

Planning Update

Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex: Alamosa, Baca, and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuges

Issue 4, August 2015



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Greater sandhill cranes and other waterfowl forage on a cold spring morning at the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge.

Final Plan Available

After more than four years of work, we, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are excited to announce that the final comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental impact statement (EIS) for the San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex (refuge complex) is now available. The CCP and EIS details options for managing the three national wildlife refuges, Alamosa, Monte Vista, and Baca National Wildlife Refuges (refuge(s)) for 15 years.

Thank you to all who submitted comments on the draft CCP and EIS. Your

comments gave us a better understanding of the issues and concerns. After evaluating the comments, we made some changes in the final CCP and EIS.

This planning update briefly summarizes the public comment process, the four alternatives considered for management of the refuge complex, the significant changes that we made in the final plan, and the next steps of the planning process.

The plan is available for viewing on our Web site at http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/refuges/refugesUpdate/alm_bac_mtv.php.

Responses to Comments

We evaluated nearly 1,000 comments and developed responses to the substantial issues. These were the issues that (1) questioned with reasonable basis, the accuracy of our information or the adequacy of our environmental analysis; (2) presented reasonable alternatives other than those found in the EIS; or (3) caused changes or revisions to the proposal. In some instances, we opted to respond to nonsubstantive comments where the public displayed a strong interest. All of our responses can be found in the final CCP and EIS (appendix G).

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Public Comments

We published the draft CCP and EIS on August 26, 2014 for a 60-day comment period. Some of the key topics of concern centered on the following topics:

- Elk management
- Bison conservation
- Managing water resources
- Visitor services
- Wilderness protection

Alternatives

We developed four alternatives during the planning process and analyzed them in detail in the EIS. Key actions for each alternative are briefly described below and on the next page.

Alternative A—No Action

Few changes would occur in managing existing wildlife populations and habitat. Public use would occur at current levels.



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What do you see?

We would continue to manage wetland areas, wet meadows, riparian areas, and uplands to provide habitat for a variety of waterbirds and other migratory birds. We would continue to produce small grains on the Monte Vista Refuge (up to 270 acres, depending on water availability and crop rotation) to provide food for spring-migrating sandhill cranes.

Few changes would be made in managing big game populations on the refuge complex, and elk numbers would continue to fluctuate. There would be no public hunting of big game. Waterfowl and limited small game hunting would continue on Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges.

We would phase out the existing lease arrangement with The Nature Conservancy for season-long bison grazing on those parts of the Medano Ranch that are within the Baca Refuge, and bison would not be used in the future.

We would provide limited public access on Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges, and we would not open Baca Refuge to the public outside of occasional staff-led tours.

We would not recommend wilderness designation.

Alternative B—Wildlife Populations, Strategic Habitat Restoration, and Enhanced Public Uses (Preferred Alternative)

We would maintain or restore the composition, structure, and function of natural and modified habitats. Wildlife species needs and ecological site conditions would be considered in strategies that preserve and restore biological integrity and diversity. Compatible

wildlife-dependent uses would be enhanced and expanded to include Baca Refuge. We would strengthen partnerships that help us to facilitate our objectives.

We would manage wetland areas to achieve a variety of wetland types and conditions to support a diversity of migratory birds and other wildlife, with a specific focus on focal species that represent our larger conservation goals. We would restore historical water flow patterns in specific areas through more effective water management practices and restore riparian habitat along 21 miles of stream corridor on Baca Refuge and in select areas through Alamosa Refuge. With restoration, there would be a slight reduction in the amount of grain production on Monte Vista Refuge. We would use public hunting to complement the State's elk management by opening portions of Baca Refuge to public hunting (limited big and small game) and parts of Alamosa and Monte Vista to limited big game hunting (in addition to the existing waterfowl and limited small game hunting program).

We would research the feasibility and suitability of accommodating some semi-free-ranging bison year-round on about 12,140 acres of habitats that is in proportion to the greater landscape.

We would enhance public access and opportunities on Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges including allowing for limited bank fishing near the Chicao dam on Alamosa Refuge.

We would recommend protecting wilderness values on the eastern edge of Baca Refuge (about 13,800 acres) to be managed as a wilderness study area.

Alternative C—Habitat Restoration and Ecological Processes

We would take all feasible actions to restore or mimic, where needed, the native vegetation community (greater extent than alternative B). We would continue to provide public uses, but they would be adapted to changes in area management. Partnership efforts to be geared toward restoration.

We would restore the function of both the riparian areas and playas on the Baca Refuge and in select areas on Alamosa Refuge. We would eliminate grain production on Monte Vista Refuge.



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What do you see?

Similar to alternative B, we would use hunting to manage elk populations across the refuge complex. Except for limited hunting access, there would be no other trails, facilities, or other programs provided on Baca Refuge.

