

Record of Decision

Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement

Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge

October 2015

Introduction

This record of decision (ROD) for the final environmental impact statement (EIS) for the comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado (refuge) provides the basis for management decisions we, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will make in ongoing and future management of the refuge. The EIS was prepared as part of the development of a CCP in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and relevant planning policies. We propose to finalize, adopt, and implement the CCP in the next few months to provide guidance on managing the refuge for a 15-year period.

The EIS (Federal Register [FR] 80 (155):48328–31) described our proposed action and three alternatives for management of the refuge. Of these, alternative C has been selected for implementation. This refuge is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), and is managed as part of a larger refuge complex that includes Two Ponds National Wildlife Refuge and Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado. As part of the Refuge System, these three national wildlife refuges are managed for wildlife conservation above all else. This ROD addresses management of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

In preparing the final EIS, we worked closely with several cooperating agencies and partners: Adams County, City and County of Denver, City of Commerce City, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), Denver International Airport (DIA), Denver Water, Tri-County Health Department, Urban Drainage and Flood Control District, U.S. Army, U.S. Department of Agriculture—Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and U.S. Department of Transportation—Federal Highway Administration. Other Federal,

State, and local governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and private citizens contributed substantial input to development of the CCP.

Background

The primary planning area for this decision is the congressionally designated boundary of the refuge, which is nestled between the City of Commerce City, the City of Denver, and DIA in Adams County, Colorado.

Wildlife habitats on the refuge include prairie grasslands, riparian areas, shrublands, planted woodlands, and lakes that provide important resources for many migratory birds, bison, deer, and a variety of other resident wildlife. The black-footed ferret, federally listed as endangered, will be reintroduced into the refuge as part of our selected CCP alternative.

Visitors take part in a variety of wildlife-dependent recreational activities on the refuge. Every year, the bison roundup, guided refuge tours, fishing, and photography attract thousands of visitors. The refuge is also open to wildlife observation, environmental education, and interpretation. As part of the CCP and EIS process, we have considered and will open the refuge to limited hunts of deer and doves.

The refuge area is rich in more than 12,000 years of prehistory and history. The refuge site has been utilized for hunting by Native Americans; for farming and ranching by European settlers; for making and assembling munitions by the U.S. Army; for developing rocket fuels, herbicides, and pesticides by chemical companies; and by resident and migratory wildlife once again. The refuge contains, safeguards, and provides interpretive opportunities for significant cultural and historical resources.

We could not accomplish our conservation mission without the many partner organizations with whom we collaborate locally and regionally. These include the Friends of the Front Range Wildlife Refuges; the City of Commerce City; the City and County of Denver; the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory; the Denver Botanical Garden; the Butterfly Pavilion; Federal, State, and local governmental agencies; Native American tribes; and interested citizens.

Purpose and Need for the CCP

We developed a CCP for the refuge for four reasons: (1) to comply with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act), which requires that every unit of the Refuge System be managed in accordance with an approved CCP; (2) to comply with the Improvement Act requirement that the CCP will be updated at least every 15 years; (3) to describe the role of the refuge in supporting the mission of the Refuge System; and (4) to provide long-term guidance for management of refuge programs and activities.

The CCP will help us achieve the following:

- communicate with the public and other partners in efforts to carry out the mission of the Refuge System;
- provide a clear statement of direction for management of the refuge;
- ensure that the refuge continues to conserve fish, wildlife, and ecosystems in the face of ongoing drought, water shortages, and climate change;
- provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of our management actions on and around the refuge;
- ensure that our management actions are consistent with the mandates of the Improvement Act;
- ensure that management of the refuge considers other Federal, State, and local government plans;
- provide a basis for development of budget requests for the operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs of the refuge;

- sustain the Nation's fish and wildlife resources through the combined efforts of governments, businesses, and private citizens.

National Wildlife Refuge System

Like all national wildlife refuges, the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge is administered under the National Wildlife Refuge System Act of 1966 as amended in 1997.

The mission of the 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.

Refuge Purposes

Each national wildlife refuge is managed to fulfill the mission of the Refuge System, as well as the specific purposes for which that refuge was established.

In 1992 Congress passed the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge Act that established the refuge to (1) conserve and enhance populations of fish, wildlife, and plants within the refuge, including populations of waterfowl, raptors, passerines, and marsh and water birds; (2) conserve species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act and species that are candidates for such listing; (3) provide maximum fish and wildlife oriented public uses at levels compatible with the conservation and enhancement of wildlife and wildlife habitat; (4) provide opportunities for compatible scientific research; (5) provide opportunities for compatible environmental and land use education; (6) conserve and enhance the land and water of the refuge in a manner that will conserve and enhance the natural diversity of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats; (7) protect and enhance the quality of aquatic habitat within the refuge; and, (8) fulfill international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats.

The first 4,930 acres of the refuge were transferred by the U.S. Army to the Service on April 21, 2004. Today the refuge encompasses nearly 16,000 acres and is home to more than 468 plant species and 350 wildlife species, including bison, deer, a wide variety of resident and migratory birds and raptors, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, and insects.

Vision

The refuge is part of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge Complex (refuge complex), which also manages the Two Ponds National Wildlife Refuge and the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge. At the beginning of the planning process we developed a vision for the refuge complex that describes the focus of management and portrays a picture of the refuge complex in 15 years. It reads:

As the sun rises, bison thunder across the prairie, red-tailed hawks soar overhead, and the urban bustle begins. Lands once known for their agricultural and industrial uses are being restored on the Nation's premiere urban wildlife refuge, where time moves at nature's pace and wildlife have the right-of-way. Propelled by public and private partnerships, refuge stewards at Rocky Mountain Arsenal, Two Ponds, and Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuges continue to work to repair and regenerate wildlife habitat. These prairie oases nestled within Colorado's Front Range communities welcome visitors from near and far and foster an appreciation for nature. They will connect people with the land for generations to come.

Goals

We developed nine goals for the refuge's CCP.

Habitat Management Goal

Use an adaptive management framework to conserve, restore, and enhance the ecological integrity of Front Range prairie communities, including wetlands, grasslands, native shrubs, and trees.

Wildlife Management Goal

Balance and preserve wildlife species of concern through active management.

Visitor Services Goal

Foster the public's appreciation of natural resources and provide inclusive, accessible, high-quality, wildlife-dependent recreation, education, and interpretation.

Communications and Outreach Goal

Through effective communication and innovative technology, engage the public and stakeholders to help them better understand the importance of natural resources, operations, and history at the refuge complex so that they are inspired to take part in and support management and restoration efforts.

Partnerships Goal

Seek and foster strong partnerships to support research and management, enhance wildlife-dependent recreation, and promote an appreciation of nature.

Cultural Resources Goal

Protect artifacts and interpret the archeological, agricultural, military, and industrial histories of the refuge complex and the story of its restoration in order to connect visitors and the community to the area's past.

Research and Science Goal

Use science and promote research to advance the understanding of natural resource functions and management within the refuge complex and beyond.

Infrastructure and Operations Goal

Effectively use money, staff, partners, volunteers, and equipment to restore and manage refuge complex habitats, conduct programs, and improve and maintain all necessary infrastructure.

Access and Transportation Goal

Support the improvement of suitable access to the refuges, develop sustainable transportation options, and provide more connections within the refuge complex.

Significant Issues

In the EIS, we disclosed and compared the effects of four management alternatives. These alternatives were derived to address significant issues identified during the scoping process, to support the goals stated above, and to conform to laws, regulations, and policies including Service policy directives. The significant issues addressed in the EIS included:

- habitat and wildlife management
- water rights
- connecting people with nature
- setting clear expectations about the refuge
- improving and expanding public use facilities and programs
- maintaining a sense of retreat
- interpretation of the site's history
- improving access and transportation
- reintroducing native species
- improving outreach to neighboring communities
- increasing partnership opportunities
- making the refuge more welcoming

Decision (Alternative C)

We have selected Alternative C—Urban Refuge for implementation because it is the alternative that best meets our vision, the planning goals for the refuge CCP, and the Service's Urban Wildlife Conservation Program.

