

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Contact: *Tedd Gutzke*
Refuge Manager
Address: *Medicine Lake NWR*
223 North Shore Road
Medicine Lake, MT 59247

Phone: 406/789 2305
Fax: 406/789 2350
E-mail: r6rw_mdl@fws.gov
Homepage: <http://www.r6.fws.gov>



Planning Update

Hello!

This is the first in a series of periodic updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to keep you informed of progress on the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Through these updates, we will announce opportunities for you to participate in the planning process and keep you informed of the status and progress of the plan.

Where We've Been

In October 1998, we announced the beginning of the planning process, held a well-attended open house at Refuge Headquarters, and distributed issue worksheets to interested parties to gather their thoughts on the current management and future of the Complex. Issues and ideas identified during this process came both from public groups and individuals as well as the Complex staff.

Issues or ideas that can be addressed in the CCP include the following:

- Creating an interpretive center/viewing area on or adjacent to Highway 16.
- Creating a canoe trail on the Refuge.
- Potential walking trail at Sayer Bay on existing roadbed.
- Provide guided bird-watching and/or identification tours.
- Develop a user friendly webpage for Refuge information and events.
- Initiate a "Friends of Medicine Lake NWR" group.
- Revise and update all Refuge brochures, create a checklist of mammals, reptiles/amphibians, wildflowers, butterflies, and their corresponding habitats.
- Purchase remaining private land inholdings within the Refuge boundary from willing sellers.
- Investigate expanding the official boundary to include the Big Muddy Creek floodplain connecting the Homestead unit to the main Refuge and protecting important habitat for pintail and lesser scaup.
- Increase management for nontraditional native prairie species, such as migratory grassland birds and butterflies.
- Continue to restore tame grass areas on the Refuge to native plant communities.

Issues that cannot be covered in the CCP:

Some issues cannot be covered in the CCP because the authority to address them does not lie with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or with this public process. These issues are:

- *Use of motorized boats and power augers on Medicine Lake*

Medicine Lake was designated as Wilderness by Public Law on October 19, 1976. Text of the law does not contain any special provision that provides for use of motorized equipment for recreation. To remove wilderness designation would take an act of Congress, which is beyond the scope of this Plan. Prohibiting motorized boats and power augers for recreational use protects the wilderness resource of the lake.

- *Provide an overnight camping area on the Refuge*
The Refuge is designated a "day-use" area only. Most national wildlife refuges are day-use only, with a few exceptions. The exceptions are those units that are so remote that visitors cannot use and enjoy the refuge without camping overnight. Camping facilities are available near Medicine Lake, and the staff makes this information available upon request.

Ideas and suggestions that are already being addressed:

Several ideas and suggestions were made that are already part of ongoing Refuge programs. These will be described fully in the CCP. Descriptions of these follow:

- *Why aren't there walking trails on the Refuge?*
A lot of the Refuge is already open to walking. The use that developed trails will probably get does not justify the cost of building and maintaining them. One potential trail site (depending on the amount of interest received) is on an old roadbed along Sayer Bay. Revisions to Refuge brochures could emphasize what areas are currently open to walking and provide visual guides to plants and animals.



■ *What does the Refuge do to control noxious weeds?*
Refuge staff controls noxious weeds on the station using mechanical, chemical, and biological methods. They have worked with the U.S. Department of Agricultural, Agricultural Research Station at Sidney, Montana using integrated pest management techniques to control weeds. Additionally during the past two years, the Refuge, in cooperation with Daniels, Roosevelt, and Sheridan Counties, partnered in a State grant to control Canada thistle. Control and eradication are different. Control implies that known colonies are not spreading. Eradication implies that all individual plants have been destroyed permanently.

■ *Open more areas of the Refuge to public hunting.*
First, to address this request, we need more information. What areas are of interest? What types of hunting does this refer to? Would changes in Refuge hunting regulations accomplish the same thing? The total percentage of Refuge land that can be opened to hunting is limited by legislation, so the areas selected must reflect this. Some parts of the Refuge are closed to hunting because they are critical feeding and resting areas for migrating wildlife or are needed as safety zones. As a reminder, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks sets season dates, lengths, and bag limits, and the Refuge follows these regulations.

■ *Why are you removing Russian olive trees?*
Russian olive is an introduced plant that is not part of the native prairie plant community. Refuge management focuses on restoring and maintaining the native prairie ecosystem for the wildlife that depends upon it. Russian olive will be left standing in shelterbelts where they function as a windbreak for buildings, such as around the Headquarters area, but any newly establishing colonies spreading outside this area will be removed.

■ *Shelterbelts and food plots should be planted for upland game birds.*
Shelterbelts and small grain foods already exist on the Refuge. The cooperative farming program leaves standing and baled grain for upland birds. Additionally, the management of wetlands creates aquatic vegetation such as bulrush which is important cover for upland birds in fall and winter. Seeds produced from a variety of wetland plants are a major food source for these birds. As the focus of Refuge management is on restoring and maintaining native prairie for native wildlife, no plans are in place to establish additional food plots or treebelts for introduced upland game species such as pheasants.

■ *We are interested in using snowmobiles on the Refuge.*

Refuge recreational use must be compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established and also be wildlife-dependent. Most Refuge roads are closed to public entry in the winter to protect wintering wildlife from disturbance. Problems with allowing snowmobile use on the Refuge include potential trespass into sensitive habitats and disturbance to deer at an already stressful time of year. Even if snowmobiling were allowed, access would be limited to few established Refuge roads. Snowmobiling experiences would not be better or different than what is currently available along public road rights-of-way surrounding the Refuge. Patrol and enforcement of regulations would increase staff costs.

■ *We need improved communications between local communities and the Refuge.*

Currently, the Refuge staff writes a monthly article in local newspapers to keep residents informed about Service activities and to pass on interesting information on wildlife. Announcements and special events are covered in special articles, radio, and local access TV. Refuge Manager Ted Gutzke belongs to the Sheridan County Chamber of Commerce and the Medicine Lake Commercial Club and attends monthly meetings. The Refuge staffs a booth at the Sheridan and Roosevelt County Fairs and at the State Fair in Great Falls each year. The staff hosts and instructs hunter safety courses for kids annually. The Refuge has hosted meetings for Northeast Montana Economic Development and Medicine Lake Commercial Clubs. Refuge staff gives tours and talks to groups and are available to answer questions by phone during business hours as well.

Where We Are Now

With your assistance, we have identified issues or concerns that can be addressed in the draft plan and environmental assessment. **If you have an idea or a concern you do not see reflected in this Update, please contact the Refuge staff to make sure your concerns are known.** The next step in the planning process is to develop a vision for the future of Medicine Lake and to write goals and objectives enabling us to reach it. We will announce when the draft plan will be available for public review and/or when future public meetings will be held in the next update. If you have any questions about the process so far, please contact the Refuge Manager at the address above.

Thank you for your participation, and stay in touch!

