

# Appendix F—Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement and Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the National Bison Range

## 1.1 Introduction

This Record of Decision (ROD) for the final Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP, plan) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the National Bison Range (NBR, refuge), Montana, provides the basis for management decisions made by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (we, Service). The CCP was prepared along with an EIS in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and relevant planning policies. We propose to adopt and implement the plan, which will provide guidance on managing the refuge for a 15-year period.

In preparing the final CCP and EIS, we worked closely with several cooperating agencies and partners including the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MTFWP), Lake and Sanders Counties. Other nongovernmental organizations and private citizens contributed substantial input to the plan.

## 1.2 Background

The primary planning area for this decision is the Congressionally-designated boundary of the refuge located in Sanders and Lake Counties, Montana. President Theodore Roosevelt established the NBR on May 23, 1908 when he signed legislation authorizing funds to purchase suitable land for the conservation of bison. NBR is one of the oldest units of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Its history is closely tied to the history and survival of the plains bison and to the Native American Tribes with ancestral ties to western Montana.

The 18,800-acre NBR is located where three major geographic features merge, Mission Valley, Mission Mountain Range, and Jocko River Valley. The glacial history of the region has had a pronounced influence on the soils and landforms. Grasslands dominate the landscape at lower elevations, dotted with wetland and riparian vegetation along seasonal drainages and around seeps and springs. Mixed-conifer forest occurs at the upper elevations. The Jocko River and Mission Creek form riparian and wetland corridors along the north and south boundaries of the refuge. Invasive plant species are recognized as an important factor affecting ecosystem function and health on the refuge.

The NBR provides cover, food, water, and sufficient space for numerous native wildlife species. The NBR supports a healthy population of plains bison as well as populations of other native ungulates and a variety of predators. The refuge also supports over 200 native bird species. In addition to the federally threatened grizzly bear and bull trout, there are forty-three Montana species of concern that occur on the refuge.

Although people have lived in the region for thousands of years, relatively few cultural resource sites have been formally recorded on the refuge. It is anticipated that a wide range of undocumented cultural resource types are located on the NBR. These could include, but would not be limited to, pre-contact and/or protohistoric open camps, stone circles and alignments, cairns, lithic scatters, rock shelters, trails and roads, drive-lines, kill (i.e. jump or pound) sites, hunting blinds, eagle traps,

fasting beds, and rock imagery, as well as historic buildings and structures associated with the mission and operation of the NBR.

Visitors come from all over the country and other parts of the world to learn about NBR and enjoy a variety of wildlife-dependent recreational activities. In 2017, NBR welcomed approximately 180,000 visitors. Annual visitation to the NBR is concentrated during spring through fall, when the full length of the Red Sleep Mountain Drive is open. Wildlife observation, photography, and hiking account for an estimated 94 percent of visits to the NBR. NBR affects the economy through the resident and nonresident visitor spending it generates, the employment it supports, and the value it adds to the surrounding area.

### **1.3 Purpose of and Need for the Plan**

The purpose of this CCP and EIS is to identify the role the refuge plays in support of the mission of the Refuge System and to provide long-term guidance for management of refuge programs and activities. The CCP seeks:

- to communicate with the public and other partners in efforts to carry out the mission of the Refuge System
- to provide a clear statement of direction for management of the refuge
- to provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of the Service's management actions on and around the refuge
- to ensure that the Service's management actions are consistent with the mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (Improvement Act)
- to ensure that management of the refuge considers other federal, state, and local government plans
- to provide a basis for prioritizing allocation of funding and staffing levels across NBR programs (e.g. visitor services, law enforcement, management, biology)
- to recognize and address, as appropriate, NBR's location within the Flathead Indian Reservation and address the refuge's importance to the tribes and the communities within the Mission Valley of Montana

### **1.4 National Wildlife Refuge System**

Like all national wildlife refuges, the NBR is administered under the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act).

“The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

### **1.5 Refuge Purposes**

In addition to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the goals, objectives, and strategies in the CCP are intended to support the individual purposes for which the refuge was established. Refuge specific goals and purposes include:

“a permanent National Bison Range for the herd of bison to be presented by the American Bison Society” (Public Law 60-136, May 23, 1908).

“as a refuge and breeding ground for birds”(Executive Order 3596 (Dec. 22, 1921) also reserved the NBR)

“To provide adequate pasture for the display of bison in their natural habitat at a location readily available to the public” (Public law 85-622, August 12, 1958)

## 1.6 Vision

We developed a vision for the entire National Bison Range Complex (Complex, refuge complex) at the beginning of the planning process. The vision describes the focus of refuge complex management and portrays a picture of the refuge complex in 15 years. As one of the units of the Complex, the vision statement below sets the context for the future for the NBR.

*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 Complex, 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 contributed, 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 Séliš, Q̓lipé, and Ksanka Tribes.*

## 1.7 Goals

We developed eight goals for the refuge based on the Improvement Act, the purposes of the refuge, and information developed during planning. The goals focus work towards achieving the vision and purposes of the refuge and outline approaches for managing refuge resources. Goal topics include:

### **Habitat Goal**

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

### **Wildlife Goal**

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

**Research and Science**

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

**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

**Cultural Resources**

Preserve and interpret 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.

**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.

**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 and provide education along with all necessary infrastructure of the inter-montane ecosystem of western Montana.

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.

**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 infrastructure to the benefit of the Complex and the Refuge System.

## 1.8 Significant Issues

In the EIS, we disclosed the effects of three management alternatives derived from significant issues that were identified during the scoping process. The significant issues addressed in the final CCP and EIS include:

- Habitat Management
- Bison Management
- Wildlife Management
- Tribal Cooperation/Cultural Resources
- Visitor Services/Public Use
- Socioeconomics/Refuge Operations/Staffing
- Partnerships/Communication
- Monitoring and Research

## 1.9 Decision (Alternative C)

We select Alternative C for implementation. Alternative C is selected because it is the alternative that best meets our vision and planning goals for this project. This alternative will enable us to maintain and, where feasible, enhance ecological communities while recognizing ever-changing environmental conditions. In cooperation with our partners, the Service will develop and utilize a prioritization framework to identify and define future conditions that will drive management actions to build ecological community resiliency, promote species and genetic diversity, and build sustainability in management capacity and operations.