Alternative C will enable us to implement the refuge Habitat Management Plan (HMP) to maintain or restore the composition, structure, and function of the natural and modified habitats on the refuge. We will apply strategic habitat conservation principles (a structured, science-driven, and adaptive approach) in determining how best to manage our lands for fish, wildlife, and plant species, with a particular emphasis on migratory birds and listed species. Compatible wildlife-dependent public uses will be enhanced and expanded to include limited hunts. Prior to implementing a hunting program on the refuge, a Hunt Plan will be developed in accordance with Service policy; that plan will include opportunity for public comment.

Habitat Management

Habitat management will continue to be conducted as described in our HMP. We will use an adaptive management framework to conserve, restore, and enhance the ecological integrity of the Front Range prairie communities, including the wet-

lands, trees, and native shrubs within those communities. We will use prescribed fire, mowing, grazing, and integrated pest management to restore and then maintain refuge habitats.

We will manage for habitat diversity in fire-maintained ecosystems using management tools like prescribed fire, as described in the refuge's approved Fire Management Plan (FMP).

We will pursue the goals specified in the refuge Habitat Restoration Plan (HRP) and the HMP to restore native prairie to develop diverse plant community mosaics that differ in composition, height, and density. These activities will promote successful long-term establishment and maintenance of seeded restoration sites, as well as existing native prairies and shrublands, to provide habitat for species of concern. We will work with DIA and adjacent cities on co-management of specific parcels of wildlife habitat (such as the bison viewing area) and to acquire and protect inholdings and lands adjacent to the existing refuge boundary.

Where appropriate, we will maintain and restore shrubland to provide suitable nesting habitat for migratory birds as well as forage and shelter for associated small mammals and deer.

We will manage wetlands to promote native emergent species, provide opportunistic benefits to wetland-dependent wildlife, and maintain spawning grounds for forage fish. We will treat cattails when 80 percent or more of the shorelines are covered within 30 feet of the shoreline.

We will inventory and sustain riparian corridors. Surface flow will likely remain unaltered without actively managing hydrology.

We will manage invasive species through the use of approved biological controls, physical controls, chemical controls, and appropriate cultural controls for the prevention, early detection, monitoring, and control (or eradication) of invasive plant species and other pests on the refuge.

We will manage herbivore populations as necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of restored prairie and shrubland, contribute to the Service's national bison population goals, and provide suitable habitat for species of concern.

We will pursue various strategies to protect wildlife habitat, including fee-title acquisition, leases, and co-management of private lands.

Wildlife Management

We will maintain healthy wildlife communities in harmony with the refuge's historic cultural landscape—which includes New Mexico locust thickets, old farmstead windbreaks, and other planted trees—as well as with cottonwood galleries, created wetlands and lakes, and restored grasslands.

We will restore habitat for species of concern (such as grassland-dependent birds, burrowing owls, bald eagles, neotropical migratory birds, bats, and black-footed ferrets). We will provide nesting sites for burrowing owls along with long-term quality nesting and roosting habitat for bald eagles. We will provide habitat in the refuge's Environmental Education Zone for neotropical migratory bird species that are losing suitable stop-over areas to urban development in the Denver Metropolitan area. We will maintain a mosaic of wetland and riparian habitats to provide foraging habitat in support of big brown bat populations, and will discontinue the use of artificial bat roosts.

We will reintroduce the endangered black-footed ferret and carry out studies to determine if we could also reintroduce the prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse to showcase native prairie ecosystems. If the studies show that the refuge habitat can sustain these bird species, then we will seek reintroduction regardless of whether these species could become self-sufficient.

We aim to release 15–40 ferrets during the first year. Subsequent ferret releases will be based on requirements outlined in the refuge's annual ferret allocation request. The release will occur directly into targeted prairie dog complexes in the fall when juvenile ferrets typically become independent; exhibit dispersal behaviors; and are more capable of killing their own prey, avoiding predators, and adjusting to environmental conditions. Public access to the northern half of the refuge will be restricted to support ferret and bison populations and research activities.

We will develop a live ferret exhibit to showcase ferret conservation efforts on the refuge and range-wide. We anticipate that the exhibit will generally display two live ferrets. Although ferrets are nocturnal and may hide from view, the exhibit will be designed to maximize the possibility of visitors viewing ferrets while providing a controlled and secure environment for the animals.

We will preserve a population of black-tailed prairie dogs as directed in the Black-Tailed Prairie Dog Management Plan (PDMP) of appropriate size to provide functions necessary to perpetuate native grasslands and support associated migratory birds and ferrets.

We will maintain a bison population as directed in the refuge bison management plan that contributes to the Department of Interior's Bison Conservation Initiative and helps maintain the structure and composition of native and restored prairies necessary to support priority grassland bird species. We will manage the bison population at or below the refuge's carrying capacity.

Visitor Services

The CCP will provide for a wide variety of compatible wildlife-dependent recreation. We will foster the public's appreciation of natural resources and provide inclusive, high-quality, wildlife-dependent recreation, education, and interpretation. We will increase accessible trails, reopen Rattlesnake Hill and Wildlife Watch, and add more wildlife viewing facilities. We will conduct visitor use satisfaction surveys.

We will educate visitors about hunting as a management tool and partner with CPW to offer hunting education courses. We will develop an archery range and work with partners to offer instructional archery classes.

We will implement a limited archery deer hunting program and consider the possibility of a limited shotgun hunt for doves, in conjunction with State hunting seasons. Hunting would be limited to special programs for youth and people with disabilities and would be allowed by lottery draw only, restricting the number of hunters and the dates on which hunting is allowed.

We will offer catch-and-release fishing from April to October, according to State fishing regulations, and offer an annual fishing pass. We will provide introductory fishing classes or educational opportunities and increase instructional fishing programs in partnership with Environmental Learning for Kids and others. We will consider spring instructional programming, hosting fishing clinics to prepare people for the summer season, and organizing additional fishing derbies.

We will renovate refuge facilities and signage to increase the quality of fishing opportunities and assess fishing satisfaction with assistance from anglers, volunteers, and partners. We will improve access by offering shoreline fishing opportunities—an improvement over the current access that is only available from docks—and will improve Lake Mary as a developmental reservoir with more facilities, a high catch rate, and increased user-friendly access.

We will provide wildlife observation and photography opportunities and accessible facilities on the refuge, supported by self-guided auto tours, nature trails, and wildlife viewing blinds and overlooks. We will support seasonal closures to protect sensitive wildlife areas and reduce disturbance to wildlife. We will make available a limited number of commercial photography permits each year, evaluating requests on a case-by-case basis.

We will provide wildlife viewing facilities and trails at Rattlesnake Hill and Wildlife Watch and will increase the accessibility of existing trails and facilities. We will develop partnerships to lead instructional programming and guided tours. We will

develop new interpretive panels and brochures to enhance self-guided visitor opportunities. We will use improved and simplified signs and expanded law enforcement to manage public use and reduce impacts on habitat.

We will explore nontraditional ways to educate visitors about environmental topics. We will develop partnerships with other organizations and concessionaires to provide environmental education programs and summer camps. We will use current and emerging technology to extend educational “reach” and to connect with a broader audience.

We will maintain an opportunistic environmental education program dependent on staff availability, offering regular tours as well as environmental education and interpretation programs. We will update interpretive panels, brochures, factsheets, Web sites, and refuge maps, and will make use of the Contact Station to provide interpretive programs as well as to provide a venue for teachers to use our environmental education curriculum. New curricula covering black-footed ferrets will be added.

We will endeavor to provide an Environmental Education Center to offer high-quality experiences. We will partner with organizations like recreation centers, libraries, parks, and schools to deliver conservation education programs to neighboring communities. We will expand interpretive programs for adult education as a potential venue for increasing stewardship and volunteerism. We will work with partners to create refuge-inspired nature murals to help raise refuge visibility in local communities.

