

## Chapter 1



USFWS

*Welcome sign at Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge*

## Purpose of, and Need for, Action

- **Introduction**
- **Purpose of, and Need for, the Proposed Action**
- **Service and Refuge System: Policies and Mandates Guiding Planning**
- **History and Establishing Purposes**
- **Conservation Plans and Initiatives Guiding the Proposed Action**
- **Refuge and WPA Vision**
- **Refuge and WPA Goals**
- **The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process**
- **Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities**
- **Plan Amendment and Revision**



## Introduction

Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (Sunkhaze Meadows NWR, refuge) and Carlton Pond Waterfowl Production Area (Carlton Pond WPA) are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS, Service, we, our) as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). The Refuge System maintains the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of these natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations. Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA are managed by the staff of Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

This draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental assessment (EA) for Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA combines two documents required by Federal laws:

- A CCP, required by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1996, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-57; 111 Stat. 1253; Refuge Improvement Act).
- An EA, required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq., 83 Stat. 852; NEPA).

This document also conforms to Service policy and legal mandates (see “Service and Refuge System: Policies and Mandates Guiding Planning” section below).

Following the public review of this draft CCP and EA, the Service’s Regional Director will decide on the components of a final CCP to guide refuge management decisions over the next 15 years. The Service will use the CCP to promote understanding of, and support for, refuge management among State agencies in Maine, Tribal governments, our conservation partners, local communities, and the public.

This draft CCP and EA has six chapters and six appendices. This first chapter sets the stage for the subsequent chapters. Specifically, chapter 1, “Purpose of, and Need for, Action”:

- Explains the purpose of, and need for, a CCP and EA for the refuge.
- Defines the project area.
- Presents the mission, policies, and mandates affecting the development of this plan.
- Identifies other conservation plans used as references in the development of this plan.
- Lists the purposes for which the refuge was established.
- Presents the vision and goals that drive refuge management.
- Describes refuge operational (or “step-down”) plans.
- Describes the planning process and its compliance with NEPA regulations.
- Describes the key issues, concerns, and opportunities addressed in the draft plan.

Chapter 2, “Affected Environment,” describes the physical, biological, and human environments of the refuge and WPA, including the land acquisition history of refuge units and the WPA.

Chapter 3, “Alternatives Considered, Including the Service-preferred Alternative,” presents three proposed management alternatives for the refuge and WPA, each with different objectives and strategies for meeting the specified goals and addressing public issues, along with activities that are expected to occur on these lands regardless of the alternative selected for the final CCP.

Chapter 4, “Environmental Consequences,” assesses the environmental consequences of implementing each of the three proposed management alternatives, predicting the foreseeable benefits and consequences affecting the socioeconomic, physical, cultural, and biological environments described in chapter 2.

Chapter 5, “Consultation and Coordination,” summarizes how the Service involved the public and its partners in the planning process; their involvement is vital for the future management of the refuge and WPA and all other Refuge System lands.

Chapter 6, “List of Preparers,” credits Service and non-Service contributors to the draft CCP and EA.

A series of appendixes, a glossary with acronyms, and a list of references provide additional documentation and references to support the developed narratives and analysis in the plan.

## **Purpose of, and Need for, the Proposed Action**

Our proposed action is to develop a CCP for the refuge and WPA that guides refuge management over the next 15 years.

NEPA regulations require our evaluation of a reasonable range of alternatives, including a proposed or preferred action and no action. The no-action alternative can be either (1) taking no management action, or (2) not changing current management. In this CCP, alternative A, is the “no action” alternative, and it describes our current management priorities and activities, and serves as a baseline for comparing and contrasting the other alternatives and how well each meets the purpose of, and need for, a CCP. All alternatives will be evaluated and compared as to how well they meet the purpose of, and need for, a CCP.

The *purpose* of the CCP is to develop a management direction that best achieves the refuge and WPA purposes; attains the vision and goals developed for the refuge and WPA (see section 1.7); contributes to the Refuge System mission; addresses key issues and relevant mandates; and is consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife management.

There are several reasons a CCP is *needed* for these areas. First, the Refuge Improvement Act requires national wildlife refuges to develop CCPs to help fulfill the mission of the Refuge System. Second, Sunhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA need up-to-date plans that establish priorities and ensure consistent management. Third, the refuge was administratively consolidated in 2005 to increase management efficiencies. Currently, Sunhaze Meadows NWR and the Carlton Pond WPA are administered by the staff at the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Rockland, Maine.

Lastly, several Service policies providing specific guidance on implementing the Refuge Improvement Act have been developed since the refuge and WPA were established. A CCP incorporates these policies, and develops strategic management direction for 15 years, by:

- Stating clearly the desired future conditions for refuge habitat, wildlife, visitor services, staffing, and facilities.
- Explaining concisely to state agencies, refuge neighbors, visitors, partners, and other stakeholders the reasons for management actions.
- Ensuring that refuge management conforms to the policies and goals of the Refuge System and legal mandates.
- Ensuring that present and future public uses are appropriate and compatible.
- Providing long-term continuity and consistency in management direction.
- Justifying budget requests for staffing, operating and maintenance funds.

### **Project Area**

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR, Carlton Pond WPA, and the four associated FmHA conservation easements lie within two large watersheds: the Lower Penobscot River and Kennebec River watersheds (map 1.1). The Sunkhaze Meadows Unit in Milford, Maine, encompasses 11,484 acres. Sunkhaze Stream, which flows through the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit, drains directly into the Penobscot River. This portion of the refuge protects the second largest and one of the most remarkable peatlands in Maine. Although Sunkhaze Meadows NWR is a small part of the total conserved lands throughout the State of Maine, these lands protect important parts of the regional landscapes in which they are located. Adding significantly to the conserved lands network around the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit is the Lower Penobscot Forest Project, a collaboration of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Forest Society of Maine (see lands adjacent to Sunkhaze Meadows Unit in map 1.3). Together they are working to conserve over 42,000 acres abutting the southeast boundary of the refuge.

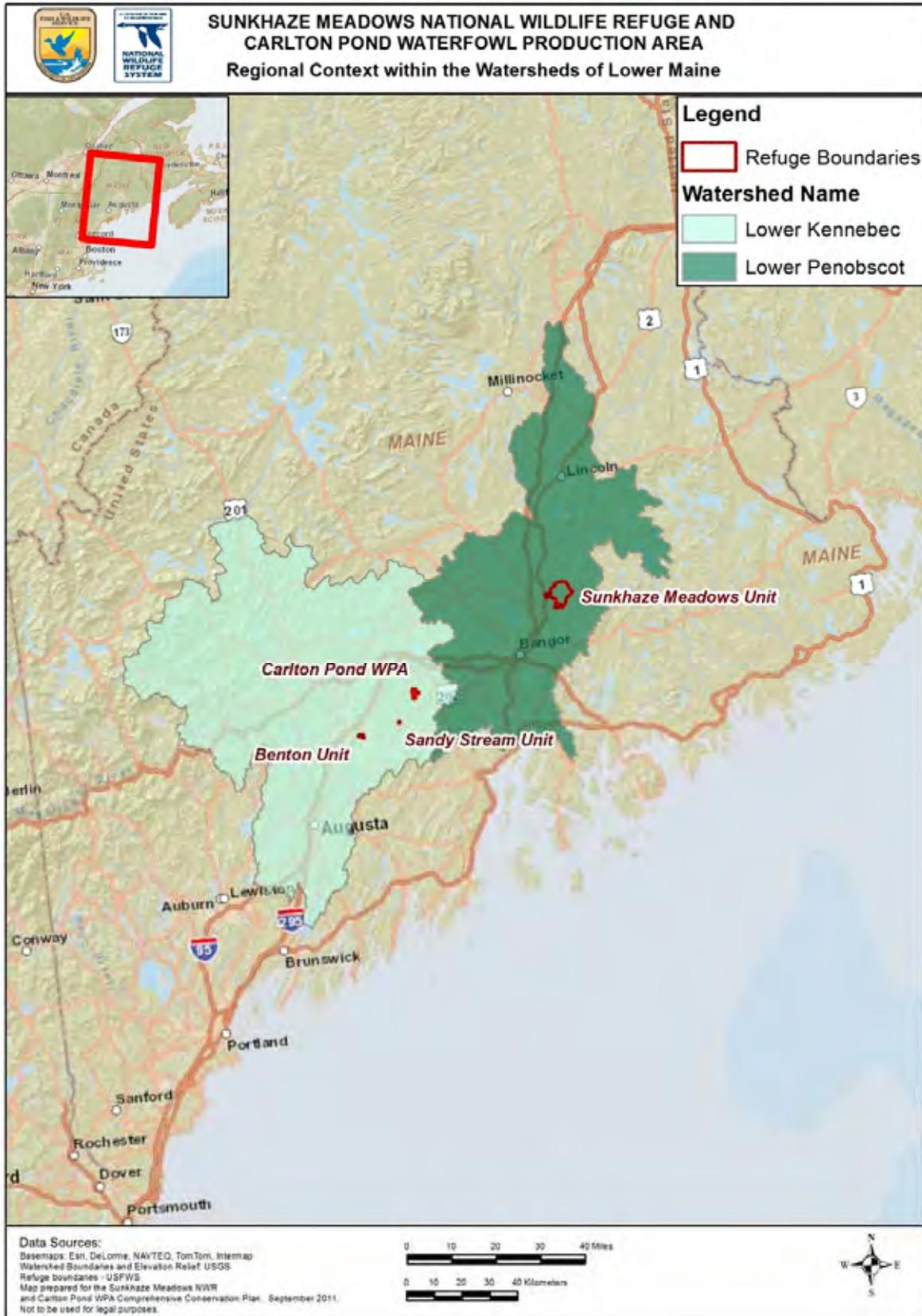
Carlton Pond WPA, as well as the refuge's Benton and Sandy Stream Units, lie within the Lower Kennebec River watershed (map 1.2). These sites drain toward the Sebasticook River that in turn flows into the Kennebec River. The Penobscot and Kennebec Rivers are subcomponents of the Gulf of Maine watershed, an immense area extending from eastern Quebec to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Maine is the only state located entirely within the watershed boundary (see map 1.1). The Gulf of Maine watershed encompasses the great rivers of Maine: St. John, Penobscot, Kennebec, Androscoggin, Saco, and the coastal drainages of Downeast Maine. It also provides habitat for more than a dozen State-listed threatened or endangered species.