We will seek to facilitate collaborative, cooperative, and coordinated management of NBR with our federal, Tribal, state, local, public, and private partners. Where possible, we will participate in landscape-level management of wildlife species, evaluate cross-boundary movements and create corridors conducive to wildlife migration and movement. We will also seek ways to incorporate the expertise, resources, and efforts of our partners to help facilitate the benefits of a broader functioning landscape.

### Habitat Management

#### Grasslands

Under this alternative, we will conduct a robust rangeland health assessment to discern the current ecological status of vegetation and soils on NBR's 14,000 acres of bunchgrass prairie to better inform management. This assessment will measure ecological carrying capacity based on an estimate of total wildlife herbivory (from grasshoppers to bison) on the NBR with consideration of the ecological needs of all priority species (e.g. bison, native birds, and other species of concern).

Another important component of this thorough rangeland evaluation will be to document and provide options for management on how and where to focus resources (i.e. prioritization). We will also work cooperatively with partners and experts to develop a methodology for monitoring grasslands annually that is achievable and supports continuing rangeland assessments every 15 years, possibly including a citizen science component.

Based on the results from the rangeland assessment, we will work to increase the total refuge acres in excellent range condition by 15 percent. We will also work to improve the quality of grasslands that are currently in fair to good condition (25-74 percent native plant composition), and prioritize areas that are also primary habitat for species such as bison and grassland birds. Grasslands in poor condition (lowest quality) on the refuge correlate strongly with existing infestations of invasive grasses that threaten the integrity of this ecosystem. Management in these areas will focus on halting the spread of annual noxious grass invasions and possibly construction of a novel ecosystem—one that is a substantial departure from the historic climax plant community, but is improved to the point where native and non-invasive species provide some diversity, integrity, and resilience.

Invasive species, grazing management, climate change, and drought are some of the key obstacles to achieving our grassland habitat objectives. Invasive species management efforts will combine preventing and reducing spread with herbicide applications, mechanical treatments, and cultural techniques. Prescribed fire will be used to restore and sustain the original fire regime to the maximum extent possible and wildfire may be allowed to burn in approved units except where infrastructure, cultural resources, or trust resources (e.g. bison) are threatened. Herbivory will be

monitored and population objectives for native ungulates will also be adjusted to support the maintenance of the highest quality grasslands on NBR. We will also increase our efforts to work with partners to improve grasslands on a landscape scale. Doing so will also capitalize on habitat management expertise to improve range conditions for a diversity of species while still recognizing the importance of bison to the NBR.

### Forests

By 2021, we will complete an inventory to assess forest health, identify old growth ponderosa pine stands, and inform management how to prioritize treatments on 3,700 acres that will improve site conditions. Once a feasible outcome has been defined in the assessment, and the stands have been prioritized, a variety of resource management tools (e.g. prescribed fire/patch burning, active thinning, slashing) will be used to renovate up to 1,000 acres. We will also seek to continue cooperation with our partners in management activities, especially prescribed fire. Refuge forests will also be evaluated with consideration of the larger landscape. For example, forest stands with rare or unique qualities, as compared to similar sites off the refuge, may be a higher priority for management or a focus of special treatments. To that end, we will design and implement a monitoring protocol to track forest health and management actions.

### Wetland and Riparian

Over the next 15 years, we will reduce juniper density by 50% on 50 acres along Mission creek and maintain or improve existing conditions on the remaining 450 riparian and wetland acres to promote habitat heterogeneity and species diversity. In addition, we will also investigate options for restoring natural flood events along Mission Creek and evaluate opportunities to work with CSKT on restoration efforts on the Jocko River and Mission Creek.

All refuge habitats will be managed using strategies including prescribed fire, mechanical treatments and grazing manipulation, as appropriate. We will focus invasive species management on small, satellite infestations and along vector pathways (riparian corridors, roads, parking lots) using early detection and rapid response (EDRR) and an integrated pest management approach (e.g. herbicide applications, prescribed fire, biocontrol agents and mechanical (i.e., pulling, cutting, etc.) treatments). Because riparian and wetland habitats are sensitive to invasion, challenging to treat, and frequently visited by all species of wildlife on the refuge, they will continue to be a high priority for treatment.

### **Wildlife Management**

The NBR bison herd will continue to be managed to maintain and improve genetic diversity and integrity within the ecological carrying capacity of the refuge. We will continue to use science-supported management strategies to contribute to the national bison conservation goals within the Refuge System metapopulation. Bison capture operations will continue to be conducted as needed to manage the NBR population using low-stress handling techniques. Surplus bison will be managed according to Service-wide policy, prioritizing donations to conservation partners, including other units of the Department of the Interiors, states, Tribes or intertribal organizations through a designated process. NBR's boundary fence, corral system, and water sources (i.e. springs, riparian, wetlands) will also continue to be maintained. We will also explore opportunities to cooperate with the CSKT on bison conservation and management. We recommend completing a feasibility study to investigate and document all options. Any specific proposals or ideas will be discussed in

collaboration with CSKT Tribal Council and staff. Possibilities could include: 1) identification of land bases available to the Tribes to start a new bison population with NBR-surplus bison that is managed by CSKT; 2) provide NBR-surplus animals to start a new population that will be considered a full partner in the Refuge System bison metapopulation management program; 3) provide NBR surplus animals to start a new CSKT Tribally-managed population that will be considered a full partner in the Refuge System bison metapopulation management program.

We will also evaluate the management of other native ungulate species relative to habitat quality, research, and species conservation needs. We will collaborate with adjacent landowners, state agencies, Tribes, and Non-Government Organizations (NGO's) to discuss how NBR can participate in landscape-level management of native ungulate species. We will review and update coyote control on NBR with public and partner involvement. We will increase communications and outreach efforts among partners about wildlife health concerns and major disease threats. We will seek to develop improved survey and monitoring methods.