Communications and Outreach

We will work with refuge volunteers to reach out to traditional and nontraditional refuge visitors, wildlife enthusiasts, and local as well as outlying communities, by participating in community outreach events such as Fishing Frenzy, Refuge Day, the Bass Pro Fishing Classic, Colorado Get Outdoors Day, the Aurora Youth Water Festival, the Barr Lake Birding Festival, and other events.

We will increase public outreach and refuge promotion in neighboring communities to increase the visibility of the refuge and overcome negative perceptions, focusing our outreach messaging to address safety concerns over the cleanup of refuge habitats, inviting visitors to participate in refuge activities and programs, and explaining the refuge’s wildlife and habitat resources. We will support the Service’s Urban Wildlife Conservation Program and participate in special events and career development programs for local students.

We will manage our Web site and social media platforms to reach a broad spectrum of visitors, and will distribute the Wild News publication by email.

We will maintain the refuge brochure and rack card and develop brochures for trails and auto tour routes. We will encourage cross promotion among partners to raise awareness of the refuge. We will develop more bilingual resources, significantly increase our communications, and disseminate more information through existing outlets and media. To this end, we will develop a refuge communications plan built on a consistent message for outreach and media, and approaches specifically tailored to engage youth and to target specific minority groups.

We will explain the missions of the Service and Refuge System, emphasizing the distinction between a city park and a wildlife refuge, and illustrating how the refuge benefits and serves the community.

We will package refuge experiences into half- or full-day activities that appeal to the local community and will create monthly Refuge Saturdays with roundtrip refuge tours beginning and ending somewhere in the community.

We will use the latest technology to reach and connect with broad audiences, promoting the refuge as a premiere urban refuge full of opportunities for people to connect with nature.

Partnerships

We will maintain existing partnerships and focus our attention on building and maintaining more partnerships throughout the Denver area—and especially in surrounding communities and local government agencies—to assist with outreach and to connect area residents with refuge resources and programs. We will leverage partnerships to build physical linkages between the outlying communities, regional trails, and the refuge, to support more instructional programming and reach nontraditional visitors. We will increase the use of Citizen Science and our collaboration with local schools to work on habitat restoration. We will expand partnerships to include Regional Transportation District, Denver Regional Council of Governments, and commercial partners.

Cultural Resources

In accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), we will continue to conduct cultural resource reviews for projects that involve ground-disturbing activities or that could affect buildings or structures more than 50 years old.

We will avoid disturbing significant cultural resources unless such disturbance is necessitated by unusual circumstances. In addition, we will continue to conduct law enforcement patrols to monitor sensitive sites. We will continue to consult with the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office, Native American tribes, local governments, and members of

the general public on matters pertaining to cultural resources. We will continue to adhere to other cultural resource laws; however, research opportunities will be minimal.

Artifacts currently stored at the refuge—both prehistoric and historic items—will be cared for and inventoried. We will explore and possibly implement deaccession of some artifacts.

Significant historic buildings, structures, and sites will be preserved and interpreted using signage and bus tours. The interior and exterior of the Egli homestead, listed in the State Register of Historic Properties, will be fully restored. We will continue to protect other historic sites such as the observation bunker, the guard tower foundation, the weapons storage bunker, a wagon road, historical tree plantings, and farming equipment.

Additionally, we will: (a) increase our efforts to identify and protect significant resources; (b) seek ways to display some World War II and Cold War items at the Visitor Center; (c) enter into partnerships with the Native American community to interpret the prehistoric landscape; (d) seek full restoration of the Egli farmstead; and, (e) provide more guided interpretation of cultural resources suited for outdoor storage, such as farm equipment and some World War II and Cold War machines.

Research and Science

Within existing funding levels, we will continue to be engaged in several research and monitoring programs, such as: (a) trapping and banding burrowing owls; (b) conducting bald eagle winter roost surveys and nest counts in cooperation with the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory to monitor overall riparian health and bald eagle reproductive success on the refuge; (c) monitoring raptor nests in accordance with objectives in the HMP; (d) assessing fish populations through electrofishing and gillnetting in accordance with objectives in the HMP to maintain a quality sport fishery; and (e) conducting a deer census and a bison roundup each fall to assess overall and individual health and to evaluate populations for inclusion into the refuge forage allocation plan.

We will continue to support Citizen Science projects—especially the Christmas Bird Count each January, the Great Backyard Bird Count each February, and spring and fall bird counts in May and September—and collection of meteorological data to help identify trends in climate change at the refuge.

Additionally, we will: (a) evaluate prairie dog densities, especially as they relate to reintroduction of ferrets; (b) emphasize the use of public participation and social media as means of acquiring and collating data to support refuge management; (c) delegate some monitoring and data-gathering activities to

volunteers and partners and develop Citizen Science projects to support monitoring of the ferret population as well as bald eagle nesting and roosting; (d) enhance monitoring of visitation commensurate with the increased access points, trails, and road system; (e) establish neighbor satisfaction surveys; (f) create additional Citizen Science opportunities, such as tracking phenological characteristics and some monitoring efforts; (g) explore opportunities for the public to participate in ferret spotlighting surveys; (h) consider installing remote cameras to monitor and provide Web-based public viewing of refuge fauna for species like bald eagles and ferrets; and (i) broaden the use of existing and emerging technologies and social media to aid in wildlife management and tracking while also engaging visitors in conservation activities.

Rationale for Selecting Alternative C

Alternative C best balances significant management issues of this refuge with the vision and goals developed by the planning team and the purposes, missions, and management policies of the Service, as well as with the interests and perspectives of many agencies, municipalities, organizations, and the public.

Overall, we received substantial support from our cooperating agencies, local agencies, adjoining municipalities, conservation organizations, and the public for most elements in alternative C. We acknowledge the differing individual views with respect to expanding refuge access and public use opportunities by creating new access points, opening the refuge to hunting, and expanding existing visitor services programs and facilities.

In the final EIS, alternative C was slightly revised from the proposed action in the draft CCP and EIS after consideration of the comments received from agencies, other stakeholder organizations, and the public during the 60-day public comment period. These changes are reflected in the description of alternative C above and in the final EIS.

Other Alternatives Considered

The final EIS evaluated a no-action alternative (A) and two other action alternatives (B and D), all of which are described below. We developed all the alternatives to meet the planning goals we set for the project. Some of the alternatives met specific elements of our planning goals better than others, and we considered this in our decision.

Alternative A—No Action

Under this alternative, the management activities that we currently conduct would remain in effect. We would not develop any new management, restoration, or educational programs. We would not expand or change the current habitat, wildlife, infrastructure, and refuge operations practices, except as allowed by existing approved plans, such as the HMP, HRP, Integrated Pest Management Plan (IPMP), Water Management Plan (WMP), FMP, PDMP, and Station Safety Plan. Funding and staff levels would remain the same with little change in overall trends. Programs would follow the same direction, emphasis, and intensity as they do now.

Under this alternative there would be no new access to the refuge and the existing infrastructure and visitor services facilities and programs would remain unchanged. Volunteering and outdoor-recreation opportunities would remain at current levels and within existing sites.

We would continue to collaborate with our partner agencies and organizations to achieve our conservation and educational goals.

Our outreach efforts and avenues of communications would continue within existing levels and methods.

Habitat Management

We would continue managing the refuge habitats as we presently do—that is, in accordance with our approved plans and in the same way as described above for alternative C.

Wildlife Management

We would largely continue managing the refuge's wildlife as we presently do, in accordance with our approved plans, and in the same way as described for alternative C above. However, we would not seek to reintroduce black-footed ferrets or any other native animal species to the refuge.

Visitor Services

Under this alternative we would maintain the same level, extent, and location of existing facilities and programs as we currently support.

The refuge would remain closed to all hunting and hunting-related activities (such as hunter education). The refuge would continue to be open for catch-and-release fishing from April to October in accordance with State fishing regulations.

