLANNING ISSUES

### LACK OF FUNDING AND PERSONNEL

With the addition of the Baca National Wildlife Refuge to the refuge complex (Alamosa, Monte Vista, and Baca National Wildlife Refuges),

Congress significantly expanded the Service's acquisition authority and subsequent management responsibilities in the San Luis Valley, without expanding its operating budget and personnel base. No additional funding or personnel are dedicated to the administration and operation of the refuge, therefore, the refuge will be managed initially with existing staff from Monte Vista and Alamosa refuges.

Personnel required to effectively administer operations and management at the refuge include a refuge manager, biologist, administrative assistant, two maintenance workers, a full-time law enforcement officer, and two biological technicians. Initial costs for setup, administration, operations, maintenance, and developments are estimated at \$2.7 million. This includes costs associated with staffing, law enforcement activities, fence maintenance, signing refuge boundaries, water distribution system repairs, and road and structure repair and removal if needed. Annual operating costs for the same items are estimated at \$857,000. Without sufficient personnel and funding, most if not all of the goals and action items described in this CMP will be difficult, if not impossible, to attain.

### ELK POPULATION

Based on annual surveys conducted by the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW), estimates of the elk population in the vicinity of the refuge total approximately 5,000 animals (Rivale, pers. comm. 2003). Generally, the elk travel between the refuge, neighboring NPS and TNC lands, and surrounding private lands. From an ecological standpoint, it is unclear how elk are affecting vegetative communities, and to what extent biological carrying capacities are being reached or exceeded. In October 2004, researchers from U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and CDOW initiated a 3-year research effort within the Great Sand Dunes ecosystem to assess the condition of plant communities, and to assess the effects of large ungulate (elk, bison, and cattle) grazing on these communities. Although chronic wasting disease (CWD) has not been detected in wild ungulate populations within the San Luis Valley, CWD is a concern due to relatively high animal densities.

From an economic standpoint, area farmers and ranchers have expressed concerns about damage to crops and haystacks, and competition for available grass for cattle. Numerous comments were received during public scoping meetings such as



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*Rocky Mountain elk*

“there are too many elk,” and “keep the elk off my land.” CDOW has received similar comments for several years in relation to elk; as a result CDOW implemented special dispersal hunts on the entire Medano-Zapata Ranch (TNC) and on the leased state lands on the Baca Ranch (13,105 acres) in an attempt to reduce elk conflicts. These hunts are intended to keep elk east of State Highway 17.

General hunting has had limited success at reducing overall herd size due primarily to the inaccessibility of elk to hunters. Most of the areas where elk spend a large amount of time during the hunting season, like the Baca Ranch lands and the NPS lands, are not open to public hunting. Over the last 5 years, an average of 355 animals have been killed during the hunting season within game management unit #82 (CDOW 2004b). This number reflects combined hunter success and animals harvested during the dispersal hunts.

This research may provide important biological information needed to assist with the development and implementation of an elk management program on the refuge. Hunting will be considered as part of an elk and habitat management program. The refuge will have an approved hunting plan in place prior to establishing a hunting program. Hunting is recognized as a priority use on national wildlife refuges. A hunting plan will be developed as part of the visitor services planning process. Public comment will be encouraged during the development of a visitor services plan and hunting plan (see public use section for additional information.)

### INVASIVE PLANTS

Identification and control of invasive plants are considered a priority for the Service. Invasive plants are one of the greatest threats to intact landscapes and a major cause of reduced biodiversity. Plants of primary concern include Canada thistle (*Cirsium*

*arvense*), tall whitetop (*Lepidium latifolium*), Russian knapweed (*Acroptilon repens*) and salt cedar (*Tamarisk* spp.) especially in the wetland and riparian habitats. In addition to ground surveys, the Service will assess the extent of weed infestations on the refuge through discussions with previous owners, TNC, and other knowledgeable individuals. Concurrent with an assessment, strategies will be developed to address known infestations given the reality of funding and staffing constraints.

Building on a knowledge base assembled by Service personnel at Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges, a variety of tools including herbicide applications, mechanical control including mowing and haying, biological control, grazing, and prescribed fire may be used to help combat the spread of invasive plants. In the short term, haying and grazing will be used as the primary means to combat existing infestations, especially in the wet meadows. Once the severity and locations of infestations are better understood, the role of haying and grazing for invasive control will be re-evaluated. Because invasive plants do not obey property boundaries, the Service is committed to active participation with neighboring agencies, TNC, and other property owners to collectively and efficiently combat infestations.

### NORTHERN ACCESS TO THE NATIONAL PARK

The National Park Service is currently undergoing their general management plan (GMP) planning effort for the Park, which will guide management activities for the next 15-20 years. One of the biggest issues facing NPS involves public access to new lands included in the northern portion of the Park. The process and details of developing additional public access has received considerable attention from the public. Currently, the primary access to the Park is available from the south via State Highway 150. Expansion of the Park adjacent to the Baca Grande Subdivision has created a defacto

point of access to new Park lands. The Baca Grande Subdivision has a network of public, county roads, some of which end at the boundary between the Park and subdivision. Although residents of the property owners association are concerned with potential large increases in traffic and parking issues associated with visitors using these roads to access the Park, their ability to restrict traffic is very limited. Several alternatives are being considered for development by the NPS and their advisory council. None of these alternatives promote access via existing county roads in the Baca Grande community subdivision to specific trail head locations on the Park. However, one may be developed that accommodates parking inside the park boundary adjacent to the subdivision.