### **Research and Science**

We will identify and support research that substantially informs the scientific community or the ecology and management of NBR species and habitats. We will also encourage the integration of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as part of partner-generated research or other scientific-information gathering efforts.

### **Monitoring and Adaptive Management**

We will continue to support existing monitoring projects, such as refuge bird populations, wildlife health, bison demographics and genetics, species of concern, and public use. In addition, this alternative highlights the importance of native bird species that are endemic to the native grasslands present on NBR. We will seek to further the Service's relationship with academic entities and other agencies in a way that informs NBR management and facilitates habitat improvement specific to the ecological needs of these species. We will develop an adaptive management project for grasslands that allows NBR management to assess wildlife and vegetative responses, including invasive plants, to various management activities, such as native ungulate forage allocations, water management, predator control, rest, prescribed fire, public use impacts, and invasive weed control, as well as climatic variations.

### **Cultural Resources**

Cultural resources interpretation and education about Tribal citizens and early people's use of the lands within NBR's boundary will be provided at the Visitor Center. We will work with CSKT and other Tribal partners in planning, producing and providing relevant materials, exhibits, signs, educational and interpretation materials. Access to specific NBR resources, or Tribal heritage sites used for cultural traditional values, will be allowed through a "special use permit" on a case-by-case basis. We will issue and implement NBR-specific guidance on how special-use permits would be managed to improve efficiency. We will also conduct outreach to local groups regarding NBR's history and the NBR's effects on conservation, species management, and the community since its inception.

## **Public Use**

### Fishing

Fishing will continue to be allowed on three and three quarters (3.75) miles of the Mission Creek and one and one-half miles (1.5) of the Jocko River. Decisions to close areas accessible to fishing will give greater consideration to the conflict or disturbance to priority species or habitat. We will also provide additional information to enhance the quality of the fishing experience that highlights the conservation importance of native species, especially bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout.

### Wildlife Observation and Photography

We will continue to provide opportunities for self-directed wildlife viewing and photography for at least 180,000 visitors per year. We will encourage awareness of and provide an opportunity to learn about conservation and mission of the refuge system and to highlight the unique history of bison conservation and cultural and historical significance of the NBR. We will prioritize public use opportunities when not in conflict with priority species or habitat. We may close trails or portions of trails with minimal use or substantial maintenance needs.

### Environmental Education and Interpretation

We will provide environmental education and interpretation through general information contacts at the Visitor Center. Education and interpretation resources and programs will emphasize appreciation and understanding of bison, native birds, and their habitats. Visitor Services staff will provide outreach to schools with a focus on providing education pertaining to priority species and habitat. All environmental education and interpretation programs will emphasize that wildlife and habitat are the priority for the management of the NBR. We will educate the public on the importance and necessity of regulations aimed at protecting and conserving priority species and habitats. We will communicate to the public how the Service incorporates TEK into its management practices and incorporate native languages into educational materials, signage, and outreach materials to the maximum extent possible. The Visitor Center will be open 7 days a week, May – October, subject to funding and availability of interns, seasonal employees and/or volunteers.

### Other Uses

The NBR will support various forms of nature-based outdoor recreation that, while not strictly wildlife-dependent, may support or facilitate wildlife-dependent recreation. These activities include social gatherings in the day use area, allowing special user groups to collect antlers, and conducting an annual Saddle Club Trail ride. These proposed activities will be managed in a way that the use will not conflict with or cause disturbance to priority species or habitats.

## **Partnerships**

We will seek to maintain strong and effective working relationships with existing partners and develop new partnerships to achieve our priority habitat and wildlife goals. Examples of these partnerships include:

- Reinvigorate the Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management (PRISM) and solicit new partners (e.g. private landowners) for a comprehensive approach to invasive species management on the Flathead Indian Reservation (FIR).
- Consider expanding opportunities for donations of bones, skulls, hides etc. to the CSKT, the Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council, or other Tribes for cultural or educational purposes.

- Work with neighboring private landowners and other partners (CSKT) to develop priority conservation areas within the FIR that model and ultimately promote wildlife-friendly livestock management.
- Expand partnerships with the CSKT, MTFWP, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Pheasants Forever, other governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations to include working on wildlife management issues, specifically on priority species and their habitats and use of prescribed fire on NBR.

### **Administration and Operations**

In addition to maintaining current staff, we will prioritize hiring a visitor services specialist. Also, we will seek to strengthen biological support for refuge management by hiring a biological technician and by seeking at least 20 volunteers for various biological programs in which they have interest and skills. Staff capacity and training in understanding and interpreting local indigenous culture, history and TEK will be expanded.

We will prioritize improvements and maintenance on roads, trails, facilities, and infrastructure that are critical to manage NBR for priority species and sustainability of natural habitats. We will review the current housing on NBR to define what housing is necessary to accommodate full-time and seasonal employees, visiting Service employees, interns, contractors, and volunteers. We will remove internal fences that are no longer utilized and are considered obstacles to wildlife movement. Maintenance of the day use area is not a priority under this alternative, but its importance to environmental education and the overall visitor experience is recognized. Volunteers will be utilized to clean the bathrooms, mow and water the grass, and maintain a generally healthy and clean environment in the day use area.

## **1.10 Rationale for Selecting Alternative C**

This alternative balances the significant management issues at NBR with the purposes, missions, and management policies of the Service, as well as with the interests and perspectives of many agencies, organizations, tribes, and the public.

Overall, we received support for many of the elements in alternative C from our cooperating agencies, local agencies, conservation organizations, and the public. During the public review period for the draft CCP and EIS, we received numerous comments to expand conservation efforts of the wildlife resources on the NBR and improve the condition of the grassland habitats, and increase invasive plant control efforts. We acknowledge the importance of public use activities on the refuge and although Alternative C places more emphasis on wildlife and habitat management, quality public use is still an important component of this alternative.

In the final CCP and EIS, alternative C was revised from the proposed action in the draft CCP and EIS after consideration of many comments received from agencies, tribes, other stakeholder organizations, and the public during the comment period.

