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# Record of Decision for the Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

*Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge  
UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge*

July 2012

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## INTRODUCTION

This record of decision provides the basis for management decisions for the final comprehensive conservation plan and environmental impact statement for Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge (together, “the refuge”), Montana. We, the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) manage these two national wildlife refuges as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge lies within Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge; these two units are managed cohesively as one refuge. Unless otherwise specified in this record of decision, they are referred to as Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. As part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge is managed for wildlife conservation above all else.

The comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) was prepared along with an environmental impact statement (EIS) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act and relevant planning policies. We published a notice of availability for the final CCP and EIS in the Federal Register on May 7, 2012 (FR 77 (88):26781–84).

In preparing the final CCP and EIS, we worked closely with several cooperating agencies and partners including: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Bureau of Land Management; Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; Montana Department of Natural Resources; counties of Fergus, Petroleum, Garfield, McCone, Valley, and Phillips; and Missouri River Conservation Districts council (for the six districts that surround the refuge). Other tribal governments, Federal, State and local agencies, non-governmental organizations, and individuals contributed input to the plan.

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## REFUGE BACKGROUND

The planning area is located in Fergus, Petroleum, Garfield, McCone, Valley, and Phillips Counties in Montana. The refuge headquarters is in Lewistown, Montana. Encompassing nearly 1.1 million acres, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge is one of the largest refuges in the lower 48 States. It extends west about 125 air miles along the Missouri River from Fort Peck Dam to the refuge’s western edge at the boundary of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument.

Refuge habitat includes native prairie, forested coulees, river bottoms, and badlands. Wildlife is as diverse as the topography and includes Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorn, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, sharp-tailed grouse, prairie dogs, endangered black-footed ferrets, and over 236 species of birds.

More than 250,000 visitors take part in a variety of wildlife-dependent recreational activities every year. In particular, the refuge is renowned for its outstanding hunting opportunities. Other visitors enjoy viewing and photographing wildlife along the refuge’s extensive network of roads. The Fort Peck Interpretive Center showcases many exhibits. Still others enjoy fishing along the Missouri River.

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## PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PLAN

The purpose of this final CCP and EIS is to identify actions necessary to accomplish the purposes of both refuges, identify the role the refuges will play in support of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and to provide long-term guidance for management of refuge programs and activities.

The CCP is needed:

- to communicate with the public and other partners in efforts to carry out the mission of the National Wildlife 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 the Service's management actions are consistent with the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997;
- to ensure that management of the refuge considers other Federal, State, and county plans;
- to provide a basis for development of budget requests for the operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs of the refuge.

We are committed to sustaining 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, Charles M. Russell and UL Bend National Wildlife Refuges are administered under the National Wildlife Refuge System.

*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.*

## REFUGE PURPOSES

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

In 1936, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order 7509 for the following purpose:

"That the natural forage resources therein shall be first utilized for the purpose of sustaining in a healthy condition a maximum of four hundred thousand (400,000) sharp-tailed grouse, and one thousand five hundred (1,500) antelope, the primary species, and such nonpredatory secondary species in such numbers as may be necessary to maintain a balanced wildlife population, but in no case shall the consumption of the forage by the combined population of the wildlife species be allowed to increase the burden of the range dedicated to the primary species: Provided further, That all the forage resources within

this range or preserve shall be available, except as herein otherwise provided with respect to wildlife, for domestic livestock...And provided further, That land within the exterior limits of the area herein described...may be utilized for public grazing purposes only to the extent as may be determined by the said Secretary (Agriculture) to be compatible with the utilization of said lands for the purposes for which they were acquired."

UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1969 "for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds" (16 U.S.C. 715d, Migratory Bird Conservation Act).

Other lands within both refuges subsequently have been acquired under a variety of transfer and acquisition authorities or have different designations including designated and proposed wilderness, giving both refuges more than one purpose.

