

Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement Release

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan is Now Available for Public Comment

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is pleased to announce the release of a draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) for public review and comment. In this newsletter, we summarize three management alternatives that we are evaluating for the CCP. We also explain how to get a copy of the draft CCP/EIS and submit comments in writing or in person at public meetings. The public comment period ends on August 6, 2012.

Refuge Background

In 1963, Prime Hook NWR was established under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act “for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or any other management purpose, expressly for migratory birds.” It was established primarily to preserve coastal wetlands as wintering and breeding habitat for migratory waterfowl.

The 10,133-acre refuge stretches along the west shore of Delaware Bay and is located 22 miles southeast of Dover, Delaware. Eighty percent of the refuge is tidal and freshwater wetlands that flow into the Delaware Bay and



Northern pintails

Kevin Fleming

surrounding coastal marshes. The remaining 20 percent of the refuge consists of upland habitats that abut intensive agricultural and residential developments.

CCP Planning Process

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, which requires a 15-year CCP for each national wildlife refuge to guide all aspects of refuge management, including habitat and wildlife, recreation, and administration. Each CCP is designed to be consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife management, conservation, legal mandates, and our policies.

Public Outreach

We started the CCP process for Prime Hook NWR in September 2004. During 2005, we had a formal public scoping period to solicit comments from the community and other interested parties on issues and impacts that should be evaluated in the draft CCP/EA. We held public meetings in Milton, Dover, and Lewes, Delaware, which were attended by more than 100 people.

Throughout the rest of the planning process, we have participated in community meetings, events, and other public forums, and requested public input on managing the refuge and its programs.

Why Has It Taken So Long?

Because we want to get it right! Typically it takes 3 years to produce a draft CCP. The Prime Hook NWR CCP draft was delayed several years for many reasons, including rapid habitat changes from storms and dune breaches, lawsuits against the Service for cooperative farming and dune repairs, and the complexity of issues requiring the thorough review of

Inside this Newsletter

Major Issues.....	2
Refuge Vision Statement.....	2
Alternatives Evaluated.....	3
CCP/EIS Organization.....	3
How to Get the Draft CCP/EIS..	5
How to Provide Comments.....	5
Public Meetings.....	5
Refuge Open Houses.....	5
Comparison of Alternatives.....	6
Map of Refuge.....	7
Refuge Goals.....	8



Short-billed dowitchers

Kevin Fleming



Kevin Fleming

Prairie warbler

an environmental impact statement rather than an environmental assessment.

The CCP will guide management at the refuge for the next 15 years and includes a comprehensive analysis of management issues using the best science available. Now that the draft is out for public comment, we want to hear from you so we can continue moving forward.

Major Issues

There are five major issues that came up in public scoping, internal discussions, or talking with our State partners. These are summarized below.

1. Climate, Sea Level Rise, and Marshes

Prime Hook NWR is primarily marsh habitat. Humans have been altering the refuge's marshes for a long time, including constructing artificial freshwater ponds. Although these ponds attracted wintering waterfowl, they are not sustainable in the long term due to saltwater intrusion from storms and other natural events. Global climate change and sea level rise are also impacting the refuge's marshes.

These changes also affect nearby communities. Storms have breached dunes and berms, flooding roads and homes. Opinions about management of the marshes differ. Some people think dunes should be continually repaired and maintained to protect beach front development, while others believe that taxpayer money should not be used for this purpose.

2. Hunting

Hunting is a tradition that is part of the culture and heritage of Prime Hook NWR. Hunters have come to depend on high-quality hunts on the refuge. Under the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, hunting is considered a priority wildlife-dependent recreational opportunity on national wildlife refuges.

Hunting also provides biological, recreational, and economic benefits to the refuge and surrounding area. Although more than half of visitors surveyed at the refuge rated hunting as a moderate to very important public use activity, other visitors opposed hunting in general or opposed hunting on a national wildlife refuge.