Section 1.19, *Environmentally Preferable Alternative*, expands upon the basis for selecting Alternative C.

## 1.11 Other Alternatives Considered

The final CCP and EIS evaluated a no-action alternative (A) and one other action alternative (B), which are briefly summarized below. We developed all the alternatives to meet the planning goals we set for the project as well as to fulfill the purposes for which the NBR was established. Some of the alternatives met specific elements of our planning goals better than others, and we considered this in our decision.

## 1.12 Summary of Alternative A (No Action)

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

### Habitat Management

Under this alternative, we would have continued the practice of conducting a range condition survey approximately every 10-15 years, with the most recent being completed in 2005 and 2010. The range condition survey would assess conditions and update forage allocations for large ungulate use of 14,000 acres of grasslands on the NBR. We would continue to maintain grasslands already in excellent condition, strive to moderately increase native composition of grasslands in good to fair condition and seek to contain invasive species in the poorest quality grasslands.

We are currently planning to complete an inventory of forest health and identify old growth ponderosa pine stands on NBR in partnership with CSKT as part of the Reserve Treaty Rights Lands Initiative. After the inventory is completed, we plan to prioritize and treat 1,000 acres of forest to reduce Douglas fir densities to try to avert the risk of a stand-replacing wildfire. Encroaching trees in grasslands would also be selectively removed.

We would have continued to maintain 500 acres of existing riparian and wetland habitats. NBR's riparian vegetation is largely in good condition.

All refuge habitats would have been managed using strategies including prescribed fire, mechanical treatments and grazing manipulation, as appropriate. We would have focused invasive species management on small, satellite infestations and along vector pathways (riparian corridors, roads, parking lots) using early detection and rapid response (EDRR) and an integrated pest management approach (e.g. herbicide applications, prescribed fire, biocontrol agents and mechanical (pulling, cutting, etc.) treatments). Because riparian and wetland habitats are sensitive to invasion, challenging to treat, and frequently visited by all species of wildlife on the refuge, they would have continued to be a high priority for treatment.

### Wildlife Management

The NBR bison herd would have continued to be managed to maintain and improve genetic diversity and integrity within the ecological carrying capacity of the refuge. We would have continued to use science-supported management strategies to contribute to the national bison conservation goals within the Refuge System metapopulation. Bison capture operations would have continued to be conducted as needed to manage the NBR population using low-stress handling techniques. Surplus bison would have been managed according to Service-wide policy, prioritizing donations to

conservation partners, including other Department of Interior (DOI) units, states, Tribes or intertribal organizations through a designated process. NBR's boundary fence, corral system, and water sources (i.e. springs, riparian, wetlands) would also have continued to be maintained.

Populations of representative native ungulates, that are ecologically compatible with bison, would have been maintained on NBR (currently approximately 130 elk, 200 mule deer, 175 white-tailed deer, 125 pronghorn, and 75 bighorn sheep), through active management and partner participation. We would have regularly conducted disease surveillance on bison and other ungulates.

### **Research and Science**

We would have maintained current levels of support for self-sustaining long-term research. We would have collected traditional ecological knowledge as part of any research or other scientific-information-gathering efforts.

### **Monitoring and Adaptive Management**

We would have continued to support existing monitoring projects, such as refuge bird populations, wildlife health, bison demographics and genetics, species of concern, and public use.

### **Cultural Resources**

Cultural resources interpretation and education about Tribal citizens and early people's use of the lands within NBR's boundary would have continued at its current level at the Visitor Center. Access to specific NBR resources, or Tribal heritage sites used for cultural traditional values, would have been allowed through a "special use permit" on a case-by-case basis.

### **Public Use**

Fishing would have continued to be allowed on three and three quarters (3.75) miles of the Mission Creek and one and one-half miles (1.5) of the Jocko River.

We would have continued to provide opportunities for self-directed wildlife viewing and photography for at least 180,000 visitors per year. Similarly, we would have continued to provide education and interpretation opportunities at the Visitor Center to a minimum of 30 percent of annual visitors. NBR programs encourage awareness of, and provide an opportunity to learn about, conservation and the mission of the Refuge System. Visitors are also provided the opportunity to learn about the unique history of bison conservation and the cultural and historical significance of the refuge.

We would have continued to provide opportunities for appropriate and compatible non-wildlife dependent recreation. We would have communicated to the public how the Service incorporates traditional ecological knowledge into NBR management practices and incorporates native languages into educational materials, signage, and outreach materials to the maximum extent possible.

### **Partnerships**

We would have maintained strong and effective working relationships with existing partners to achieve our habitat, wildlife, and visitor services goals. We would also have continued to foster a constructive relationship with CSKT.

### **Administration and Operations**

Currently, there are 7.5 permanent refuge staff. We would have continued to seek funding for seasonal, temporary, and youth positions. We would have continued recruiting volunteers, as needed,

to support refuge activities related to administrative, public use, maintenance, and biological activities. We would have continued to build staff capacity for understanding and interpreting local indigenous culture, history, and traditional ecological knowledge. Facilities and real property would have been maintained in operational condition that meets Service standards and NBR goals. Road maintenance, including annual dust abatement and grading, would have continued. The current Visitor Center is expected to be replaced starting in 2020, if funding becomes available.

### **1.13 Rationale for Not Selecting Alternative A**

Alternative A was not selected for implementation because although it would meet some aspects of the planning goals, it would do so to a lesser degree than the other alternatives.

Under Alternative A, habitat management would primarily serve to maintain current conditions with only minor benefits to grasslands and forests. There would be limited efforts to achieve the goal of promoting biological integrity and sustainable, ecologically diverse habitats. Alternative A would meet the goals of wildlife management by continuing a robust program to conserve the bison but fewer benefits would be expected for other ungulates and wildlife. Research, monitoring and partnerships would continue under Alternative A, but would be limited to primarily established projects or those requiring few refuge resources, and thus would not achieve the goals for research, monitoring and partnerships to the same degree as the preferred alternative.