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR also has responsibility for four conservation easements on private lands in Maine, totaling about 320 acres. One easement (54 acres) is located in the Penobscot River watershed, about 35 miles north and a little east of Millinocket. Another easement (213 acres) is located in the Penobscot River watershed about 23 miles northwest of Bangor. The remaining two easements are located in the Kennebec River watershed. One easement (about 16 acres) is located about 4 miles northwest of Waterville, the other (37 acres) is located about 26 miles northwest of Waterville.

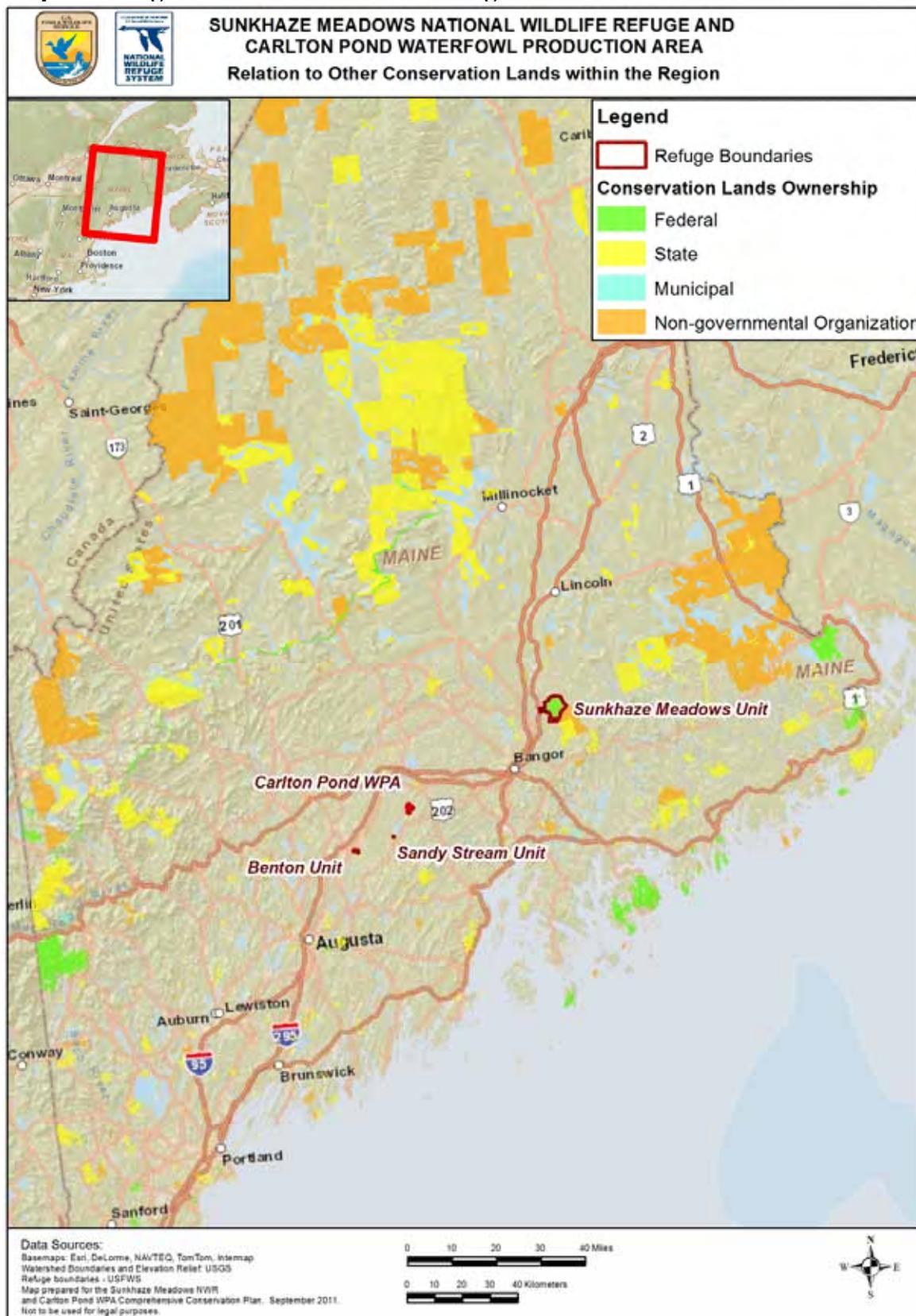
**Map 1.1 Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA and Context within the Gulf of Maine Watershed**



Map 1.2 Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA and Regional Context



Map 1.3 Refuge Location and Relation to Regional Conservation Lands



## **Service and Refuge System: Policies and Mandates Guiding Planning**

### **The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its Mission**

As part of the Department of the Interior, the Service administers the Refuge System. The Service mission is “Working with others, to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

Congress entrusts the Service with the conservation and protection of these Federal trust resources: migratory birds and fish, federally listed threatened or endangered species, interjurisdictional fish, wetlands, certain marine mammals, and national wildlife refuges. The Service also enforces Federal wildlife laws and international treaties on importing and exporting wildlife, assists states with their fish and wildlife programs, and helps other countries develop conservation programs.

The Service Manual (USFWS 2011) contains the standing and continuing directives on implementing our authorities, responsibilities, and activities. In addition, the Service publishes special directives that affect the rights of citizens or the authorities of other agencies separately in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR); the Service Manual does not duplicate them (see 50 CFR 1–99).

### **The National Wildlife Refuge System and its Mission and Policies**

The Refuge System is the world’s largest network of lands and waters set aside specifically for the conservation of wildlife and the protection of ecosystems. More than 550 national wildlife refuges encompass more than 150 million acres of lands and waters in all 50 states and several island territories. Each year, more than 40 million visitors hunt, fish, observe and photograph wildlife, or participate in environmental education and interpretation on refuges (Carver and Caudill 2007).

In 1997, President Clinton signed the Refuge Improvement Act into law. This act establishes a unifying mission for the Refuge System and a new process for determining the compatibility of public uses on refuges, and requires us to prepare a CCP for each refuge. The mission of the Refuge System, as established by the Refuge Improvement Act, focuses on wildlife conservation first. The Refuge Improvement Act also established that the mission of the Refuge System, coupled with the purpose(s) for which each refuge was established, will provide the principal management direction on each refuge. The mission of the Refuge System is:

“to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.” (National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act; P.L. 105–57)

The National Wildlife Refuge System Manual (Refuge Manual) contains policy governing the operation and management of the Refuge System that the Service Manual does not cover, including technical information on implementing refuge policies and guidelines on enforcing

laws (USFWS 2010). We have summarized a few noteworthy policies instrumental in developing this draft CCP and EA in the next section.

### **Policy on the National Wildlife Refuge System Mission, Goals, and Purposes**

This policy (601 FW 1) sets forth the Refuge System mission noted above, how it relates to the Service mission, and explains the relationship of the Refuge System mission and goals, and the purpose(s) of each unit in the Refuge System. In addition, it identifies the following Refuge System goals:

- Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants.
- Develop and maintain a network of habitats.
- Conserve those ecosystems, plant communities, and wetlands that are unique within the United States.
- Provide and enhance opportunities to participate in compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation.
- Help to foster public understanding and appreciation of the diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

This policy also establishes management priorities for the Refuge System:

- Conserve fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.
- Facilitate compatible, wildlife-dependent recreational uses.
- Consider other appropriate and compatible uses.

### **Policy on Refuge System Planning**

This policy (602 FW 1, 2, 3) establishes the requirements and guidance for Refuge System planning, including CCP and step-down management plans. It states that the Service will manage all refuges in accordance with an approved CCP that, when implemented, will help:

- Achieve refuge purposes.
- Fulfill the Refuge System mission.
- Maintain and, where appropriate, restore the ecological integrity of each refuge and the Refuge System.
- Achieve the goals of the National Wilderness Preservation System and the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
- Conform to other applicable laws, mandates, and policies.

That planning policy provides step-by-step directions and identifies the minimum requirements for developing all CCP's. Among them, the Service is to review any existing special designation areas such as Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers, specifically address the potential for any new special designations, conduct a Wilderness review, and incorporate a summary of that review into each CCP (602 FW 3).

