

1 Introduction



Michele Hernandez/USFWS

Sunset over Upper Red Rock Lake.

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has developed this final comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) to provide a foundation for the management and use of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (refuge). This refuge is located in the Centennial Valley in southwestern Montana in Beaverhead County, 47 miles west of West Yellowstone and 38 miles east of the town of Lima (see figure 1). It is one of the most remote refuges in the contiguous United States. This CCP is intended as a broad umbrella plan that provides general concepts and specific wildlife, habitat, visitor services, and partnership objectives over the next 15 years. When the plan is implemented additional step-down management plans will be developed. The purpose of these step-down management plans is to provide greater detail to managers and employees for carrying out specific actions and strategies authorized by the CCP. Table 9 (chapter 4) presents the plans needed for the refuge, their status, and the next revision date. This chapter provides an introduction to the CCP process and describes the involvement of the Service, the state of Montana, tribes, the public, and others, as well as conservation issues and plans that affect Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

This CCP was developed in compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) and Part 602 “National Wildlife Refuge System Planning” of “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.” The actions described in

this CCP meet the requirements of the Council on Environmental Quality regulations that implement the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Compliance with NEPA was also achieved through involvement of the public.

This final CCP specifies the necessary actions to achieve the vision and purposes of the refuge. Wildlife is the first priority in refuge management, and various public uses, including wildlife-dependent recreation may be allowed as long as they are determined to be compatible with the Service’s purposes for the refuge and the mission of the refuge.

This CCP has been prepared by a planning team comprised of refuge staff and representatives from various state and Service programs. In addition, the planning team used public input, public involvement, and the planning process as described in section 1.6, “Planning Process.” See appendix A for details about the public involvement process.

After reviewing a wide range of public comments and management needs, the planning team developed alternatives for managing the refuge. This was documented in the “Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment—Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.” The regional director of region 6 approved alternative B as the Service’s preferred alternative for management of the refuge. This preferred alternative has now become this final CCP. This action addressed



Figure 1. Location of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Montana.

all substantive issues, while determining how best to achieve the purposes of the refuge.

1.1 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PLAN

The purpose of this final CCP is to identify the role that Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge will play in support of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) and to provide long-term guidance for managing 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 Refuge System;
- provide a clear statement of direction for managing the refuge;
- provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of the Service's management actions on and around the refuge;
- ensure that the Service's management actions support the goals and intent of the Improvement Act;
- to the extent practicable, ensure refuge plans will be consistent with the fish and wildlife conservation plans of the state and the conservation programs of tribal, public, and private partners within the ecosystem;
- provide a basis for development of budget requests for the refuge's operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

1.2 EARLY HISTORY OF CONSERVATION

Wildlife conservation in North America evolved to take on a form unique to the world. In recent years it has come to be known as the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (Geist et al. 2001). The wildlife conservation movement arose out of the conflict between market hunters and sport hunters in the mid- to late-19th century. Market hunting increased in response to the growth in urban population fueled by the Industrial Revolution. Between 1820 and 1860 the percentage of Americans who lived in cities increased from 5% to 20%; this four-fold increase is the greatest proportional increase in urban population that ever occurred in America (Reiss 1995). The demand for meat and hides—along with feathers for the millinery trade—led to exploitation of game animals by market hunters. Along with the increase in the urban population came a new breed of hunter—one who hunted for the chase and the challenge it provided. These sport hunters valued game animals more when they were alive, as opposed to market hunters who placed value on dead animals they could bring to market. The growing legion of sport hunters fomented a national movement that resulted in state and federal governments taking responsibility for regulating the take of wildlife.

The keystone concept of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, and the bedrock that allowed government to exercise control, is the Public Trust Doctrine (Geist and Organ 2004). Originating in an 1842 Supreme Court decision in the *Martin v. Waddell* case, its origins derive from Greek and Roman law and the Magna Carta. Simply stated, wildlife belongs to no one; it is held in trust for all by government.

The seven pillars of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation are:

- wildlife as a public trust resource
- elimination of markets for game
- allocation of wildlife by law
- wildlife can only be killed for a legitimate purpose
- wildlife considered an international resource
- science as the proper tool to discharge wildlife policy
- democracy of hunting

These pillars have stood the test of time and have seen significant changes in approaches to wildlife conservation for over 100 years. The original conservation movement championed by Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell and others placed emphasis on stemming the decline, and programs restricting take and protecting lands were put in place. During the 1920s, conservationists realized that more was needed, and a committee comprised of Aldo Leopold, A. Willis Robertson, and other leading conservationists of the time authored the 1930 American Game Policy. This policy called for an active program of restoration of habitats and populations based on scientific research, and stable equitable funding to achieve this. Within a decade, landmark legislation fulfilled many of the needs identified, with passage of the Duck Stamp Act to fund land acquisition for national wildlife refuges, and the Pittman–Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act that shifted excise taxes imposed on firearms and ammunition to fund wildlife restoration through cooperation between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state fish and wildlife agencies. In order for states to avail themselves of these funds, they were required to pass laws that prevented revenues from hunting licenses to be diverted to any purpose other than administration of the state fish and wildlife agency.

In recent decades, the importance of overall wildlife diversity has gained more emphasis in wildlife management. All wildlife have benefited from the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation pillars, not just game animals. However, the vast majority of funding for wildlife conservation at the federal and state level comes from Pittman–Robertson excise taxes, Duck Stamp revenues, and hunting license sales. We owe the origins of the National Wildlife Refuge System to the hunters

who articulated the need and provided the funds (Grinnell 1913). The National Wildlife Refuge System has evolved along with the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, and today provides refuge for virtually all species found in America, and recreation for all Americans. It is a realization of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation to provide for science-based management of international wildlife resources held in trust for all. The importance of this system to our society can best be appreciated if we were to contemplate its loss. Wildlife connects us to the heritage of this country and our ancestors who built our society. It connects us as well to the natural world of which we are a part, but from which we have become so disconnected. To lose this connection is to lose the basis of our humanity.

1.3 U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND THE REFUGE SYSTEM

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation. The Refuge System is one of the Service's major programs.

