

Appendix H



USFWS

Cat Point Creek

Finding of No Significant Impact

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Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In July 2009, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (Draft CCP/EA) for Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge (refuge). The approved refuge boundary extends approximately 65 miles along both sides of the Rappahannock River in Caroline, Essex, King George, Lancaster, Middlesex, Richmond, and Westmoreland counties, Virginia. This refuge is part of the Eastern Virginia Rivers National Wildlife Refuge Complex (Refuge Complex) which also includes James River, Presquile, and Plum Tree Island refuges. The Rappahannock River Valley Refuge Draft CCP/EA evaluates three alternatives for managing the refuge over the next 15 years. It carefully considers their direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the environment and their potential contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). The Draft CCP/EA restates the refuge's purposes, creates a vision for the next 15 years, and proposes five goals to be achieved through plan implementation. Alternative B is identified as the Service-preferred alternative. Chapter 3 in the draft plan details the respective goals, objectives, and strategies for each of the three alternatives. Chapter 4 describes the consequences of implementing those actions under each alternative. The draft plan's appendixes provide additional information supporting the assessment and specific proposals in Alternative B. A brief overview of each alternative follows.

Alternative A (Current Management): The Council of Environmental Quality regulations on implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require this "No Action" alternative, which we define as current management. Alternative A includes our existing programs and activities and serves as the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives. Under Alternative A, we would continue to use a variety of habitat management tools to maintain and improve the refuge's grasslands and forests, and would continue to work with willing sellers to protect additional lands (up to 22,000 acres total) within the approved refuge boundary. Cooperative farming would be phased out. We would continue our efforts to control invasive species across all refuge habitats as funding permits. We would maintain our current level of effort in conducting baseline inventories and in monitoring the results of management actions to improve the status of targeted species. Our visitor facilities and programs would continue at present levels, whereby we offer opportunities for all six priority recreational uses of the Refuge System at modest levels. We would continue to offer hunt programs for deer, recreational fishing at the Wilna Tract, on-and off-site interpretation and environmental education visits up to 40 times per year, wildlife observation on several tracts, most by reservation only, and limited photography opportunities. Staffing would remain at seven positions for the entire Refuge Complex. Administrative facilities, including our 19th century headquarters

building, would be maintained for extended future use as funding permits. While this alternative is intended as a “snapshot in time,” we include activities that were underway at the time the plan was being prepared, some of which are completed, and some of which are still in progress.

Alternative B (the Service-preferred alternative): This alternative includes an array of management actions that, in our professional judgment, work best toward achieving the purposes of the refuge, our vision and goals for those lands, the Refuge System mission, and the goals in State and regional conservation plans. Under Alternative B, we would expand areas managed as grasslands from about 700 acres to a maximum of 1,200 acres. We would increase forest management by thinning overstocked stands, and planting new areas with trees to supplement natural regeneration, especially in riparian zones. We propose to widen forested riparian buffers to a width of at least 330 feet, and to 1,000 feet where feasible. We would continue invasive species control and expand our efforts, including assistance to private landowners, if staffing and funding are increased. We will ensure that our monitoring and inventory procedures contribute to both refuge and regional needs. We propose to expand visitor opportunities for all six priority uses of the Refuge System. Among newly proposed programs, some of which will require additional environmental analysis, are waterfowl and turkey hunting, expanded recreational fishing, new photo blinds, expanded environmental education programs on and off-site, and an increase in interpretive signs and wayside exhibits. Interpretive messages will include reference to the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, the historic role that farming has played in wildlife management, bald eagle ecology and management, and migratory bird conservation. Pending future funding, we would move our headquarters from the 19th century Wilna House to a newly constructed facility on the Hutchinson Tract. A new building would offer better access for the public and allow us to keep the Wilna House in a more historic condition. We would create small visitor contact hubs at Port Royal, Laurel Grove, and the Warsaw area in addition to the Hutchinson Tract near Tappahannock. We would seek funding for four additional staff positions to help implement new and on-going management activities.

Alternative C: Alternative C is similar in many respects to Alternative B, but would place greater emphasis on forest management over grassland management. We would allow the 700 acres of managed grassland to revert to shrub and forest habitats. Croplands, once taken out of cultivation, would be planted in trees, or allowed to naturally revert to forest. Staff time not needed for intensive grassland management would be directed toward additional work in improving forest habitat, including thinning overstocked stands, established new forested areas, improving forest health assessments, and controlling forest pests. Biological monitoring and inventories would be shifted from assessing grassland management to techniques more oriented toward forest conversion and management. Visitor services improvements, including new recreational programs, would be consistent with those outlined in Alternative B. The same is true for goals and objectives relating to staffing and administration.

We distributed the Draft CCP/EA for a 35-day period of public review and comment from July 23 to August 28, 2009. We received 47 unique letters representing individuals, organizations, and state agencies. Appendix G in the final CCP includes a summary of those comments and our responses to them.

After reviewing the proposed management actions, and considering all public comments and our responses to them, I have determined that the analysis in the EA is sufficient to support my findings. I am selecting Alternative B, as presented in the Draft CCP/EA with the minor changes listed below, to implement as the final CCP. Changes we made in the final CCP are:

- We included a map of the proposed public use facilities on the Wellford Tract that we inadvertently omitted in the Draft CCP/EA.
- We inserted language recognizing the important partnership we have with state agencies and the need to follow required state regulations during construction of new facilities.
- We clarified our position on cooperative farming.
- We clarified our position regarding use of gas-powered boats and water access.
- We corrected all format and typographical errors that were brought to our attention.

I concur that Alternative B, with the above changes and in comparison to the other two alternatives, will: best fulfill the mission of the Refuge System; best achieve the refuge's purposes, vision, and goals; best maintain and, where appropriate, restore the refuge's ecological integrity; best address the major issues identified during the planning process; and is most consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management. Specifically, in comparison to the other two alternatives, Alternative B provides the biggest increase in the diversity, integrity and health of high quality habitats, through enhanced grassland, riparian, shrub and forest management. It also provides the most reasonable and effective improvements to existing public use programs that are in high demand, with minimal impacts to wildlife and habitats. The plans to increase staffing and develop new infrastructure are reasonable, practicable and will result in the most efficient management of the refuge and best serve the American public. This Finding of No Significant impact includes the EA by reference.

I have reviewed the predicted beneficial and adverse impacts associated with Alternative B that are presented in Chapter 4 of the Draft CCP/EA, and compared them to the other alternatives. I specifically reviewed the context and intensity of those predicted impacts over the short and long-term, and considered cumulative effects. My evaluation concludes that implementing Alternative B would not result in any concerns with public health or

safety, nor result in adverse implications to any unique cultural or natural characteristics of the geographic area, including wetlands or Federal-listed species. 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 NEPA. Therefore, I have concluded that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required, and this Finding of No Significant Impact is appropriate and warranted.

Dawn Comish

12/30/09

Acting

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Date