### **Policy on the Appropriateness of Refuge Uses**

Federal law and Service policy provide the direction and planning framework for protecting the Refuge System from inappropriate, incompatible, or harmful human activities and ensuring that visitors can enjoy its lands and waters. This policy (603 FW 1) provides a national framework for determining appropriate refuge uses to prevent or eliminate uses that should not occur on Refuge System lands or waters. It describes the initial decision process the refuge manager must

follow when first considering whether to allow a proposed use on a refuge. An appropriate use must meet at least one of the following four conditions:

- The use is a wildlife-dependent recreational use as identified in the Improvement Act.
- The use contributes to fulfilling the refuge purpose(s), the Refuge System mission, or goals or objectives described in a refuge management plan approved after October 9, 1997, the date the Improvement Act became law.
- The use follows State regulations for the take of fish and wildlife.
- The use has been found to be appropriate after concluding a specified findings process using 10 criteria.

Commercial uses are subject to additional conditions before they can be found appropriate (see 50 CFR 29.1). Draft findings of appropriateness for Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA are provided in appendix B.

### **Policy on Compatibility**

This policy (603 FW 2) complements the appropriateness policy. After finding a use is appropriate, the refuge manager must conduct an assessment to determine compatibility. The compatibility determination ensures refuge uses are consistent with refuge purposes and the mission of the Refuge System. Draft compatibility determinations completed for those public uses found to be appropriate are included in appendix B as part of this draft CCP and EA.

Service policy on compatibility determinations (603 FW 2) provides guidelines for determining compatibility of uses and procedures for documentation and periodic review of existing uses.

Highlights of the guidance in that chapter are as follows:

- The Refuge Improvement Act and its regulations require an affirmative finding by the refuge manager on the compatibility of a public use before the Service allows it on a refuge.
- A compatible use is one “that will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the Refuge System or the purposes of the refuge.”
- The act defines six wildlife-dependent uses that are to receive enhanced consideration on refuges: “hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.”
- The refuge manager may authorize those priority uses on a refuge when they are compatible and consistent with public safety.
- When the refuge manager publishes a compatibility determination, it will stipulate the required maximum reevaluation dates: 15 years for wildlife-dependent recreational uses; or 10 years for other uses.
- However, the refuge manager may reevaluate the compatibility of a use at any time. For example, the refuge manager may reevaluate compatibility sooner than its mandatory date, or even before the Service completes the CCP process, if new information reveals unacceptable impacts or incompatibility with refuge purposes (603 FW 2.11, 2.12).
- The refuge manager may allow or deny any use, even one that is compatible, based on other considerations such as public safety, policy, or available funding.

Draft compatibility determinations for Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA are provided in appendix B.

### **Policy on Wildlife-dependent Public Uses**

Part 605, chapter 1 of the Service manual presents specific guidance on implementing management of the priority public uses, including the following criteria for providing a quality, wildlife-dependent recreation program that:

- Promotes safety of participants, other visitors, and facilities.
- Promotes compliance with applicable laws and regulations and responsible behavior.
- Minimizes or eliminates conflict with fish and wildlife population or habitat goals or objectives in an approved plan.
- Minimizes or eliminates conflicts with other compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation.
- Minimizes conflicts with neighboring landowners.
- Promotes accessibility and availability to a broad spectrum of the American people.
- Promotes resource stewardship and conservation.
- Promotes public understanding and increases public appreciation of America's natural resources and our role in managing and conserving these resources.
- Provides reliable and reasonable opportunities to experience wildlife.
- Uses facilities that are accessible to people and blend into the natural setting.
- Uses visitor satisfaction to help define and evaluate programs.

### **Policy on Maintaining Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Health**

This policy (601 FW 3) provides guidance on maintaining or restoring the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System, including the protection of a broad spectrum of fish, wildlife, and habitat resources in refuge ecosystems. It provides refuge managers with a process for evaluating the best management direction to prevent the additional degradation of environmental conditions and restore lost or severely degraded components of the environment. It also provides guidelines for dealing with external threats to the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of a refuge and its ecosystem.

### **Native American Policy**

The Service adopted a Native American Policy in 1994. This policy is a framework for our relationships with Native American Tribes in order to address whole ecosystems in conservation, and do it with the greatest assistance possible. You may view this policy on the Web at [www.fws.gov/policy/npi94\\_10.html](http://www.fws.gov/policy/npi94_10.html); accessed September 2012.

Some highlights of the Native American Policy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service include:

- The Service recognizes the sovereign status of Native American governments.
- There is a unique and distinctive political relationship between the United States and Native American governments...that differentiates Native American governments from other interests and constituencies.
- The Service will maintain government-to-government relationships with Native American governments.
- Affected Native American governments will be afforded opportunities to participate in the Service's decisionmaking process for Service lands.
- The Service will consult with Native American governments on fish and wildlife resource matters of mutual interest and concern to the extent allowed by the law. The goal is to

keep Native American governments involved in such matters from initiation to completion of related Service activities.

- The Service will involve Native American governments in all Service actions that may affect their cultural or religious interests, including archaeological sites.
- The Service will provide Native Americans reasonable access to Service managed or controlled lands and waters for exercising ceremonial, medicinal, and traditional activities recognized by the Service and by Native American governments.
- The Service will provide Native American governments with the same access to fish and wildlife resource training programs as provided to other government agencies.
- The Service will facilitate the development of Native American fish and wildlife professionals through innovative educational programs and on-the-job training, partnerships and cooperative relationships with Native American educational institutions, and including Native American schools in its environmental education outreach programs.

### **Other Mandates**

Although Service and Refuge System policy and the purpose(s) of each refuge provide the foundation for its management, other Federal laws (e.g., Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Archaeological Resources Protection Act, The Historic Sites, Buildings and Antiquities Act, National Historic Preservation Act), executive orders, treaties, interstate compacts, and regulations on conserving and protecting natural and cultural resources also affect how the Service manages refuges. The “Digest of Federal Resource Laws of Interest to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service” describes many of them at <http://www.fws.gov/laws/lawsdigest.htm>.

Of particular note for Sunkhaze Meadows NWR, are The Wilderness Act of 1964 (16 U.S.C. 1131–1136; P.L. 88–577) and The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, as amended.

#### The Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act establishes a National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) that is composed of federally owned areas designated by Congress as Wilderness areas. The act directs each agency administering designated Wilderness to preserve the wilderness character of areas within the NWPS, and to administer the NWPS for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave those areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. The act also directs the Secretary of the Interior to review every roadless area of 5,000 acres or more and every roadless island (regardless of size) within the Refuge System and the National Park System for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Service planning policy requires that the Service evaluate the potential for wilderness on refuge lands, as appropriate, during the CCP planning process. The draft Wilderness Review is available in this document as appendix C.

#### The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, as amended, selects certain rivers of the nation possessing remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values, preserves them in a free flowing condition, and protects their local environments. Service planning policy requires that the Service evaluate the potential for wild and scenic rivers designation on refuge lands, as appropriate, during the CCP planning process.

Chapter 4, “Environmental Consequences,” evaluates this plan’s compliance with the acts noted above, and with the Clean Water Act of 1977 as amended (33 U.S.C. 1251, et seq.; P.L. 107–303), the Clean Air Act of 1970 as amended (42 U.S.C. 7401 et seq.), and the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531–1544), as amended. Finally, the Service designed this draft CCP and EA to comply with NEPA and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 CFR 1500–1508). The draft Wild and Scenic Rivers Review is available as appendix D.

## History and Establishing Purposes

Refuges and WPA can be established by U.S. Congress through special legislation, by the President through Executive Order, or administratively by the Director of the Service (with authority delegated by the Secretary of the Interior). Refuge lands may be acquired under a variety of administrative and legislative authorities as well.

### Sunkhaze Meadows NWR

In the early 1980s, the peat mining industry was exploring the potential to mine peat from Sunkhaze Meadows Unit for use as heating fuel, threatening the bog and the integrity of the wetland complex. The mining plans were not implemented and because of the heightened awareness of the ecological significance of the area, funding was secured for its permanent protection as a national wildlife refuge.

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR was established administratively in 1988 to ensure the ecological integrity of the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit peat bog and to conserve wetland, stream, and forest habitats, and associated wildlife. The Sunkhaze Meadows NWR also includes two smaller units, Benton (334 acres) and Sandy Stream (58 acres), and four conservation easements scattered throughout central Maine.

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR was established under the authority of the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 and the Refuge Recreation Act. The purposes for which Sunkhaze Meadows NWR was established are:

- “...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources....” 16 U.S.C. 742f(a)(4) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)
- “...for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services.” 16 U.S.C. 742f(b)(1) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)
- “...suitable for— (1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species ....” 16 U.S.C. 460k-1 (Refuge Recreation Act, as amended)

### Carlton Pond WPA

Carlton Pond WPA was authorized by administrative action on July 15, 1964. The WPA was officially established when the first parcel was acquired on November 24, 1965, under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act and Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act. The intent was to provide primarily breeding habitat for waterfowl, as well as benefitting shorebirds, waterbirds, and other wildlife. About 95 percent of the nation’s waterfowl

production areas occur in the prairie potholes region of the Midwest (USFWS 2007). Carlton Pond WPA is the only waterfowl production area in the Service's Northeast Region. The 1,068-acre Carlton Pond WPA was managed by Moosehorn NWR until Sunkhaze Meadows NWR was established in 1988.

