

Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Greetings from the refuge!

We are pleased to announce the release of our final Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge (refuge). We thank everyone who provided comments and input on our draft CCP/Environmental Assessment(EA) released in September 2009. These comments provided us with valuable information for preparing our final document.

The CCP is our 15-year management plan for this refuge. It furthers the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, provides direction to achieve the purposes, vision and goals of the refuge, and contributes to state and regional conservation plans. Implementing the plan will enable us to fulfill the refuge's important role in conserving and managing wildlife resources.

You may view or download the CCP from our website at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/Eastern%20Neck/ccphome.html>.

You may also obtain a print copy or CD-ROM version by contacting the refuge headquarters (see contact information below).



Wading tundra swans



Waterfowl taking off at Hail Cove

Terry Willis

Background

The Service established Eastern Neck Refuge in 1962 for the purpose of protecting and conserving migratory birds. Due to its location at the confluence of the Chester River and the Chesapeake Bay, the refuge serves as important habitat for migrating and wintering waterfowl. The 2,286 acre island contains a diversity of habitat types including tidal marshes, open water, fields and forest.

Public Comment on the Draft Plan

We greatly appreciate the level of public interest and involvement in our planning, and benefited from the discussions during open houses and public meetings. Many responded to our planning update newsletters and notices in the *Federal Register*.

We released the draft CCP/EA for public comment from September 9, 2009 to October 30, 2009. We also held a public meeting on September 24, 2009 in Rock Hall, Maryland.

We received 42 responses, both written and oral, during the public comment

period. These comments covered a variety of topics including shoreline protection, tidal marsh restoration, cropland and wetlands management for waterfowl, staffing, and hunting and other public use opportunities.

We evaluated all comments received during the comment period, and include our responses to them as Appendix H "Summary and Response to Public Comments," in the final CCP. Those comments helped us improve the management objectives and strategies in the CCP.

Highlights of the CCP

The final CCP represents the array of management actions that best works toward achieving our vision and goals.

Under the CCP, our highest priority will continue to be the protection and restoration of the refuge's shoreline and tidal marsh habitat. Our management will also focus on providing quality habitat for migratory waterfowl and birds, as well as other species of conservation concern.

Eastern Neck CCP Goals

Goal 1: Protect and enhance Service Trust Resources, species and habitats of special concern in the Chesapeake Bay region.

Goal 2: Maintain a diversity of community types comprised of native plants and animals to pass on to future generations of Americans.

Goal 3: Conduct effective outreach activities and develop and implement quality wildlife-dependent public use programs, with an emphasis on wildlife observation and photography, to raise public awareness of the refuge and Refuge System, and promote the enjoyment and stewardship of natural resources in the Chesapeake Bay.

Jonathan Priday/USFWS



Kayakers along Eastern Neck

To accomplish this, we will expand our shoreline protection program to an additional 28,000 linear feet of shoreline through the development of new break-water or onshore armoring projects.

Additionally, we will enhance our management of the existing 5 green tree reservoirs and create up to 3 new moist soil units to provide habitat for wintering waterfowl and other wildlife. Cropland management on approximately 400 acres will also provide quality wintering waterfowl habitat. By allowing some croplands to revert to mixed deciduous forest habitat, we increase stop-over habitat for forest-dependent migratory birds.

The main focus of our visitor services program will be to continue to offer high quality wildlife observation and photography opportunities. We will also continue to offer high-quality deer hunting, youth turkey hunting, and recreational crabbing and fishing opportunities.

We also propose to seek funding for two additional staff positions. We plan to hire a biological technician and a park ranger (law enforcement).

Changes between Draft and Final Plan

Based on the responses we received during the public comment period and a site visit with State and Federal waterfowl biologists, the final plan includes the following important changes from what was presented in Alternative B, the Service-preferred alternative, in the draft CCP/EA.

1. We will create 3 new moist soil units (MSU's) totaling 22 acres, instead of 4 as proposed in the draft CCP/EA. We re-evaluated our plans in the field with Service and Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MD DNR) biologists and determined that it was more efficient, effective, and beneficial to waterfowl to create 3 larger units in areas we intend to maintain as cropland, instead of 4 smaller units where 2 of those units lie in forest habitat. Map 4.1 in the final CCP depicts the new MSU locations.

