

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck and Featherstone National Wildlife Refuges

Developing a Conservation Plan for the Future

A conservation plan for the future

We continue to progress in developing a comprehensive conservation plan for the Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck and Featherstone national wildlife refuges. That CCP will guide their wildlife and habitat management and public use programs for the next 15 years.

The managers and staff of the Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex, headquartered in Woodbridge, VA, are leading this planning project, with the assistance of planners, biologists, and other natural resource specialists from the Service, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF), and Mason Neck State Park.

Our planning team is using the draft refuge vision statements and broad management goals we posted in our early newsletters as the basis for developing a range of refuge management alternatives, each with a

different theme. Then we will develop detailed objectives in each alternative that are consistent with its theme for managing habitats, wildlife species of concern, and visitor uses. During the next few months, we will finalize those alternatives and objectives, and will publish their details in a spring 2008 newsletter. We plan to publish the draft CCP early next summer, and the final CCP by the end of 2008.

Public and partner involvement

We often discuss shared issues or concerns and management recommendations with state agencies, other conservation organizations, interested individuals, and our volunteer group, the Friends of the Potomac River Refuges. We will continue to inform them about our planning at every opportunity.

We hosted public open houses on March 27 at the Potomac Community Library and on March 28 at the Gunston Elementary School.



Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

The Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck refuge is one of the "Top 10 Great Places to keep an eye on bald eagles" (USA Today, Nov. 29, 2001).



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The Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck refuge encompasses more than 2,000 acres of oak-hickory forest, freshwater marshes, and 4 miles of the Potomac River shoreline.

Our purpose was to provide local residents and other interested individuals their first opportunity to become involved in the comprehensive conservation planning process. They voiced their concerns and recommendations about many aspects of refuge management, which we have highlighted below for each refuge.

Featherstone Refuge

- Monitor refuge water quality to address the potential for pollutants from adjacent land uses contaminating the refuge and river.
- Provide trail access to the refuge for such activities as bird-watching, including canoe and kayak access from the river.
- Control unauthorized uses of the refuge, including camping, fishing, and dumping.



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An active railroad forms the western border of the Featherstone refuge.

- Establish wildlife observation trails linked to the Potomac National Heritage and Scenic Trail and the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail.
- Protect the refuge as one of the most significant bald eagle conservation areas in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.
- Focus on conserving waterfowl and other migratory birds using the refuge.
- Integrate planning for the three refuges in the refuge complex: the Featherstone, Mason Neck, and Occoquan Bay refuges.

Mason Neck Refuge

- Continue to protect the recently delisted bald eagle.
- Address migratory and wintering waterfowl and Neotropical breeding bird needs.
- Survey the refuge for invasive species; develop a program to eliminate them.
- Conduct a forest health study to serve as a baseline for analyzing future refuge management.
- Address shoreline erosion with effective measures like the breakwater project.
- Use volunteer groups more effectively; network volunteers with common interests working across the Mason Neck peninsula.

- Formalize volunteer agreements and facilitate resource support to accomplish priority projects.
- Emphasize interagency cooperation for management of resources across the Mason Neck peninsula.
- Integrate planning for the three refuges in the refuge complex: the Featherstone, Mason Neck, and Occoquan Bay refuges.
- Hire a refuge biologist to lead wildlife studies and use volunteer or “citizen science” groups to help.
- Improve public access to the refuge by upgrading trails, constructing new ones, and interpreting their key resources.
- Preserve the rich heritage of the refuge; survey archeological and historic resource and protect areas from shoreline erosion.

Refuge field reviews

After the public scoping meetings, we hosted two field meetings with representatives of the VDGIF and Mason Neck State Park to discuss some of the scoping issues related to public use and habitat management on the Mason Neck refuge.

On May 15, we met to discuss the status of wildlife-dependent and other recreational public uses of the refuge, and what uses it might support in the next 15 years. Among them were improving existing trails, creating new trails for wildlife observation and photography, and increasing opportunities for environmental education.

On May 16, we met to discuss the future management of habitat at the Mason Neck refuge. In particular, we discussed managing its Little Marsh impoundment to increase the habitat for waterfowl and fish and the benefits for a wide variety of wildlife: specifically, foraging bald eagles and herons. We also discussed managing the mature forest nearby for nesting and roosting bald eagles and herons, managing the deer herd, and protecting the refuge shoreline from erosion.

During the last few months, we have also pursued discussions with resource professionals with expertise on the resources of concern at the refuge complex. We hosted a field visit with an expert on forest pests and pathology from the USDA Forest Service. We asked whether the forest on the Mason Neck refuge was at risk of an

infestation of gypsy moths. Results suggest the forest is at low risk, given its present condition.

Other planning activities

When we talked with the VDGIF this spring about the possibility of their cooperatively managing the Featherstone refuge, they expressed an interest. We will continue to investigate the feasibility of that cooperative management.

We invited the Volunteer Coordinator for the Northern VA Soil and Water District and the Potomac River Watershed Coordinator of the VA DEP to a CCP team meeting in early October, to discuss water quality monitoring and the use of volunteers. We and members of our volunteer group learned about other established volunteer monitoring programs.

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

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