The purposes for which Carlton Pond WPA was established are:

- "...as Waterfowl Production Areas subject to... all of the provisions of such Act [Migratory Bird Conservation Act] ...except the inviolate sanctuary provisions ..." 16 U.S.C. 718(c) (Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act)
- "...for any other management purpose, for migratory birds." 16 U.S.C. 715(d) (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

### **Farmers Home Administration Conservation Easements**

From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) acquired many properties throughout the country through foreclosure sales. Under the terms of a memorandum of understanding between FmHA and the Service, a review team consisting of their staff, our staff, staff from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service, and staff from USDA Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service evaluated those properties for their conservation value. Based on those evaluations, and before reselling the properties, the FmHA placed permanent conservation easements on many of these properties to protect important habitats, as authorized by the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990. FmHA retained full ownership in a smaller number of the properties. The responsibility for monitoring and enforcing those easements and managing the retained properties rests was transferred to the Service under authority of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C. 2002). We have usually delegated this authority to the manager of the closest refuge. As discussed previously under "Project Area," Sunkhaze Meadows NWR has responsibility for four conservation easements on private lands in Maine, totaling about 320 acres. The Service's rights and responsibilities are specific to conditions stipulated in each easement.

The Farmers Home Administration properties (Benton and Sandy Stream Units) and conservation easements were transferred "...for conservation purposes..." 7 U.S.C. 2002 (Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act).

## **Conservation Plans and Initiatives Guiding the Proposed Action**

Important guidance for habitat management and visitor service management at Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA has already been provided by a series of refuge-specific, State, regional, and national plans and initiatives, and their priorities.

## Regional and National Plans and Initiatives

### Refuge System Visioning: Fulfilling the Promise, Conserving the Future

In 1999, the report, “Fulfilling the Promise, The National Wildlife Refuge System; Visions for Wildlife, Habitat, People and Leadership” (USFWS 1999a), culminated a year-long process by teams of Service employees that created a nationwide vision for the Refuge System.

To update the vision for the Service’s future, the *Conserving the Future* conference was convened in July 2011 for the purpose of working toward a renewed and updated vision for the Refuge System. It was the largest gathering regarding the future of the Refuge System since the *Fulfilling the Promise* conference in 1998. It began with a draft vision document and over the course of the conference, both online and in-person feedback was gathered for its revision and finalization. The final vision document and its recommendations were published in the fall of 2011 (USFWS 2011a). This 21st century strategic vision for the Refuge System acknowledges the broad social, political, and economic changes that have made habitat conservation more challenging since the agency last set comprehensive goals in 1999. The vision document represents the Service’s vision for how to protect and conserve lands and waters in the coming decades and outlines a series of 24 recommendations for Service staff and other conservation partners to consider in future management.

We have often looked to the recommendations in these documents for guidance when writing this draft CCP and EA. For example, one recommendation is that we “ensure these plans view refuges in a landscape context and describe actions to project conservation benefits beyond refuge boundaries.” To address this, we have viewed the refuge and WPA within a wider landscape context throughout this document and have targeted conservation actions that directly relate to needs within the larger landscape. Another recommendation of the vision document involves partnerships, “develop and nurture active and vibrant Friends groups or community partnerships for every staffed refuge or refuge complex.” Throughout this CCP, we have recognized the value that the Friends and other partnerships bring to the refuge and WPA and our reliance on them for its future. The vision document also outlines other recommendations for the Service, including other programs outside of the Refuge System. Many of these other recommendations are supported in part by refuge management guided by this CCP.

### Strategic Habitat Conservation

The Service has a goal of establishing and building capacity for science-driven landscape conservation on a continental scale. Our approach, known as strategic habitat conservation, applies adaptive resource management principles to the entire range of species, groups of species, and natural communities of vegetation and wildlife. This approach is founded on an adaptive, iterative process of biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, and monitoring and research. The Service is refining this approach to conservation in a national geographic framework. This geographic frame of reference will allow us to more precisely explain to partners, Congress, and the American public why, where, and how we target resources for landscape-scale conservation and how our efforts connect to a greater whole. More information regarding SHC can be found at

<http://www.fws.gov/science/StrategicHabitatConservation.html>.

### North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative Operations Plan (USFWS 2010)

The Service and our partners are implementing a network of Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) to help protect our nation's natural and cultural resources and landscapes from negative effect of land use changes, drought, wildfire, habitat fragmentation, contaminants, pollution, invasive species, disease, and a rapidly changing climate. LCCs are public-private partnerships that recognize these challenges transcend political and jurisdictional boundaries and require a more networked approach to conservation that is collaborative, adaptive, and grounded in science to ensure the sustainability of America's land, water, wildlife, and cultural resources. The North Atlantic LCC is a conservation science-management partnership, consisting of federal agencies, states, Tribes, universities and private organizations, focused on collaboratively developing science-based recommendations and decision-support tools to implement on-the-ground conservation. The goal is having all partners working together to sustain landscapes capable of maintaining abundant, diverse and healthy populations of fish, wildlife, and plants. The work of the North Atlantic LCC will be integrated with a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) regional climate impact response center to conduct studies and develop landscape-scale conservation plans. The North Atlantic LCC will also address impacts to ecosystems beyond those of climate change, such as potential extirpation of wildlife populations from disease or habitat loss.

LCCs use principles of strategic habitat conservation to develop and communicate landscape-scale scientific information to shape conservation across the Northeastern United States. This initial plan outlines the regional threats to conservation, some priority species and habitats, as well as active regional partnerships.

### North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI)

The NABCI brings together the individual landbird, shorebird, waterbird, and waterfowl plans into a coordinated effort to protect and restore all native bird populations and their habitats in North America. By integrating bird conservation partnerships, NABCI strives to reduce redundancy in the structure, planning, and implementation of conservation projects. It utilizes Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) to guide landscape-scale, science-based approaches to conserving birds and their habitats.

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR lies within BCR 14, the Atlantic Northern Forest. A blueprint for the design and delivery of bird conservation in this region was created by the Service based on input from dozens of bird experts from around the region (Dettmers 2006). The BCR 14 blueprint identifies 52 bird species designated "highest" or "high" conservation priority in the region, and 15 habitat types important for supporting one or more of those priority bird species during at least one of their life stages. Those habitats either need critical conservation attention, or are crucial in long-term planning to conserve continentally and regionally important bird populations. Of the 52 highest and high-priority birds, 17 breed on the Sunkhaze Meadows NWR or Carlton Pond WPA and several others migrate through.

Each of the individual bird plans noted below were referenced as we developed habitat goals and objectives for the Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA.

- Partners In Flight Landbird Conservation Plan: Physiographic Area 27: Northern New England (Hodgman and Rosenberg 2000)

- Partners In Flight Landbird Conservation Plan: Physiographic Area 28: Eastern Spruce-Hardwood Forest (Rosenberg and Hodgman 2000)
- Northern Atlantic Regional Shorebird Plan Version 1.0. (Clark and Niles 2000)
- Regional Waterbird Conservation: Mid Atlantic/New England/Maritimes (MANEM Waterbird Working Group 2006)
- Atlantic Coast Joint Venture Waterfowl Implementation Plan (ACJV 2005)

Partners in Flight Area 27 Landbird Conservation Plan (Rosenberg and Hodgman 2000)

In 1990, Partners in Flight (PIF) was conceived as a voluntary, international coalition of government agencies, conservation organizations, academic institutions, private industry, and other citizens dedicated to reversing the population declines of bird species and “keeping common birds common.” The foundation of PIF’s long-term strategy for bird conservation is a series of scientifically based bird conservation plans, using physiographic areas as planning units. Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA straddle the PIF physiographic areas 27, Northern New England and 28, Eastern Spruce-Hardwood Forest.

The PIF 27 (Northern New England) plan includes objectives for the following habitat types and associated species of conservation concern on the refuge.

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Northern hardwood forest:  | Canada warbler, wood thrush, black-throated blue warbler, and blackburnian warbler |
| Early successional forest: | American woodcock and chestnut-sided warbler                                       |

Partners in Flight Area 28 Landbird Conservation Plan (Rosenberg and Hodgman 2000)

The PIF 28 (Eastern Spruce-Hardwood Forest) plan (Rosenberg and Hodgman 2000) includes objectives for the following habitat types and associated species of conservation concern on the refuge.

- |                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Northern hardwood forest:    | Canada warbler, wood thrush, and veery   |
| Conifer (spruce-fir) forest: | bay-breasted warbler, Cape May warbler, blackburnian warbler, spruce grouse, and red crossbill |
| Boreal peatland/edge/shrub:  | American woodcock, chestnut-sided warbler, and olive-sided flycatcher                          |

North American Waterbird Conservation Plan (Kushlan et al. 2002)

The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan (NAWCP) represents an independent partnership among individuals and institutions with interest and responsibility for conserving waterbirds and their habitats. The primary goal of the plan is to ensure that the distribution, diversity, and abundance of populations and habitats of breeding, migratory, and non-breeding waterbirds are sustained or restored throughout the lands and waters of North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. The plan facilitates continentwide planning and monitoring, national-state-provincial conservation action, regional coordination, and local habitat protection and management.

A partnership of organizations and individuals working to facilitate waterbird conservation in the Mid-Atlantic/New England/Maritimes (MANEM) region of the U.S. and Canada has developed a regional waterbird conservation plan (MANEM Waterbird Working Group 2006). Over 200 partners comprising the MANEM Waterbird Working Group have compiled and interpreted

technical information on the region's waterbird populations and habitats, assessed conservation status of these natural resources, developed strategies to ensure the persistence of sustainable waterbird populations in the region, and identified near-term priorities.

