

Planning Update

Draft Alternatives for Future Management *National Bison Range Complex*

Issue 1, April 2018

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Beginning the Plan

During the next 2 years, we, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will be developing comprehensive conservation plans (CCP) for all the units of the National Bison Range Complex (Complex). We will develop a CCP and environmental impact statement (EIS) for the National Bison Range and concurrently develop a CCP and environmental assessment for Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Pablo NWR, Ninepipe NWR, and the Lake County and Flathead County Wetland Management Districts (WMD).

A wetland management district (WMD) is composed of and provides oversight to waterfowl production areas purchased with Duck Stamp funds, as well as wetland and grassland conservation easements within an approved boundary. These lands are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), the largest network of lands in the world set aside to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats.

What is a CCP?

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (Improvement Act). This legislation provides clear guidance to manage all the units of the Refuge System.

The Improvement Act directs the Service to manage the Refuge System as a national system of lands and waters devoted to the conservation of

wildlife and maintenance of the biological integrity of ecosystems.

The Improvement Act also requires us to develop a CCP for each unit in the Refuge System. CCPs provide long-range guidance and management direction for all the programs of the units of the Refuge System. CCPs are “living” documents that are updated every 15 years.

As required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the CCPs and the accompanying NEPA documents we are developing for the Complex will describe a range of viable management alternatives being considered and their effects on the environment.

In summary, the CCPs will:

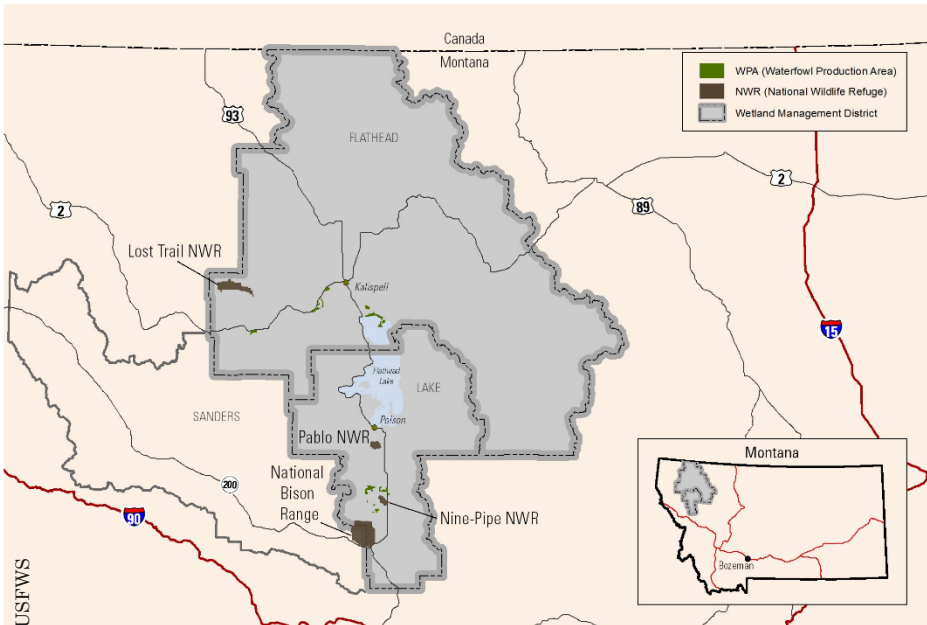
1. Outline a vision.
2. Guide management decisions.
3. Outline goals, objectives, and strategies to achieve the vision and the purposes of all units of the Complex.
4. Provide local and tribal governments, other agencies and the public with an understanding of the management actions to be carried out across the Complex.

Why Are You Receiving This Planning Update?

This planning update is being widely distributed to generate further interest in the planning process, inform the public the status of the plan, and collect input from the public, tribal, state and local governments, organizations, and other partners.

Draft Vision

“Relax and take a deep breath while you step back in time to reflect on what was, what is and what is yet to come. Immerse yourself in the inter-montane valleys of northwestern Montana shaped by glacial forces and steeped in rich cultural history. This is a special landscape important to people age after age, where we pay tribute to the persons and peoples who set aside the lands, conserved the wildlife and plants, and were stewards of various components that make up the complex. Visitors from all over the world travel to the NBRC which seeks to provide an opportunity to learn and experience varied habitats, abundant wildlife and the natural beauty of these lands. The units of the Complex safeguard these values and preserve connectivity across the landscape, forming continuity through time for future generations to treasure. Each unit is unique, and collectively they have, and will continue, to contribute to the Complex and the Refuge System. Partners foster cultural and natural resources conservation where the cultural history is expressed across the landscape. Unique opportunities to work with partners benefit many of the units within the Flathead Indian Reservation and other units located within traditional homelands of the Salish, Upper Pend d’Oreille, and Kootenai Tribes.”