2. We will reduce the acres in croplands from the existing 557 to 403 (28% reduction). The draft CCP/EA proposed a reduction from 557 to 372 acres, (a 33% reduction). The 31 acre difference includes fields we plan to maintain in cropland based on a field evaluation by Service and MD DNR waterfowl experts. Those experts recommend we continue to manage these acres as croplands since additional data and observations indicate the fields receive higher waterfowl use than originally assumed, and because their location adjacent to public access roads will facilitate wildlife observation and photography.

3. We will maintain two hedgerows that were planned for removal in the draft CCP/EA based on a field review that determined they contribute to wildlife habitat diversity, facilitate wildlife observation and photography because of their proximity to public access roads, and minimize soil erosion from wind and storm events in adjacent croplands.

4. Our plans to retain certain hedgerows and croplands, as noted above, caused us to reevaluate the draft CCP/EA proposal to move the refuge headquarters road. The hedgerows and croplands referred to lie near the headquarters road, and the resulting configuration does not warrant a change in road location. This point, coupled with public concern about the expense of moving the road, justify dropping those plans from the final CCP.

5. We will increase the amount of shoreline and tidal marsh protection described in draft CCP/EA to include an additional 3,000 linear feet and adjacent marsh along the northern boundary of the refuge. We decided to include this area because shoreline



Blue crab at the refuge

USFWS

Vision Statement for Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge

“Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge will sustain diverse and healthy tidal marsh, aquatic and uplands habitats so the refuge supports robust populations of Federal trust species and remains an essential link in the network of conserved lands in the Chesapeake Bay. Our successes will be supported by the strong partnerships we develop with other Federal agencies, State agencies, conservation organizations, land managers, and neighboring communities. Working with those partners will provide the opportunity to showcase and demonstrate a science-based, adaptive management approach, with emphasis on the protection and restoration of shoreline and tidal marsh.

We will continue to reward all who visit with an opportunity to immerse themselves in the natural sights and sounds of the Chesapeake Bay. The thrill of observing more than 100,000 migrating and wintering waterfowl moving in and out of the refuge each year, including the rare tundra swan, is an experience that forms a lasting impression about the wonders of nature. Visitors will also be delighted by the refuge’s healthy populations of bald eagles and ospreys as they dive for fish and attend to their young. They will also enjoy the opportunity to observe the phenomenon of over 100 species of birds migrating through each fall. We will enhance these and other refuge experiences by providing exceptional interpretive and visitor programs about the Chesapeake Bay and its rich diversity of natural and cultural resources.

We hope residents of neighboring communities on the Delmarva Peninsula will value the refuge for enhancing their quality of life. Within the National Wildlife Refuge System, the refuge will be treasured for conserving the Chesapeake Bay’s Federal trust resources and providing inspirational outdoor experiences for present and future generations of Americans.”

erosion and tidal marsh loss has accelerated in recent years. As stipulated in both the draft CCP/EA and the final CCP, all new major shoreline protection projects will require additional environmental analysis and public involvement.

6. We will modify the aggressive *Phragmites* control efforts described in the draft CCP/EA. There are certain areas where the loss of refuge shoreline is accelerating and the presence of *Phragmites* helps dissipate the erosive force of wind and wave action. In short, removal of *Phragmites* would result in open water and no shoreline protection. Until we can establish native vegetation or other natural barriers to those impacts, we will scale back our *Phragmites* control efforts in certain high risk areas.

Our Regional Director has selected this modified alternative B, with the changes noted above, for implementation. The rationale for his decision is documented in Appendix I, “Finding of No Significant Impact,” of the final CCP.

Please come and visit the refuge!

The refuge provides recreational opportunities for all types of wildlife enthusiasts including:

- a fall deer hunt and a spring youth turkey hunt
- six miles of hiking trails, an observation tower, viewing blinds, and accessible boardwalks
- an interpretive water trail around Eastern Neck Island for paddlers
- fishing and crabbing opportunities



Soaring osprey - John McRay

What’s Next?

Implementation of priority projects decided upon by the refuge manager can begin immediately. We encourage you to stay involved during the plan’s implementation. To be successful, we must continue to develop partnerships, enhance our volunteer program and support our Friends Group.

Contact Information

To learn more about Eastern Neck Refuge, please visit <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/easternneck/>.

You may also reach Refuge Complex Headquarters by:
 Telephone: 410/228-2692
 Email at fw5rw_bwnwr@fws.gov.

Please send mail to:
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