Wilderness protection would be the same as Alternative B.

Alternative D—Maximize Public Use Opportunities

We would manage wildlife and habitats on the refuge complex consistent with our mission and purposes of the refuges while emphasizing quality visitor experiences and compatible wildlife-dependent public uses. Partnerships that complement our efforts to provide for the priority public uses would be strengthened.

Habitat management would be a blend of alternatives A and B. To enhance wildlife viewing, we could irrigate more areas closer to wildlife viewing areas. We would increase the amount of grain production for sandhill cranes.

We would manage elk similar to alternative B with a greater focus on maximizing opportunities especially for youths or mobility impaired hunters.

We would introduce and manage a small bison herd on Baca Refuge.

We would expand public use opportunities above the levels described for alternative B, including allowing for walk-in fishing at several places on Alamosa Refuge.

Wilderness protection would be the same as alternative B and C.



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Bank fishing would be allowed under alternatives B and D.

Changes made in the Final CCP and EIS

As a result of public comments on the draft CCP and EIS, we made several significant changes or clarifications in the final CCP and EIS.

Hunting

We clarified that under all the action alternatives (B, C, and D), we would develop and begin implementing a step-down hunt plan within 1-3 years, but it would take time and resources to fully enact the hunt program. We made it clearer as to what the steps are to publish new hunting regulations (develop a step-down hunt plan and publish regulations in the Federal Register). We added additional emphasis that we would maximize the options and tools available to us for elk management. We would also conduct a minimum requirements analysis for wilderness management as part of developing the hunt plan.

We also addressed why sterilizing elk is not a reasonable alternative to reduce the herd.

Fishing

Based on public support for a fishing opportunity, on Alamosa Refuge, under alternative B, we would allow for fishing access near Chicago dam (fishing from the dam would not be allowed). This was part of a element that was only considered under alternative D in the draft CCP and EIS. Initially, we would allow one access point, but could consider additional access in the future.

Other Public Uses

For Baca Refuge, we modified several trails under alternative B and D to provide for some shorter loops and longer loops. We also made several other modifications to both the maps and the text to provide greater clarity about how the public use program would be managed on Baca Refuge. During hunting season wildlife viewing enthusiasts would have greater opportunities to see the refuge.

For Alamosa and Monte Vista Refuges, we made minor modifications to the dates for opening and closing the hunting areas to public access for wildlife viewing, etc. to have greater latitude in opening and closing these



We added more information about how we would implement a big game hunting program on the refuge complex.

areas due to seasonal variations by nesting birds. Additionally, the type of access, specifically biking could be more restricted in some areas.

Cultural Resources

We added more information about the importance of oral traditions to Native Americans as part of the significance of the cultural resources.

Other

We added in two new figures, one on impaired waters in the San Luis Valley, and another for sandhill crane migration. We emphasized the need for better research on the amount of waste grain and forage that is now available for sandhill cranes in the San Luis Valley and how changes in farming practices on private lands could affect the body condition of sandhill cranes. Finally, we added information about New Mexico jumping mouse. It is unknown whether the mouse is found on the refuge complex, but we would survey and monitor for the mouse prior to implementing changes in habitat management or providing new infrastructure to support public use.

Consequences

The alternatives for managing the refuge complex would provide a variety of positive effects (benefits) as well as potential negative effects (impacts). In the final CCP and EIS, we updated

the affected environment and consequences chapters.

Appendices

We reviewed the draft compatibility determinations (appendix D) and made changes to reflect public comments. The compatibility determinations were finalized and signed in the final CCP and EIS.

Appendix G is a new appendix to the EIS which details our responses to the substantive issues raised on the draft CCP and EIS.



American bittern is a focal bird species identified in the plan.

Next Steps

There is not a formal comment period for the final CCP and EIS. Our final decision will be documented in a record of decision published in the Federal Register no sooner than 30 days after filing the document with the Environmental Protection Agency. We will begin implementing some of the key actions soon after.

We will also publish a final stand-alone plan. The final plan does not constitute a commitment for funding, and future budgets could influence implementation priorities.

Contact Information

For a Copy of the Plan

San Luis Valley NWR Complex
Comprehensive Conservation Plan
Attn: Laurie Shannon, Planning
Team Leader
P.O. Box 25486
Denver, CO 80225-0486



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Bison conservation was a key topic of interest during the planning process.

Give us a call or send us an email

Tel 303 / 236 4317; 303 /236 4792
SLVrefugesplanning@fws.gov

*Download the document or get
on the mailing list: http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/refuges/refugesUpdate/alm_bac_mtv.php.*



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Kangaroo rats are found on the refuge complex.



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**San Luis Valley NWR Complex CCP
Division of Refuge Planning
P.O. Box 25486
Denver, CO 80225-0486**

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