Seventy-four waterbird species use habitats in MANEM for breeding, migrating, and wintering. Avian families include loons, grebes, shearwaters, storm-petrels, boobies, pelicans, cormorants, herons, ibises, rails, gulls, terns, skuas, jaegers and alcids. Partners in four subregions of MANEM selected 43 Focal Species for immediate conservation action. In addition, 55 of MANEM's waterbirds are identified in state wildlife action plans as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (MANEM Waterbird Working Group 2006).

#### USFWS Migratory Bird Program Strategic Plan (USFWS 2004)

The Migratory Bird Program Strategic Plan provides direction for the Service's migratory bird management over the next decade (2004 to 2014). The plan contains a vision and recommendations for the Refuge System's place in bird conservation. It defines strategies for the Service, including the refuge system, to actively support bird conservation through monitoring, conservation, consultation, and recreation. To the extent practicable, considerations for standard monitoring protocols, habitat assessment and management, and promoting nature-based recreation and education to forward the vision of the Migratory Bird Program Strategic Plan have been incorporated into this plan.

#### USFWS Birds of Conservation Concern (USFWS 2008)

The 1988 amendment to the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act mandated that the Service "identify species, subspecies, and populations of all migratory nongame birds that, without additional conservation actions, are likely to become candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973."

This report identifies the migratory and non-migratory bird species (beyond those already designated as federally threatened or endangered) that represent the Service's highest conservation priorities and draws attention to species in need of conservation action. The geographic scope includes the United States in its entirety, including island territories in the Pacific and Caribbean. Birds considered within this report include nongame birds, gamebirds without hunting seasons, subsistence-hunted nongame birds in Alaska; and Endangered Species Act candidate, proposed endangered or threatened, and recently delisted species. Assessment scores are based on several factors, including population trends, threats, and distribution, abundance, and area importance.

#### Maine Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (MDIFW 2005)

Maine's comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy (MDIFW 2005) targets species in greatest need of conservation for the State while keeping "common species common." The plan covers the entire State, from the coastline to the heights of Mt. Katahdin. It builds on existing fish and wildlife programs and on a species planning effort that has been ongoing for nearly 40 years and a landscape approach to habitat conservation that was initiated in 2000. These efforts incorporate a long history of public involvement and collaboration among conservation partners. The Maine landscape is not static but the result of profound natural and human-caused changes. Changes brought about by fire, land conversion, abandonment of agricultural land, timber harvesting, and

the defoliation of forest by insects have had, and will continue to have, a dramatic impact on habitats and levels of biodiversity. Similarly, aquatic ecosystems in Maine have been profoundly and adversely affected by exotic introductions, dam building, pollution, pesticide use, and excessive nutrient input. These effects have occurred, and are occurring, statewide, but they differ in intensity from north to south.

In their statewide wildlife conservation plan, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW) noted the following: “Historically, wildlife conservation efforts tended to focus on single species. Other conservation efforts identify and protect areas of land (focus areas) that contain diverse assemblages of at-risk species. However, as we continue to change our landscape, species-by-species and focus-area conservation approaches, while both laudable may not be the most effective means to conserve biodiversity, and they do little to ensure the continued well-being of more common species under Department stewardship. Landscape-level conservation that addresses the needs of many species by conserving underlying resources upon which they depend, may be a more productive way to use limited resources to benefit the greatest number of species and address the full array of wildlife in Maine.”

USFWS Fisheries Program, Northeast Region Strategic Plan 2009 to 2013 (USFWS 2009)

The primary mission of the Service’s Fisheries Program is to work with others to maintain self-sustaining, healthy populations of coastal and diadromous fish (fish that spend part of their lives in fresh water and part in the ocean), fish species that cross state or national boundaries, and endangered aquatic animals and their habitats. In the Northeast Region, 25 fishery management offices and national fish hatcheries work with states and other partners to restore and protect a variety of fish and other aquatic species.

The Regional Fisheries Program Strategic Plan (USFWS 2009) is an extension of the vision, describing more specifically the tactics to be implemented by the Northeast Region to fulfill the goals and objectives identified in the vision. The first plan covered years 2004 to 2008. One step-down effort resulting from the plan is the identification and ranking of fish and other aquatic species according to their level of conservation concern by USGS hydrologic unit (i.e. HUC watersheds). We used this ranking and have consulted with the Regional Fisheries Program staff in developing aquatic objectives and strategies.

Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture Conservation Strategies (EBJV 2011)

The Joint Venture’s Conservation Strategy is directed by rangewide objectives to guide conservation efforts across the eastern range of brook trout. The regional objectives represent expectations to be achieved by 2012. The Joint Venture, working with the National Fish Habitat Partnership, will use the Conservation Strategy (EBJV 2011) as its blueprint for raising and using resources at the state level. The Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture Conservation Strategies (EBJV 2011) for Maine were developed to maintain and restore then native brook trout populations in the streams, rivers, lakes, and ponds of Maine. Short- and long-term goals of the Joint Venture include determining the status of wild brook trout in watersheds lacking adequate and current data, identifying degraded stream habitats and prioritizing restoration efforts, restore degraded brook trout habitat, and prevent further degradation of existing brook trout habitat.

### Sebasticook Regional Land Trust's Unity Wetlands Conservation Plan (FUW 2006)

The Sebasticook Regional Land Trust (formerly the Friends of Unity Wetlands) developed the Unity Wetlands Conservation Plan (FUW 2006) with support from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and The Natural Resource Conservation Service. The plan encompasses the 42,000-acre Unity Wetlands Focus Area, a unique and significant resource, with a combination of wild and working lands that is rich in biodiversity, scenic beauty, and economic value. This large tract of relatively undeveloped land stretches from the west side of Unity through all of Unity Plantation and into portions of Albion, Benton, Burnham, Clinton, and Freedom. It is home to many threatened and rare plants, animals, and natural communities, as well as to more wide-ranging creatures like black bear, moose, and bobcat. It is home, too, to a rich agricultural heritage that is critical to the regional economy. The farms and infrastructure within and adjacent to the Unity Wetlands are a vital component in Maine's Dairy Belt. They also provide habitat in their own right for fish and wildlife, contribute to several blocks of contiguous undeveloped habitat, and are a buffer between the interior undeveloped blocks and encroaching development.

The Benton and Sandy Stream Units are located within the Unity Wetlands Focus Area. Recommendations in the conservation plan support refuge management objectives of increasing the riparian buffer at Sandy Stream and managing habitat for grassland birds at Benton. The Sebasticook Regional Land Trust is interested in partnering with the refuge to increase public understanding of refuge lands, their conservation values and public use opportunities. Carlton Pond WPA is located north and east of Unity Pond, just outside of the Unity Wetlands Focus Area.

### **Refuge-specific Plans**

A number of other refuge-specific plans have been consulted either in their draft or final format to help guide decisionmaking. These plans will also be maintained and updated as necessary to maintain accordance with the recommendations of the CCP.

### Sunkhaze Meadows NWR Station Management Plan (USFWS 1992)

The original master plan for the refuge was developed in 1992 through collaboration amongst individuals within the Northeast Region of USFWS's Division of Refuges. The master plan set the original guidance for management of Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and outlined the resources it protected.

### Visitor Service Review

A Service-based review team assessed the public use issues, opportunities, and facilities available at Sunkhaze Meadows NWR in preparation for the refuge's comprehensive conservation planning process and to develop recommendations to improve the quality of the refuge's visitor services program. A visitor services review was conducted for Sunkhaze Meadows NWR on October 18 to 22, 2010, by a review team consisting of visitor services personnel from the Regional Office and other refuges. This review focused on the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit of the refuge, and recommendations included increased staffing, visitor use access, and public outreach. The Visitor Services Review recommendations were used as a stepping-off point for visitor services planning; its recommendations were also used to help develop goals, objectives, and strategies for refuge visitor services planning.

## Step-down Plans

The Service Manual, (602 FW 4) identifies more than 25 step-down management plans that may be completed for each refuge. These plans provide the details necessary to “step-down” general goals and objectives to specific strategies and implementation schedules. Some require annual revisions; others are revised on a 5- to 10-year schedule. Some require additional NEPA analysis, public involvement, and compatibility determinations before they can be implemented.

Following is a list of step-down plans for the refuge and WPA:

- Annual Habitat Work Plan, most recently completed in 2010.
- Fire Management Plan, completed in 2001.
- Furbearer Management Plan, completed in 2001.
- Fisheries Management Plan, completed in 1999, to be updated after approval of the final CCP.
- Wildlife Inventory Management Plan, completed in 1995.
- Hunting Management Plan, completed in 1990, to be updated after approval of the final CCP.
- Law Enforcement Plan, to be completed after approval of the final CCP.
- Visitor Services Plan, to be completed after approval of the final CCP.
- Safety Plan, to be completed after approval of the final CCP.

## Refuge and WPA Vision

The planning team developed the following vision statement to provide a guiding philosophy and sense of purpose in the CCP.

*Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA are a tapestry of natural lands within central Maine.*

*The Sunkhaze Meadows Unit supports an expansive, intact peat bog system. The free-flowing Sunkhaze Stream and its tributaries meander through diverse habitats including raised peat domes, grassy wet meadows, and floodplain forests before joining the restored Penobscot River. Mature upland forests surround the wetlands, protecting this unspoiled landscape for future generations of plants, animals, and people.*

*Bobolink and sedge wren sing and woodcock dance in the large contiguous grassland and deer overwinter in the forest mosaic comprising the Benton Unit. Wood turtles and rare mussels are protected by the wide, shaded riparian forests of the Sandy Stream Unit.*

*Carlton Pond WPA is a beautiful wetland jewel amidst a pastoral landscape. Rare black terns nest in the emergent marsh, while bald eagles, bitterns, and marsh wrens forage amid the shallow open waters and emergent pickerelweed and wild rice.*

*Visitors experience wildness and find respite within nature throughout the year. In spring, birders observe migratory waterfowl and songbirds. Wildlife enthusiasts and anglers enjoy fishing, paddling, and hiking throughout summer. Hunters spend crisp autumn mornings stalking their prey. In winter, people snowshoe and ski through the*

*silent woods. Through our close partnerships and programs, visitors gain further appreciation of conservation and are inspired stewards of nature.*

## Refuge and WPA Goals

The planning team developed seven goals after considering the vision statement, the purposes for establishing the refuge and WPA, the missions of the Service and the Refuge System, and the mandates, plans, and conservation initiatives noted above. These goals are intentionally broad, descriptive statements of purpose. They highlight elements that we will emphasize during future management.

- Goal 1. Sunkhaze Meadows Biological Management. Promote the environmental health of Sunkhaze Meadows Unit wetland, forest, and aquatic habitats to protect water quality and sustain native rare plants, natural communities, and wildlife, including species of conservation concern.
- Goal 2. Carlton Pond WPA Biological Management. Promote the environmental health of forest, open water, and emergent wetland habitat at Carlton Pond WPA to benefit waterfowl and sustain a diversity of wildlife including species of conservation concern.
- Goal 3. Benton and Sandy Stream Biological Management. Promote the environmental health of forest, grassland, and shrubland habitat at Benton and Sandy Stream Units to sustain a diversity of wildlife, including species of conservation concern.
- Goal 4. Sunkhaze Meadows Public Use. Engage visitors, students, and nearby residents in the Refuge System's six priority public uses, as well as other compatible public uses, to enhance public understanding, enjoyment, and environmental stewardship of the wetlands, woods, wildlife, and cultural resources of the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit.
- Goal 5. Carlton Pond WPA Public Use. Engage visitors, students, and nearby residents in the Refuge System's six priority public uses, as well as other compatible public uses, to enhance public understanding, enjoyment, and environmental stewardship of the wetlands, woods, and wildlife at Carlton Pond WPA.
- Goal 6. Benton and Sandy Stream Units Public Use. Engage visitors, students, and nearby residents in the Refuge System's six priority public uses, as well as other compatible public uses, to enhance public understanding, enjoyment, and environmental stewardship of the shrublands, woods, grasslands, and wildlife at the Benton and Sandy Stream Units.
- Goal 7. Partnership Coordination. Communicate and collaborate with local communities, Federal and State agencies, local and Tribal representatives, and other organizations throughout Maine and the region to further the purposes of the refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

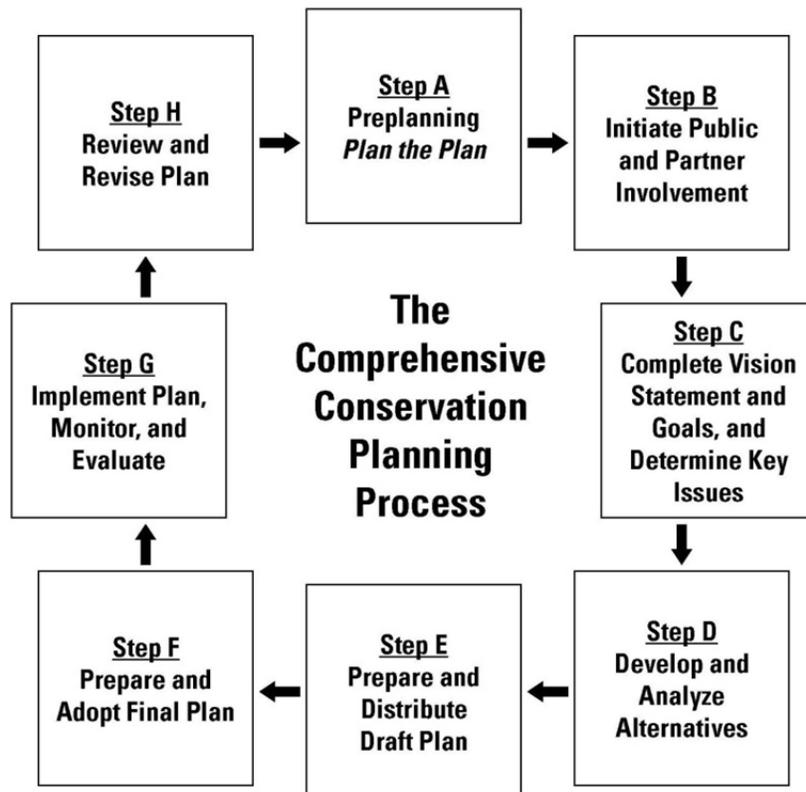
## The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process

Service policy (602 FW 3) establishes an eight-step comprehensive conservation planning process that provides guidelines for developing CCPs and facilitates compliance with NEPA by integrating NEPA compliance requirements in the CCP process (figure 1.1). The full text of the policy and a detailed description of the planning steps can be viewed at <http://policy.fws.gov/602fw3.html>; last accessed September 2012.

The following describes the specific process implemented by the Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA planning team including how others were engaged in developing issues for the draft CCP.

This summary does not detail the numerous meetings, events, and informal discussions the refuge manager and staff have had since January 2011 where the CCP was a topic of conversation. Those involved a wide range of audiences, including conservation groups, elected officials or their staffs, educators, refuge visitors and other interested individuals. During those discussions, the refuge manager and staff would provide an update on CCP progress and encourage comments and participation.

Figure 1.1 The Service's Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process



## Chronological Summary of CCP Process

### *Step A: Preplanning*

Several steps were initiated as part of “Step A: Preplanning” including the formation of the core planning team which is responsible for developing the CCP. Our core planning team consists of refuge staff, Regional Office staff, a representative of the MDIFW, a representative of the Penobscot Indian Nation, an elected representative from the town of Milford, and contractors responsible for compiling information and preparing documents. The CCP planning process began formally on January 4, 2011, with a conference call between refuge staff, Regional Office staff, and contractors to discuss information needs, timelines, and involvement of others in the core planning team. As part of the preplanning process, the core planning team discussed management issues, drafted a vision statement and tentative goals and compiled a project mailing list of known stakeholders, interested individuals, organizations, and agencies. The team also began work on Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River reviews, and began summarizing the refuge’s biological inventory and monitoring information.

On March 1, 2011, a conference call was held between refuge staff, regional Service staff, and contractors to work on the preparations for the agency and Tribal partnership scoping meeting, as well as the public scoping meetings.

On March 7, 2011, the refuge manager emailed 29 local, county, State, and Federal agency contacts an invitation to an agency partner scoping meeting. This invitation encouraged agency participation in the agency scoping meeting in order to provide other government entities the opportunity to share their issues and concerns related to Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA. A follow-up reminder email was sent to this same group of contacts on March 17, 2011.

### *Step B: Public Scoping*

On March 18, 2011, we started “Step B: Initiate Public Involvement and Scoping” by publishing the Notice of Intent (NOI) in the *Federal Register*, officially announcing the beginning of public scoping for the Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA CCP. The project planning Web site and the refuge Web site were also updated at this time.

On March 23, 2011, the core team contacted approximately 394 individuals and organizations included in the planning contacts database compiled for the CCP. The refuge manager emailed 44 of those contacts inviting them to participate in our scoping process and to attend our public open houses in April and included an electronic copy of the first newsletter. The remaining 350 contacts were mailed paper copies of the first newsletter containing a similar invitation to participate.

On March 24, 2011, the core team held the agency scoping workshop at the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Bangor Research Office. The workshop was attended by six representatives from municipal, State, and Federal agencies. Refuge and planning team staff were also in attendance at the meeting.

The core team completed their public scoping meetings in mid-April. Two public scoping meetings were held on April 12, 2011, in Milford, Maine, at the Milford Town Hall: one session was held from 2:00 to 4:00 PM, and another session was held from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. Combined, these meetings were attended by 22 individuals from the surrounding communities. A third public scoping meeting was held from 4:00 to 8:00 PM in Unity, Maine, at Unity College on April 13, 2011. This meeting was attended by 12 individuals. Refuge and planning team staff were also in attendance at all three meetings.

The official comment period for initial public scoping to identify issues and opportunities for the CCP ended on April 30, 2011.

#### *Steps C and D: Vision, Goals, and Alternatives Development*

Following the public scoping period, the core team compiled and summarized all comments received. In doing so, the Service initiated “Step C: Review Vision Statement and Goals and Determine Significant Issues.” Through a series of conference calls and emails, the core team reviewed comments received and identified key issues to be addressed throughout the development of the CCP. At the same time, the core team evaluated the draft vision and goals presented during scoping. During this evaluation, the core team decided to reorganize the draft goals to better reflect the individuality of each refuge unit. This was motivated by two primary factors: (1) many individual comments received during scoping pertained to particular refuge units and people’s interest in a particular unit, and (2) each refuge unit and the WPA contain unique habitats and features and are managed individually.