Although Alternative A would partially meet the goals for Cultural Resources, this alternative would be the least beneficial of the three considered. Public uses would also continue under Alternative A, but would be primarily self-directed with few improvements or innovations. Refuge activities would mostly be focused on maintenance of existing public use facilities such as the auto tour loop, trails, signs and interpretive panels. Similarly, under Alternative A, refuge operations would focus on existing facilities and staffing and funding levels are the lowest of the three alternatives. Under Alternative A we would develop new strategies for including TEK and native language into signs and communications. However, overall, Alternative A is expected to only have minor benefits for cultural resources, socioeconomics and visitor services.

Alternative A did receive some support from the planning team and in the public comments. Some commenters felt that Alternative A has proven to be achievable, and the additional strategies and benefits of the other alternatives may not be realized if the necessary resources are not dedicated to achieving the goals. We also received comments in support of continuing the bison herd management, in particular the genetic diversity, as described under Alternative A.

### **1.14 Alternative B**

This alternative emphasizes managing habitat and wildlife populations, as well as NBR infrastructure and operations, to provide quality, wildlife-dependent opportunities for the public. All NBR programs would have sought to foster public support and appreciation for the resources of Refuge System lands and waters. We would have striven to maximize the quality of recreational opportunities by providing improved access, facilities, interpretive materials, and environmental education programs. We would also have aimed to enhance the quality of the public's experience by maintaining healthy wildlife populations and habitats that support activities such as wildlife

observation, photography, interpretation, education, and fishing. Working with partners, through existing and new partnerships, would also have been a key component of this alternative.

### **Habitat Management**

We would have conducted a range condition survey, similar to that in Alternative A, to assess forage availability for large, grazing native ungulates. In combination with a range survey, this alternative would also have surveyed the public to identify areas important for a high-quality visitor experience. Identified areas would then have been prioritized for grassland management, including preventing the spread of invasive plant species using integrated pest management. Under this alternative, we would also have developed interpretive and educational materials to inform our visitors about invasive plant species issues and the treatment efforts implemented by NBR. Visitors would have been encouraged to aid refuge staff in prevention and early detection efforts through vehicle wash stations, boot brushes at trailheads and new invader handouts.

Under this alternative, the forest assessment would have included all of the information described under Alternative A, as well as determining which forest areas are most accessible to visitors and which forest wildlife species might be of greatest viewing interest to the public. Based on the assessment, we would have sought to renovate 1,000 acres of forest, rather than simply treat forest stands, as described under Alternative A. We use the term *renovation* rather than *restoration* because restoration often suggests a complete return to historic conditions, which is unlikely to be feasible. Renovation is used in this context to indicate improvements in forest stand health and resiliency, but not necessarily complete return to an entirely “natural,” self-sustaining, or historical condition. Once a feasible renovation outcome had been defined, and the stands had been prioritized with consideration of public access and interest, we would have used a variety of resource management tools to achieve desired future conditions. These management tools would have included those described in Alternative A, as well as would have sought to restore and sustain to the maximum extent possible, the original fire regime.

Over the life of the plan, we would have worked to reduce juniper density by 50 percent on 50 acres along Mission Creek to enhance opportunities for wildlife viewing and photography, and maintain or improve existing conditions on the remaining 450 acres of riparian and wetland habitat. There is concern that the Rocky Mountain juniper is expanding and negatively impacting overall plant and wildlife diversity. We would have reduced juniper density through mechanical removal or use of prescribed fire in partnership with CSKT as part of Reserved Treaty Rights Lands Initiative or other future partnerships.

### **Wildlife Management**

We would have managed wildlife as described in Alternative A, plus we would have managed bison and other native ungulates to increase the public’s opportunities to observe and photograph them, as well as enjoy interpretation and environmental education opportunities. Under this alternative, we would have investigated options for updating the corral system (e.g. cameras and/or audio systems, catwalks in areas post handling) to better accommodate public interest in bison management, while maintaining low-stress handling protocols. Engaging the public in research and monitoring efforts involving native ungulates on the refuge would have been another way to enhance the quality of their experience.

### **Research and Science**

Same as A, plus we would have sought new research projects that are pertinent to NBR resources and could have been accomplished through public involvement. We would have collected traditional

ecological knowledge as part of any research or other scientific information gathering efforts. We would have encouraged development of school research projects that support management of NBR and would also have worked with partners to conduct a research project to better understand visitor use and impacts.

### **Monitoring and Adaptive Management**

Same as A, plus we would have striven to share monitoring results with the public more widely and emphasize monitoring projects using citizen science and volunteer engagement. In the first 5 years after the plan was finalized, we would have developed a project to monitor visitor impacts on wildlife habitat and populations.

### **Cultural Resources**

Same as A, plus we would have enhanced interpretation programs for cultural resources. In collaboration with CSKT (and other partners), we would also have developed topic-specific cultural resources interpretation and education programs. We would have issued and implemented NBR-specific guidance on how special-use permits would be managed to improve efficiency.

### **Public Use**

#### Fishing

In addition to Alternative A, the NBR would have focused efforts to enhance the quality of the fishing experience. We would have explored increased access along Mission Creek as well as increasing accessible opportunities and improve communication pertaining to fishing to further enhance the visitor experience.

#### Wildlife Observation and Photography

Under this alternative, we would have consistently striven to increase visitor satisfaction of opportunities for wildlife viewing and photography by improving services to accommodate at least 180,000 visitors per year. We would have completed a Visitor Service Plan and developed a visitor satisfaction survey to obtain feedback on how well we are achieving the objective of increasing visitor satisfaction.

We would have enhanced communication programs and products, including regularly updating NBR's website and kiosk, with recent wildlife observations and photography opportunities. We would have facilitated workshops and guided wildlife observation and photography tours through the use of staff and partner organizations, possibly in areas currently closed to the public.

We would have explored opportunities to improve the 19 miles of wildlife drive auto tour routes, including the possibility of paving sections or the entire tour route, or expanding the season of public access on Red Sleep Mountain Drive. We would have investigated the opportunity to increase trail miles and increase trail accessibility. We would also have worked with partners to develop year-round wildlife viewing areas (turn-offs) along US 93, Highway 200, or Highway 212. We would have sought additional funding to improve and enhance the wildlife observation and photography program, including analyzing opportunities to increase entrance fees.