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working with others, is to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, America's fish and wildlife resources were declining at an alarming rate, largely due to unrestricted market hunting. Concerned citizens, scientists, and hunting and angling groups joined together and generated the political will for the first significant conservation measures taken by the federal government. These actions included the establishment of the Bureau of Fisheries in the 1870s, and in 1904, passage of the first federal wildlife law, the Lacey Act, that prohibited interstate transportation of wildlife taken in violation of state laws. Beginning in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt created over fifty wildlife refuges across the nation. Over the next 3 decades the United States ratified the Migratory Bird Treaty with Great Britain; and Congress passed laws to protect migratory birds, establish new refuges, and create a funding source for refuge land acquisition. In 1940, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service was created within the Department of the Interior, and existing federal wildlife functions including law enforcement, fish management, animal damage control, and wildlife refuge management were combined into a single organization for the first time.

Today, the Service enforces federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores vital wildlife habitat, protects and recovers endangered species, and helps other governments with conservation efforts. In addition, the Service administers a federal aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars to states for fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, and related programs across America.

SERVICE ACTIVITIES IN MONTANA (2006)

Service activities in Montana contribute to the state's economy, ecosystems, and education programs. The following list highlights the Service's presence and activities:

- employed 142 people in Montana
- 407 volunteers donated more than 21,131 hours to Service projects on refuge lands
- managed two national fish hatcheries, one fish and wildlife management assistance office, one fish health center, four ecological services offices, and one fish technology center
- managed twenty-three national wildlife refuges encompassing 1,195,828 acres (1.27% of the state)
- managed five wetland management districts (districts)
 - managed 47,884 acres of fee waterfowl production areas
 - managed 135,320 acres under various leases or easements
- hosted more than 629,950 annual visitors to Service-managed lands
 - 112,835 hunting visits
 - 71,665 fishing visits
 - 419,062 wildlife observation visits
 - 9,905 students (8,944 in on-site programs) participated in environmental education programs
- provided \$6.9 million to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) for sport fish restoration and \$6.3 million for wildlife restoration and hunter education (generated through taxing hunting and fishing equipment)
- since 1988, the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program has helped private landowners restore more than 27,402 wetland acres on 2,141 sites; 320,124 upland acres on 298 sites; and 1,138 miles of river habitat
- paid Montana counties \$315,271 under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (money used for any public purpose)

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt designated the 5.5-acre Pelican Island in Florida as the nation's first wildlife refuge for the protection of native nesting birds. This was the first time the federal government set aside land for wildlife. This small but significant designation was the beginning of the Refuge System.

One hundred years later, the Refuge System has become the largest collection of lands and waters in the world specifically managed for wildlife, encompassing over 150 million acres within 550 refuges and over 3,000 waterfowl production areas for waterfowl breeding and nesting. Today, there is at least one refuge in every state and in each of the Pacific and Caribbean territories.

The Improvement Act of 1997 established a clear mission for the 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.

The Improvement Act states that each national wildlife refuge (that is, each unit of the Refuge System, which includes wetland management districts) shall be managed to

- fulfill the mission of the Refuge System;
- fulfill the individual purposes of each refuge and district;
- consider the needs of fish and wildlife first;
- fulfill the requirement of developing a CCP for each unit of the Refuge System and fully involve the public in preparation of these plans;
- maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System;
- recognize that wildlife-dependent recreation activities, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation, are legitimate and priority public uses;
- retain the authority of refuge managers to determine compatible public uses.

In addition to the mission for the Refuge System, the wildlife and habitat vision for each unit of the Refuge System maintains the following principles:

- Wildlife comes first.
- Ecosystems, biodiversity, and wilderness are vital concepts in refuge and district management.

- Habitats must be healthy.
- Growth of refuges and districts must be strategic.
- The Refuge System serves as a model for habitat management with broad participation from others.

Following passage of the Improvement Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service immediately began to carry out the direction of the new legislation, including preparation of CCPs for all national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts. Consistent with the Improvement Act, the Service prepares all CCPs in conjunction with public involvement. Each refuge and each district is required to complete its CCP within the 15-year schedule (by 2012).

PEOPLE AND THE REFUGE SYSTEM

The nation's fish and wildlife heritage contributes to the quality of American lives and is an integral part of the country's greatness. Wildlife and wild places have always given people special opportunities to have fun, relax, and appreciate the natural world.

Whether through bird watching, fishing, hunting, photography, or other wildlife pursuits, wildlife recreation contributes millions of dollars to local economies. In particular, money generated from the taxing of sporting arms and ammunition, and of fishing equipment, authorized by the Pittman–Robertson and Dingell–Johnson Acts, respectively, have generated tens of millions of dollars. This money, distributed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has been used by states to increase wildlife and fish populations, expand habitat, and train hunters across the nation. Approximately 37 million people visited the Refuge System in 2004, mostly to observe wildlife in their natural habitats. Visitors are most often accommodated through nature trails, auto tours, interpretive programs, and hunting and fishing opportunities. Significant economic benefits are being generated to the local communities that surround refuges and wetland management districts. Economists report that Refuge System visitors contribute more than \$1.4 billion annually to local economies.

1.4 NATIONAL AND REGIONAL MANDATES

Refuge System units are managed to achieve the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System, along with the designated purpose of each refuge and district (as described in establishing legislation, executive orders, or other establishing documents). The key concepts and guidance of the Refuge System are contained in the Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Administration Act), Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual,” and the Improvement Act.

The Improvement Act amends the Administration Act by providing a unifying mission for the Refuge System, a new process for determining compatible public uses on refuges and districts, and a requirement that each refuge and district be managed under a CCP. The Improvement Act states that wildlife conservation is the priority of Refuge System lands and that the Secretary of the Interior will ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of refuge lands are maintained. Each refuge and district must be managed to fulfill the Refuge System's mission and the specific purposes for which it was established. The Improvement Act requires the Service to monitor the status and population of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge and district.

A detailed description of these and other laws and executive orders that may affect the CCP or the Service's implementation of the CCP is found in appendix B. Service policies on planning and day-to-day management of refuges and districts are in the "Refuge System Manual" and "The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual."