From August 2012 through January 2013 the core team has been working on “Step D: Develop and Analyze Alternatives.” On August 9 and 10, the core team met in person at the USFWS Ecological Services Office in Orono, ME to discuss key issues and develop appropriate management considerations.

As part of this initial development of alternatives, the core team considered management alternatives at the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit that included special use designations such as wilderness area or research natural area. To further evaluate special designations as alternatives, in January 2012, we distributed a public notice and newsletter describing the consideration of special designations, specifically wilderness area designation and invited interested individuals to attend a public meeting to learn more about the consideration and obtain public input. This newsletter was distributed to 452 contacts, 112 of these received the newsletter via email, and the remaining 340 were mailed hard copies. The public notice was also published on February 3, 2012, in a local newspaper, the SV Weekly.

The Sunkhaze Meadows Unit wilderness consideration public meeting was held on Thursday, February 9, 2012, at the Milford town hall. In total, 38 people from the general public attended the meeting. The refuge manager described the purpose of the meeting, the current status of our CCP/EA planning efforts, and the Wilderness Act criteria and how the Service delineated the potential wilderness area designation for the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit. The Service then facilitated public input while recording the comments on flip charts.

Following this meeting, the Service reviewed and considered comments received and determined not to pursue special designations at the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit. In early August 2012, the Service distributed a newsletter updating the public on the Service's decision not to pursue a wilderness area designation. This newsletter was distributed to the same 452 contacts noted in the January 2012 newsletter distribution.

#### *Step E: Draft CCP and NEPA Document*

This draft CCP and EA represents "Step E: Prepare Draft Plan and NEPA Document." The Service will publish a Notice of Availability (NOA) in the *Federal Register* announcing the release of this document for its 30-day period of public review and comment. During the comment period, the Service will also hold public meetings to obtain comments on the document. We expect to receive comments by regular mail, electronic mail, and at the public meetings. We will also prepare and distribute a newsletter summarizing the three management alternatives for the draft CCP and EA to coincide with the publication of the NOA. After the comment period, the Service will review and summarize all of the substantive comments we have received, develop our responses, and publish them as an appendix to the final CCP.

#### *Step F: Adopt Final Plan*

Once the final CCP has been prepared, it will be submitted to our Regional Director for approval. The Regional Director will determine whether the CCP warrants a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), and whether its analysis is sufficient to simultaneously issue a decision adopting the CCP. If the Regional Director has concerns, the planning team may be required to revise the EA or complete an environmental impact statement (EIS). The Service will announce the Regional Director's final decision and the final CCP by publishing Notice(s) of Availability in the *Federal Register*. That will complete "Step F: Prepare and Adopt a Final Plan."

#### *Steps G and H: Implement, Evaluate, and Revise the Plan*

With the planning phase of the CCP process complete, "Step G: Implement Plan, Monitor and Evaluate" will begin. As part of "Step H: Review and Revise Plan," the Service will modify or revise the final CCP, as warranted, following the procedures in Service policies 602 FW 1, 3, and 4 and the NEPA requirements. Minor revisions that meet the criteria for categorical exclusions (550 FW 3.3C) will require only an environmental action memorandum. As the Refuge Improvement Act and Service policy stipulate, the Service will review and revise the CCP at least every 15 years.

## **Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities**

The Service defines an issue as "any unsettled matter requiring a management decision" (USFWS 2010). Issues can include an "initiative, opportunity, resource management problem, threat to a resource, conflict in use, or a public concern." Issues arise from many sources, including refuge staff, other Service programs, state agencies, other Federal agencies, Tribes, other partners, neighbors, user groups, or Congress. One of the distinctions among the proposed management alternatives is how each addresses those issues.

From agency and public meetings and planning team discussions, we developed a list of issues, concerns, opportunities, and other items requiring a management decision. We placed them in two categories: key issues and issues outside the scope of the draft CCP and EA.

*Key issues*—Key issues are those the Service has the jurisdiction and authority to resolve. The key issues, together with refuge goals, form the basis for developing and comparing the different management alternatives we analyze in chapter 3. The varying alternatives were generated by determining different options for addressing key issues that also conform with the goals and objectives. We describe the key issues in detail below.

*Issues and concerns outside the scope of this analysis*—These issues do not fall within the scope of the “purpose of, and need for, action” in this draft CCP and EA. These issues are discussed after the key issues below, but are not addressed further in this document.

Following is a summary of the issues that arose during the scoping process.

## **Key Issues**

We derived the following key issues from public and partner meetings and further team discussions. The three management alternatives in chapter 3 are distinguished by how well each alternative supports refuge goals and addresses these issues.

### ***Facilities, Infrastructure, and Staffing***

1. *At what levels does the Service plan to continue staffing and management of the refuge?*

The lack of Service personnel at the refuge was raised several times by the public during scoping. Perceptions expressed during scoping were that the refuge has been abandoned or that the Service did not care about the future of the property. The long-term vision for the refuge includes staff stationed out of the Sunkhaze Meadows NWR. However, like all management decisions, the actual implementation of staffing is dependent upon budget availability.

How the refuge will respond to staffing concerns is noted in the refuge administration discussion for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

### ***Habitat and Wildlife Management***

1. *How will the refuge address potential impacts of climate change on existing refuge habitats?*

Climate change and its corresponding effects on species migrations or range distributions, extreme shifts in temperature and precipitation, and invasive species introductions may potentially pose dramatic threats and alterations to the habitats encompassed within the refuge. The ability to adapt or address these ever-changing concerns requires a comprehensive understanding of the refuge’s landscape context, individual habitats, species utilization, and their resilience.

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA are located within the range of inland spruce–fir dominated plant communities. Many of the refuge habitats have developed under the climate conditions present over the past 8,000 years. Given the projections for shifts in mean temperature and precipitation for the region, new introductions of both native and nonnative species are possible results of climate change.

Potential impacts of climate change are discussed in chapter 2 and how the refuge will respond to its implications is noted in goals 1 through 3 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

2. *How will the refuge protect or improve its biological integrity in light of landscape-level ecological concerns such as biological connectivity with other nearby habitats?*

Fragmentation of both terrestrial and aquatic habitats can have adverse effects on many plant, fish, and wildlife species: reducing biodiversity, limiting genetic diversity, and increasing susceptibility to species invasion and other stressors. Activities such as logging, agriculture, or residential development can create a patchwork of forest, wetland, and grassland habitats. Dams, culverts, and other water control structures can fragment the available aquatic habitat in a similar manner.

The units encompassed by Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA are each fragmented to varying degrees. Sunkhaze Meadows Unit near Milford and Carlton Pond WPA near Unity are abutted by large acreages of private forest lands, some of which have been recently logged. As a result, while these areas still provide habitat for some species, it does represent a fragmentation of late successional forest lands. Other units, such as Sandy Stream and Benton, are surrounded by roads, residential property, and agriculture, which also result in fragmentation of the habitats available onsite.

We envision partnering with a variety of Federal, State, and non-governmental organizations to address these landscape-level concerns to the refuge. How the refuge will respond to connectivity needs is noted in goals 1 through 3 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

3. *How will the refuge balance early successional habitat management for species like American woodcock with late successional habitat management?*

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA provide important habitat for many State-listed birds and other species of conservation concern across the region. Among these are species such as the American woodcock, identified in many state, regional, and national plans as a priority species. It is listed as a species of highest conservation priority in BCR 14 (Dettmers 2006). Woodcock require an assemblage of early successional habitat including clearings for courtship (singing grounds), large openings for night roosting, shrub and sapling stands (0 to 15 years) for foraging, as well as young, second-growth hardwoods or mixed woods (15 to 30 years) for nesting, feeding, and brood-rearing (Sepik et al. 1981, Keppie and Whiting 1994).

Many of the bird species of conservation concern in the Northeastern U.S. are not entirely dependent on late-successional or old-growth forest (Hagan and Grove 1999); however, there are some at-risk species that are primarily dependent on the habitat features found in older forests.

Birds of conservation concern that feed and nest within these late-successional forests at Sunhaze Meadows Unit and elsewhere include bay-breasted warbler, Canada warbler, wood thrush, eastern wood-pewee, chestnut-sided warbler, blackburnian warbler, black-throated-blue warbler, and bald eagles. In addition, older forests have ecological processes that are mostly absent from young forests (Hagan and Whitman 2007). These species and processes require areas of long-term preservation in order to be sustained in perpetuity. This level of protection is not typically available with private lands, where changes in ownership can result in differing land use. Equally, other conservation lands managed by State, Federal, or local partners may change over time or have management goals that do not promote mature forest preservation. Therefore, a management emphasis on late successional forest is important to sustaining the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Atlantic Northern Forest region.

Throughout this planning process, we have considered both the availability of habitat on a regional scale, while also considering our ability to successfully manage these types of habitats across refuge units and the WPA. How the refuge will balance early successional habitat management with late successional habitat management is noted in goals 1 through 3 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

4. *What are the biological inventory and monitoring needs for the refuge and WPA and how will the Service meet them?*

Scientifically sound inventory and monitoring is important for the Service to understand what resources and species are present on refuge and WPA lands. Inventory and monitoring helps us increase our knowledge of those resources that we are striving to conserve and protect. In some cases, it can also help us evaluate how species or habitats respond to our management actions. A renewed emphasis on inventory and monitoring that helps inform on the ground management actions is an important recommendation of the recent *Conserving the Future* conference and final vision document, and the Service has recently expanded national funding for inventory and monitoring efforts.