3. Cooperative Farming

In the past, a cooperative farming program helped to manage approximately 600 acres of agricultural fields on the refuge to provide feeding areas for Canada geese and dabbling ducks. In response to a 2006 lawsuit, we suspended the program to evaluate management alternatives for previously farmed areas. Some hunters and local residents would like the refuge to reinstate the cooperative farming program.

4. Mosquito Management

Mosquitoes are a natural and important part of the refuge ecosystem, but they may be a nuisance or health threat to local communities and refuge visitors. Some health threats may be reduced naturally by maintaining a diversity of birds on the refuge.

The State of Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control manages mosquitoes on the refuge using a variety of methods, including marsh management and insecticides. Marsh management techniques may increase the amount of open water on the refuge and insecticides may harm non-target insects and animals.

Prime Hook NWR Vision Statement

The vision statement below describes our desired future character of Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge. We will refine it throughout the planning process with input from our partners and the public, and it will guide program emphasis and priorities at the refuge.

Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge will comprise a variety of Delmarva coastal plain habitats, such as barrier island beach, freshwater and tidal wetlands, grassland, shrubland and forest. The refuge will manage, maintain, enhance and, where appropriate, restore habitats for native plants and animals, with an emphasis on migratory birds and rare species. A balanced approach will be used to ensure all wildlife dependent recreational users experience quality opportunities. The refuge will be a leader in conservation, research and community partnerships, adapting to physical and community changes as necessary to maintain the ecological integrity of the refuge and build a stewardship ethic for current and future generations.



Kevin Fleming

Delmarva fox squirrel

5. Nuisance Species

Populations or individuals of some animal species currently, or potentially, can have a detrimental effect on the refuge. These include overabundant resident Canada geese or snow geese, predators of rare shorebirds, non-native animals, and other animals that damage refuge habitats or infrastructure. Management of some nuisance animals can involve lethal control, which is opposed by some people.

Other issues addressed in the draft CCP/EIS are management of beach-nesting birds, invasive plant control, fire management, management of grassland and shrubland areas, Delmarva fox squirrel recovery and forest management, wildlife observation and photography, recreational fishing and crabbing, environmental education and interpretation, other recreational uses, and community outreach and partnerships.



Kevin Fleming

Rough green snake

Management Alternatives We Are Considering

To address issues identified during scoping, we developed and evaluated three alternatives in the draft CCP/EIS. In selecting a final alternative, we may incorporate elements from any of the three alternatives evaluated.

A side-by-side comparison of how each of the three alternatives address the issues we have described is on page 6 of this newsletter. Please note that this newsletter only presents the highlights of the draft CCP/EIS; for a full description of the management actions for the three



Chuck Fulmer

Scarlet tanager

alternatives, and their potential effects, please see the draft CCP/EIS (see “How to Get a Copy of the Draft CCP/EIS” on page 5).

Alternative A-Current Management

Alternative A satisfies the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*) requirement of a “No Action” alternative. We define this as “continuing current management.” This alternative describes our existing management priorities and activities and serves as a baseline for comparing against alternatives B and C.

Under alternative A, we would not actively manage refuge forests and would not maintain cooperative farming. We would also not actively manage refuge wetlands affected by recent and extensive changes along the refuge shoreline.

Our biological program would continue current priorities:

- Conserving and enhancing waterfowl and shorebird habitats
- Maintaining habitat for the Delmarva fox squirrel
- Cooperating with State partners to monitor bald eagles and Delmarva fox squirrels
- Protecting bald eagle and osprey active nest sites from human disturbance on refuge lands
- Using controlled burns to reduce fuel hazards simulating natural fire processes on refuge habitats
- Conducting wildlife and habitat monitoring

CCP/EIS Organization

What is in the draft CCP/EIS?

The draft CCP/EIS is divided into two volumes and organized into the following 6 chapters and 11 appendices:

Volume One

Chapter 1. The Purpose of, and Need for, Action explains why and how we must prepare a draft CCP/EIS for the refuge

Chapter 2. The Planning Policies and Process explains the planning steps in developing the CCP; describes the influences of other national, regional, ecosystem, and State plans; and identifies refuge operational or step-down plans.