1.5 REFUGE CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PLANS

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge contributes to the conservation efforts outlined in the various state and national plans described here.

FULLFILLING THE PROMISE

A 1999 report, "Fulfilling the Promise, The National Wildlife Refuge System" (USFWS 1999b), is the culmination of a yearlong process by teams of Service employees to evaluate the Refuge System nationwide. This report was the focus of the first national Refuge System conference (in 1998)—attended by refuge managers, other Service employees, and representatives from leading conservation organizations.

The report contains forty-two recommendations packaged with three vision statements dealing with wildlife and habitat, people, and leadership. This CCP deals with all three of these major topics. The planning team reviewed the recommendations in the document for guidance during CCP planning.

PACIFIC FLYWAY MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN POPULATION OF TRUMPETER SWANS

The "Pacific Flyway Plan for the Rocky Mountain Population of Trumpeter Swans" (Subcommittee on Rocky Mountain Population of Trumpeter Swans 2008) provides broad direction to the states, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other interests engaged in cooperative management of this

population. The document was developed by The Pacific Flyway Council's Subcommittee on Rocky Mountain Population of Trumpeter Swans. The plan has been periodically updated to address evolving management challenges and to incorporate new information. The Pacific Flyway Council approved the most recent revision in 2008. The 2008 plan included six objectives to (1) redistribute wintering swans, (2) rebuild the United States breeding flocks, (3) encourage the growth of Canadian flocks, (4) increase the abundance of desirable submersed macrophytes in Henry's Fork of the Snake River, (5) monitor the population, and (6) maintain the tundra swan hunt in the Pacific Flyway in a manner compatible with trumpeter swan restoration. The plan assigns specific tasks and time frames to carry out the strategies listed. Population objectives specific to the Centennial Valley, including the refuge, are provided in this CCP as part of the objective to rebuild the United States' breeding flocks. In the past the refuge has used, and will continue to use, the "Pacific Flyway Plan for the Rocky Mountain Population of Trumpeter Swans" to determine refuge management objectives for trumpeter swans.

PARTNERS IN FLIGHT

The Partners in Flight program began in 1990 with the recognition of declining populations of many migratory bird species (Rich et al. 2004). The challenge is, according to the program, maintaining functional natural ecosystems in the face of human population growth. To meet this challenge, Partners in Flight worked to identify priority land bird species and habitat types. Partners in Flight activity has resulted in fifty-two bird conservation plans covering the contiguous United States.

The primary goal of Partners in Flight is to provide for the long-term health of bird life on this continent. The first priority is to prevent the rarest species from going extinct. The second priority is to prevent uncommon species from descending into threatened status. The third priority is to "keep common birds common."

There are fifty-eight physiographic areas, defined by similar physical geographic features, wholly or partially contained within the continental United States, and several others wholly or partially in Alaska. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge lies within the physiographic area known as the central Rocky Mountains (see figure 2). It is a huge physiographic area, extending from northwest Wyoming to all of western Montana, the northern two-thirds of Idaho, large areas of eastern Oregon and Washington, much of southeast British Columbia, and a sliver of west Alberta. It is an area of high mountains, with elevations exceeding 10,000 feet. Glaciation has left broad flat valleys between mountain ranges. Elevation determines the dominant vegetation. The highest areas are alpine tundra. The

subalpine zone is dominated by Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir, with ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir in the montane zone below that. Stand-replacing fire can change forests in either of those zones to lodgepole pine or aspen. Grass and sagebrush occur under open pine forests that grade downslope into grasslands, wetlands, woodlands, or shrub-steppe.

Approximately twenty-eight species of birds have a higher population in the central Rocky Mountains than in any other physiographic area. This is the highest such number in any physiographic area in the contiguous United States, and it seems to represent the huge size of the area and the vast amount of quality bird habitat that still exists.

Fire in higher elevation coniferous forests of the central Rocky Mountains tends to be of high intensity and low frequency. After such stand-replacing fires, either aspen or lodgepole pine occupy a site until a century or more of succession results in redominance of the site-specific hemlock, spruce, or fir species. Many birds are dependent on these different stages of succession—both black-backed and three-toed woodpeckers specialize in foraging on charred postfire trees. Dusky grouse and Williamson's sapsucker are among those species most abundant in aspen.

A huge percentage of the central Rockies in the United States are in public ownership, mostly managed by the Forest Service. Maintenance

or restoration of healthy forest ecosystems on public and private industrial lands will be the most important factor in keeping the central Rocky Mountains a healthy ecosystem for so many forest birds.

The priority bird species and habitats of the central Rocky Mountains found on the refuge include the following:

Shrub-steppe

greater sage-grouse

Wetland

American white pelican

trumpeter swan

Barrow's goldeneye

Franklin's gull

Riparian

calliope hummingbird

Coniferous forest

Dusky grouse

black-backed woodpecker

Aspen

Williamson's sapsucker

red-naped sapsucker

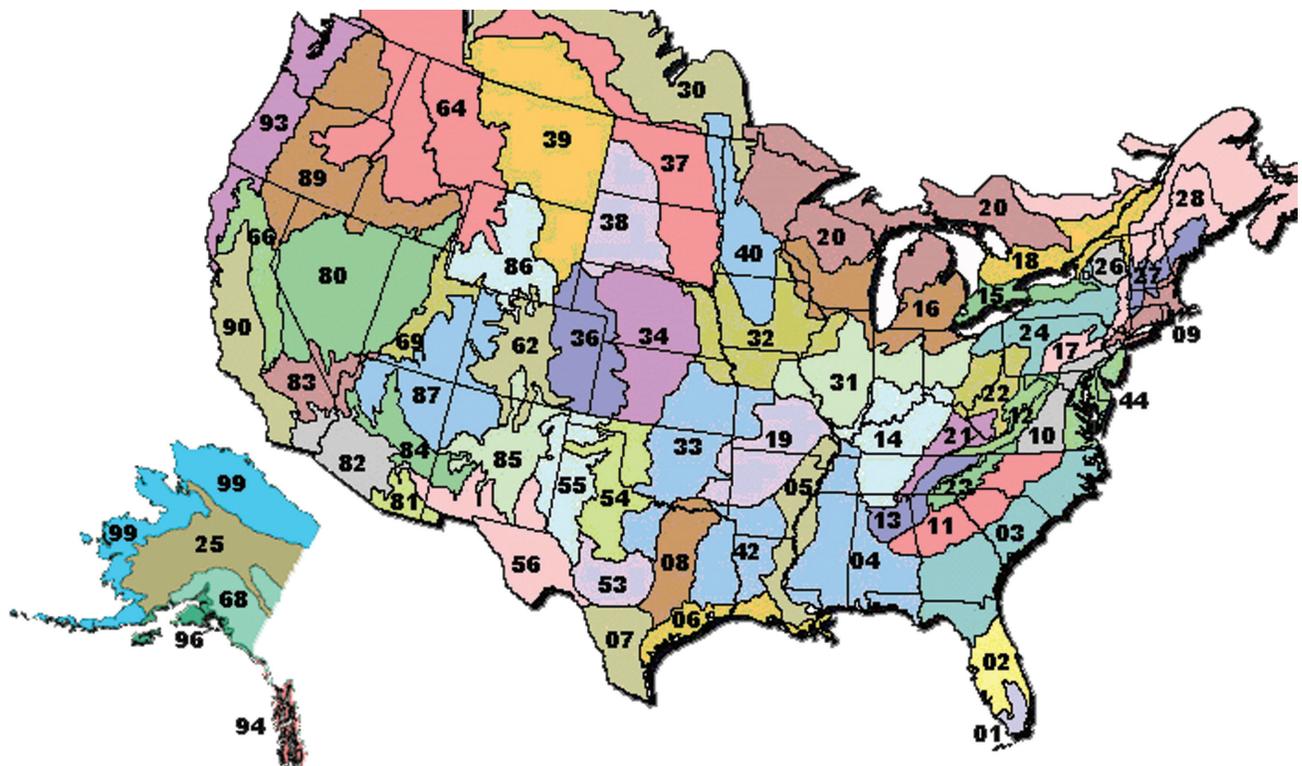


Figure 2. Physiographic area map of the United States. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge lies within physiographic region 64.

(Source: *Partners in Flight*)

NORTH AMERICAN WATERFOWL MANAGEMENT PLAN

Originally written in 1985, the “North American Waterfowl Management Plan” (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service 1986) envisioned a 15-year effort to achieve landscape conditions that could sustain waterfowl populations. Specific plan objectives are to increase and restore duck populations to the average levels of the 1970s—62 million breeding ducks and a fall flight of 100 million birds.

By 1985 waterfowl populations had plummeted to record lows. Habitat that waterfowl depend on was disappearing at a rate of 60 acres per hour. Recognizing the importance of waterfowl and wetlands to North Americans and the need for international cooperation to help in the recovery of a shared resource, the United States and Canadian governments developed a strategy to restore waterfowl populations through habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement. Mexico became a signatory to the plan in 1994.

The plan is innovative because of its international scope and its implementation at the regional level. Its success depends on the strength of partnerships called “joint ventures,” involving federal, state, provincial, tribal, and local governments; businesses; conservation organizations; and individual citizens.

Joint ventures are regional self-directed partnerships that carry out science-based conservation through a wide array of community participation. Joint ventures develop implementation plans that focus on areas of concern identified in the plan. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge lies within the Intermountain West Joint Venture.

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST JOINT VENTURE

The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) was established in June of 1994 to serve as the implementation arm of the “North American Waterfowl Management Plan” (Intermountain West Joint Venture 2005b) in the Intermountain West region. The focus of the IWJV was conservation of wetland and associated habitats. The IWJV is comprised of multi-level partnerships between diverse public and private organizations who share common interest in the conservation, maintenance, and management of key ecosystems in the Intermountain West region.

The IWJV encompasses much of the Intermountain West region, from the Sierras and Cascades on the west to just east of the Rocky Mountains, and from the Mexican border on the south to the Canadian border on the north. This extensive geographic region encompasses portions of eleven western states and includes an enormous diversity of avian habitat.

In 2005 the IWJV Montana steering committee developed a “Coordinated Implementation Plan for Bird Conservation in Western Montana” (Intermountain West Joint Venture 2005a). This team divided the state of Montana into Bird Habitat Conservation Areas to be used for all bird conservation projects over the next 5 to 7 years. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is located in the Centennial/Beaverhead Bird Habitat Conservation Area and has almost all of the habitat types and species identified as priorities for this region. The plan identifies this refuge as the single most important nesting area for trumpeter swans within the Intermountain West region.

The refuge will continue to work closely with the IWJV to support ongoing planning efforts and meet their objectives, by protecting high priority habitats and the species they support.

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST REGIONAL SHOREBIRD PLAN

The “Intermountain West Regional Shorebird Plan” (Oring et al. 2000) was released in 2000. The plan notes that perhaps one million shorebirds breed in the Intermountain West region and that millions more migrate through the area each year. The plan recognizes that finding ample high-quality fresh water will be the greatest challenge faced by shorebirds in the Intermountain West region. The shorebird plan articulates seven goals plus associated objectives and strategies related to habitat management, monitoring and assessment, research, outreach, and planning. The planning goal includes objectives to coordinate shorebird planning and projects with other migratory bird initiatives and specifically with the Intermountain West Joint Venture. The shorebird plan identifies eleven species of shorebirds that regularly breed in the region, as well as twenty-three additional species that are annual migrants. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is recognized in the plan as one of the seventy-nine managed shorebird sites.

NORTH AMERICAN WATERBIRD CONSERVATION PLAN

The “North American Waterbird Conservation Plan” provides a contiguous framework for conserving and managing colonial nesting waterbirds, including 209 species of seabirds, coastal waterbirds (gulls, terns, pelicans), wading birds (herons, ibises), and marsh birds, such as certain grebes and bitterns. The overall goal of the plan is to ensure that the distribution, diversity and abundance of populations, habitats (breeding, migratory, and nonbreeding), and important sites of waterbirds are sustained or restored throughout their ranges in North America. The geographic scope of the plan covers twenty-eight countries, from Canada to Panama, as well as

islands and nearshore areas of the Atlantic, Pacific, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Sea. As with the Intermountain West Joint Venture and Partners in Flight, this waterbird partnership includes federal, state, and provincial wildlife agencies, individuals, and nonprofit conservation organizations. Also, as with Partners in Flight and other migratory bird plans, the “North American Waterbird Conservation Plan” includes a goal to establish conservation action, and exchange information and expertise with other bird conservation initiatives. The plan also calls for establishment of Practical Units for Planning for terrestrial habitats; Western Montana, including Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, falls within the Intermountain West Region Practical Units for Planning.