We maintain a mailing list of individuals and groups interested in this planning process. Since this mailing list is subject to the Freedom of Information Act, those wishing to be included in the mailing list need to complete and provide us a signed Mailing List Request Form (downloadable from the CCPs Planning Website listed under “Public Involvement”) to the physical or email addresses or the fax number listed under “Public Involvement”.

A Vision and Management Options for the Future

In May 2017, in accordance with our planning policy, we reached out to tribal, state, and local governments, as well as other federal agencies with interest in the planning area, and invited them to join our efforts to develop the CCPs for the units of the Complex. Accordingly, we formed a Planning Team with members of the Complex staff and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 6 Regional Office, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Lake County, Sanders County, and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

In November 2017, the Planning Team developed the draft vision and a set of goals provided here, based primarily on the mission of the Refuge System and legislative purposes of each unit of the Complex, to guide the future management of all the units of the Complex.

Draft Goals

Cultural Resources

Preserve and value the cultural resources and history of the National Bison Range Complex to connect staff, visitors, and community to the area’s past and continuing traditions.

Partnerships and Collaboration

Maintain and cultivate partnerships that help achieve the vision and supporting goals and objectives of the National Bison Range Complex to support wildlife and habitat conservation, research, foster awareness and appreciation of natural and cultural resources of the inter-montane ecosystem of western Montana and provide education along with all necessary infrastructure. Recognizing its importance, we will collaborate with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and other Tribal governments in a manner consistent with the Service’s Native American policy and with other Federal, State, and local government entities in a manner consistent with applicable Service policies.

Public Use

Provide compatible, wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, for persons of all abilities, to learn, enjoy, and appreciate the inter-montane landscape of western Montana, the fish and wildlife and plants.

Wildlife Management

Protect, maintain, and restore healthy and diverse wildlife populations with respect to species that are endemic, migratory, and mandated species of

concern.

Invasive Species

Prevent, reduce, and contain the invasion and spread of noxious, invasive, and harmful nonnative species within the Complex while working with partners to address off-Complex infestations within the surrounding landscape.

Habitat Management

Conserve, restore, and promote biological integrity in functional and sustainable ecologically diverse habitats of the inter-montane ecosystem of western Montana.

Research and Science

Encourage high quality research and promote the use of scientifically sound management decisions.

Administration and Operations

Effectively use funding, staff, partnerships, volunteers, and equipment to restore and manage Complex habitats, conduct programs, and improve and maintain all necessary infrastructures to the benefit of the Complex and the Refuge System.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management

Through the life of this plan, we will monitor and evaluate the consequences of our actions and use adaptive management to reach desired outcomes.

Draft Alternatives for Future Management

In early March 2018, the Planning Team developed a draft range of management alternatives to guide the future management of all the units of the Complex. The following are short descriptions of each alternative:

Alternative A: No Action

Under this alternative we would continue all the current management activities, and maintain funding, infrastructure, all programs, and staffing at existing levels.

Alternative B: Maximize the Quality of Public Experiences

This alternative emphasizes managing habitat and wildlife populations to provide quality, wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities for the public. All programs of the Complex would foster public support and appreciation for the resources of our land and our waters. The Service would maximize these recreational opportunities by

providing improved access, facilities, interpretive materials, and environmental education. The Service would aim to maintain natural processes and healthy wildlife populations through partnerships to enhance the quality of the public's experience.

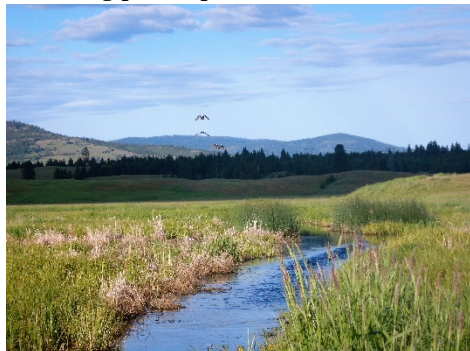
Alternative C: Manage for Ecological Sustainability

This alternative emphasizes maintaining and/or enhancing ecological communities, recognizing ever-changing environmental conditions. In cooperation with our partners, the Service would use a prioritization framework to identify and define future conditions that will drive management actions to:

- Build ecological community resiliency
- Promote species diversity
- Increase integrity of habitats
- Restore natural processes

Alternative D: Species-Focused Management

Under this alternative, carrying capacity for target species would generally drive management of wildlife and plant population numbers. Lands would be managed under a corridor concept for transient species populations (e.g. wolverine, lynx, grizzlies, wolves). Carrying capacity for bison would be determined in concert with carrying capacities for other species. Bison population management would also involve genetic diversity considerations. Targeted species populations (e.g. Spalding's catchfly, trumpeter swans, and bighorn sheep) would be managed with individualized considerations (e.g. disease, threatened and endangered species, and habitat). Management objectives would include managing for a diversity of species, including plant species.