Chapter 3. Description of the Affected Environment describes the physical, biological, and human environment of the refuge.

Chapter 4. Alternatives, Including the Service-preferred Action presents and analyzes three management alternatives that offer different strategies in fulfilling the refuge’s goals and objectives, and responds to key issues.

Chapter 5. Environmental Consequences evaluates the foreseeable consequences of implementing each of the three management alternatives.

Chapter 6. Consultation and Coordination with Others describes public and partner involvement during the planning process, and lists who helped prepare the plan.

Volume Two

- Appendix A - Gap Habitat Maps
- Appendix B - Draft Habitat Management Plan
- Appendix C - Draft Hunting Management Plan
- Appendix D - Refuge Resources of Concern
- Appendix E - Compatibility Determinations and Findings of Appropriateness
- Appendix F - Wilderness Review
- Appendix G - Intra-Service Section 7 Biological Evaluation Form
- Appendix H - Refuge Operations and Needs System and Service Asset and Maintenance Management System
- Appendix I - Regional Economic Impacts
- Appendix J - Aerial Photography
- Appendix K - Elevation Data

We would not actively manage predators, mute swans, or snow geese. We would continue to allow the use of a pesticide for adult mosquitoes that can impact other insects and animals.

Under alternative A, we would continue to provide our existing level of public use programs, which includes hunting of white-tailed deer, waterfowl, upland game, and mourning dove, snipe, and woodcock. We would continue to offer hunting and fishing opportunities on refuge lands, and provide interpretive and school programs upon request.

Alternative B-Service-preferred

This alternative is our preferred alternative. It includes management actions we believe would most effectively achieve the refuge's purposes, vision, and goals, and responds to issues raised during the scoping period.

Under alternative B, we would actively manage the refuge to mimic natural processes. At the same time, we would reduce or discontinue management actions that are contrary to the Service's policy on biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health, such as maintaining extensive, artificial freshwater ponds that are vulnerable to sea level rise.

After researching existing science, we feel that managing the existing impoundments is not sustainable. Instead, under this alternative we propose restoring the four refuge units to salt marsh, which we



Chuck Fulmer

American oystercatcher

believe will help the refuge be more resilient to the impacts of climate change and sea level rise.

Under alternative B, we would not reinstate the cooperative farming program. Instead, we would restore areas previously farmed to native forest habitat, which would not only increase habitat for endangered Delmarva fox squirrels and forest interior birds, but would also help deter use by nuisance resident Canada geese and overabundant snow geese. We would use a variety of methods such as fencing and predator behavior modification to protect endangered piping plovers and other rare beach-nesting birds. We would also use lethal control, if needed, to manage resident Canada geese, mute swans, and snow geese. We would discontinue the use of an insecticide that kills adult mosquitoes to protect non-target insects and animals unless there is a human health concern.

Alternative B would also enhance our visitor services' program by improving and expanding the hunting program by opening more areas and days for hunting, waving fees for non-lottery hunts, discontinuing the maintenance and use of fixed hunting structures, adding a pre-season lottery for waterfowl hunting, and adding a turkey hunt. It would also add new hiking trails, and expand fishing opportunities and environmental education programs.

Alternative C-Historic Habitat Management

Under alternative C, we would reinstate cooperative farming in upland refuge fields and management of freshwater wetland ponds, both for the benefit of migratory birds. We would also rebuild infrastructure and conduct duneline enhancements necessary to re-establish management of freshwater ponds. Upland fields previously in the cooperative farming program would once again be farmed with the cooperation of local farmers.

We would not actively manage predators, mute swans, snow geese, or other nuisance species except resident Canada geese, but we would discontinue using a pesticide for adult mosquitoes that can impact other insects and animals.

Alternative C would also expand opportunities for hunting and have a greater emphasis on public outreach and education. However, compared to alternative B, alternative C would offer fewer public use opportunities and decrease the number of hunting areas and days. Alternative C would not offer a turkey hunt. Fishing, wildlife observation, and wildlife photography would be similar to alternative A.