RECOVERY PLANS FOR FEDERALLY LISTED THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES

When federally listed threatened or endangered species occur at Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, management goals and strategies in their respective recovery plans will be followed. Currently no threatened or endangered species reside on the refuge; nevertheless, this may change as species are listed, or as listed species are discovered on refuge lands. The refuge may have incidental visits by various listed species. To ensure the impacts to any of these species were considered in this document, the Service conducted a biological evaluation of the actions in this CCP per section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (see appendix C).

STATE COMPREHENSIVE FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION STRATEGY

“The Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy” (MFWP 2005) covers all vertebrate species known to exist in Montana, including both game and nongame species, as well as some invertebrate species, such as freshwater mussels and crayfish. From the early years of fish and wildlife management, the focus has been placed on game animals and their related habitats because most of the agency’s funding has been provided by hunters and anglers.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks does not intend to reduce its focus on important game species and maintains that conserving particular types of habitats will benefit a variety of game and nongame species. With this new funding mechanism and conservation strategy in place, MFWP believes that managing fish and wildlife more comprehensively is a natural progression in the effective conservation of Montana’s remarkable fish and wildlife resources (MFWP 2005). Although game species are included in MFWP’s conservation strategy, the priority is species and their related habitats “in greatest conservation need.” This means focus areas,

community types, and species that are significantly degraded or declining, are federally listed, or where important distribution and occurrence information used to assess the status of individuals and groups of species are lacking. Because management of game species has been largely successful over the last 100 years, most game species have populations that are stable or increasing, and fewer are identified as “in greatest conservation need” (forty-nine nongame, eleven game). MFWP’s conservation strategy uses five ecotypes to describe the broad areas of Montana’s landscape that have similar characteristics. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is located in the intermountain/foothill grassland ecotype, a mosaic of private and public land that extends from the glaciated Flathead River Valley to the north, south to Centennial Valley, and east to Little Belt Foothills. This western Montana ecotype harbors more wildlife communities than any other in Montana.

Within each of the ecotypes, Tier 1 (greatest need of conservation) geographic focus areas were identified for all terrestrial and aquatic areas of the state. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is located within the Southwest Montana Intermontane Basin and Valley focus area. The Tier 1 priority species for this area include the western toad, common loon, trumpeter swan, bald eagle, greater sage-grouse, long-billed curlew, flammulated owl, Townsend’s big-eared bat, pygmy rabbit, great basin pocket mouse, gray wolf, grizzly bear, and Canada lynx.

The “Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy” outlines five conservation concerns and strategies for the Southwest Montana Intermontane Basin and Valley Focus Area. The key concerns are:

- habitat fragmentation and loss of connectivity as a result of human population growth and development
- invasive or exotic plant species
- altered fire system
- range or forest management practices
- streamside residential development

FISHERIES PROGRAM, VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The Fisheries Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has played a vital role in conserving and managing fish and other aquatic resources since 1871. Today, the Fisheries Program is a critical partner with states, tribes, other governments, other Service programs, private organizations, public institutions, and interested citizens in a larger effort to conserve these important resources. The nation’s fish and other aquatic resources are among the richest and most diverse in the world. These resources have helped support the nation’s growth by providing enormous ecological, social, and economic benefits. Despite efforts by the Service and others

to conserve aquatic resources, a growing number are declining at alarming rates. Loss of habitat and invasive species are the two most significant threats to the diversity of aquatic systems. One-third of the nation's freshwater fish species are threatened or endangered, 72% of freshwater mussels are imperiled, and the number of threatened and endangered species has tripled in the last 20 years. Clearly, there is increasing urgency to identify and carry out actions that will reverse these alarming trends before it is too late (USFWS 2002a).

In order to better conserve and manage fish and other aquatic resources in the face of increasing threats, the Service worked with partners to refocus its Fisheries Program and develop a vision outlined in the document, "Fisheries Program, Vision for the Future" (USFWS 2002a). The vision of the Service and its Fisheries Program is working with partners to restore and maintain fish and other aquatic resources at self-sustaining levels and to support federal mitigation programs for the benefit of the American public. To achieve this vision, the Fisheries Program will work with its partners to

- *protect* the health of aquatic habitats,
- *restore* fish and other aquatic resources,
- *provide* opportunities to *enjoy* the benefits of healthy aquatic resources.

One of the objectives in this document states:

Objective 2.2: Restore declining fish and other aquatic resource populations before they require listing under the Endangered Species Act. The Fisheries Program will increase its support and assistance in stopping and reversing declines of native fish and other aquatic resources, including restoring fish passage and rebuilding populations.

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge has one of the only endemic adfluvial populations of Arctic grayling in the contiguous United States, along with a native population of Westslope cutthroat trout. An endemic population is native to the region and its distribution is relatively limited to a particular locality. This population of Arctic grayling are lake-dwelling for most of the year, but use rivers and streams to spawn. Both of these populations are imperiled due to a significant loss of habitat, disease, and impacts from other nonnative fish species. In order to achieve this objective of restoring declining fish populations, the refuge will need to take management actions to enhance these species and their habitats, while ensuring that the purposes of the refuge are being met.

1.6 ECOSYSTEM DESCRIPTIONS AND THREATS

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is located within the Upper Missouri, Yellowstone, and Upper Columbia Rivers Ecosystem. This ecosystem lies within the Rocky Mountain and Great Plains physiographic provinces and includes a large part of Montana, northern Wyoming, and a small section of western North Dakota (see figure 3). Some of the wildest and most unpopulated country in the contiguous United States occurs within this 185,000 square mile area, including such significant protected areas as Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, Bob Marshall Wilderness, and the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. Wildlife in these areas is abundant and diverse.