The auto tour routes, existing refuge trails, and viewing blind would continue to provide wildlife

observation, interpretation, and photographic opportunities. The Wildlife Drive and the northern portion of the refuge would remain closed to the public except for staff-led tours. We would continue to implement seasonal closures to protect sensitive wildlife areas and reduce disturbance to wildlife as necessary, and would continue issuing a limited number of commercial photography permits.

We would continue to offer environmental education programs depending on the availability of refuge staff, and would make our environmental education curriculum available to teachers. We would continue our interpretation program and offerings of regular tours and programs. We would maintain and update the refuge interpretive panels, brochures, factsheets, Web sites, and maps as funding allows. We would continue to make use of the Contact Station to provide interpretive programs as well as to provide a venue for teachers to use our environmental education curriculum.

Communications and Outreach

We would continue to participate in community outreach events (such as Refuge Day, Colorado Get Outdoors, and similar events) with the help of refuge volunteers to reach out to traditional refuge visitors and local communities. We would continue to support the Service's Urban Wildlife Conservation Program and participate in career development programs for local students. We would reach a broad spectrum of visitors by managing Web site and social media platforms and distributing *The Wild News* publication and resources by email. We would continue to make our general brochure and rack card available to refuge visitors.

Partnerships

Through partnerships with other organizations and municipalities (including those in the Rocky Mountain Greenway Trail Network and Sand Creek Greenway Partnerships), we would continue to create new trails and connect them with existing trails to form a trail network connecting the refuge with Two Ponds National Wildlife Refuge and Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge. Friends of the Front Range Wildlife Refuges would continue to support refuge programs and operate the Visitor Center store—Nature's Nest Books and Gifts. Partnerships with City of Commerce City Parks and Recreation and Bass Pro Shops to sponsor the annual Fishing Frenzy would continue. We would continue to work with the City and County of Denver and the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory to implement the Urban Bird Treaty. We would continue to implement the Urban Refuge Partnership with Environmental

Learning for Kids at its property in Montbello. We would continue to develop our partnerships with the Denver Botanical Garden and Butterfly Pavilion for monarch and pollinator programs and outreach. We would continue to work with Mile High Youth Corps and Groundwork Denver for habitat restoration projects. The refuge would continue to employ Arrupe High School students—one student once a week—to assist with operation of the Visitor Center through an agreement managed by our regional Diversity and Civil Rights Office.

Cultural Resources

In accordance with Section 106 of the NHPA, we would continue to conduct cultural resource reviews for projects that involve ground-disturbing activities or that could affect buildings or structures more than 50 years old.

We would avoid disturbing significant cultural resources unless such disturbance is necessitated by unusual circumstances. In addition, we would continue to conduct law enforcement patrols to monitor sensitive sites. We would continue to consult with the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office, Native American tribes, local governments, and members of the general public on matters pertaining to cultural resources. We would continue to adhere to other cultural resource laws; however, research opportunities would be minimal.

Artifacts currently stored at the refuge—both prehistoric and historic items—would be cared for and inventoried. We would explore and possibly implement deaccession of some artifacts.

Significant historic buildings, structures, and sites would be preserved and interpreted using signage and bus tours. The Egli House and garage, listed in the State Register of Historic Properties, would continue to be preserved through some stabilization actions and maintained in a state of arrested decay. This house and other historic sites—including the observation bunker, the guard tower foundation, the weapons storage bunker, homestead sites, a wagon road, historical tree plantings, and farming equipment—would continue to be protected.

Research and Science

Within existing funding levels, we would continue to be engaged in several research and monitoring programs, such as: (a) trapping and banding burrowing owls; (b) conducting bald eagle winter roost surveys and nest counts in cooperation with the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory to monitor overall riparian health and bald eagle reproductive success on the refuge; (c) monitoring raptor nests in accordance with objectives in the HMP; (d) assessing fish popula-

tions through electrofishing and gillnetting in accordance with objectives in the HMP to maintain a quality sport fishery; (e) conducting a deer census and a bison roundup each fall to assess overall and individual health and to evaluate populations for inclusion into the refuge forage allocation plan.

We would continue to support Citizen Science projects, especially the Christmas Bird Count in January, the Great Backyard Bird Count each February, spring and fall bird counts in May and September, and the collection of meteorological data to help identify trends in climate change at the refuge.

Infrastructure and Operations

Under alternative A, the refuge's current funding, facilities, and personnel would continue unchanged, with approximately 80 volunteers continuing to support refuge operations (such as staffing the Visitor Center front desk and special events, conducting interpretive tours and programs, performing light maintenance of trails and facilities, assisting in some biological surveys, and maintaining a pollinator garden).

No new wildlife observation and photography facilities would be developed, but existing facilities would be supported. A new administration building that has been planned could be constructed.

We would continue to host special events and meetings that support the purposes of the refuge and the missions of the Service and of the Refuge System. We would consider hosting special events and meetings for Department of Interior and other Federal, State, and local agencies on a case-by-case basis.

We would continue to safeguard the refuge from unnatural sounds and undue light contamination, and modify energy distribution lines (by burying or relocating them) when redeveloping certain areas of the refuge, to the extent possible. All existing signs would continue to be maintained, and there would be no changes to the refuge fencing, sign design, and material standards. The refuge would continue to be open from sunrise to sunset, and in general, visitors would not be allowed on the refuge during hours of darkness.

The Army would continue to own and operate the five major dams on the refuge until all necessary repairs have taken place, after which the dams would be transferred to the Service.

Access and Transportation

We would continue to enable year-round automobile, bus, and pedestrian travel on the refuge as weather conditions permit. Recreational biking would continue to be allowed only on certain areas of the refuge. We would continue to have only one visi-

tor access point to the refuge, and existing way-finding signs would remain in use.

The Legacy Loop tour route would remain open to the public when the refuge is open, and the Wildlife Drive would generally remain closed to the public, except for tours guided by refuge personnel.

The infrastructure and the type and condition of the refuge roads would remain unchanged from the predominantly older asphalt roads; these roads would only receive maintenance necessary to sustain operations.

We would maintain 10 miles of refuge trails, repair flood-damaged portions of existing trails, and allow snowshoeing on refuge trails.

Rationale for Not Selecting Alternative A

Alternative A was not selected for implementation because it would not meet our stated planning goals for communications and outreach or for access and transportation. Alternative A would meet the planning goals we developed for wildlife management, visitor services, partnerships, cultural resources, research and science, and infrastructure and operations, but to a lesser degree than other alternatives.

Implementing alternative A would not allow the staff to implement the tenets of the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program on the refuge.

Alternative A would satisfy our wildlife management goal to a lesser degree than other alternatives as it would not seek to increase wildlife diversity on the refuge by restoring native species.

Alternative A would partially satisfy our visitor services goal by maintaining the five existing priority public uses at current levels. However, under this alternative, hunting would continue to be precluded on the refuge and the Wildlife Drive and northern portion of the refuge would continue to be generally closed to the public. There would continue to be a lack of sufficient dedicated resources for providing visitor services. There would continue to be few opportunities for nontraditional visitors to participate in wildlife-dependent recreation activities on the refuge.

Alternative A would not satisfy our goal for communications and outreach because we would only maintain our existing avenues of communication and outreach efforts to neighboring communities and traditional refuge visitors. This would leave out potential nontraditional visitors and would miss the opportunity to find better ways to communicate with our refuge neighbors and communities.

Alternative A would achieve our goal for partnerships but to a lesser degree than the selected alternative by maintaining existing partnerships that help the refuge staff run part of the Visitor Center, pro-

vide some visitor programs, and support management of biological resources.

Alternative A would partially achieve our goal for cultural resources by continuing to protect cultural resources on the refuge. But this alternative would not allow the staff to better interpret or restore cultural and historical resources, as would alternatives C and D. At existing staff levels, it is difficult to increase protection and interpretation beyond basic adherence to cultural resource laws in association with implementing new projects.

Alternative A would only partially satisfy our goal for research and science by opportunistically allowing research projects on the refuge, and allowing the continuation of current inventory and monitoring programs and projects.