### Environmental Education and Interpretation

We would have worked with partners and volunteers to increase environmental education, interpretation, and outreach programming. This may have included activities for specific grades or groups, teacher trainings, and tours in normally closed areas. New communication products would have been developed on specialized topics, such as bison conservation, ungulates, native birds and their habitats, and integrating traditional ecological knowledge into refuge management.

Within 2 years of finalizing the plan, we would have conducted a complete sign inventory and developed a work plan for a comprehensive replacement (as needed) and maintenance of refuge wayfinding, regulatory, and interpretive signage. We would have incorporated native languages into educational materials, signage, and outreach materials to the maximum extent possible. Visitor Center operations would have been expanded to 5 days a week, 8am-4:30pm, from November – April and 7 days a week, 9am-7pm, May – October with staff and volunteers present to interact with visitors. Sources for alternative funding, such as grants or increased visitor-use fees, to improve and enhance the environmental education, interpretation, and outreach program would have been explored.

### Other Uses

Same as A, plus the NBR would have supported various forms of nature-based outdoor recreation that, while not strictly wildlife-dependent, may support or facilitate wildlife-dependent recreation. These activities may have included social gatherings in the day use area, allowing special user groups to collect antlers and conducting an annual Saddle Club Trail ride.

### **Partnerships**

Same as A, plus we would have sought to develop new partnerships focused on creating higher quality public use opportunities including developing a refuge “Friends” group. We would have developed partnerships with colleges and universities to recruit students to work with and develop environmental education programs for grades K-12, both on and off refuge. We would have worked with the CSKT and Salish and Kootenai College regarding methods of collecting traditional ecological knowledge and opportunities to collaborate. We would also have developed partnerships with applicable groups to enhance wildlife recreational opportunities, such as birding groups and photography groups to develop and fund observation blinds and events. We would have sought to reestablish the book store through a partnership with the refuge Friends group or another cooperating association.

### **Administration and Operations**

Same as A, plus we would have hired a visitor services specialist. We would have sought to provide for at least 25 volunteers for various public use programs in which they have interests and skills. Staff capacity and training in understanding and interpreting local indigenous culture, history and traditional ecological knowledge would have been expanded. We would make improvements to visitor facilities and infrastructure including upgrading trails, improving accessibility and providing additional public restrooms.

## **1.15 Rationale for Not Selecting Alternative B**

Alternative B was not selected for implementation. Although it would meet the stated goal for public use and have the most benefit for socioeconomics and visitor services of the three alternatives,

Alternative B would not meet the other planning goals as well as Alternative C. Even though this alternative emphasizes the importance of healthy habitats and wildlife as essential to quality public uses, this alternative would require the most investment in providing for visitor services, and fewer resources could be used for wildlife and habitat management.

Alternative B would be more beneficial for forest, wetland and riparian habitats than Alternative A due to additional strategies to improve conditions and interpretive opportunities for engaging the public. Alternative B would also maintain the bison conservation program under current management, but would not result in additional benefits to bison, other ungulates or other wildlife. Even though the Service would employ best management practices, there may also be a slight increase in adverse impacts to streams and wetlands due to siltation associated with potentially greater use and maintenance of public roads and trails as well as new construction under Alternative B. Alternative B would meet the goals of research, monitoring and partnerships by continuing existing programs and developing new efforts, especially to engage the public with citizen science and to incorporate TEK into refuge management, interpretation and communication. Alternative B would also be more beneficial for achieving the cultural resources goals by building on efforts under Alternative A.

Some members of the planning team expressed support for Alternative B and several public comments expressed support for elements of this alternative. We recognize the importance of the refuge to the visiting public and some of the key strategies from Alternative B were included in the preferred alternative (C).

## **1.16 Tribal Involvement and Consultation**

In accordance with the Service's planning policy (602 FW 3), we notified Native American Tribes and other federal and state agencies with a land management interest on the planning effort and invited them to participate as cooperating agencies and members of the Planning Team.

The Service sent letters of notification about the planning process, including an invitation to join the Planning Team, to the following Tribes: CSKT, Blackfeet Nation, Coeur d'Alene Tribe, Apache Tribe, Fort Belknap Indian Community of the Fort Belknap Reservation, Kalispel Indian Community of the Kalispel Reservation. The CSKT decided to join us as a cooperating agency.

## **1.17 Public Involvement and Outreach**

A notice of intent (NOI) to develop a CCP and a request for comments was published in the Federal Register on May 18, 2017 [82 FR 22843]. This NOI was a revision to an earlier NOI published in January 18, 2017 [82 FR 5597]. The NOI notified the public of our intent to begin the CCP and EIS process.

### **Comments on the Draft CCP and EIS**

The draft CCP and EIS was released to the public for a 45-day public review and comment period on April 5, 2019, following the publication of a Notice of Availability in the Federal Register [84 FR 13662]. The public comment period ended on May 20, 2019. We received 275 comments from 55 individual submittals on the draft CCP and EIS. In addition, we received 10 letters from the CSKT,

other governmental agencies, and other conservation organizations. Our responses to all substantive comments received are contained in Appendix H of the final CCP and EIS.

## **1.18 Comments on the Final Plan and EIS**

A Notice of Availability for the final CCP and EIS was published in the Federal Register on September 6, 2019 [84 FR 46950], and the 30-day waiting period [40 CFR 1506.10(b)] ended on October 7, 2019.

### **Summary of Comments**

We received comments on the final CCP and EIS from eleven organizations or individuals. Most of the comments we received were of similar nature to those that we responded to in the draft CCP and EIS. The EPA reviewed the final CCP and EIS and concurred that Alternative C is the environmentally preferable alternative based on the ecological benefits.

We received comments providing additional information regarding the history of the establishment of the National Bison Range. Although the purpose of the history section in the CCP is not meant to be a full historical account, the Service is appreciative of this information and how it will support current and future management decisions and visitor service programs.

