

Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge

Comprehensive Conservation Planning Update

This planning update describes the progress the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service, we) has made in developing a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge (the refuge). It also summarizes the different alternatives the planning team considered for managing the refuge and includes information about how to obtain and comment on the draft CCP.

The Refuge

We established Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge in 1996 with the purpose to conserve and protect wetlands and fish and wildlife resources, including endangered and threatened species. Refuge habitats include freshwater tidal marsh, forested swamp, upland deciduous forest, mixed pine forest, and managed grassland on 7,711 acres.

Comprehensive Conservation Plans

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. Its main components include a unifying mission for the Refuge System, a new process for determining compatible uses of refuges, and a requirement to prepare CCPs for each refuge in the Refuge System by 2012.



Wood duck ducklings



Cat Point Creek

USFWS

A CCP is a 15-year strategic plan guiding management for all refuge programs. Service policy requires that CCPs be revised at least every 15 years, or sooner if significant new information surfaces.

Draft Plan Available for Public Review

We began preparing a CCP for this refuge in 2005. We have now completed a draft plan which we are distributing for public review and comment through August 28, 2009.

An environmental assessment, (EA), required by the National Environmental Policy Act, accompanies the draft plan. The EA describes the three alternatives that we evaluated in detail to achieve the refuge purposes, vision and goals (see highlights below). It also provides an analysis of their effects on the environment.

We have identified alternative B as the Service-preferred alternative.

How to Obtain a Draft Plan

You may request a hard copy or CD-ROM of the draft plan from our office

at Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

Telephone: 804/333-1470

Email: fw5rw_evnrnr@fws.gov

You may also view and download the draft CCP/EA online:

<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/Rappahannock/ccphome.html>

How to Provide Comments

We invite you to share your comments about the draft plan either in writing or in person at our public meetings (see below). We will accept letters, faxes, and emails. To be considered, all comments must be emailed or postmarked by August 28, 2009.

Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov
(Please put "Rappahannock River NWR" in the subject line)

Mail: Nancy McGarigal
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035

Phone: 413/253-8562

Fax: 413/253-8468

USFWS

Public Meetings

You may also wish to participate in our two public meetings in Warsaw and Richmond, VA. There will be a short presentation on the draft plan, and then we will record any comments you would like to provide.

July 30th 2009 - Richmond, VA

10:00 am-12:00 pm

Virginia Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife Headquarters
Division Director's Conference Room
4010 West Broad St.
Richmond, VA 23230
Directions: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/about/headquarters.asp>

July 30th 2009 - Warsaw, VA

6:30 pm -9:00 pm

Rappahannock Community College -
Warsaw Campus
Annex Building- Room 202
52 Campus Drive, Warsaw, VA 22572
Directions: <http://www.rappahannock.edu/visitors/directions.shtml>

Alternatives Considered

Alternative A (Current Management)

This alternative describes our current refuge programs on 7,711 acres (6,352 in full fee title; 1,359 under conservation easement) for habitat management, fish and wildlife inventories and monitoring, administrative infrastructure and staffing, and visitor services.

Land Protection

- Continue to work with willing sellers and in partnership with other agencies and organizations to achieve our 20,000-acre goal for land protection.

Habitat Management

- Continue to manage 700 acres of refuge fee lands using prescribed fire, mowing and herbicides to



Green tree frog

Draft Goals

We developed the following goals to describe the desired future conditions of the refuge and to establish a framework within which to develop management objectives.

Goal 1: Contribute to the biological diversity of the mid-Atlantic region by protecting, enhancing, and restoring the refuge's upland habitats, with an emphasis on breeding, migrating and wintering birds.

Goal 2: Maintain the long-term biological integrity of riparian habitats along the Rappahannock River and its tributaries for bald eagles and other migratory birds.

Goal 3: Maintain and enhance the biological diversity and environmental health of tidal and non-tidal wetlands to benefit Federal listed species, waterfowl, other migratory birds, fish and shellfish, reptiles, and amphibians.

Goal 4: Promote enjoyment and stewardship of our Nation's natural resources by providing high-quality, wildlife-dependent recreational and educational opportunities on refuge lands and waters.

Goal 5: Communicate and collaborate with local communities, Federal and state agencies, and conservation organizations throughout the lower Rappahannock River watershed to promote natural resource conservation and the mission of the Refuge System.

sustain those areas in grasslands, old fields, and other early stages of succession.