Alternative A would partially achieve our goal for infrastructure and operations by maintaining existing infrastructure as necessary. Staffing and funding levels would remain at present levels, and no new facilities would be built. Existing infrastructure, signage, vehicles, and other resources would be maintained but not improved.

Alternative A would fully satisfy our goal for habitat management.

As detailed in "Chapter 5—Consultation, Coordination and Responses to Comments" in the draft CCP/EIS, we received no public support to continue managing the refuge as described under the no-action alternative. None of our cooperating agencies supported alternative A.

Alternative B—Traditional Refuge

Under this alternative our management would focus on providing what we consider traditional refuge visitor uses and in conveying the importance of conservation, wildlife protection, and the purposes of the Refuge System to our visitors, partners, and neighbors. Access to the refuge would remain more limited than under alternatives C and D, and wildlife-dependent recreation, as well as community outreach, would be minimally expanded.

Habitat Management

Habitat management under this alternative would be the same as described for alternatives A, C and D, as it is governed by the refuge HMP completed in 2013.

Wildlife Management

We would manage wildlife in the same way as described for alternative C above, except that we

would only seek reintroduction of prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse if it was determined that these species could eventually become self-sufficient.

Visitor Services

Under this alternative, we would continue the same visitor services programs and opportunities as under alternative A, but would make the following improvements: (a) slightly increase accessible trails; (b) reopen Rattlesnake Hill and Wildlife Watch and add viewing facilities at these sites; (c) add more wildlife viewing facilities; (d) undertake minor renovations to facilities and signage to increase the quality of fishing opportunities; (e) assess fishing satisfaction with the assistance of anglers, volunteers, and partners; (f) increase accessibility of existing trails and facilities; (g) create a black-footed ferret outdoor exhibit; and (h) add new environmental education curricula covering black-footed ferrets.

Hunting would be allowed, and a hunter's education program would be instituted under this alternative as described under alternative C.

Communications and Outreach

We would continue to use the same communications and outreach tools, resources, messages, and levels of effort as described for alternative A. However, we would enhance our emphasis on the refuge's conservation efforts as well as the overall purposes of the Refuge System.

We would target our traditional refuge use audience as well as wildlife enthusiasts. We would also increase public outreach and refuge promotion in neighboring communities to increase the visibility of the refuge and overcome negative perceptions.

We would focus our outreach messaging to address safety concerns over the cleanup of refuge habitats, invite visitors to participate in refuge activities and programs, and explain the refuge's wildlife and habitat resources.

We would encourage more cross promotion among partners to raise awareness of the refuge, develop more bilingual resources (such as a refuge Web site, signs, and brochures); slightly increase our communications; and disseminate more information through existing outlets and media.

Partnerships

Partnerships under this alternative would be similar to those under alternative A.

Cultural Resources

We would manage and protect cultural resources as described above for alternative A.

Research and Science

In addition to the research activities described for alternative A, we would: (a) develop opportunities to conduct important research on the reintroduced black-footed ferret population in collaboration with the Black-Footed Ferret Center (BFFC); (b) develop an inventory and monitoring plan; (c) restart water quality monitoring and data gathering; (d) adopt the findings of the WMP; (e) reestablish yearly monitoring of cultural resources sites; (f) monitor reintroduced species for success; (g) introduce the use of hand-held devices (such as tablets) to facilitate improvements in data and information collection and monitoring; (h) increase extent of current bird counts as other opportunities arise and implement the Big Sit Bird Count; (i) initiate research and monitoring of phenological characteristics of various species of plants, birds, and pollinators; and (j) be alert to impacts of climate change on habitat and wildlife regimes at the refuge.

Infrastructure and Operations

Under alternative B, refuge facilities would be the same as those under alternative A, but would include consideration of a new headquarters office, removing unused facilities (such as trailers and some buildings), and replacing temporary bunkhouses. Funding would decline by \$100,000 and personnel would decrease by one seasonal and two full-time employees annually.

In addition to the groups and programs described for alternative A, we would help develop a reliable core group to staff the Visitor Center desk and lead various tours and programs. We would offer to support Scout projects and volunteers.

We would develop a branding scheme, entailing a set of standards for fencing and signage design and material to be implemented consistently across the entire refuge complex. Hours of operation, energy transmission facilities, dams, and water rights would be maintained and managed as described for alternative A.

Access and Transportation

We would enhance the main general visitor access point and reevaluate the need for three employee entrances. We would allow Service-owned buses and vans, autos, recreational biking as far as the Visitor Center, and pedestrian access.

We would address navigation, investigate new ways to bring people to the refuge, and use way-finding to clarify circulation on the refuge. We would incorporate positive messages into signs—focusing on what is allowed rather than what is not allowed—and update refuge maps in the Visitor Center and at all kiosks.

Our management of roads and infrastructure would be as described for alternative A, except that we would discontinue maintenance of, or remove, some of the section line roads. We would expand the Wildlife Drive to allow self-guided driving and would continue to provide bus-guided interpretive tours on weekends.

We would increase interpretive opportunities and accessibility on the existing trail system and would improve and build new trail connections with outlying regional trails. We would complete the Perimeter Trail and continue building a connection with the Rocky Mountain Greenway Trail. We would rehabilitate and reopen closed trails.

Rationale for Not Selecting Alternative B

Alternative B was not selected for implementation. While this alternative would meet our stated planning goals for the CCP, the goals for communications and outreach, access and transportation, visitor services, partnerships, cultural resources, and infrastructure and operations would be met to a greater extent than under alternative A but to a lesser extent than under the selected alternative.

Although alternative B might best protect the wildlife and habitats from unintended impacts brought about by increased visitation to the refuge, its implementation would not allow the staff to implement the tenets of the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program on the refuge.

Alternative B would satisfy our visitor services goal by opening the refuge to hunting and maintaining the other existing priority public uses at or near the existing levels. We would work with CPW to implement the onsite hunter education program, perform the hunting lottery, and carry out the youth and disabled hunt on the refuge. As noted above, alternative C would also include greater refuge access, more trails, improved programs, and a newer facility.

Alternative B would partially achieve our goal for partnerships by maintaining existing partnerships that help the refuge staff run part of the Visitor Center, provide some visitor programs, and support management of biological resources. Alternative C would include a greater number and diversity of partnerships; consequently, the lack of emphasis on developing new partnerships under alternative B could result in missed opportunities to foster and develop new partnerships in other management areas.

Alternative B would meet our goal for cultural resources to some extent by continuing to protect cultural resources on the refuge. But this alternative would not allow the staff to better interpret or to restore cultural and historical resources, as would alternatives C and D.

Alternative B would address our goal for infrastructure and operations by continuing to maintain existing infrastructure and a few new facilities, such as a new headquarters building. Staffing and funding levels would decrease slightly from current levels under this alternative; in contrast, the selected alternative would increase staffing with the addition of two new law enforcement officers.

Alternative B would fully satisfy our goals for habitat management, wildlife management, and research and science.

Overall, we received only one comment in support of alternative B—a conservation organization that noted it might best protect wildlife from disturbance. For this reason, we have designated alternative B the environmentally preferable alternative as noted in the appropriate section later in this ROD. None of our cooperating agencies supported alternative B.

Alternative D—Gateway Refuge

Under this alternative, we would emphasize increasing the visibility of the refuge, the refuge system, and other public lands in the area. Because of the way in which we would manage our staff and resources, there would be reduced visitor services programming on the refuge than under alternative C, but we would give greater emphasis to offsite programs in conjunction with our partners.

Habitat Management

Habitat management under this alternative would be the same as under alternatives A, B, and C. Additionally, we would pursue collaborative efforts with neighbors and other groups to preserve and improve wildlife habitat connectivity.

Wildlife Management

We would manage most wildlife, including surrogate species and native species reintroductions, much as we would under alternative B. However, a key difference from alternative C is that we would establish a ferret-specific set of partnerships and collaborative activities, sharing knowledge with entities such as CPW, the Denver Zoo, and the BFFC. In addition, we would develop partnerships with CPW to manage ferrets onsite and offsite, and would work with neigh-

boring landowners to extend the range of native species.