Threatened and endangered species are actively protected and managed within various areas of this ecosystem; those species include grizzly bear, gray wolf, black-footed ferret, bull trout, pallid sturgeon, piping plover, least tern, and water howellia. Some of these species, such as the grizzly bear and gray wolf, are only listed in certain areas. Both the gray wolf and grizzly bear have been observed on the refuge. Sitting astride the Continental Divide, the ecosystem gives rise to the Columbia and Missouri rivers. Three main habitat groups are predominant throughout the ecosystem: (1) mountain habitat, (2) river habitat, and (3) prairie habitat. Mountain habitat groups contain a number of habitat types. Arid lands in the valleys have mixed wheatgrass and fescue grasslands along with considerable acreage of sagebrush stands. Surrounding mountains are of moderate elevation and are cloaked with conifer forests. The highest elevations have Douglas-fir or spruce-fir forests or alpine vegetation. Gray wolves, grizzly bears, wolverines, and various species of trout occur in these habitat groups. River habitat groups are comprised of a mix of native prairie grass and sagebrush-steppe. Cottonwood- and shrub-dominated communities are also common. Many of the same animals that are present in the mountain habitat are present in the river habitat. Prairie habitat groups include woodlands and grass- or sage-dominated areas where adequate moisture for a forest canopy is not available. Higher elevations host subalpine communities and rock outcrops. Prairie grasslands or shrub-steppe dominate at lower elevations, with riparian areas along watercourses. Black-tailed prairie dogs, bald eagles, ferruginous hawks, and a diverse group of fish can be found in this habitat.

Key threats to the ecosystem include invasive plant species, conversion of native prairie to agriculture, and habitat fragmentation from development and population growth. Priorities for the Upper Missouri, Yellowstone, and Upper Columbia Rivers Ecosystem

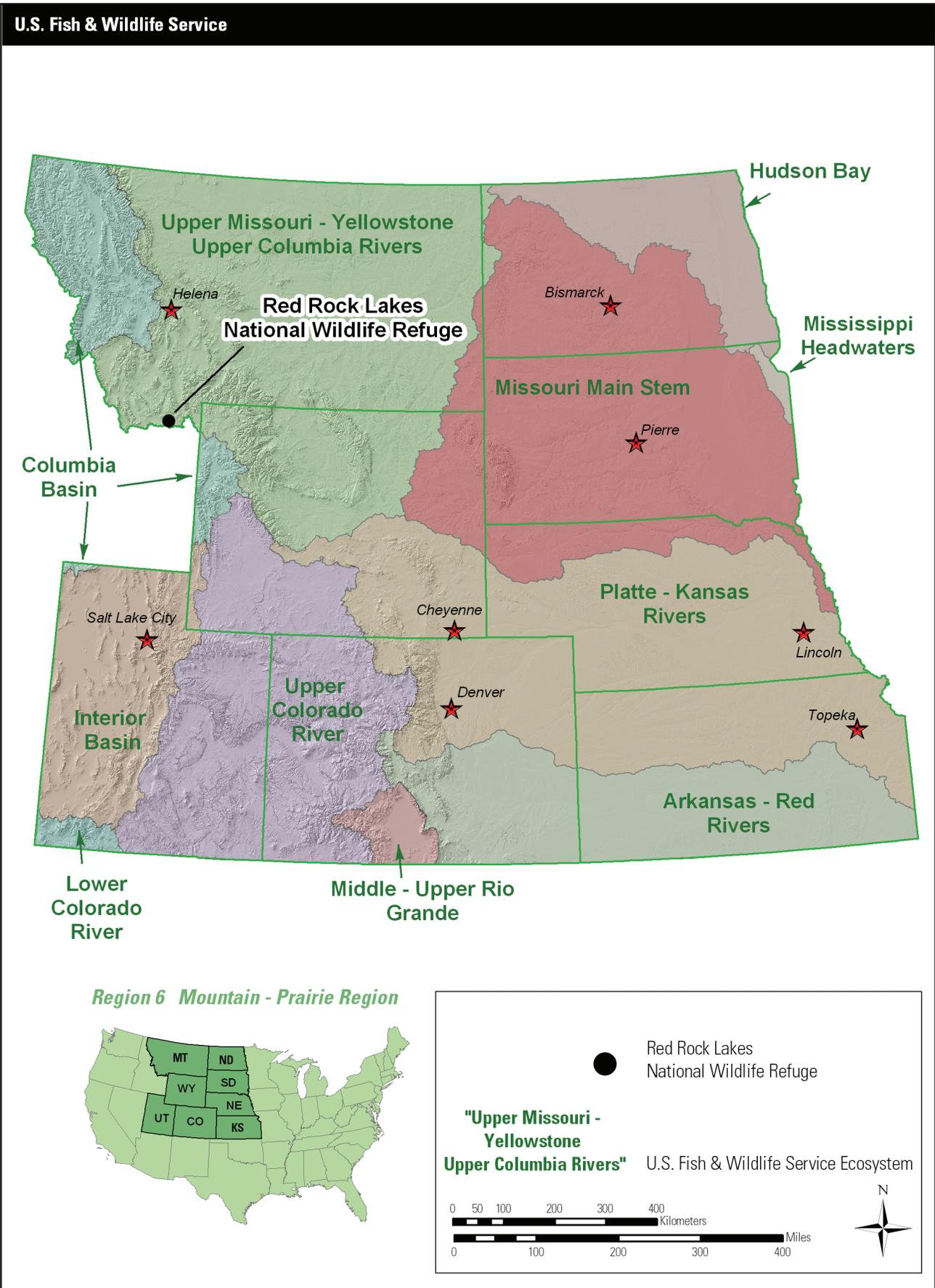


Figure 3. Upper Missouri, Yellowstone, and Upper Columbia rivers ecosystem map.

include ensuring natural and healthy ecological processes for the area, and making sure that economic development complements environmental protection.

THE GREATER YELLOWSTONE ECOSYSTEM

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is also part of an area designated as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), an area roughly the size of West Virginia which straddles the states of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho.