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## VISION

At the beginning of the planning process, we developed a vision for the refuge that describes the focus of refuge management and portrays a picture of the refuge in 15 years:

*Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge's expansive badlands, cottonwood river bottoms, old-growth forested coulees, sagebrush steppes, and mixed-grass prairies appear out of the sea that is the northern Great Plains.*

*Encompassing more than a million acres, the refuge affords visitors solitude, serenity, and unique opportunities to experience natural settings and wildlife similar to what Native Americans and, later, Lewis and Clark observed. The diversity of plant and animal communities found on the refuge stretch from the high prairie through the rugged breaks, along the Missouri River, and across Fort Peck Reservoir. The refuge is an outstanding example of a functioning, resilient, and intact landscape in an ever-changing West.*

*Working together with our neighbors and partners, the Service employs adaptive management rooted in science to protect and improve the biological integrity, biological diversity, and environmental health of the refuge's wildlife and habitat resources.*

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## MANAGEMENT GOALS

We developed eight goals for the refuge based on the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997

and the refuge purposes, and we refined these goals as the planning process progressed. The goals direct work toward achieving the vision and purposes of the refuge and outline approaches for managing refuge resources.

## **HABITAT CONSERVATION**

Conserve, restore, and improve the biological integrity, environmental health, and ecological diversity of the refuge's plant and animal communities of the Missouri river Breaks and surrounding prairies to support healthy populations of native populations of native plants and wildlife in a changing climate. Working with others, reduce and control the spread of nondesirable, nonnative, invasive plant and aquatic species for the benefit of native communities on and off the refuge.

## **THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES AND SPECIES OF CONCERN**

Contribute to the identification, preservation, and recovery of threatened and endangered species and species of concern that occur or have historically occurred in the northern Great Plains.

## **RESEARCH AND SCIENCE**

Advance the understanding of natural resources, ecological processes, and the effectiveness of management actions in a changing climate in the northern Great Plains through compatible scientific investigations, monitoring, and applied research.

## **FIRE MANAGEMENT**

Manage wildland fire using a management response that promotes fire's natural role in shaping the landscape while protecting values at risk.

## **PUBLIC USE AND EDUCATION**

Provide all visitors quality education, recreation, and outreach opportunities that are appropriate and compatible with the purpose and goals of the refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System while maintaining the remote and primitive experience unique to the refuge.

## **WILDERNESS**

Conserve, improve, and promote the wilderness character and associated natural processes of designated and proposed wilderness areas and wilderness study areas within the refuge for all generations.

## **CULTURAL AND PALEONTOLOGICAL RESOURCES**

Identify, value, and preserve the significant paleontological and cultural resources of the refuge to connect refuge staff, visitors, and the community to the area's prehistoric and historic past.

## **REFUGE OPERATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS**

Through effective communication and innovative use of technology and resources, the refuge uses funding, personnel, partnerships, and volunteer programs for the benefit of natural resources while recognizing the social and economic connection of the refuge to adjacent communities.

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## **SIGNIFICANT ISSUES**

In the EIS, we disclosed the effects of four management alternatives that were developed to address significant issues, which were derived from the scoping process. The significant issues in the final CCP and EIS include:

- habitat and wildlife
- water resources
- public use and access
- wilderness
- socioeconomics
- partnerships and collaboration
- cultural values, traditions, and resources

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## **DECISION (Alternative D)**

We select to implement Alternative D—Ecological Processes Emphasis. This alternative is selected for management because it will enable the Service to use natural, dynamic, ecological processes and management activities in a balanced responsible manner to restore and maintain the biological diversity, biological integrity, and environmental health of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and the UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge. Once natural processes are restored, a more passive approach (less human assistance) will be favored. There will be quality wildlife-dependent public uses and experiences. Economic uses will be limited when they are injurious to ecological processes.

Alternative D addresses the significant management issues raised during the planning process. This alternative best meets the purposes of the refuges,

the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the vision and management goals set for the refuge while adhering to the management policies of the Service. Additionally, this alternative balances the interests and perspectives of many agencies, organizations, tribes, and the public.

Alternative D was revised from the proposed action in the draft CCP and EIS after our consideration of many comments received from agencies, tribes, other stakeholder organizations, and the public, many of whom supported this approach, during the comment period.