We also received additional information regarding grassland management on the NBR; the Service will consider this information in the future development of the NBR Habitat Management step down plan.

We received a request for more information about the cost of the visitor center. At this time, not enough detail is available to provide an estimate. As noted in the final CCP and EIS, it is anticipated that construction of a new Visitor Center would be the subject of follow-on detailed planning when any decision to construct moves forward.

We also received a comment asking that we include a specific mention of the presence of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in Montana. The management of CWD is led by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks ([fwp.mt.gov/CWD](http://fwp.mt.gov/CWD)), however, DOI agencies, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may provide support. In the preferred alternative, we addressed the need to increase communication about wildlife health concerns and major disease threats among partners. In addition, we identified the need for a Disease Contingency step-down plan where ungulate health monitoring, for diseases such as CWD, will be further addressed.

There were additional comments about the level of pre-planning effort for the CCP and EIS, however, we have prepared the EIS and CCP in compliance with Service planning policy (602 FW3). We also received comments about the DOI reorganization (<https://www.doi.gov/employees/reorg>) that are outside of the scope of this planning effort.

## **1.19 Environmentally Preferable Alternative**

The environmentally preferable alternative is defined as the “alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA’s Section 101. Typically, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment. It also means the

alternative that best protects, preserves and enhances historic, cultural and natural resources” [46 FR 18026].

Based on our environmental consequences analysis in the final CCP and EIS, we believe Alternative C is the environmentally preferable alternative. Alternative C emphasizes maintaining and, where feasible, enhancing ecological communities, building ecological community resiliency, promoting species and genetic diversity, and build sustainability in management capacity and operations. Under this alternative, the Service would seek to facilitate collaborative, cooperative, and coordinated management of NBR with our Federal, Tribal, State, local, public, and private partners. Where possible, we would also seek ways to incorporate the expertise, resources, and efforts of our partners to help facilitate the benefits of a broader functioning landscape.

The Alternative C objectives and strategies would be more beneficial for priority habitats like grasslands and forests by focusing on ecosystem and landscape-scale management. More so than Alternatives A or B, Alternative C would involve greater consultation and coordination with Service staff, Tribes, and partners to conduct specific species assessments, improve refuge habitats on a landscape scale, and use TEK to inform wildlife and habitat management. Indirectly, these kinds of partnerships could have long-term, beneficial effects over the life of the CCP on all refuge biological communities by introducing new strategies and management practices.

Under Alternative C, strategies for maintaining and improving bison genetic diversity as well as overall bison management would be similar to those described under Alternative A. Alternative C would somewhat more beneficial for bison by including species-centric strategies to manage bison operations for the well-being of the bison and collaborating with CSKT.

Management of habitat communities, as described under Alternative C, would have the greatest beneficial effect on overall habitat management and wildlife species at NBR. Prioritization of management strategies would favor wildlife under Alternative C, and so it would be expected to have more overall benefits to wildlife than Alternatives A and B. Migratory birds and Montana species of concern present at the NBR would benefit under specific wetland, grassland, and other habitat management objectives as described under both Alternatives A and B, but benefits would be higher under Alternative C.

Alternative C includes elements that would expand public use over the current management (Alternative A), but not to the extent as described under Alternative B. Even though the Service would employ best management practices, under Alternative B there may also be a slight increase in adverse impacts to soils, air quality, streams and wetlands due to siltation associated with potentially greater use and maintenance of public roads and trails as well as new construction. Alternative C would also include, as needed, closures to protect wildlife and habitat which would further reduce impacts to the physical environment from public uses.

Overall, both Alternatives B and C, would result in negligible-to-major benefits to cultural resources. The Service would continue to follow all cultural resources regulations and policies for any federal undertaking on NBR to minimize potential adverse effects. Under Alternatives B and C, the Service would increase protection efforts largely through more explicit coordination with our conservation partners. Tribes would continue to collect and use plants, bison, and other resources for ceremonial purposes under special use permits. The emphasis on public use in Alternative B would most likely provide more awareness and protection of cultural resources and traditional cultural resources, a minor, beneficial effect. Under Alternative C, having a stronger metapopulation of bison under

Alternative C could bolster and support CSKT's cultural heritage and increased protection to certain species may coincide with CSKT efforts to preserve and protect TEK and other traditional cultural resources.

In consideration of our mission and policies, the mission of the Refuge System, and the purposes of the refuge, we believe that Alternative C is environmentally preferable. This alternative causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment and best protects, preserves and enhances the natural, historic, and cultural resources of the NBR, while still providing for important public use opportunities.

## **1.20 Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm**

The EPA reviewed the final CCP and EIS and concurred that Alternative C is the environmentally preferable alternative based on the ecological benefits. Throughout the planning process, we took into account all practicable measures to avoid or minimize environmental impacts that could result from the implementation of Alternative C. These measures include the following:

- NBR would continue to reduce its carbon footprint by using renewable energy where feasible (for example, wind and solar energy) and green technologies in the development of any new facilities.
- Prescribed fire would be carried out under an approved fire management plan. We would follow best management practices during prescribed burns and appropriately use prescribed fire timing and intensity to minimize negative impacts to soil, air, vegetation and wildlife. When appropriate, we would follow-up prescribed fire with treatment for invasive weeds.
- NBR staff would continue to strictly follow Service guidance of pesticide application on refuges, including the Fish and Wildlife Service Integrated Pest Management guidance (569 FW 1), Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point planning (750 FW 1), Departmental Integrated Pest Management (IPM) (DM 517 1), and pesticide use safety (242 FW 1). We will also refer to manufacturer's recommendations and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency labeling instructions, spraying guidelines, and timing recommendations; finally, we would only use herbicide formulations that are appropriate for the target weed species, with appropriate consideration for the ecological site condition, application method, weather conditions, and timing, as specified according to the product label for each herbicide.
- We would seek to prevent new invasive plant occurrences and reducing spread by prohibiting off-road driving for management activities, and promoting the concept of "clean, dry, and inspect" techniques for equipment to remove seeds and pollen (i.e. first cleaning, then drying, then visually inspecting to make certain that visible plant material has been removed).
- Tree removal would be focused in the winter when soil is frozen or in a dry period when soil moisture is low would minimize impacts from soil compaction, rutting, and puddling.
- Dust control would be limited to a single, annual application on roads, which are already compacted and covered with a layer of gravel and small stone. To minimize magnesium chloride runoff, application would be avoided before or after rain events, during considerable snow melt periods and where it would directly impact wetlands or riparian areas.
- Water quality would be protected by limiting the amount of bare soil, using soil erosion barriers, limiting the use of herbicides, and following other best management practices, during any future management activities near wetlands and riparian areas.