Within the GYE, the headwaters of three major river systems—the Yellowstone, the Snake, and the Green—support a renowned trout fishery and are the lifeblood of agriculture, towns, and cities.

The 18 million acre GYE is one of the largest, relatively intact temperate zone ecosystems left on earth. This area includes Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, portions of seven surrounding national forests, Bureau of Land Management lands, three national wildlife refuges, and state and private lands. Vast, roadless landscapes continue to be the hallmark of the GYE, the source of its attraction as well as its ecological health. They include designated wilderness areas within the region's seven national forests, Red Rock Lakes National Wilderness, undeveloped portions of two national parks, and also the surrounding lands managed by a number of federal and state agencies which have, as yet, neither roads nor legal restrictions on road-building.

In the GYE's natural tapestry, wildlife is a spectacular element, attracting worldwide interest and awe. The ecosystem is home to one of the largest herds of elk in North America, and is one of the few remaining areas in the contiguous United States where the magnificent grizzly bear still roams in significant numbers. The GYE serves as breeding and wintering ground for trumpeter swans, and is home to the largest free-ranging herd of bison in the contiguous United States. The GYE's relatively intact natural landscape appears to retain its full complement of vertebrate wildlife. Mountain lion and wolverine still roam its mountains, bighorn sheep scramble among its cliffs, moose browse its willows, and eagles grace the open sky (Greater Yellowstone Coalition 2006).

Residential development is the greatest threat to this ecosystem—threatening

ranching, destroying wildlife habitat, disrupting wildlife migrations, and compromising natural processes such as fire.

1.7 PLANNING PROCESS

This final CCP for the refuge follows the Improvement Act and NEPA, and the implementing regulations of both acts. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued its Refuge System planning policy in 2000. This policy established requirements and guidance for refuge and district plans—including CCPs and step-down management plans—to ensure that planning efforts follow the Improvement Act. The planning policy identified several steps of the CCP and environmental analysis process (see figure 4), which begins with preplanning.

Table 1 lists the specific steps in the planning process for the preparation of this final CCP. The Service began the pre-planning process in August 2005 with the establishment of a planning team. The planning team is comprised primarily of Service personnel from the refuge and representatives from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Some additional contributors included other Service divisions, U.S. Geological Service, Montana State University, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) (see appendix D). During pre-planning, the team developed a mailing list, internal issues, and a special qualities list. Over the course of pre-planning and public scoping, the planning team collected available information about the resources of the refuge and the surrounding areas. This information was first summarized in chapter 4 of the draft environmental assessment (EA). This information has been retained in this final CCP in chapter 3. During preplanning, the refuge hosted three separate biological workshops inviting eighteen individuals from various

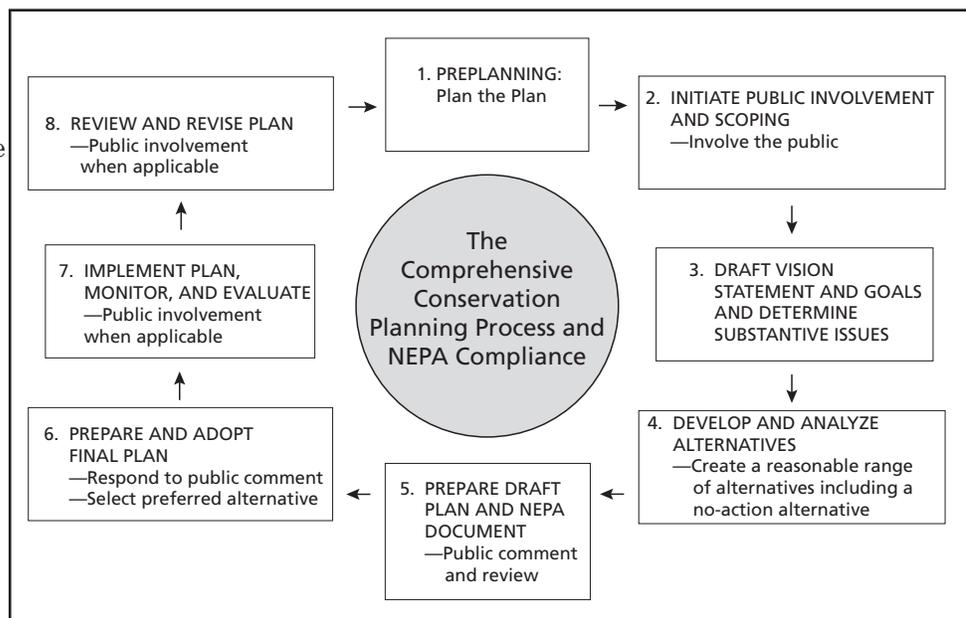


Figure 4. CCP and environmental analysis process steps.

Table 1. Planning process summary for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
August 16, 2005	Kickoff meeting	CCP overview developed, planning team list developed, purposes identified, initial issues and qualities list developed, development of mailing list started.
September 20, 2005	Visitor services review	Visitor services programs and facilities evaluated by education and visitor services staff.
February 21, 2006	Biological review	Gathered information from a team of researchers and biologists on the natural processes that formed and continue to influence Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.
May 17, 2006	Biological review	Worked with contracted U.S. Geological Survey researcher to evaluate current biological programs and needs.
June 12, 2006	Notice of intent	Published notice of intent in <i>Federal Register</i> to start public scoping.
August 1, 2006	Planning update	First planning update sent to mailing list describing planning process and announcing upcoming public scoping meetings.
August 15, 2006	Public scoping meeting, Ennis, MT	Offered public opportunity to learn about the CCP and provide comments.
August 15, 2006	Vision and goals workshop	Developed draft vision and goals statements.
August 16, 2006	Public scoping meeting, Dillon, MT	Offered public opportunity to learn about the CCP and provide comments.
September 9, 2006	Public scoping meeting, Lima, MT	Offered public opportunity to learn about the CCP and provide comments.
September 11, 2006	Biological review	Panel of biologists and researchers gathered to review and evaluate biological program and issues.
January 5, 2007	Focus group meeting (realty issues)	Staff and realty specialists discussed boundary and conservation easement program issues.
January 10, 2007	Alternatives netmeeting workshop	Developed draft alternatives table.
February 12, 2007	Objectives and strategies workshop	Finalized alternatives table, selected proposed action, and began writing objectives/strategies.
April 2007	Draft CCP	Began writing draft CCP/EA.
July 11–25, 2008	Internal review of draft CCP	Draft CCP is reviewed by Service, state, and other federal partners.
September 26, 2008	NOA of public draft CCP	Notified the public that the CCP/EA was available for a 30-day review.
October 8, 2008	Public meeting in Lima, Montana	Offered public opportunity to learn about the draft CCP and provide comments.
October 9, 2008	Public meeting in Dillon, Montana	Offered public opportunity to learn about the draft CCP and provide comments.

