

Appendix M



Michael Kidder/USFWS

View of refuge marsh in winter

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Finding of No Significant Impact Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In March 2007, we published the draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (CCP/EA) for the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Missisquoi NWR spans over 6,592 acres, lies on the eastern shore of Lake Champlain near the Canadian border in Franklin County, Vermont and includes most of the Missisquoi River Delta, the largest wetland complex in the Lake Champlain Basin. That draft evaluates two alternatives for managing the refuge over the next 15 years, and carefully considers their impacts on the environment and their potential contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) and refuge purposes and goals. Its appendixes provide additional information supporting the assessment. A brief overview of each alternative follows.

Alternative A: This alternative describes refuge management projects now planned, funded, or underway. The priorities of the biological program will continue focusing on managing habitat for migrating waterfowl, breeding great blue herons, black terns, ospreys and cavity-nesting waterfowl, grassland-nesting birds, woodcock and other early successional species; protecting State- or Federal-listed threatened or endangered species; monitoring and controlling invasive species; trapping raccoons to protect nesting birds; and trapping beavers and muskrats to protect dikes. Other priority public use programs will continue. Concerning visitor services, we would keep the new Visitor Contact Station open during the week, but would likely keep it closed on weekends. We would continue to offer opportunities for hunting and fishing on the refuge, and maintain its trails for walking and observing nature. The user fees we describe below would remain the same. Although we would respond to requests for environmental education and school programs, we would be unable to meet many requests due to our limited staff and resources. We would also continue our partnership with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department (VT FWD) in banding waterfowl and assisting in waterfowl and other surveys as staff time permits. We would continue to protect cultural and historical resources as they are discovered. However, we would be unable to create more opportunities for interpretation relative to the cultural resources on the refuge. Any new opportunities to conserve land would be limited. We would continue to acquire the 8 parcels comprising of 253 acres that remain within the original approved acquisition boundary of the refuge, and the occasional parcel that becomes available next to the refuge. Our current management program offers few law enforcement capabilities, despite a significant need due to the level of public use at the refuge and its proximity to the International Border. This alternative provides no new refuge staff. Selecting this alternative would maintain the status quo in refuge management over the next 15 years. It also serves as the baseline for comparing alternative B.

Alternative B: The draft CCP/EA identifies this alternative as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service)-proposed action. Selecting this alternative will increase the inventory, monitoring, and management of the Missisquoi River Delta wetlands (floodplain forest, lakeshore and river shore wetlands, impoundments, rivers and creeks, bays, bogs, swamps, vernal pools, and scrub-shrub habitat) to maintain their ecological integrity for the rich diversity of plants and animals on the refuge; better management of high-quality grasslands, shrublands, and other early successional habitats for a range of wildlife species of conservation concern; enhanced, expanded programs of outreach, and environmental education and interpretation to raise public awareness and involvement in the protection and stewardship of refuge wildlife and habitats; enhanced, expanded wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities (wildlife observation and photography, hunting, and fishing) that provide quality experiences for refuge visitors and protect wildlife and their habitats; greater inventory, protection, and interpretation of the rich cultural history of the Missisquoi River delta and enhanced partnerships with the local Abenaki tribe and other interested communities; cooperative partnerships within the northern Lake Champlain Basin, including the Missisquoi River watershed, working toward better water quality, improved land stewardship, and greater protection of fish and wildlife resources; Geographical Information System (GIS) that contains current data on refuge biological resources that will more effectively and efficiently guide habitat and species management; an inventory of aquatic and upland invasive species that tracks annual distribution and control methods, and management results of these nuisance species on the refuge and in Missisquoi

Bay; in partnership with others, the protection of additional lands and waters, particularly intact, fully functioning wetlands and associated riparian areas and lands that maintain and expand the protection of large, unfragmented blocks of upland habitat for area-sensitive wildlife species; visitors will be encouraged to make voluntary contributions at collection boxes at the trailheads and boat launches, a new, \$1.00 Refuge Activity Fee that will raise additional funds for trail maintenance, informational kiosks, educational programs, and other actions to benefit all visitors to the refuge; a critical new law enforcement position, to enhance staff and visitor safety, ensure compliance with regulations, and maintain communications with Homeland Security, given the refuge's proximity to the International border and active recreational community in the Missisquoi Bay and river; other new critical positions, including a park ranger, maintenance worker, and biological technician, to maximize the use and effectiveness of the new visitor center and associated interpretive trails, ensure safe, quality refuge experiences through well-maintained facilities, ensure our use of the best available science in conserving and managing the fish and wildlife resources and their habitats, and ensure that public uses are compatible with the wildlife first mission of the NWRS, and to allow the refuge to benefit from its proximity to Burlington and urban communities.

We distributed the draft CCP/EA for a 38-day period of public review and comment from March 22 through April 30, 2007. We received 65 written responses, plus 40 additional oral comments at public meetings. Appendix L in the final CCP includes a summary of those comments and our responses to them.

After reviewing the proposed management actions, considering all public comments and our responses to them, I have determined that the analysis in the EA is sufficient to support my findings, described below.

I am selecting draft CCP/EA Alternative B (the Service-proposed action) as the final CCP for implementation, with these clarifications.

1. Many commenters suggested that the refuge should not charge fees to access the refuge. Therefore, in lieu of a fee, visitors will be encouraged to make voluntary contributions at collection boxes at the trailheads and boat launches. We will also work with the Friends of Missisquoi NWR to develop a voluntary annual refuge pass.
2. This alternative will provide the public an opportunity to get out onto the refuge for wildlife observation/photography. Additional public uses are also provided for hunting and fishing. Extending and adding trails at Missisquoi NWR will also be carefully considered. We must first detail, inventory and map the archaeological and cultural features, sensitive habitats and species currently present before we can determine the appropriateness and compatibility of new trails on the refuges. Safety will be another important consideration. The Service understands the public's desire to be able to view plants and wildlife in representative natural landscapes, and we will explore ways to be able to facilitate future compatible access.
3. The Service will strive to increase public awareness of the refuge. We will work with our partners to explore ideas to enhance the refuge's presence and visibility, and promote a positive effect on protecting the resources.
4. Region 5 has recently identified "areas of emphasis" with regards to the six priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses for every refuge. The Missisquoi NWR has been identified for hunting and fishing. Thus, we will further consider this recognition as we implement the strategies of the CCP over the next 15 years.
5. We have removed the Compatibility Determination's (CD) on Snowmobiling and Bicycling. These were found to be an Inappropriate Use at Missisquoi NWR, therefore a CD is not required.

I have selected Alternative B as modified for several reasons. It helps fulfill the mission of the NWRS; best achieves the refuge purpose, vision, and goals; maintains and, where appropriate, restores the ecological integrity of the refuge; addresses the major issues identified during the planning process; and is consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management.

I find that implementing Alternative B adheres to all legal mandates and Service policies, and will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, in accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of the NEPA. Therefore, I have concluded that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required, and this Finding of No Significant Impact is appropriate and warranted.

Thomas J. Healy


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Acting

9.24.07

Date