Under alternative C, we would enhance local community outreach and partnerships, and continue to support a friends group and provide valuable volunteer experiences. We would promote research and the development of applied management practices through local universities to sustain and enhance natural species composition and ecological patterns and processes on the Delmarva Peninsula.



Kevin Fleming

Clapper rail



Ryan Hagerty

Diamondbacked terrapin

How to Get a Copy of the Draft CCP/EIS

You may view and download the draft CCP/EIS online at: <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/primehook/>

You may also request a CD-ROM copy of the draft plan from refuge staff:

Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov
Phone: 302/684 8419

How to Provide Comments

We invite you to share your substantive comments about the draft plan in writing or in person at a public meeting. We consider comments substantive if they:

- Question, with reasonable basis, the accuracy of the information in the document;
- Question, with reasonable basis, the adequacy of the EIS;
- Present reasonable alternatives other than those presented in the EIS; and/or
- Provide new or additional information relevant to the EIS.

We will accept letters, faxes, and e-mails. To be considered, all comments must be received or postmarked by August 6, 2012. Please put "Prime Hook NWR CCP" in the subject line of your e-mail.

Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov
Mail: Thomas Bonetti
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035
Fax: 413/253-8468



Chuck Fulmer

Seaside sparrow

Public Meetings

You may also wish to participate in one of our public meetings. We will hold a formal public meeting on June 19, 2012. We will also have five other meetings focused on specific topics, such as habitat management, hunting, and other public uses.

Public Meeting Times and Places:

Date: Tuesday, June 5, 2012
Time: 6 PM - 9 PM
Topic: Habitat Management
Place: Milford Senior Center
111 Park Avenue
Milford, DE

Date: Thursday, June 7, 2012
Time: 6 PM - 9 PM
Topic: Hunting
Place: Milford Senior Center
111 Park Avenue
Milford, DE

Date: Saturday, June 9, 2012
Time: 1 PM - 4 PM
Topic: Habitat Management
Place: Milton Fire Hall
116 Front Street
Milton, DE

Date: Tuesday, June 12, 2012
Time: 6 PM - 9 PM
Topic: Hunting
Place: Cape Henlopen High School
Cafeteria
1250 Kings Highway
Lewes, DE

Date: Thursday, June 14, 2012
Time: 6 PM - 9 PM
Topic: Wildlife Observation and Photography, Fishing, Environmental Education, and Interpretation
Place: Milton Fire Hall
116 Front Street
Milton, DE

Date: Tuesday, June 19, 2012
Time: 6 PM - 9 PM
Topic: Formal Meeting
Place: Cape Henlopen High School
Theater
1250 Kings Highway
Lewes, DE

People with disabilities who need special assistance to participate in these meetings, please contact refuge staff at 302/684-8419 or the Federal Relay Service at 1-866-377-8642. Requests for accommodations should be made at least 5 days in advance.



Kevin Fleming

American bittern

Refuge Open Houses

Staff will be also be available on the following Sundays from 1 PM to 4 PM at the refuge office for individuals to stop by to ask questions regarding the CCP:

Dates: Sunday, June 3, 2012
Sunday, June 10, 2012
Sunday, June 17, 2012
Time: 1 PM - 4PM
Place: Prime Hook NWR
11978 Turtle Pond Road
Milton, DE 19968