Table 1. Planning process summary for Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
October 20, 2008	Extended comment period	Provided the public an additional 30 days in which to comment on the draft CCP.
November 26, 2008	Comment period ends	Public comments must be emailed or postmarked by this date.
January 8–9, 2009	Planning team meeting	Based on substantive public and internal review comments, discussed needed revisions.
February 3, 2009	Meeting with refuge supervisor	Discussed public comments.
March 2009	Final CCP prepared	Prepared final CCP and made necessary revisions based on substantive public comments.
June 15, 2009	FONSI signed	Regional Director approved alternative B as the proposed action and signed the Finding of No Significant Impact.
December 2009	Final CCP completed	Finished editing final CCP for printing.

state and federal agencies who are experts in their fields. These groups discussed the challenges and opportunities identified by the refuge staff and the public and shared their expertise on options for managing the refuge in the future. A visitor services review was also conducted.

In compliance with the Federal Advisory Committee Act, the general public is consulted through the scoping process, including public meetings and solicitation of comments. This provides opportunities for the public to share concerns and issues they would like addressed, while providing their ideas on how to best manage the refuge.

COORDINATION WITH THE PUBLIC

A notice of intent (NOI) to prepare the draft CCP and EA was published in the *Federal Register* on June 12, 2006. A mailing list of more than 250 names including private citizens; local, regional, and state government representatives and legislators; other federal agencies; and interested organizations was prepared during pre-planning (see appendix A).

The first planning update issue was sent in July 2006 to everyone on the mailing list. Information was provided on the history of the refuge and the CCP process, along with an invitation to the public scoping meetings. Public scoping meetings were also announced through state and local media. Each planning update included a comment form to give the public an opportunity to provide written comments. Emails were also accepted at the refuge's email address: redrocks@fws.gov.

Three public scoping meetings were held within 2 hours distance of the refuge office. There were thirty-three attendees, primarily local citizens,

including surrounding ranchers. Following a presentation about the refuge and an overview of the CCP and NEPA processes, attendees were encouraged to ask questions and offer comments. Verbal comments were recorded, and each attendee was given a comment form to submit additional thoughts or questions in writing.

All written comments had to be postmarked by September 15, 2006. A total of fifty-five additional written comments were received throughout the scoping process. All substantive comments were shared with the planning team and considered throughout the planning process.

The draft CCP and EA was released to the public on September 26, 2008 through a notice of availability published in the *Federal Register*. Copies of either the draft CCP and EA and/or a planning update were mailed to individuals on the planning mailing list. Initially the public was offered a 30-day review period. Numerous requests from the public and state representatives resulted in an additional 30 days being granted, for a total of 60 days for public review. Two public meetings were held on October 8 in Lima, Montana and on October 9 in Dillon, Montana. These meetings were announced in the planning update and through the local and statewide media. Over thirty individuals participated in these meetings. A short presentation was given on the draft plan, followed by an opportunity for participants to offer comments. All comments needed to be received or postmarked by November 26, 2008.

In addition to oral and written comments received during these public meetings, the planning team received over 100 additional written comments during the public review process. The planning team reviewed all comments both individually

and as a team. Numerous modifications, including clarifications, were made to this final document based on the public review. Responses to substantive comments are summarized in appendix A.

STATE COORDINATION

At the start of the planning process, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's region 6 director sent a letter to MFWP, inviting them to participate in the planning process. Since then, numerous state biologists have been involved in the planning process and have also participated in biological reviews of the refuge's management program. At the start of the process, the offices of each of the three state members of Congress (then Senator Conrad Burns, Senator Max Baucus, and Representative Dennis Rehburg) were sent letters notifying them of the planning process and inviting them to comment on the plan. Four other Montana state senators and representatives and Governor Brian Schweitzer were sent similar letters. The state was provided copies of both the internal and public review drafts. Based on state comments, various changes were made to the final CCP.

TRIBAL COORDINATION

Early in the planning process, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's region 6 director sent a letter to tribes identified as possibly having interest in participating in the planning efforts at Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. Those contacted were the Northern Cheyenne, Crow, Eastern Shoshone, and Arapaho tribal councils. The tribal councils did not submit responses to the region 6 letter; nevertheless, the councils were provided planning updates and opportunities to comment. During public review of the draft CCP, we received a comment that several other tribes may have

historically used the Centennial Valley and the refuge at one time. These tribes included the Nez Pierce, Confederated Salish and Kootenai, Shoshone-Bannock, and the Blackfeet Nation. We provided each a copy of the public draft and offered 30 days in which to comment on the document. No comments were received.

PLAN AMENDMENT AND FINAL DECISION

An intra-Service Section 7 evaluation was completed on the document by the Service's Ecological Services office to evaluate impacts to threatened and endangered species (See appendix C). The Service's region 6 regional director considered the environmental effects of each alternative and the public comments on the draft document and approved alternative B as Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge's final 15-year comprehensive conservation plan. The decision is disclosed in a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) included in this CCP (appendix E). Implementation of the CCP will begin with the regional director's signature and publication of the final CCP. The final compatibility determinations are found in this document under appendix F. This CCP provides long-term guidance for management decisions. It establishes goals, objectives, and strategies (chapter 4) needed to accomplish refuge purposes, and identifies the Service's best estimate of future needs.

This CCP details program planning levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and thus are primarily for Service strategic planning purposes. This CCP does not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operation and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisitions.