Visitor Services

Hunting-related activities would be similar to those described for alternative A, with no hunting or hunter education programs as alternative C provides, but would promote hunting opportunities throughout Colorado and the Refuge System.

In addition to the fishing opportunities described for alternative C, we would explore raising permit fees to support increased fish stocking rates and expanded programming, as well as increasing fishing days and hours. We would promote fishing opportunities throughout the Refuge System and Colorado, and would partner with others to implement fishing improvements and expanded programming such as more advanced fishing classes and more partner-run fishing programs and events. We would consider offering a fishing concession.

In addition to the opportunities described for alternative C, accessibility would be incorporated into all new facilities. We would offer more partner- and concessionaire-guided tours and programming, as well as advanced photography classes. We would promote the refuge as a birding destination. If native species are reintroduced, we would offer wildlife viewing and tours led by partners or concessionaires.

In addition to the opportunities described for alternatives B and C, we would expand environmental education programming at the refuge for youth and adults. We would explore concessionaire- or partner-led summer camps on the refuge, design a career experience program, develop a summer refuge intern program, develop vocational programs for high school and college students, and work with surrounding community organizations and high schools to raise awareness of and promote conservation careers.

In addition to the opportunities mentioned under alternative C, we could collaborate with universities to expand learning opportunities, offer adult education forums, and offer expanded interpretive programs about refuge history and cultural resources.

We could develop more programs in partnership with neighboring parks and recreation departments and the Sand Creek Greenway than those described under alternative C. We would encourage partners to cross-promote refuge programs, interpret at their sites, and incorporate nature play into facilities at their sites. We could provide more offsite interpretive programming and explore developing an onsite living history program in collaboration with outside partners.

Communications and Outreach

In addition to the target audiences mentioned under alternative C, under alternative D we would expand our target audiences to include the entire Colorado Front Range region and even international visitors. We would develop a communications plan for the entire refuge complex and recruit partners to reach out to their constituencies. We would specifically target birders, history enthusiasts, and international visitors with more appealing messages to them.

In addition to the message outlined for alternative B, we would emphasize the conservation, transformation, and evolution of the refuge. We would step up promotion of the entire refuge complex as well as other regional prairie sites, and we would coordinate with regional entities to promote improved regional access to the refuge.

We would approach and engage presently untapped resources (for example, associations and TV channels) to help us promote the refuge and would use the refuge Web site as a clearinghouse for regional events and activities.

We would use existing technology to reach and connect with broad audiences, such as: (a) employing social marketing to broaden the Service's reach, (b) engaging visitors to use social media to share wildlife sightings and plant discoveries, (c) maintaining and updating the refuge Web site, (d) soliciting partners and volunteers to post regularly on Facebook, (e) recruiting interns to explore technologies and outreach strategies, (f) sharing refuge images and videos on social media, and (g) translating the Web site into multiple languages to boost international visitation.

Partnerships

We would focus on engaging partners to expand programming and wildlife-dependent recreation and increase their autonomy in conducting these activities. Using this approach, we would support activities such as day camps, the Master Naturalist Program, certified interpretive guide training, Backyard Habitat with the National Wildlife Federation, photography tours and classes, advanced birding with groups such as Audubon, and fishing clinics with groups like Trout Unlimited and Orvis.

We would expand our breadth of partnerships to include conservation organizations, local governments, government agencies, and private companies in expanding programming and visitor use activities both on and off the refuge. We would establish a regional prairie coalition to cross-promote programming, activities, and research among conservation groups and natural areas throughout the Front

Range. We would engage partnerships to create more physical links connecting outlying communities, regional trails, and the refuge.

We would develop specific partnerships to support ferret recovery and collaborative activities, working with groups such as CPW, Denver Zoo, and BFFC. We would also develop partnerships with CPW to manage ferrets on- and offsite, enter into collaborative efforts and partnerships with neighbors and other groups to preserve and improve wildlife habitat connectivity, and increase collaboration with other divisions of the Service and other agencies and organizations on issues related to migratory birds and federally listed species. We would seek ways to collaborate with other states and nations to address species concerns that transcend borders—leveraging, if possible, nearby cities' international sister cities to share conservation research and practices.

We would build additional partnerships with Fast Tracks, Colorado Department of Transportation, DIA (for outreach to international travelers), and Regional Transportation District (to promote increased frequency of routes providing refuge access). We would pursue other partnerships under the America's Great Outdoors initiative.

We would work with partners and corporate sponsors to host two additional large annual events. We would tie into nationwide events like Public Lands Day, Earth Day, and National Trails Day.

Cultural Resources

We would manage cultural resources as described for alternative C, but with the following additions: (a) work with partners to establish an offsite World War II and Cold War museum owned and operated by an organization other than the Service, (b) conduct further research on prehistoric sites on the refuge, (c) undertake full restoration of the interior and exterior of the Egli farmstead to allow for reuse and comprehensive interpretation, and (d) permit and encourage occasional living history interpretation of early homesteading and farming and establish electronic and remote tools to provide interpretation.

Research and Science

In addition to the programs described for alternative B, we would: (a) seek knowledge exchange opportunities with partners, neighbors, and other agencies; and (b) collaborate with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, DIA, and the Regional Air Quality Council on air quality monitoring.

In addition to the priorities discussed for alternative C, we would do the following: (a) strive to increase collaborative research projects where the

refuge serves as a field laboratory for others; (b) research prehistoric use of overlooks at First Creek and Second Creek; (c) If possible, make existing office trailers available to facilitate research on black-footed ferrets; (d) link Citizen Science opportunities with other citizen research that takes place elsewhere on the refuge complex as well as on partners' sites; (e) as appropriate, institute the use of the same data collection and modeling platforms that refuge partners and other agencies use; (f) enlarge the range of partners and other agencies with whom we would share wildlife data (such as bison and bird bands); (g) increase cooperation with universities and other higher education institutions on research initiatives; (h) explore increasing research programs to study the response of grassland birds and pollinators to restored prairie habitat; (i) study responses of coyotes to changes in prey base, parasitism, and wildlife diseases; and (j) study the extent and spread of prairie dog populations.

Infrastructure and Operations

Staffing and budget under alternative D would be less than under alternative C but more than under alternatives A and B. We would add commercial transit operators, and a partner coordinator would replace the Service-supported volunteer coordinator.

In addition to the facilities described for alternative B, we would develop food concessions and partnerships with food truck businesses. We would also rehabilitate and improve facilities to better interpret cultural resources and enhance the visitor experience. We would rehabilitate the Army's old communications building to house exhibits interpreting the site's history. We would improve and interpret the bunker on the Wildlife Drive, and would identify and memorialize the POW internment camp and the 2013 Ivory Crush event.

Although the volunteer programs under alternative D would be similar to those under alternative C, alternative D calls for the largest volunteer program of all the alternatives, in order to support extensive offsite work. In addition to the strategies described for alternative C, we would develop a system for sharing volunteers among the three refuges in the complex, as well as among partnering groups.

Our approach to energy transmission towers and other energy-related infrastructure would be the same as under alternative C. However, in contrast to alternative C, we would: (a) develop signs to promote other regional opportunities, (b) improve the appearance and uniformity of the refuge fence and access points, (c) extend branding across the refuge complex and adjacent jurisdictions and landowners, and (d) identify additional access points where the fence

could be opened to foot traffic to promote regional connections.

Dams and water rights management, as well as hours of operation, would be the same as described for alternatives A, B, and C.

Access and Transportation

The way-finding and signage plan under this alternative would be similar to that described for alternative B.