The key actions of alternative D follow:

- We will apply management practices that mimic and restore natural processes on the refuge to manage for a diversity of plant species and wildlife species in uplands, riparian areas, and river bottoms. This will involve a concerted manipulation of habitats or wildlife populations (using prescribed fire, grazing, hunting, and other tools) through coordinated objectives. Management will evolve toward more passive approaches that allow natural processes such as fire, grazing, and flooding to occur with less human aid or money.
  - We will maintain plant diversity and health using fire in combination with wild ungulate herbivory or prescriptive livestock grazing, or both, to ensure the viability of populations of sentinel plants (those plant species that decline first when management practices are injurious). Prescriptive livestock grazing will be implemented across 50–75 percent of the refuge within 6–9 years. We will communicate with permittees as new habitat management plans are developed.
  - In collaboration with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and others, we will maintain the health and diversity of all species' populations—including focal birds, migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, species of concern, game species, and nongame species—by restoring and maintaining balanced, self-sustaining populations. This could include manipulating livestock grazing and wildlife numbers, or both, if habitat monitoring determined conditions were declining or plant species were being affected by overuse. Predators will be managed to benefit the ecological integrity of the refuge. Limited hunting for mountain lion or other furbearers or predators will be considered only after monitoring verified that population levels could be sustained with a hunt.
  - If the State of Montana moves forward with a plan to restore wild bison in Montana, we will cooperate with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; conservation organizations; and others to conduct the necessary biological, social, and economic research to determine the feasibility of restoration for wild bison on the surrounding landscape. Before any wild bison reintroduction could proceed, we would work with others to complete a cooperative wild bison management plan developed and agreed-on by all involved parties. A wild bison plan would address population objectives and management, movement of animals outside restoration areas, genetic conservation and management, disease management, and conflict-resolution procedures.
- We will cooperate with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks to provide hunting experiences that keep game levels that meet or exceed State objectives, sustain ecological health, and provide opportunities not found on other public lands. We will develop cooperative programs with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks for monitoring big game populations and habitat. During development of habitat management plans, we will establish population levels, sex and age composition targets, and harvest strategies that are jointly agreed to and tailored to the varied habitat potential on the refuge. To provide a variety of quality recreational opportunities, hunting regulations will include population objectives with diverse male age structures not generally managed for on other public lands.
  - Refuge access will be managed primarily to benefit natural processes, but some improvements will be made to provide quality visitor experiences. Initially, we will close about 21 miles of roads, implement a seasonal closure along 2.4 miles of road 315 (Petroleum County), and designate 13 miles of roads on the northeast side of the refuge as game retrieval roads where seasonal closures will be applied. Other closures or modifications could be necessary after further review of the road program. This will encourage free movement of wildlife, permit prescribed fire or wild-fire suppression, and increase effective harvest of wild ungulates. Additionally, we will consider (1) upgrading about 5 miles of roads to all-weather access (gravel) to allow for additional winter fishing access, and (2) adding trails, viewing blinds, and a science interpretive center to expand opportunities for quality wildlife observation, interpretation, and environmental education.
  - We will expand or adjust existing proposed wilderness units by 19,942 acres in Alkali Creek, Antelope Creek, Crooked Creek, East Seven Blackfoot, Mickey Butte, Sheep Creek, Wagon Coulee, and West Hell Creek. UL Bend Wilderness Area will remain protected.

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## OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The final CCP and EIS evaluated two other action alternatives and the no-action alternative.

### ALTERNATIVE A: NO ACTION

Few changes would occur in the management of existing wildlife populations and habitat. Wildlife-dependent public uses and economic uses would continue at current levels. Key actions of alternative A follow:

- There would be a continued emphasis on big game management, annual livestock grazing, use of fencing for pastures, invasive species control, and water development. Habitat would continue to be managed in the 65 habitat units that the Bureau of Land Management established for livestock grazing purposes. Prescriptive grazing would be implemented gradually as units became available and habitat evaluations were completed (anticipated to be 50-percent implemented by year 15).
- Big game would be managed to achieve target levels as described in a 1986 record of decision on an earlier environmental impact statement for resource management.
- Select stock ponds would be maintained and rehabilitated. Riparian habitat would be restored where possible, and standard watershed management practices would be enforced.
- Access would be allowed on 670 miles of refuge roads.
- About 155,288 acres of proposed wilderness within 15 units of the Charles M. Russell Refuge would be managed in accordance with Service policy. UL Bend Wilderness Area would be protected.

Alternative A was not selected for implementation, because it would not meet the goals of the CCP for habitat and wildlife management. The continuation of existing management objectives and strategies would not restore biological integrity, environmental health, or ecological diversity (a primary element in the vision for the refuge) nor would it enable the refuge to manage wildlife and habitat in a comprehensive manner as was intended by the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. There would be continued emphasis on managing wildlife habitats within the confines of the 65 habitat units that were originally established for domestic grazing purposes and not for wildlife. This alternative would only partially satisfy the goals for threatened and endangered species and species of concern, research and science, fire management, public use

and education, wilderness, and refuge operations and partnerships.

Although alternative A would continue the transition toward implementing prescriptive fire and grazing strategies, it would largely maintain the current management emphasis of fire suppression and annual livestock grazing. The Great Plains evolved through a complex interaction of fire and grazing, and the continued emphasis on constant grazing and fire suppression across the uplands would greatly limit the composition, structure, and function of vegetation, resulting in the continued loss of plant diversity and habitat function. Although the gradual transition toward implementing prescriptive grazing over annual grazing has resulted in some minor benefits in localized areas across the refuge, these benefits have not resulted in a recovery of sentinel plants and may be offset by increases in native ungulates.

There would be few specific strategies undertaken to restore riparian areas and wetlands outside of what is currently done (keeping livestock away from riparian areas where possible and limited invasive species control). The continued transition toward implementing prescriptive grazing would result in minor incremental benefits to the overall health of riparian areas; however, localized sites would continue to experience a negative trend. Similarly, the continued use of water impoundments under this alternative would result in minor long-term impacts to riparian areas.

Alternative A would meet basic elements of the threatened, endangered, and species of concern goal. However, it would only maintain or continue existing efforts toward recovery or monitoring of special status species with limited efforts made at increasing protection efforts for special status species. Similarly, existing research programs would continue but would not increase.

There would not be a designated staff member to support public use and education. There would continue to be limited environmental education opportunities and few improvements for nonconsumptive, wildlife-dependent users.

Alternative A would maintain the status quo for wilderness protection but would not improve or promote these qualities on the refuge. This alternative would satisfy the goal for cultural and paleontological resource protection. We would continue to work with many partnership organizations; however, there would not be a volunteer program or the ability to increase conservation strategies across the landscape.

Some stakeholder agencies, organizations, and the public expressed support for all or elements of alternative A, primarily because it would maintain the emphasis on annual livestock grazing, wildland fire suppression, stock pond management, and inte-

rior fencing. Many oppose road closures, increases in wilderness protection, potential bison restoration, species reintroductions, and an increase in predators on the refuge. However, many stakeholders and the public did not support a continuation of existing management on the refuge and were emphatic about the need to manage the refuge for wildlife purposes.

## **ALTERNATIVE B: WILDLIFE POPULATION EMPHASIS**

We would manage the landscape, in cooperation with our partners, to emphasize the abundance of wildlife populations using balanced natural ecological processes such as fire and herbivory by wild ungulates and responsible farming practices and tree planting. Wildlife-dependent public use would be encouraged, and economic uses would be limited when they compete for habitat resources.

We would actively manipulate habitat, thus creating a diverse plant community of highly productive wildlife food and cover. The management emphasis would be on habitat for target wildlife species, including focal bird species, in separate parts of the refuge. We would consolidate the 65 habitat units and write new habitat management plans based on field station boundaries and habitat evaluation for target species. We would work with others to develop methods to monitor and evaluate target or focal species and habitat needs. Prescriptive grazing would be implemented across 50–75 percent of the refuge within 4–7 years.

We would close about 106 miles of roads and would work with partners to develop a travel management plan and to secure access to the refuge through other lands.

We would expand or adjust by 25,869 acres the existing proposed wilderness units: Alkali Creek, Antelope Creek, Crooked Creek, East Seven Blackfoot, Mickey Butte, Sheep Creek, Wagon Coulee, West Beauchamp Creek, and West Hell Creek.

Alternative B was not selected for implementation. The overall effects on habitat quality, biological integrity, and ecological resilience (health) would vary geographically based on the target and focal species and the management tools that were used. This management approach would improve habitat conditions and habitat function, although maximizing wildlife populations would not necessarily improve biological diversity, biological integrity, or environmental health across the refuge. For example, potential increases in elk populations or invasive species could offset benefits in riparian areas, depending on livestock management and the interactions between wild and domestic ungulates and riparian habitat. Maximizing big game populations would likely necessitate further reductions in live-

stock grazing to reduce competition and to provide adequate forage and space for native ungulates without adversely affecting habitat quality and conditions for other wildlife species.

The closing of 106 miles of roads would have many benefits for wildlife security as well as for those hunters who desire more roadless hunting opportunities, but it could also limit harvest effectiveness in some locations or have other unintended consequences on access.

Alternative B would add one outdoor recreation planner, which would enable the refuge to improve visitor services over current conditions, but it would still be limited and would not increase wildlife-dependent public uses or environmental education programs to any degree. Visitation would likely remain stagnant over 15 years.

A large number of stakeholder organizations and the public expressed support for alternative B, primarily because of its emphasis on maximizing wildlife populations, increasing wilderness protection, and closing of 106 miles of roads. However, many local citizens and agencies oppose any road closures and many of the objectives and strategies in alternative B.

## **ALTERNATIVE C: PUBLIC USE AND ECONOMIC USE EMPHASIS**

We would manage the landscape in cooperation with our partners to emphasize and promote the maximum, compatible, wildlife-dependent public use and economic uses while protecting wildlife populations and habitats to the extent possible. Damaging effects on wildlife habitats would be minimized by using a variety of management tools to enhance and diversify public and economic opportunities.

Alternative C was not selected for implementation; while it would enable us to take some steps toward improving existing conditions, it would only minimize damaging effects in other localized areas. It would not restore biological integrity, environmental health, or ecological diversity. Furthermore, this alternative would not advance the understanding of ecological processes or promote fire's natural role. With increased staff levels for outdoor recreation planners, the refuge could provide more visitors educational, interpretive, and recreational opportunities, although the emphasis would be on moderate increases in visitor numbers and not necessarily an emphasis on providing quality experiences.

As with alternative A, alternative C would maintain the status quo for wilderness protection, but it would not promote additional wilderness protection. Therefore, this alternative would not fully satisfy the goal for wilderness.

Alternative C would fully satisfy the goals for cultural and paleontological resources and an increase in partnerships across the landscape.

Some stakeholder agency or organizations and the public expressed support for some elements of alternative C but, overall, it was not widely supported by agencies, organizations, or the public. Many organizations and stakeholders felt it went too far in providing for economic uses, in spite of the fact that all public and economic uses are subject to compatibility requirements.

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## **TRIBAL INVOLVEMENT AND CONSULTATION**

At the start of the planning process in 2007, we sent notification letters including an invitation to participate on the CCP planning team to the following tribes: Arapahoe Business Council, Chippewa Cree Tribe, Crow Tribal Council, Fort Belknap Tribal Council, Fort Peck Tribal Council, and Northern Cheyenne Tribe. In early July 2009, we reached out to several of the closest tribes to the refuge—Fort Peck Tribes and Fort Belknap Tribes—and made arrangements to initiate government-to-government consultation (July 8–9, 2009). Subsequently, we advised the Fort Peck Tribes and the Fort Belknap Tribes on the important aspects of the plan. During the comment period for the draft CCP and EIS, a representative from the Fort Peck Tribes attended a public hearing held in Glasgow, Montana (October 2010), and we also received comments from the Fort Peck Tribes on the draft CCP and EIS.

On June 5–6, 2012, we continued our government-to-government consultation process with the Fort Peck Tribes and the Fort Belknap Tribes for briefing the tribes about important aspects of the final CCP and EIS.

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## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND OUTREACH**

The formal scoping period began on December 4, 2007, with the publication of a notice of intent in the Federal Register (FR72 (232):68174–76). Before this and early in the preplanning phase, we outlined a process that would be inclusive of diverse stakeholder interests and would involve a range of activities for keeping the public informed and ensuring meaningful public input. This process was summarized in a planning update titled Public Involvement Summary (October 2007). Soon after, we created a project Web site,

and six additional planning updates and other project information have been added to the Web site. We have mailed all planning updates to the project mailing list.

During the initial scoping period, we received nearly 24,000 written responses. Hundreds of people attended seven public meetings across Montana and provided many verbal comments.

In the fall of 2008, we again reached out to the public and the cooperating agencies and sought additional input on four potential draft alternatives before fully developing and analyzing these alternatives. We held seven additional public meetings during this time and received hundreds of additional written and oral responses.

### **COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT PLAN AND EIS**

A notice of availability for the draft CCP and EIS was published in the Federal Register on September 7, 2010 (FR75 (172): 54381–84) announcing the availability of the draft CCP and draft EIS, our intention to hold public meetings, and a request for comments. We published another notice in the Federal Register on November 1, 2010 (FR75 (210):67095), extending the comment period by 24 days to December 10, 2010. We held seven public meetings on the draft CCP and EIS. During the subsequent comment period, we received 20,600 letters, emails, or verbal comments. All substantive issues raised in the comments were addressed in volume 2 of the final CCP and EIS.

### **COMMENTS ON THE FINAL PLAN AND EIS**

The notice of availability for the final CCP and EIS was published in the Federal Register on May 7, 2012 (FR77 (88): 26781–84). Subsequently, the Environmental Protection Agency published on May 18, 2012, its list of the environmental impact statements filed the previous week, and the 30-day waiting period ended on June 18, 2012.

We received one letter from the Environmental Protection Agency and one individual comment about the changes made to the final CCP and EIS and about the responses to comments.

### **SUMMARY OF COMMENTS**

In general, we received support for the changes that were made in the final CCP and EIS. The only new concern raised was whether alternative B was the environmentally preferred alternative, which we discuss below.

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## ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE

The environmentally preferable alternative is defined as the “alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in section 101 of the National Environmental Policy Act. 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). We believe Alternative D—Ecological Processes Emphasis is the environmentally preferable alternative.

The primary focus of alternative D is to restore and maintain the biological diversity, biological integrity, and environmental health of the refuge. This alternative will promote ecological resilience, restore pyric herbivory, promote animal movement with long periods of abandonment, increase landscape species and structure heterogeneity, and improve wildlife diversity. This will be accomplished by (1) writing new habitat management plans including inventory and monitoring plans based on soil characteristics, historical fire occurrence, and hunting district boundaries; and (2) monitoring the focal bird species found on the uplands, river bottoms, riparian areas, and wetlands of the refuge. There will be increased efforts to reduce invasive species and restore degraded riparian areas. We will increase wilderness protection on 19,942 acres, initially close 21 miles of roads, and seasonally close 15 miles of roads if needed to protect wildlife. We will work with others to restore or establish new populations of species like Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep.

Alternative B shares many similar, if not identical, strategies as alternative D for improving habitat for wildlife populations. Nonetheless, there are several key differences in management approaches. Alternative D emphasizes the importance of building diverse and healthy habitats, which in turn should provide for diverse and abundant wildlife populations, whereas, under alternative B, we would target key wildlife species together with maximizing an abundance of wildlife.

Some aspects of alternative B could be considered to be more environmentally preferable than under alternative D. For example, more roads would be closed (106 miles versus 21 miles in alternative D), and more acres of wilderness would be protected (25,869 acres versus 19,942 acres in alternative D). Alternative B would also implement prescriptive

grazing in a faster timeframe (4–7 years versus 6–9 years in alternative D); therefore, riparian areas could be restored at a slightly more aggressive rate (85 percent of the streams versus 75 percent in alternative D). However, with some exceptions, most of the roads found on the refuge are two-track roads that are lightly used, most often during hunting season. Therefore, closing roads may not equate to substantially less impact. Many areas of the refuge are inaccessible during the winter months or prolonged wet periods. None of the more heavily used roads (all-season gravel) would be closed under any of the action alternatives. By taking a slower approach to closing roads as identified under alternative D, we believe it will enable the refuge to achieve many of the same objectives as in alternative B for protecting habitat and wildlife. We will begin by developing a step-down transportation plan that includes monitoring boat use on the river, increasing wildlife security, and addressing future access needs. If future road closures are necessary, either through permanent or seasonal closures, we will have better information to make those determinations.

Conversely, we believe the magnitude of negative effects has the potential to be greater under alternative B than under alternative D. Maximizing wildlife populations in alternative B would not necessarily increase biological diversity, integrity, and environmental health nor would it increase the resiliency of the refuge due to climate change, drought, and invasive species. Although careful management of wild ungulates under alternative B should benefit habitat conditions overall if the objectives and strategies were implemented successfully, it could also result in minor to moderate negative effects due to overgrazing by all ungulates. Closing roads could have negative effects, particularly in riparian areas, if harvest objectives were not met. The attraction of wild ungulates to these areas could add to any negative effects that have occurred in the past. Overbrowsing by all ungulates, both domestic livestock and wild ungulates, has been found to negate efforts to restore riparian and wetland health on the refuge. In addition, the planting of nonnative monoculture crops to restore the river bottoms in alternative B could reduce the plant diversity in some areas in the river bottoms, limiting or reducing the availability of diverse habitats for some wildlife species.

### MEASURES TO MINIMIZE ENVIRONMENTAL HARM

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

- To reduce the refuge's carbon footprint (carbon emissions), we will use strategies such as driving fuel-efficient vehicles, considering more road closures, upgrading offices to make them more energy-efficient, conducting more teleconferences, and recycling.
- We will minimize emissions and particulates by following the best management practices when using motorized equipment and conducting restoration activities. Reducing fuel buildup and restoring a more natural fire regime will reduce the risk of larger wildfires.
- Successful revegetation in the river bottoms and restoration of closed roads will reduce the effects of invasive species.
- Prescribed fire will be carried out under an approved fire plan and stringent smoke management plans. We will consider the application and timing of prescribed fire to reduce wildlife mortality, particularly during breeding seasons. Limiting the use of prescribed fire during drought conditions and using ignition techniques that lessen the intensity of the burn (small spot fires) will reduce soil erosion following fires.
- We will reduce potential negative effects on water quality by limiting the amount of bare soil using soil erosion barriers, limiting the use of herbicides, hardening popular public use areas, and implementing a prescriptive fire and grazing program.
- Careful planning in locating and building visitor facilities or road improvements will minimize disturbances to wildlife, particularly during critical breeding periods. Undertaking further studies to fully assess the effects of boating and fishing along the Missouri River will enable us to find ways to work with partners to reduce disturbances to threatened and endangered species and species of concern including many bird species.
- Moving toward a greater reliance on prescriptive grazing will enable us to fully assess the effects on plants by all ungulates. Soil erosion and impacts to water quality will be lessened with lighter grazing levels, limiting livestock grazing during the hot season, and fencing livestock out of riparian areas. The plan will incorporate the following measures: (1) controlling the numbers of domestic and wild ungulates; (2) using fire to move ungulates to other areas; (3) making reductions in livestock grazing; (4) expanding boundary fencing; (5) removing fencing, and (6) managing water structures. These actions will also benefit other species of concern including greater sage-grouse and Sprague's pipit.
- Permittees for paleontological excavations will be required to reclaim areas.
- Mitigation measures for cultural resources will be addressed with the State Historic Preservation Office if required as a result of an undertaking.

## **CONSULTATION REQUIREMENTS: SECTION 7 OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT**

Several wildlife species with populations or habitat on the refuge are listed as threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act or are candidate species being considered for listing. These species were documented through an intra-Service section 7 consultation. Three endangered species—black-footed ferret, least tern, and pallid sturgeon—and the threatened piping plover are found on the refuge. Two species, the endangered whooping crane and the threatened grizzly bear, are not found on the refuge but have been found nearby: (1) whooping cranes migrate through McCone, Valley, and Phillips Counties; and (2) several grizzly bears found on the east side of the Rocky Mountain Front have ventured toward the Missouri River corridor. Candidate species are greater sage-grouse and Sprague's pipit. The intra-Service consultation concluded that the preferred alternative (D) may affect but is not likely to adversely affect any protected species. Similarly, the preferred alternative may affect but is not likely to jeopardize candidate or proposed species or critical habitat for greater sage-grouse or Sprague's pipit.

## **SECTION 106 OF THE NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT**

Activities outlined in alternative D have the potential to negatively affect cultural resources, either by direct disturbance during construction of habitat projects and facilities related to public use or administrative operations or indirectly by exposing cultural and historic artifacts during management activities such as habitat restoration or prescribed burning. Before any undertaking that is subject to section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, activities that could negatively affect cultural resources will be identified. Options for minimizing negative effects will be discussed before implementation of the preferred alternative including entering into consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer and other parties as appropriate. We will protect all known gravesites.

## **PROTECTION OF RIPARIAN AREAS AND WETLANDS**

Many of the refuge's streams and riparian areas have seen improvements in overall health and function since 1995, when the University of Montana's

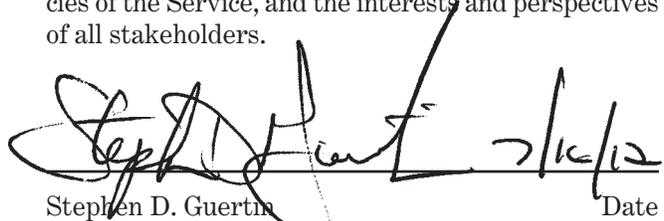
Riparian and Wetland Research Program evaluated riparian areas. However, not all riparian areas have improved equally, and problems remain. Activities outlined in alternative D are aimed at restoring several riparian areas and wetlands that were identified as nonfunctioning or functioning at risk during the most recent study completed by Ecological Solutions Group in 2009. Restoration measures will vary depending on the conditions and trends of riparian habitat. Most management actions identified in the preferred alternative (D) will provide many benefits and improvements to degraded riparian areas: establishing stream gauges on the refuge; restoring eroded streambanks; planting vegetation; fencing riparian areas; reducing livestock grazing or wild ungulate grazing in these areas; reducing invasive species; and restoring the function of streams that were once perennial. When water right issues for the refuge have been fully adjudicated (outside the scope of this record of decision) and the stock ponds provide no other wildlife benefit, we will eliminate stock ponds that are negatively affecting riparian areas downstream and are reducing the flow regime. We will incorporate applicable regulatory compliance such as wetland permitting and dam safety into any stock pond removal efforts.

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## FINDING AND BASIS FOR DECISION

I have considered the environmental and relevant concerns presented by agencies, tribes, organizations, and individuals on the proposed action to develop and implement a comprehensive conservation plan for Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge. The substantive issues and comments raised have been addressed in the final CCP and EIS. Comments and responses on the final CCP and EIS are addressed above.

Based on the above information, I have selected alternative D for implementation, because it achieves a reasonable balance between significant resource management issues, the refuge purposes, National Wildlife Refuge System mission, management policies of the Service, and the interests and perspectives of all stakeholders.



The image shows a handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Stephen D. Guertin". To the right of the signature, the date "7/16/12" is written. A horizontal line is drawn across the page, passing through the signature and the date.

Stephen D. Guertin  
Regional Director, Region 6  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Lakewood, Colorado

Date