- Continue to treat invasive plants, with emphasis on *Phragmites*.
- Continue with plans to phase out cooperative farming program on 200 acres over the next 5 years.

Inventories and Monitoring

- Continue baseline surveys such as breeding bird surveys, anuran call counts, winter and summer bald eagle surveys, and habitat monitoring.

Visitor Services

- Continue to average 3 environmental education programs and 37 interpretive and outreach programs per year.
- Continue to improve visitor access at the Wilna, Hutchinson and Laurel Grove tracts, but establish no new facilities or uses beyond those now available or underway.
- Continue white-tailed deer hunting on 9 (of 16 total) refuge tracts.

Refuge Administration

- Staffing would remain at seven positions for the refuge complex.
- Headquarters office would remain at Wilna house and we would accomplish the upgrades necessary for safety, accessibility and utility over time.

Alternative B (Enhanced Habitat Diversity; Service-preferred)

In comparison to alternative A, this alternative represents an extension and progression of all areas of refuge management.

Land Protection

- Same as alternative A

Habitat Management

- Expand our grassland/old field management to include up to 1,200 acres, primarily through new acquisitions.
- Phase out cooperative farming within 5 years unless determined it is an added benefit to the refuge's interpretive or other programs.

Inventories and Monitoring

- Enhance existing programs under an adaptive management framework to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our management actions.
- Expand monitoring to include focal species surveys, as well as baseline forest tree species and pollinator surveys, to inform management actions.

Visitor Services

- Expand existing opportunities for all six priority public uses, with emphasis on wildlife observation, photography and self-guided interpretation.
- Develop new observation trails,

interpretive water trails, and expand access for freshwater fishing.

- Promote an interpretive message about the role that farming has played in wildlife conservation over the last century.
- Evaluate opportunities for

Draft Vision Statement

“On the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge, birds will raise their young in native habitats of field, forest, and marsh. They will find rest and nourishment during migration and a haven in winter. We will manage refuge lands and waters with an emphasis on species whose populations have declined, assisting them on the road to recovery.

“In partnership with others, we will contribute to the communities where we exist, helping renew the health and vitality of the Rappahannock River and the Chesapeake Bay. We will compliment the rich traditions of hunting, fishing, forestry and agriculture on Virginia’s Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula.

“The refuge will serve as an outdoor classroom, where students of all ages will study nature’s complexity, contributing to our understanding and appreciation of the natural world and the National Wildlife Refuge System. All those who visit will find enjoyment in the presence of healthy and abundant fish, wildlife, and plants, and will leave with a renewed personal commitment to land conservation and stewardship.”

waterfowl and wild turkey hunting.

Refuge Administration

- Add 4 staff positions to support expanded refuge program.
- Construct a new Service-standard small refuge headquarters and visitor contact facility. The Wilna House would continue to be occupied for other refuge uses.

Alternative C (Forest Management Emphasis)

This alternative resembles alternative B concerning refuge administration and visitor services, but differs significantly in its habitat management and inventory and monitoring programs.

Land Protection

- Same as alternative A

Habitat Management

- Allow all current 700 acres of grasslands to revert to shrub and forest.
- Phase out cooperative farming and allow those lands to revert to forest.
- Redirect some staff time to other priority tasks, including more in-depth assessments of habitat quality of forest, shrublands and wetlands, more monitoring of habitats and fish and wildlife populations, and more work on controlling invasive species.

Inventories and Monitoring

- Conduct a more intensive, focused monitoring and inventory program designed to address specific questions about forest habitat quality.
- Document the transition from grasslands, old fields and croplands to shrub and young forest and the corresponding response in wildlife populations.

Next Steps

1. Distribute draft CCP/EA for public review and comment; host 2 public meetings in Warsaw and Richmond, VA. (July-August)
2. Evaluate all public comments and revise the CCP as warranted. (September)
3. Submit final recommendation for Regional Director approval. (September)
4. If approved, publish a notice of availability in the Federal Register and distribute final plan. (September)
5. Implement CCP (October)

Contact Information

To learn more about Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge, please visit our website: <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/rappahannock/>.

You may reach refuge staff by telephone at 804/333-1470, or by email at fw5rw_evrnwr@fws.gov.

To learn more about the planning process contact:

Nancy McGarigal, Refuge Planner
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035
413/253-8562
413/253-8468 Fax

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

July 2009



Kids' Fishing Day on the refuge

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
NWRS - Refuge Planning
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035