In addition to the management actions, facilities, and priorities described for alternative C, under this alternative we would: (a) add pedestrian and bicycle access points to Henderson Hill overlook and trail; (b) add southeast viewing access; (c) create more connections to the Rocky Mountain Greenway and a trail connection to the Fast Tracks Peña station; (d) reach out to DIA to improve the physical connections between the airport and the refuge; (e) include snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and road or mountain bikes to the modes of transportation; (f) develop a more robust bike-sharing system with links to regional trail systems and regional B-cycle stations; (g) focus on developing and promoting the Rocky Mountain Greenway and ways to physically link the three refuges; (h) open the Wildlife Drive to public vehicles for two-way traffic; (i) incorporate bike infrastructure into the road system, including striping bike lanes and an off-street path on the Wildlife Drive; (j) stripe for two-way traffic; (k) add pullouts, traffic control, and speed bumps on the northern portion of the Wildlife Drive; (l) develop an even more extensive trail system; (m) coordinate with stakeholders and adjacent landowners to manage access along the Perimeter Trail; and (n) work to connect Rocky Mountain Greenway Trail with First Creek Trail and Second Creek Trail, improve signs, and promote trail links.

Rationale for Not Selecting Alternative D

Alternative D was not selected for implementation even though it would fully meet all our stated planning goals for the CCP.

Both alternatives C and D would adhere closely to the visitor services goal because they include increased visitor access and transportation options. Alternative C would focus on providing visitor services that would be popular with our neighbors and the greater metropolitan community, such as hunting, hunting instruction, more fishing classes, and catch opportunities. Programs under alternative C would be targeted to neighboring communities and would include partnering with libraries, parks, and schools and could explore nontraditional methods and opportunities—such as refuge artists—that are

likely to inspire urban youth. Alternative D would entail partnering with others who already offer programming and is consequently more likely to result in offsite education and visitation. Some of the programs would be geared toward local visitors as they would under alternative C.

Because alternative C focuses to a greater degree on involving local youth and adult visitors, it would meet the outreach component of the goal to a greater degree than any other alternative. Alternative D may reach a more diverse audience, but that audience would be widespread and not as likely to be unaware of the importance of natural resources. Alternative C would also focus more on the refuge than the entire Refuge System or on resources at partner agencies. Both alternatives C and D would likely inspire visitors to take part in or support the refuge's management and restoration efforts.

Under alternatives C and D, we would pursue the same partnerships as under alternative B and would explore other partnership opportunities that can support necessary research and management, as well as the expansion and promotion of wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities. Alternative D focuses on adding or expanding partnerships but may not achieve this goal as well as alternative C because it would dilute staff time to a much greater degree. Under alternative C, staff would be better able to enrich current partnerships as well as build new ones, such as partnerships supporting environmental education for community members. Both alternatives C and D adhere closely to the partnership goal.

Alternative D shares many elements in common with alternative C, and also implements the Service's Urban Wildlife Conservation Program. Although both alternatives C and D fully meet each of our goals, we are concerned that implementing alternative D would redirect focus away from the refuge itself, impairing efforts to make it the "premier urban refuge" it could be. Alternative C seeks to "first get the house in order;" make the refuge more welcoming, and open more doors to the refuge to accommodate traditional and nontraditional visitors.

In part because of increased resources proposed under alternatives C and D, these alternatives would enable the staff to increase outreach and partnership efforts to find suitable groups and agencies that could properly house, curate, and interpret valuable cultural artifacts for future generations. Alternative C has been modified to include both exterior and interior restoration of the Egli House, as proposed under alternative D. Accordingly, alternatives C and D would result in the best protection of historical and cultural resources and so better adhere to this goal.

Alternatives B, C, and D would adhere closely to our stated goal for research and science. But because alternative D emphasizes collaboration with other

refuges or agency partners and wider coordination of research and data collection and sharing, it has the potential to achieve this goal to a greater degree than other alternatives. However, because the redirection of staff time and attention away from the refuge has the potential to dilute ongoing research and science on the refuge, alternative C would better advance the understanding of functions and management within the refuge complex.

Alternative C would be more expensive than D because it would be a fully Service-funded and controlled effort.

Under alternatives C and D, we propose many changes to the headquarters, fencing, and other infrastructure that we believe would maximize our resources and allow us to more effectively interact with visitors and partners. Accordingly, both alternatives C and D would adhere closely to the infrastructure and operations goal. Alternatives C and D differ in their focus, with alternative C offering substantially more opportunities to observe wildlife using new facilities like pullouts, overlooks, and viewing platforms.

Alternative C also entails more onsite facilities and programming for visitors and focuses its communications, outreach, and partnerships on local residents or organizations than does alternative D. These residents are under-served by the Service; reaching out to them is most consistent with the Service's Urban Wildlife Conservation Program.

Under alternatives C and D we propose new points and types of access to the refuge, as well as a considerable expansion and reconfiguration of the refuge's transportation options. Alternative D includes most of the trails, roads, and transportation options provided for under alternative C, but also proposes creating trail connections to areas outside the refuge, as well as opening the internal Wildlife Drive to two-way traffic. While these measures would help alternative D more fully meet the access and transportation goal, they would also redirect staff time away from habitat or wildlife management and, potentially, the quality of the visitor experience to managing security and traffic and maintaining roads and trails. Accordingly, both alternatives C and D would adhere closely to this goal.

In summary, we believe control and staff focus should be on the refuge itself rather than the region. The broadening of the refuge's research and education programs to the region is something the team believed might make an appropriate second "phase" of management and be an appropriate direction in its next CCP.

All but one commenter indicated support for alternative C, and cooperating agencies were unanimous in their support of C as the alternative the Service should select.

Tribal Involvement and Consultation

The Service sent letters of notification about the planning process, including an invitation to participate on the planning team, to the following tribes:

- Northern Arapaho Tribe, Fort Washakie, WY
- Northern Cheyenne Tribe, Lame Deer, MT
- Pueblo of Taos, Taos, NM
- Southern Ute Tribe, Ignacio, CO
- Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Towaoc, CO

Public Involvement and Outreach

A notice of intent to develop a CCP and a request for comments was published in the Federal Register on August 7, 2013 (FR 78(152):48183—48185). The notice of intent 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 60-day public review and comment period on May 6, 2015, following publication of a notice of availability in the Federal Register (FR 80(87):26084—26086). We allowed comments to be submitted until July 6, 2015. We received more than 100 comments from 12 commenters: cooperating agencies, other governmental agencies, conservation organizations, and individuals. We responded to all the substantive comments we received in Chapter 5 of the final EIS.

Comments on the Final EIS

The final EIS was published in the Federal Register on August 27, 2015 (FR 80(166):52056—52058), and the 30-day waiting period ended on October 5, 2015.

One comment, from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was received during the waiting period.

The EPA recommends that the Service conducts a hydrological evaluation to assess whether altering the "Texas Crossing" along the Wildlife Drive might affect the site's hydrology—potentially affecting

groundwater recharge, flow, monitoring, extraction, or treatment—prior to altering the site's existing configuration.

The Service will carefully consider and evaluate any infrastructural and site changes to the Wildlife Drive, especially the "Texas Crossing," and will coordinate with EPA and all other appropriate agencies prior to implementing any site changes or building any new structures at this site.

The Service has and will continue to abide by existing land use restrictions at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal.

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" (Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning Council of Environmental Quality's National Environmental Policy Act Regulations, 1981).

Based on our environmental consequences analysis, we believe alternative B—Traditional Refuge, is most likely the environmentally preferable alternative.

The four management alternatives proposed in the draft CCP and EIS shared many similarities in their management of refuge resources. But there are also differences that set them apart.

All four alternatives analyzed in the draft CCP/EIS would enhance, restore, and manage the refuge's habitats in accordance with the approved HMP, HRP, FMP, IPMP, and WMP developed by the refuge.

All four alternatives manage most wildlife in much the same manner, by following approved management plans (such as the PDMP and bison management plan). However, the three action alternatives (B, C, and D) propose reintroducing the endangered black-footed ferret and other native species to the refuge.

Although alternative B proposes to open the refuge to limited hunting, the taking of wildlife would help to maintain the deer and dove populations within the refuge habitats' carrying capacity, thus assisting in the staff efforts to restore and maintain habitats.

For protection of cultural resources, we believe that alternative D would be environmentally prefer-

able as it would afford the greatest level of protection to the cultural and historical resources found on the refuge by fully restoring the Egli house.

The primary source of impact on physical and cultural resources at the refuge over the 15-year life span of the CCP would be from visitor use. Therefore, for the purposes of determining which of the alternatives is environmentally preferable, we have looked at the degree to which public use programs, facilities, and infrastructure and visitor numbers would affect the natural environment within the boundary of the refuge.

Specifically, factors such as the degree of openness of the refuge to public access (that is, the number, location, and types of access points); the extent of public use facilities within the refuge boundary (such as trail configuration and situation, refuge roads, and educational facilities); the number and types of public use programs (such as fishing, environmental education, and hunter education); the levels of visitation; and, finally, the level of law enforcement necessary to ensure public and facilities safety and protection of refuge resources were important considerations.

Alternatives A and B would continue greatly limiting public access to the northern portion of the refuge and maintaining the Wildlife Drive generally closed to the public. Conversely, alternatives C and D would entail opening the Wildlife Drive and the northern portion of the refuge to the public in general.

Allowing the general public to access the northern portion of the refuge through motorized vehicles will increase disturbance to wildlife and habitats from increased noise, dust, erosion, and human intrusion to previously restricted portions of the refuge. We expect some of these impacts to be ameliorated by increased law enforcement presence under alternatives C and D, but believe that keeping them completely closed would have continued benefits for wildlife over and above those offered by law enforcement.

The ferret reintroduction proposed under the three action alternatives will have beneficial consequences on the restored prairie and shrubland habitats from decreased erosion as ferrets bring the prairie dog colony population size into check and eventually to a carrying capacity level. The reintroduction of other native species common to action alternatives would also help to create a more complete prairie ecosystem. These features are common only to alternatives B, C and D, and would not occur under alternative A.

Alternatives C and D call for improving and expanding the reach and length of the refuge's trail system from current conditions. Construction of new and refurbishment of existing trails and trail-related infrastructure would have adverse impacts on the

habitats of the refuge. Using these new trails or increasing the vehicular traffic on these roads could result in road-kills and long-term disturbance from human activity on wildlife in the vicinity, resulting in some abandonment of habitats.

Alternatives A and B would continue the use of a single visitor access point to the refuge (through the main gate), while alternatives C and D would increase access significantly through the opening of several new access points. This again means that visitors and visitor disturbance would be more widespread under alternatives C or D.

Because our mission, policies, and purpose of the refuge include visitor services, outreach, partnerships, and other goals that would result in increases in visitor use at the refuge if fully implemented, we selected alternative C as the best balance of meeting these and wildlife/habitat protection needs. However, continuing to manage the refuge primarily as a wildlife sanctuary would minimize impacts on biological and physical resources. Although alternative A would also minimize these impacts, alternative B is environmentally preferable because it would include reintroduction of black footed ferrets and other native prairie species.

Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm

Throughout the planning process, we took into account all practicable measures to avoid or minimize environmental impacts that could result from implementation of alternative C. These measures include the following:

- Continue maintaining solar power production and recycling efforts; increase energy efficiency; and adopt other ways to reduce the refuge's carbon footprint.
- Collaborate with EPA, Tri-County Health Department, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, adjacent communities, and other partners to monitor ground and surface water flow levels and quality throughout the life of the plan.
- Minimize emissions and particulates by following best management practices when using motorized equipment and conducting restoration activities. Prescribed fire would be carried out under the approved FMP and stringent smoke management plans. The application and timing of prescribed fire

would be considered in reducing smoke exposure to residents and workers in adjoining communities and wildlife mortality, particularly during breeding seasons.

- Plan carefully in locating and building visitor facilities, office and maintenance buildings, bunkhouses, trails, kiosks, or road improvements would minimize disturbance, particularly during critical breeding periods. Controlling the numbers of ungulates, use of fencing, and management of water structures are measures that we would incorporate into the plan.
- Use best management practices during construction activities, excavation of cultural resources, and the development of visitor services structures or facilities and other refuge infrastructure. Limit disturbing soils during dry or windy periods, using erosion controls, properly maintaining roads and culverts, and using the minimal tools necessary to accomplish the objective.

Design all new facilities, including buildings, roads, and trails, to limit their visual impact on the landscape, including reducing light pollution. Site any new use of alternative energy structures (solar panels) to limit visual impacts.

Where possible, use the following principles to minimize impacts of refuge roads and trails:

- locate roads and trails away from streams and riparian areas;
- locate roads and trails away from steep slopes and erosive soils;
- provide adequate drainage and control of erosion to avoid routing sediment into streams; and
- design roads around natural drainage patterns.
- Minimize human disturbance from habitat management activities and visitor services during the nesting season to limit impacts on biological resources. Measures could include (for example) increased visitor education, monitoring, law enforcement, and seasonal closures.
- Review any mitigation requirements for any unavoidable adverse effects on historic properties resulting from our actions

through Section 106 of the NHPA. This process will be guided by the Service's cultural resource staff in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office and other consulting parties and obtaining all required permits as necessary.

Consultation Requirements: Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act

Several species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act have a historical range that encompasses the refuge. These species were documented through an Intra-Service Section 7 Consultation. These federally listed species are black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*), Mexican spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*), Colorado butterfly plant (*Gaura neomexicana coloradensis*), Ute ladies'-tresses orchid (*Spiranthes diluvialis*) and Preble's meadow jumping mouse (*Zapus hudsonius preblei*).

Surveys for these species have failed to locate any individuals of these species on the refuge. The refuge does not lie within designated critical habitat for any of these listed species.

The refuge intends to reintroduce black-footed ferrets to the black-tailed prairie dog colonies present on the refuge in early fall 2015. The black-footed ferrets to be reintroduced have been designated a non-essential population by the Service.

The Intra-Service consultation concluded that our preferred alternative (C) may affect, and is likely to adversely affect, only the black-footed ferret. Accordingly, the Service's Colorado Field Office (CFO) issued a Biological Opinion that describes likely sources of the adverse effects on the ferrets and contains an incidental take statement, reasonable and prudent measures, and conservation recommendations to minimize or avoid the impacts of the incidental take of black-footed ferrets.

There are also federally listed species whose range includes the Platte River area in Nebraska, and that could be indirectly affected by upstream water depletions in the watershed of the Platte River. These species include the whooping crane (*Grus Americana*) and the piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*).

Currently, there are no proposed or candidate species found on or near the refuge.

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act

All the Service-managed lands within the boundary of the refuge have been surveyed for cultural and historical resources. Accordingly, activities outlined under alternative C have almost no 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. Nevertheless, prior to any undertaking that would be subject to Section 106 of the NHPA, activities that could negatively affect cultural resources would be reviewed and options for minimizing negative effects would be discussed prior to implementation of the preferred alternative. This process would include entering into consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer and other parties as appropriate. We will continue to protect all known cultural resources sites.

Protection of Wetlands and Riparian Areas

Activities outlined under alternative C are aimed at restoring native prairie and shrubland habitats and sustaining wetland and riparian habitats on the refuge. We will continue to manage wetlands to promote native emergent species, provide opportunistic benefits to wetland-dependent wildlife, and maintain spawning grounds for forage fish. We will treat cat-tails when 80 percent or more of shorelines are covered with them within 30 feet of the shoreline.

We will inventory and sustain riparian corridors, and will allow for the natural hydrology of the site to run its course so as to avoid altering surface flows within the refuge.

These strategies are expected to help preserve the long-term function and productivity of wetland and riparian habitats and to promote communities that are ecologically resilient to climatic and hydrologic changes.

We will incorporate applicable regulatory compliance, such as wetland permitting, as appropriate into any reservoir maintenance efforts.

Finding and Basis for Decision

We have considered the environmental and relevant concerns presented by agencies, tribes, organizations, and individuals on the proposed action to develop the final EIS and implement a CCP for the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

Alternative C was selected for implementation because it achieves a reasonable balance between significant resource management issues; the purposes, missions, and management policies of the Service; and the interests and perspectives of all stakeholders.

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



Noreen Walsh
Regional Director, Region 6
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Lakewood, Colorado

Date

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