What's Next? Public Availability of Comments

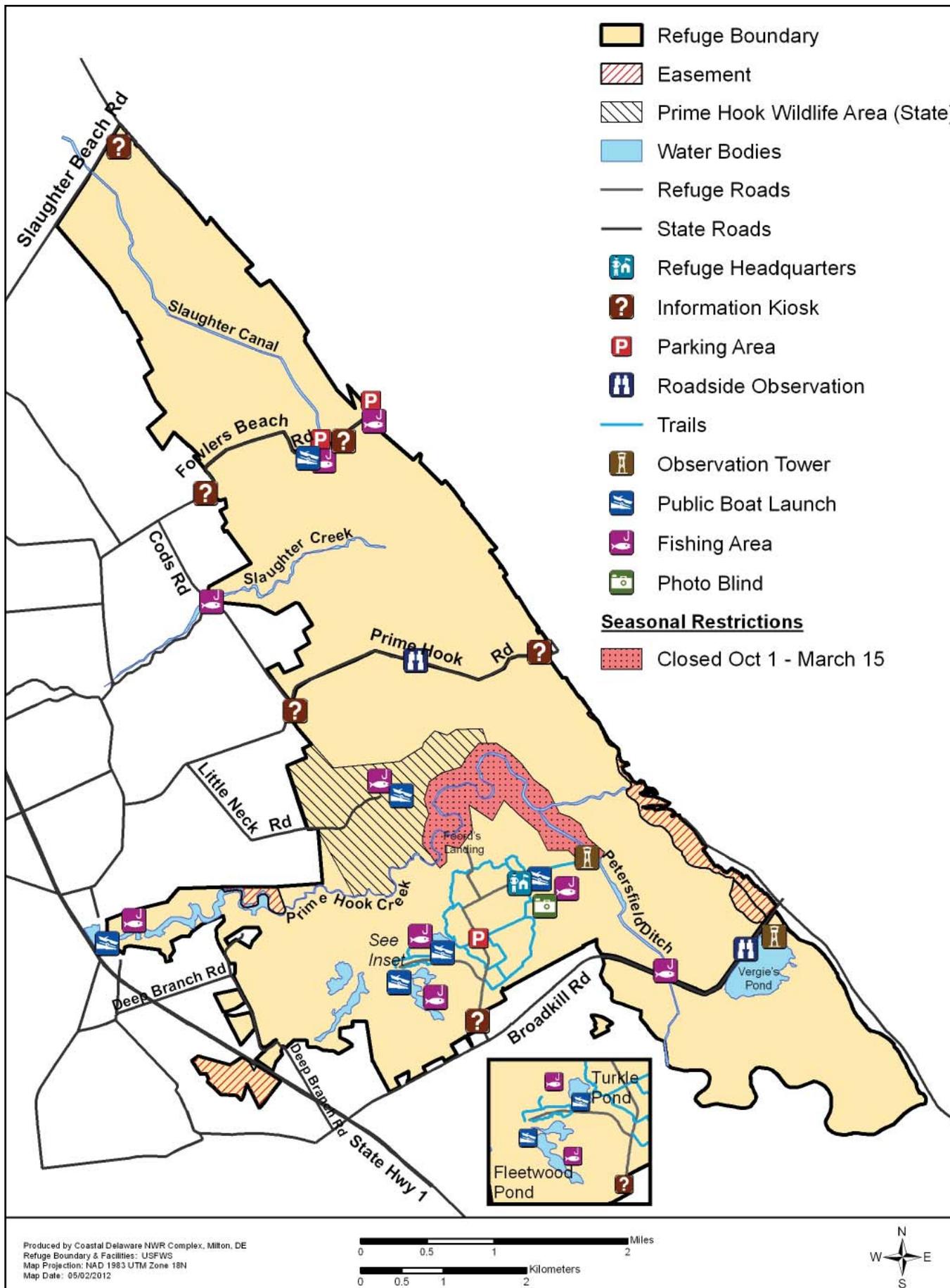
After this comment period ends, we will analyze comments and address them in the form of a final CCP/EIS. Please be aware that if you include your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment that it may be made publicly available at any time.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov>



May 2012

Alternative A <i>Current Management</i>	Alternative B <i>Service-preferred Alternative</i>	Alternative C <i>Historic Habitat Management</i>
Issue 1: Climate Change, Sea Level Rise, and Marshes		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No active management of wetlands affected by recent extensive changes along the refuge shoreline. Allow natural ecological processes to proceed without human intervention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restore salt marsh communities in portions of the refuge's former freshwater ponds to promote adaptation in the face of sea level rise. This may include addition of dredged sediment and other actions to encourage natural accretion of sediment. Additional sediments may also be needed to enhance overwash flats and potentially create low dunes or islets within the marsh. Pursue sediment placement or marsh restoration to help sediment-deficient salt marshes subsist in light of sea level rise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Return to former management conditions by building a robust barrier island capable of sustaining freshwater marshes in light of sea level rise and climate change. This action would require construction of a substantial sand barrier that would need perpetual renourishment.
Issue 2: Hunting		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain the refuge's current hunting program (no turkey hunt). Continue fee-based permit system. Maintain permanent hunting structures. Provide preseason lottery hunt for deer only. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase number of hunt days and areas. Eliminate permit hunting fees (except for lottery hunts). Phase out permanent hunting structures. Provide opportunities for preseason lottery hunts for waterfowl and deer. Offer a turkey hunt. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase number of hunt days and areas. Eliminate permit hunting fees (except for lottery hunts). Phase out permanent hunting structures. Provide opportunities for preseason lottery hunts for waterfowl and deer. No turkey hunt offered.
Issue 3: Cooperative Farming		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No agricultural management of upland fields that were once cooperatively farmed. Allow natural ecological processes to proceed, except actively control invasive species. Over time, the fields will transition to shrubland and thickets, and then ultimately to woodlands. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No active agricultural management of upland fields. Restore previously farmed and other open fields to native forest cover. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upland fields previously enrolled in the cooperative farming program would once again be managed through farming practices with the cooperation of local farmers.
Issue 4: Mosquito Management		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to allow the use of insecticides that kill mosquito larvae and adults. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eliminate the use of insecticides that kill adult mosquitoes to reduce negative impacts on non-target insects, except where there is a documented public health emergency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same as alternative B.
Issue 5: Nuisance Species		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No action except to continue working with U.S. Department of Agriculture to control resident Canada geese, including lethal control. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a variety of methods such as fencing and behavior modification to control nuisance species. As a last resort, allow lethal predator control to help endangered piping plovers and other rare beach-nesting birds. Allow lethal control, if needed, to manage resident Canada geese, mute swans, and snow geese. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same as alternative A.



Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge
11978 Turkle Pond Road
Milton, DE 19968



Refuge Goals

Barrier Island Beach and Coastal Salt Marsh Habitats Goal: Manage, enhance, and protect the dynamic barrier beach island ecosystem for migratory birds, breeding shorebirds, and other marine fauna and flora. Perpetuate and restore the biological integrity, diversity, natural sustainability, and environmental health of North Atlantic high and low salt marsh habitats.

Forested Habitats Goal: Manage the biological diversity, integrity, and environmental health of refuge upland and wetland forested cover types to sustain high quality habitats for migratory birds and increase quality habitat for the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel, forest interior breeding and wintering landbirds, reptiles, amphibians, and other resident wildlife.

Refuge Impounded Marsh Complex Goal: Maintain the quality of the wetland habitats within and surrounding the refuge's wetland impoundment complex for migrating shorebirds, breeding rails, wading birds, American black ducks, and migrating and wintering waterfowl consistent with the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health policy. Support other native wetland-dependent species and provide fish passage and nursery habitats for anadromous fish species.

Early Successional Habitat Goal: Maintain, enhance, and/or restore the native vegetation, biological diversity, and ecological integrity of early successional upland habitats to create a mosaic of native grassland, herbaceous scrub/shrub habitats, and transitional young forest to conserve migratory birds, breeding landbirds, and endangered species, and maximize benefits for other priority resources of concern.

Public Use Goal: Provide visitors with a place to safely take part in the six priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses established by the Refuge Improvement Act, as well as such other public uses as may be allowed without interfering with refuge purposes and objectives for wildlife.

Community and Partnership Goal: Collaborate with the local community and partners to complement habitat and programs on the refuge and the surrounding landscape.