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Alternative E: Collaborative/ Partner-Based Landscape Level Conservation

Units of the Complex are separated by significant distance across the landscape. All are part of the Northwestern Montana ecosystem. To provide connectivity with the larger landscape and preserve unique components of each small unit, this alternative seeks to facilitate collaborative, cooperative, and coordinated management of the Complex with our federal, tribal, state, local, public, and private partners. This alternative seeks to increase opportunities for public use and education. It seeks to provide better opportunities for fish, plant, and wildlife habitat on lands outside the boundaries of our units by creating corridors for habitats, conducive to wildlife migration and movement. It also seeks to incorporate the expertise, resources, and efforts of our partners to help facilitate the benefits of a broader functioning landscape. This approach promotes the shared responsibility of managing actions across the landscape.

Public Involvement

During the scoping period of the planning process, the Planning Team held four public meetings in Montana during the summer months of 2017 in Kalispell, Missoula, and Polson. In these meetings, we informed all participants about the planning process, answered questions, and welcomed comments from interested members of the public, various conservation organizations, and governmental agencies.

Additionally, we received many comments via postal service and email in response to the Notices of Intent published in the Federal Register in 2017. These comments are public record and have been made available on our project website at:

<https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/refuges/nbrc.php> under the "Documents" tab.

With the release of the draft vision, draft set of goals, and draft range of management alternatives, we are seeking the input of the public, our conservation partners, and tribal, state, and local governments. We ask that all comments be provided to us by May 25, 2018.



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You may provide your comments verbally during one of the upcoming public meetings (see below), or in writing via postal service or email at one of the addresses below.

For comments on the CCP and EIS for the National Bison Range:

Vanessa Fields, Planning team leader

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Division of Scientific Resources
922 Bootlegger Trail
Great Falls, Montana 59404
vanessa_fields@fws.gov
406 / 727-7400 x 219 telephone
406 / 727-7432

Via email please write to:
Scoping_nbr@fws.gov

For comments on the Lost Trail NWR, Ninepipe NWR, Pablo NWR, and the NW Montana WMDs:

Bernardo Garza, Planning team leader

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Branch of Planning and Policy
134 Union Boulevard, Suite 300
Lakewood, Colorado 80228
bernardo_garza@fws.gov
303 / 236-4377 telephone
303 / 236-4792 fax

Via email please write to:
Scoping_pablo_ninepipe@fws.gov

We will evaluate all comments received during the comment period and all substantial comments will be used to improve the draft vision, goals, and alternatives prior to the development of the draft CCPs and their NEPA documents.

During this public comment period, we invite you to provide us your comments and to attend any of the four public meetings that the Planning Team will hold to welcome your comments and answer your questions in person.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

The format and dates for the meetings is as follows:

We will host two open-house public meetings that will include brief presentations at 6:00 p.m. on the planning process and on draft documents for which we are seeking comments. We invite all attendees to arrive anytime between 5:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. to meet with members of the Planning Team and provide us with your input.

Date: May 9, 2018

Time: 5:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.

Location: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Office

Address: 490 N Meridian Rd, Kalispell, MT 59901

Venue Phone: (406) 752-5501

Date: May 10, 2018

Time: 5:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.

Location: Leon Hall

Address: 84 Leon Road, Charlo, MT 59824

Venue Phone: (406) 644-2145

In addition to these evening open-house meetings, we will also host all-day, open-house events at the headquarters of the National Bison Range and of the Lost Trail NWR. We invite the public to stop by these refuges at any time during normal business hours to meet with members of the Planning Team, learn more about the units of the Complex, about the planning process, and provide your input.

Date: May 11, 2018

Time: 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Location: National Bison Range Headquarters

Address: 58355 Bison Range Rd, Charlo, MT 59824

Venue Phone: (406) 644-2211

Date: May 8, 2018

Time: 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Location: Lost Trail Refuge Headquarters

Address: 6295 Pleasant Valley Rd, Marion, MT 59925

Venue Phone: (406) 858-2216

Contact Information

National Bison Range Refuge Complex

Address: 58355 Bison Range Road, Moiese, MT 59824

Tel: 406 / 644 2211

Refuge Web site:

https://www.fws.gov/refuge/national_bison_range/

CCP Web site:

<https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/refuges/nbrc.php>



April 2018

National Bison Range Refuge Complex

58355 Bison Range Road

Moiese, MT 59824

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED