CHAPTER 2—The Districts

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Wildlife protection is a priority of district management.

Every unit of the Refuge System has a purpose for which it was established. This purpose is the foundation upon which all programs are built, from biology and public use to maintenance and facilities. No action that the Service or the public takes may conflict with this purpose. The goals, objectives, and strategies identified in this CCP are intended to support the purposes for which each district was established.

A wetland management district provides oversight for all of the Service's small land tracts in a multicounty area. The three districts manage 445 WPAs (100,094 acres) and more than 1 million acres of conservation easements in 25 counties in South Dakota. These district lands (totaling 1,136,965 acres) are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, a network of lands set aside to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitat.

The Service purchases WPAs with funds generated from the sale of Federal Duck Stamps to protect and restore waterfowl habitat. These areas are managed primarily for the production of migratory birds. Conservation easements, also purchased using Duck Stamp funds, are on private lands where landowners have sold some of their property rights to the Service for protection and restoration of wildlife habitat.

This chapter describes the history, special values, purposes, vision, goals, and planning issues for the three South Dakota districts.

2.1 Establishment, Acquisition, and Management History

The Huron, Madison, and Sand Lake WMDs were established with the major objectives of wetland preservation, waterfowl and wildlife production, and maintenance of breeding grounds for migratory birds. The districts also provide a northern staging area and habitat for migration.

Habitat protection

The Service manages the WPAs for the benefit of waterfowl, other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and resident wildlife. The districts protect habitat primarily with two tools—WPAs and conservation easements—briefly described below.

- WPAs are public lands purchased by the Federal Government for increasing the production of migratory birds, especially waterfowl. The purchase of land is also known as "ownership in fee title," where the Federal Government holds ownership of land on behalf of the American public. Money to buy WPA lands generally comes from the sale

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Mallard drakes in flight.

of Federal Duck Stamps. This important program was developed to ensure the long-term protection of waterfowl and other migratory bird breeding habitat, primarily in the Prairie Pothole Region of the northern Great Plains (figure 3). All WPAs are within districts managed by Service staff. WPAs are open to the public for hunting, fishing, bird watching, trapping, hiking, and most other nonmotorized and noncommercial outdoor recreation. (Recreational trapping has been authorized by 50 CFR part 31.16.)

- Conservation easements are acquired to protect migratory bird species habitat on private land. Typically used where acquisition in fee title is not desirable or needed, perpetual easements are bought from willing landowners within a wetland management district. Conservation easements have several advantages over the outright purchase of lands by the Service. First, they are more cost effective in terms of both initial purchase and long-term management responsibilities. While conservation easement contracts do require attentive enforcement to ensure their integrity, they do not carry the other burdens of ownership—for example, maintenance of facilities such as fences and signs, control of invasive plants, and mowing of ditches. Second, the operator owns and manages the land in much the same way as was done before the conservation easement purchase. The program was developed and carried out by managers, biologists, and realty specialists with an interest in protecting resources at the landscape scale while minimally affecting, and even complementing, other agricultural practices. A single-habitat conservation easement is often referred to as either a "wetland easement" or a "grassland easement." Wetland easements generally prohibit draining, burning, and leveling. Grassland easements generally prohibit the cultivation of grassland habitat, while still permitting the landowner traditional grazing uses.

The Service initially focused only on the protection of wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region. However, data also revealed the importance of upland grasslands to successful nesting of waterfowl. With the continued conversion of grassland to cropland and consistent declines in the populations of grassland-dependent birds, the need to protect adjacent grassland habitats became evident. Like a wetland easement, a grassland easement transfers limited perpetual rights to the Service for a one-time, lump-sum payment. The purpose of a grassland easement is to prevent the conversion of grassland to cropland while minimally restricting existing agricultural practices. More specifically, the purposes of the grassland easement are to improve the water quality of wetlands by reducing soil erosion and the use of chemicals and fertilizers on surrounding uplands; to improve upland nesting habitat for all ground-nesting birds, especially waterfowl, and enhance nesting success on private lands; to perpetuate grassland cover established by other Federal programs (for example, the Conservation Reserve Program [CRP]); and to provide an alternative to the purchase of uplands in fee title, thus maintaining lands in private ownership. Grassland easements restrict the landowner from altering the grass by digging, plowing, disking, or otherwise destroying the vegetative cover. Haying, mowing, and seed harvest are restricted until July 16 of each year. The landowner can graze without restriction.

Wetland easements are administered similarly to grassland easements. These easements restrict the landowner from altering wetlands through draining, burning, or filling. When they are dry, the landowner can farm wetlands without restriction. Areas of wetland habitats supporting more than 25 duck pairs per square mile are eligible for the program.

The Federal Migratory Bird Conservation Fund finances the acquisition of WPAs and conservation easements by providing the U.S. Department of the Interior (Department) with monies to acquire migratory bird habitat. The 1958 amendment to the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (Duck Stamp Act) (16 United States Code [U.S.C.] 718) authorized the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program and provided for the acquisition of WPAs in addition to the previously authorized habitats. Receipts from the sale of Duck Stamps are used to acquire habitat under the provisions of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 715). The Service's perpetual conservation easements are key components of the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program; these easements, together with WPAs, have contributed greatly to the conservation and maintenance of prairie-nesting migratory birds.

The districts administer other conservation easements that were not acquired through the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program. The most common of these are Farmers Home Administration conservation

Table 2. Grassland and wetland easements in the three districts.

District	*County*	*Purchase date*	*Tract*	*Number of acres*	*Number of tracts*	*Total acres*
First Grassland Easement Purchase						
Huron	Sanborn	12/05/1990	188G	529.00	455	141,944.89
Madison	McCook	12/30/1991	191G	129.20	243	53,612.46
Sand Lake	Walworth	06/22/1990	83G	436.00	905	332,314.83
Total					1,603	527,872.18
First Wetland Easement Purchase						
Huron	Hand	10/09/1963	11X	29.00	1,424	85,579.90
Madison	Deuel	01/18/1963	10X	31.00	1,573	55,218.10
Sand Lake	McPherson	07/20/1962	12X	242.00	3,497	231,761.16
Total					6,494	372,559.16

easements—also known as Rural Economic and Community Development easements, Farm Service Agency "Ag-Credit easements," and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation easements, depending on the status of the USDA program responsible for these properties at the time they were in Federal inventory. The 1985 Farm Bill Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act was the initial authorization for Farmers Home Administration easements. The Farmers Home Administration was given authority to establish easements for conservation, recreation, and wildlife purposes on properties that were foreclosed on by the Federal Government ("inventory" properties), and the Service was designated easement manager for those easements worthy of inclusion into the Refuge System.

District descriptions

The three districts support all the waterfowl species that occur in the Prairie Pothole Region. The three districts manage more than 1.5 million acres within the 27-county planning area in South Dakota (for an accurate breakdown of these acres please see "Service Activities in South Dakota" in chapter 1). Each of the three districts is described below.

Huron WMD

The Huron WMD was established in 1992. The district was established encompassing lands that were previously under the management of both the Lake Andes and Sand Lake WMDs. This area was too far from the previous management offices to afford reliable and efficient management, resulting in minimal management of lands acquired prior to district establishment.

Huron WMD encompasses eight counties—Beadle, Buffalo, Hand, Hughes, Hyde, Jerauld, Sanborn, and Sully—in east-central South Dakota, an area of approximately 6,869 square miles. In 2010, the district administered 62 WPAs totaling approximately 17,574 acres, wetland easements totaling approximately 86,333 acres, grassland easements totaling approximately 145,205 acres, and conservation easements totaling approximately 10,100 acres (figure 5). Although at least one WPA is located in every county, the majority are currently in Beadle, Hand, and Jerauld Counties.

Important features of Huron WMD include the following:

- The district contains the smallest number of fee-title acres. Due to the smaller size of this district, staff has the ability to manage and monitor intensively.
- The district is subject to the most rapid agricultural growth and development of the three districts; this growth is expected to continue.
- The district presents opportunities to increase easement acres—meaning an opportunity to protect more native prairie.
- Management focuses on restoration of native prairie with fire and grazing.
- The Huron WMD is one of only three districts with an active Friends Group.

Issues faced by Huron WMD include the following:

- The location is challenging. Many hours of travel are required to manage and monitor district lands.
- Significant conversion of grasslands to agriculture continues within the district.

Madison WMD

The Madison WMD was established in 1969. It evolved from the withdrawal of four counties from Waubay WMD and five counties from Lake Andes WMD. Deuel, Brookings, Hamlin, Kingsbury, Miner, Moody, McCook, Lake, and Minnehaha Counties are included within the district, covering an area of 5,804 square miles. Minnehaha is the largest South Dakota county by population, with 148,281 inhabitants. The district extends west from the Minnesota border through the Big Sioux Basin and Prairie Coteau ecoregions (see discussion in chapter 4). Tallgrass prairie and agricultural lands comprise most of the district. As of January 2010, the Madison WMD administered 221 WPAs totaling

approximately 38,778 acres, wetland easements totaling approximately 57,074 acres, grassland easements totaling approximately 72,263 acres, tallgrass prairie easements totaling approximately 11,006 acres, and Farmers Home Administration easements totaling approximately 6,500 acres (figure 6).

Important characteristics of Madison WMD include the following:

- The district consists primarily of tallgrass prairie (with some mixed-grass prairie). The district contains Prairie Coteau, James River Lowland, Big Sioux Basin, and Loess Prairies.
- The district has the largest human population of the three South Dakota districts.
- The district is home to many lakes and semipermanent or permanent wetlands.
- The district contains the least amount of native prairie of the three districts.
- Such notables as early pioneer artist Harvey Dunn and author Laura Ingalls Wilder of "Little House on the Prairie" are from this area. Wilder's book, "On the Shores of Silver Lake," was written about her childhood memories of life next to a beautiful prairie wetland that still attracts many visitors each year.

Issues faced by Madison WMD include the following:

- The largest human population leads to issues with encroaching urban development.
- More lakes mean more people—meaning more jet skis and more wildlife disturbance.
- Wetland drainage issues require more enforcement. Wetlands may be wet only about 50 percent of the time; people want to drain wetlands so that they can produce crops.
- There is extensive agricultural tillage; native grass is diminishing at an alarming rate.

Sand Lake WMD

The Sand Lake WMD was established in 1961. The largest district in the country, it originally encompassed 11 counties—Brown, Spink, McPherson, Edmunds, Faulk, Campbell, Walworth, Potter, Corson, Dewey, and Sully—in north-central South Dakota, covering an area of approximately 12,000 square miles. In 1992, Sully County was transferred to the newly established Huron WMD. The current 10-county district extends west to the Missouri River and includes part of the James River Basin to the east. The western portion of the district is characterized by mixed-grass prairie. Transition prairie and agricultural lands characterize the eastern portion. In 2010, the district administered 162 WPAs totaling approximately 43,742 acres, wetland easements totaling approximately 234,986 acres, grassland easements totaling approximately 398,589 acres, and conservation easements totaling approximately 14,815 acres (figure 7).

Important characteristics of Sand Lake WMD include the following:

- The district extends from James River Lowland in the southeastern corner to the Missouri Plateau in the northwestern corner, with most of its fee title and easement lands in the Missouri Coteau and Drift Plains.
- The district straddles the Missouri River and includes some easements west of the Missouri River.
- Wetland drainage and tiling are not as great an issue as in other districts.

Issues faced by Sand Lake WMD include the following:

- The Sand Lake WMD is a very large entity, and it currently shares staff with the Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge. This shared arrangement provides minimal operational staffing for the district.
- Headquarters are at the Sand Lake refuge. This location is not ideal, because it is far from the majority of landholdings.
- Controlling invasive plants is an ongoing effort for district staff.
- Tillage is occurring at an accelerated rate.

2.2 Special Values

Early in the planning process, the planning team and public identified the outstanding qualities of the three districts. District qualities are the characteristics and features of each district that make it special, valuable for wildlife, and worthy of inclusion in the Refuge System. It was important to identify the special values of each district to recognize its worth and to ensure that the special values of the districts are preserved, protected, and enhanced through the planning process. District qualities can be distinct and important biological values, as well as simple values such as providing a quiet place to see a variety of birds and enjoy nature.

The following summarizes the qualities that make the districts unique and valued:

- The districts have a very high density of wetlands to support waterfowl and migratory birds.
- Very large blocks of intact native prairie ecosystem are protected through the districts' conservation easements and fee-title ownership.
- The districts provide protected and managed wetlands and uplands for breeding and staging habitat for waterfowl and shorebirds during migration along the central flyway.
- The districts provide diverse and abundant possibilities for public use.
- The districts provide for quality environmental education.

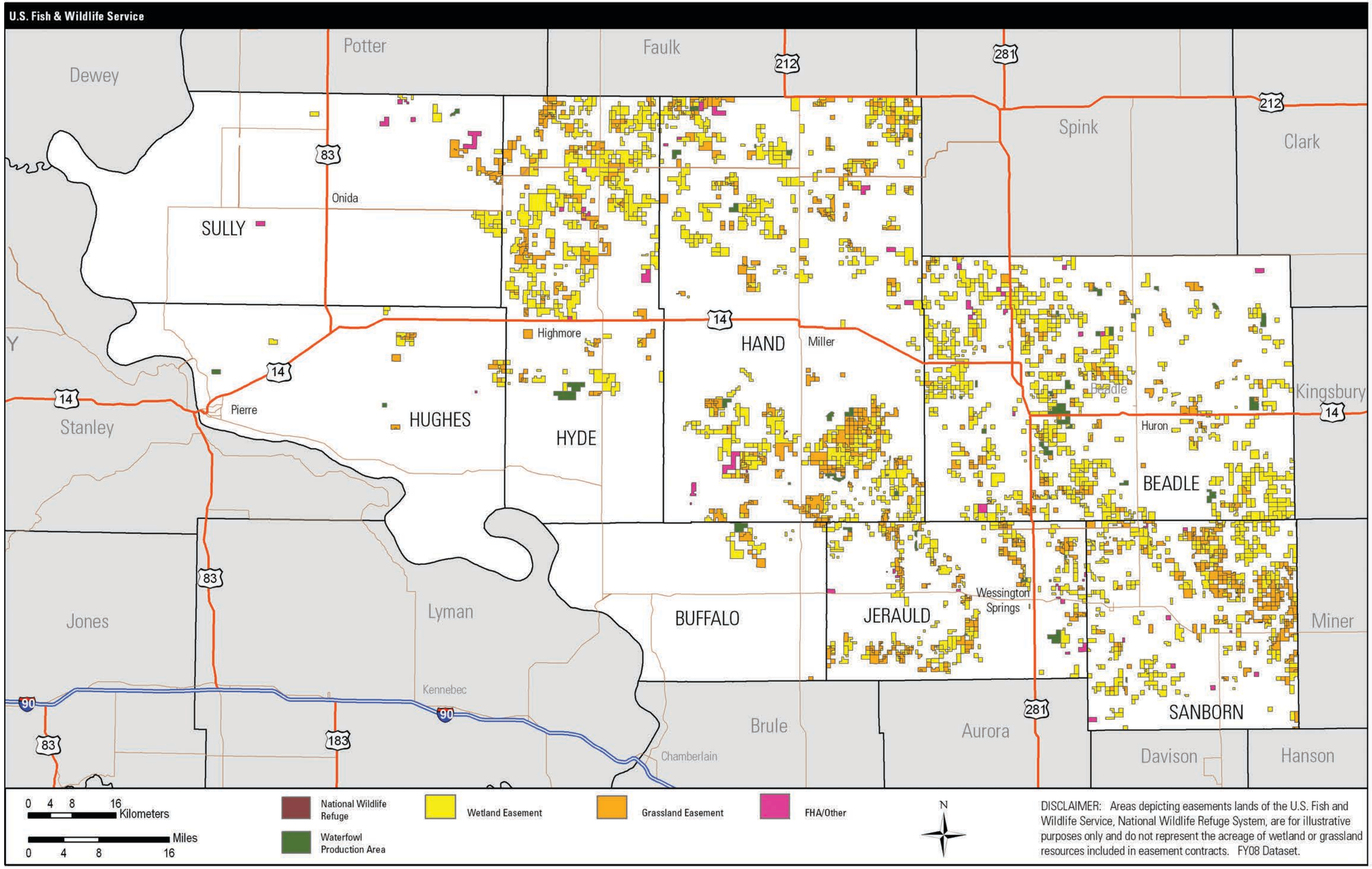

Figure 5. Service-managed lands in the Huron WMD.

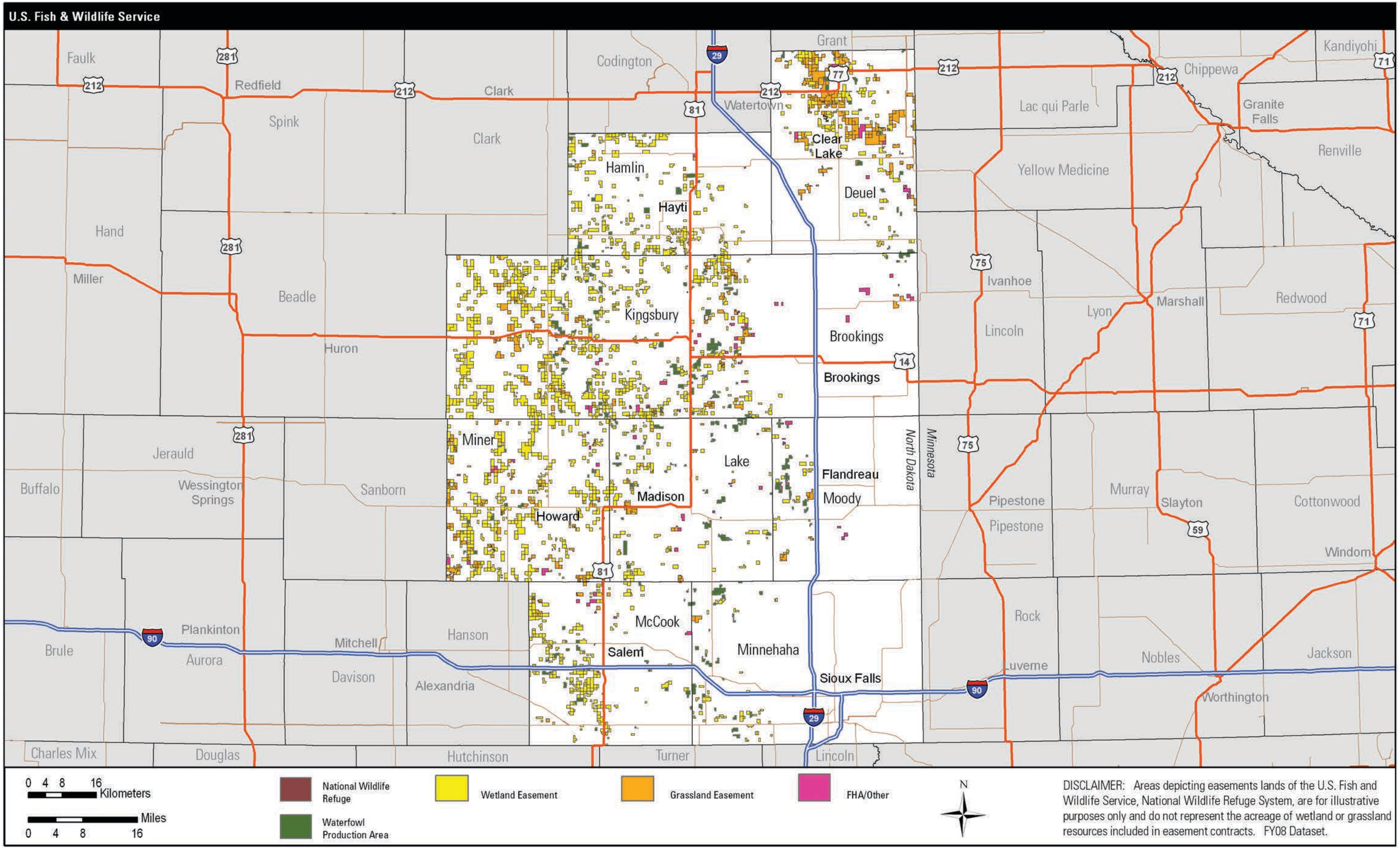

Figure 6. Service-managed lands in the Madison WMD.

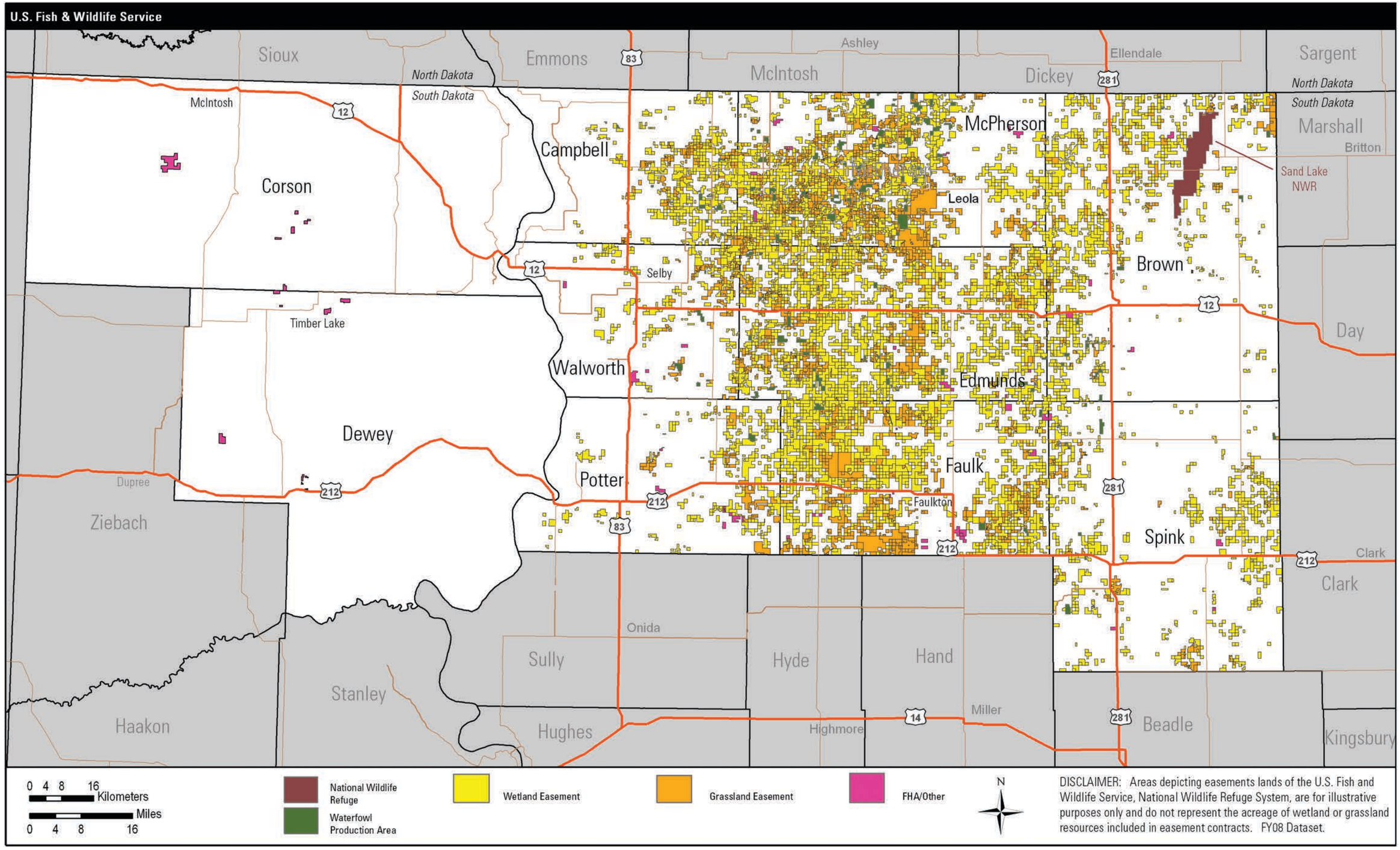

Figure 7. Service-managed lands in the Sand Lake WMD.

2.3 Purposes

The districts were created to administer the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program to save wetlands from various threats—particularly drainage. By 1991, grassland easements were also being protected under this program. The main authorities in establishment of the program are briefly discussed below:

- Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (16 U.S.C. 718d[c])—"as waterfowl production areas subject to all provisions of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act … except the inviolate sanctuary provisions." The Duck Stamp Act provides for the conservation, protection, and propagation of native species of fish and wildlife, including migratory birds that are threatened with extinction.
- Migratory Bird Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 715d[2])—"for any other management purposes, for migratory birds." This act addresses the obligations of the United States under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act through the following mechanisms:
  - Lessening the dangers threatening migratory game birds from drainage and other causes.
  - The acquisition of areas of land and water to furnish in perpetuity reservations for the adequate protection of such birds.
  - Authorizing appropriations for the establishment of such areas, their maintenance and improvement, and for other purposes.

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Western meadowlark singing.

The purpose of the districts is "to assure the long-term viability of the breeding waterfowl population and production through the acquisition and management of waterfowl production areas, while considering the needs of other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other wildlife" (memorandum from Region 6 Assistant Regional Director Richard A. Coleman, December 2006). This purpose statement was developed for all Region 6 wetland management districts. Because the purposes and management capabilities and challenges are similar for the three districts, the Service has elected to address them collectively in this CCP.

2.4 Vision

At the beginning of the planning process, the Service developed a vision for the three districts. The vision is a concept that describes the essence of what the Service is trying to accomplish in the three districts. It is a future-oriented statement intended to be realized by the end of the 15-year CCP planning horizon.

Clear blue skies frame spectacular views of grasslands and wetlands teeming with migratory waterfowl and other wildlife in the Huron, Madison, and Sand Lake Wetland Management Districts. Here, future generations will experience the whistle of the northern pintail, the song of the western meadowlark, and the distant boom of the prairie chicken. Located in the Prairie Pothole Region of South Dakota, these districts preserve timeless landscapes in the face of change. Conservation of these lands is achieved through hard work and the support of friends and neighbors who value natural places as an essential component of their quality of life.

2.5 Goals

The following goals have been developed to guide management decisions as they pertain to natural communities, uses, and management activities.

Native Prairie

Conserve, restore, and improve the biological integrity and ecological function of the native prairies to support

healthy populations of native plants and wildlife and promote the natural role of fire and grazing in shaping and managing these landscapes.

Planted grasslands

Manage planted grasslands to contribute to the production and growth of continental waterfowl populations, other migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and other wildlife.

Wetlands

Protect, restore, and enhance prairie pothole wetlands to support diverse plant communities and provide habitat to waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and associated wetland-dependent wildlife.

Research and monitoring

Provide a learning platform that uses science, monitoring, applied research, and adaptive management to advance understanding of the Prairie Pothole Region and management of these areas.

Consumptive uses

Provide visitors with quality opportunities to enjoy hunting, fishing, and trapping in waterfowl production areas and expand their knowledge and appreciation of the prairie landscape and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Bridgette Flanders-Wanner / USFWS

Biologist Shilo Comeau on a wetland field visit.

Nonconsumptive uses

Provide visitors with quality opportunities to enjoy, observe, photograph, and appreciate the prairie ecosystem while expanding their knowledge of and support for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Operations and administration

Through effective communication and innovative partnerships, secure and efficiently utilize funding, staffing, and volunteer programs for the benefit of all natural resources in the districts.

Partnerships

Promote and develop partnerships with landowners, public and private organizations, and other interested individuals to maintain, restore, and enhance a diverse and productive landscape in the Prairie Pothole Region.

Environmental education and interpretation

Provide quality educational opportunities for persons of all abilities to learn about, understand, and appreciate prairie landscapes and the role of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

2.6 Planning Issues

Several key issues were identified through the analysis of comments collected from Service staff and the public and a review of the requirements of the Improvement Act and NEPA. Substantive comments (those that could be addressed within the authority and management capabilities of the Service) were considered during the formulation of the alternatives for future management. Summaries of these key issues are below.

Wetland and upland habitats

All three districts have a primary purpose to provide optimal habitat conditions for the needs of a suite of waterfowl and other migratory birds and, to a lesser extent, native resident wildlife. Aggressive management of wetland and upland habitats must be conducted to achieve goals and objectives. Wetland and upland habitats need to be protected and enhanced through management. Habitat protection needs to be evaluated through a system of prioritization so that different approaches to protection—either fee-title acquisition or conservation easement—can be evaluated.

Invasive plants

The districts include uplands that were previously farmed. Farmed uplands have since been restored to mixes of tame and native grasses. These areas are interspersed with native uplands, the bulk of which are largely dominated by native vegetation character

but are compromised by invading species. The primary invasive forbs are leafy spurge, Canada thistle, sow thistle, and absinth wormwood. Smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, and crested wheatgrass are primary invasive grass species. These nonnative forbs and grasses substantially degrade the quality and suitability of upland habitat for many native wildlife species.

Energy development

While the Service works to minimize the negative effects of energy development, the demand for energy is an increasing factor in habitat quality and preservation in the districts. The production of biofuels and wind energy has the potential to impact the effectiveness of many district programs. The Service supports research that helps to understand the effects on wildlife of renewable energy projects such as wind farms and the conversion of grassland to cropland for ethanol production. For example, the effects of wind turbines on birds remains a challenging matter to investigate. Through studies and analysis, the Service is currently evaluating wind turbines to determine their effects on wildlife. In addition, it is unknown if wind power will affect the potential for future habitat protection through conservation easements.

Prairie conversion

Native prairie is suffering conversion to other uses at an alarming rate. Prairie is being converted for crop production, creating additional demand for irrigation water. Conservation groups should assume an active role, in partnership with the agricultural community, to protect the Federal Farm Bill and its conservation provisions, such as the CRP and the "Swampbuster" and "Sod Saver" provisions in the 1985 Farm Bill (amended 1990, 1996, 2002).

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Red foxes thrive in human-influenced environments.

Predator management

Several species—particularly red fox, coyote, striped skunk, Franklin's ground squirrel, mink, badger, and raccoon—occur at higher than historical levels due to modifications of habitat and other factors. These species can adversely affect—primarily by predation on nests of grassland-nesting bird species—waterfowl and other migratory bird populations. Such predation reduces the likelihood that the Service can attain wildlife population goals and objectives for the districts. Woody vegetation has a negative influence on grassland songbirds because it provides habitat for predators and attracts forest-edge bird species that may displace grassland species.

Visitor services

Hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation are uses currently authorized on lands administered

Bridgette Flanders-Wanner/USFWS

District lands serve multiple purposes.

by the districts. A growing demand for public recreation in South Dakota and the nation makes these six wildlife-dependent recreational uses, as specified in the Improvement Act, an issue of primary interest.

Partnerships

The Service puts a high priority on working in partnership with conservation and agricultural groups to support conservation programs such as Federal Farm Bill legislation, SDGFP projects, water quality and watershed projects, and private conservation efforts.

Operations

Funding and staff are not sufficient to fulfill the purposes and meet the goals of the districts. Identification of priorities and efficient direction of resources will always be an issue for the districts. The Service's staff needs to identify and describe unfunded needs to be able to compete effectively for additional money from within the Service as well as from partners and other sources. District facilities need to be evaluated and upgraded.

Monitoring and research

Monitoring habitat and wildlife populations is an essential element in achieving the districts' primary goals and objectives. Basic data about recruitment, mortality, and habitat use for a representative group of species must be collected and analyzed on a regular basis to make appropriate decisions for maintaining the viability of the habitats on which these species depend. Using the districts for field research could contribute valuable strides in development of new directions in management and expansion of the knowledge of field biologists.