- The Service would work proactively with the CSKT and other Tribes, particularly in the collection and application of TEK for the benefit of resources of mutual interest. Furthermore, the Service would continue existing partnerships to collect and share scientific and research information for the benefit of resources of mutual interest.
- Bison capture operations would occur only as often as needed to align with population objectives and would be conducted with low-stress methods to gather the majority of the herd.
- During forest management activities, we would retaining the ponderosa pine overstory, leave snags or girdle trees for cavity-nesting birds and bats and other Montana species of concern that use the forested areas on NBR.
- NBR staff will provide field protocols and guidelines to ensure that the researchers are minimizing their interaction with wildlife and limiting the adverse impact to habitat when taking plant and ground samples.
- Closures to certain areas on the refuge may occur when significant risks to public safety exist, or the potential for disturbance to priority species or habitat.
- If potentially significant cultural resources are within a project area, refuge staff and the cultural resource staff would work with consulting parties to assure that any concerns or recommendations are considered.
- A monitoring program will support detecting environmental harm caused by the implementation of the plan's activities. For example in native grasslands, we will monitor wildlife and vegetative responses to invasive weed control and native ungulate forage allocations. The monitoring information will guide our adaptive management to correct any non-desirable outcomes.

## 1.21 Consultation Requirements: Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act

As of June 2019, we identified three listed species that may occur on NBR: Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*; threatened), Grizzly Bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*; threatened), and Spalding's catchfly (*Silene spaldingii*; threatened plant):

Bull trout may occur in the portions of Mission Creek and the Jocko River that flow through the NBR. The entire area is located within the Columbia Headwaters Recovery Unit in the Lake Pend O'Reille (A) core area. The stretch of the Jocko River that flows through the refuge has been designated critical habitat [75 FR 63898].

Grizzly bears are known to occur regularly and seasonally throughout the Mission Valley. The NBR lies within the demographic connectivity area for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) grizzly bear population. The CSKT Wildlife Management Program is the local manager of grizzly bears within the exterior boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation and they work cooperatively with all property owners to effectively manage grizzly bears. Grizzlies have been reported by NBR visitors over the years and have been documented photographically in recent years. No evidence of denning activity is known on the NBR. All grizzly sightings are reported directly to CSKT bear management biologists, who lead trapping, tracking, and movement efforts within the Flathead Reservation.

Spalding's catchfly has not been documented on NBR but suitable habitat is thought to exist, and surveys have been conducted periodically in the past.

The USFWS's IPaC Online Consultation tool also identified Threatened Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), the Threatened Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), and the Proposed Threatened North American Wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*) as occurring on the larger landscape around the NBR. However there are no records of Yellow-billed Cuckoo on the NBR and in any case suitable habitats would be maintained by the proposed action; there are no suitable habitats for lynx or wolverine, although both these far-ranging animals have been known to cross through unsuitable habitats.

Through the intra-Service consultation process, we concluded that our preferred Alternative C may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, any listed species (final concurrence 6/27/2019).

## **1.22 Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act**

Activities outlined in Alternative C have the potential to negatively affect cultural resources, either by direct disturbance during construction of habitat projects and facilities related to public use or administration and operations, or indirectly by exposing cultural and historic artifacts during management actions such as habitat restoration or prescribed burning. Prior to any undertaking that would be subject to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, activities that could negatively affect cultural resources will be identified, and options for minimizing negative effects will be discussed prior to implementation of the preferred alternative, including entering into consultation with the CSKT Tribal Historic Preservation Office, State Historic Preservation Office and other parties as appropriate.

## **1.23 Protection of Wetlands and Riparian Areas**

Activities outlined in Alternative C are aimed at improving the ecological resilience and sustainability of grassland and forest habitats, and sustaining wetland and riparian habitats on the refuge. We will continue to manage wetlands to promote native species and provide opportunistic benefits to wetland-dependent wildlife. We will reduce juniper density by 50% on 50 acres along Mission creek and maintain or improve existing conditions on the remaining 450 riparian and wetland acres to promote habitat heterogeneity and species diversity. We will also investigate options for restoring natural flood events to existing riparian and wetland habitats along Mission Creek and evaluate opportunities to work with CSKT to expand or collaborate on riparian restoration.

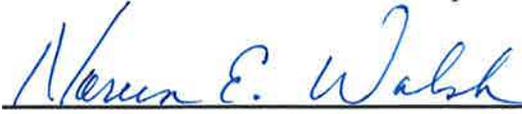
These strategies are expected to help preserve the long-term function and productivity of wetland and riparian habitats and to communities that are ecologically resilient to climatic and hydrologic changes. We will incorporate applicable regulatory compliance as appropriate into any infrastructure maintenance efforts.

## **1.24 Finding and Basis for Decision**

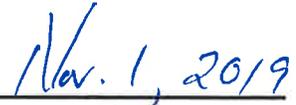
We have considered the environmental and relevant concerns presented by tribes, agencies, organizations, and individuals on the proposed action to develop and implement a comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge.

Alternative C was selected for implementation because it achieves a reasonable balance between the significant resource management issues, the purposes of the refuge, the mission of the Refuge System, and the interests and perspectives of all stakeholders.

All public, tribal, and agency comments received during the environmental process were reviewed. The issues and comments raised were addressed in the final CCP and EIS. Comments and responses on the final CCP and EIS are addressed in this record of decision. Based on the above information, we have selected Alternative C for implementation.



Regional Director, Interior Regions 5 and 7  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Lakewood, Colorado

  
Date