Without dedicated staff to Sunhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA, it is difficult for the Service to conduct the level of inventory and monitoring necessary to adequately inform management. We plan to work with the Service's regional inventory and monitoring staff, as well as area partners (e.g., local universities) to accomplish our inventory and monitoring needs. How the refuge will respond to the need for inventory and monitoring is noted in goals 1, 2, 3, and 7 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

5. *How will the refuge manage for deer populations?*

As described in section 1.3, Congress entrusts the Service with the conservation and protection of specific national natural resources: migratory birds and fish, federally listed threatened or endangered species, interjurisdictional fish, wetlands, certain marine mammals, and national wildlife refuges. Because of this mandate, local game species (those that typically do not migrate across state lines, such as white-tailed deer) are managed by state fish and wildlife agencies. In Maine, the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries defines and enforces the series of regulations and management actions to maintain the State's deer population.

However, biological management for Federal trust species proposed within this plan would continue to provide habitat for local white-tailed deer populations. In addition, the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit contains a known deer overwintering yard that may provide important shelter during hard winter conditions. Similar deer yards located on adjacent private lands have recently been lost due to logging. As a result of the biological management proposed, this deer yard will be protected under all alternatives.

This concern and the relation of white-tailed deer to habitat management is discussed in goals 1 through 3 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

6. *How will the refuge manage invasive, nonnative, and overabundant species?*

Nonnative, invasive plant species such as phragmites (*Phragmites australis*) and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) threaten refuge and WPA habitats by displacing native plant and animal species, degrading natural communities, and reducing natural diversity and wildlife habitat values. They can out-compete native species by dominating light, water, and nutrient resources, and are particularly damaging when they dominate and overtake native habitats, as when phragmites dominates an entire wetland plant community.

The Sunkhaze Meadows Unit and Carlton Pond WPA are relatively free of invasive species. In these areas, prevention will be the key focus of invasive species management. In other areas, such as Benton Unit and Sandy Stream Unit, invasive species such as reed canarygrass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) have invaded wetland habitats and require active control to minimize their impacts on refuge habitats.

There are additional concerns that other invasive species such as nonnative insects, fish, and other animals should be considered and managed as well. Some climate change estimates also predict a shift of species distributions or conditions across the region that may allow introductions of additional species in the future.

How we respond to these concerns is discussed in goals 1 through 3 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

7. *How will the refuge manage the smaller Benton and Sandy Stream units in light of limited staff resources?*

Several comments were received pertaining to the ongoing management of two of the smaller units managed as part of Sunkhaze Meadows NWR. Benton and Sandy Stream Units are each located roughly an hour's drive away from the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit and the Maine Coastal Islands NWR staff headquarters in Rockland, Maine. Because of limited staff time and the distance from the refuge's current headquarters, both the Benton Unit and Sandy Stream Unit have had minimal management or monitoring by the Service.

How the refuge will respond to concerns regarding Benton and Sandy Stream units are noted in goals 3, 6, and 7 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

### ***Visitor Services Management***

For national wildlife refuges, providing wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities is also a priority. It creates the opportunity for many visitors to experience the lands that refuges protect and see the value behind the conservation work that the Service does. Providing public access and recreational use is an important issue addressed in this draft plan. The planning team received many opinions on specific actions or techniques to improve opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation on the refuge and WPA.

Specific questions asked regarding the topic of visitor services, include:

1. *What is designated Wilderness and how would this affect public use and management of refuge lands?*

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established the National Wilderness Preservation System and a process for federal agencies to recommend wilderness areas to Congress. There are 75 wilderness areas on 63 units of the Refuge System in 26 states. About 90 percent of the Refuge System wilderness is in Alaska.

Wilderness, as defined by the Wilderness Act, is untrammeled (free from human control), undeveloped, and natural, offering outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation. Wilderness visitors may hunt, fish, and observe and photograph wildlife, if these activities are compatible with the refuge's primary mission of wildlife conservation. Many other types of compatible recreational uses, such as cross-country skiing, canoeing, kayaking, and hiking may also be enjoyed in wilderness areas (USFWS 2011b).

After completing the wilderness review, we do not intend to recommend wilderness designation on any of the refuge units or WPA at this time. The completed wilderness review is included as appendix C.

2. *What is the purpose of Wild and Scenic River designation, how is a Wild and Scenic River designation made, and how would this affect public use and management of refuge lands?*

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act provides a national policy and program to preserve and protect selected rivers, or segments of rivers, in their free-flowing condition in the National System. Wild and scenic river designation seeks to protect and enhance a river's current natural condition and provide for public use consistent with retaining those values. Designation affords certain legal protection from adverse development, e.g., no new dams may be constructed, nor federally assisted water resource development projects allowed that are judged to have an adverse effect on designated river values.

When completing land and water planning (e.g., CCPs) on Federal lands, agencies are required to initiate a wild and scenic river review. The review included in this document only applies to Service-owned lands, and only addresses our determinations of river eligibility and

classifications. These determinations are tentative, and are subject to further consideration during the study phase which we will complete sometime after the CCP is completed. At this time, we do not know when we might be able to complete the suitability study. We expect it will be several years.

Agencies by themselves cannot designate rivers under this act. If we determine that there are eligible and suitable segments (as defined by the act), we would prepare a separate legislative environmental impact statement and submit it with the results of the suitability study to the Director of the Service and ultimately to Congress for potential designation. This is a long process and there would be several opportunities for public involvement.

The results of our draft Wild and Scenic Review do not affect recreational use of Sunkhaze Stream or its tributaries, including access for boating, fishing, or hunting at current or expected levels of use. Wild and scenic river designation, if it occurs, is not expected to affect these uses either. For more information, please see the draft wild and scenic river review (appendix D).

*3. How will the Service address snowmobiling on refuge lands? Will the refuge remain open to snowmobiling? Will snowmobiling be expanded?*

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR currently allows snowmobiling in designated locations on several refuge units. Sunkhaze Meadows Unit contains a 3-mile segment of the Interconnected Trail System (ITS) trail along the western portion of the unit. Benton and Sandy Stream Units also contain smaller segments (1 mile or less) of local or regional snowmobile trails. These segments are maintained by local snowmobile clubs, which is authorized under a special use permit issued by refuge staff.

We intend to maintain snowmobile access similar to current levels under all alternatives. Specifics on how we will address snowmobiling on Service lands are noted in goals 4, 5, and 6 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

*4. How will the refuge continue to support hunting opportunities?*

As previously mentioned, hunting is one of the priority public uses identified in the Refuge Improvement Act. We received several comments from interested members of the public both supporting and opposing hunting on refuge lands. Currently, the refuge is open to all State seasons, according to State regulations with one exception, coyote hunting. Some commenters requested we more closely align refuge regulations with State regulations, specifically by expanding the coyote hunting season and revising refuge hunter orange requirements to mirror State regulations.

As Federal lands, season dates and refuge-specific regulations apply on all refuge properties. To the extent practicable, refuges align their regulations with state regulations. Because of the Refuge System's wildlife first mission and the need to balance hunting with other priority public uses, refuge hunting regulations are sometimes more restrictive than State regulations. Because changing the refuge and WPA hunter orange requirements was minor, we were able to modify

them to be consistent with State regulations in 2012. We have discussed coyote hunting on refuge and WPA lands previously (see issue 5, Habitat and Wildlife Management).

All three alternatives provide opportunities for hunting on Service lands. Specifics of how the refuge will address hunting are described in goals 4 through 6 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

*5. How will the refuge continue to support trapping opportunities?*

Trapping is not included as a priority public use under the Refuge Improvement Act. Trapping is currently allowed on refuge units and at Carlton Pond WPA as a management activity. We control this activity by issuing special use permits. We are not proposing any changes to the refuge's current trapping program under any of the alternatives. How the refuge will address trapping is noted in chapter 3, under common to all.

*6. What will the refuge do to improve access to the various refuge units?*

Having access to the refuge by way of parking lots, trails, boardwalks, and other infrastructure is an important issue for many people who provided comments during scoping. These access points and trails are used by visitors to engage in various recreational uses, as well as by Service staff for management purposes.

Infrastructure requires regular maintenance to provide safe and open access. In recent years, some of the existing infrastructure at the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit has fallen into disrepair. Trails have become blocked or overgrown. Boardwalks have buckled as a result of frost heave. Maintenance of these access areas is important to provide continued, safe public use. Current interpretive kiosks are out of date as well.

Another concern at the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit is limited access to Sunkhaze Stream. Many visitors access the refuge via small boats. Currently, the refuge's only access point for the stream is at the far northern end of the refuge. Boaters need to portage their boats over 1,000 feet to reach the stream and launch. Commenters requested additional access to Sunkhaze Stream, particularly at the southern end near its confluence with the Penobscot River and State Route 2.

Other refuge lands have varying degrees or types of access. Carlton Pond WPA has no trail system, because of limited upland areas and the dominance of open water and emergent wetlands. However, many people enjoy paddling Carlton Pond to observe wildlife. At the Benton and Sandy Stream units, no formal trail systems exist, although each unit does contain snowmobile trails that are used for winter transportation and for occasional wildlife observation during the warmer months. Several comments were received asking the refuge to consider improving access on these units for wildlife observation and other uses.

How the refuge will respond to access concerns are noted in goals 4 through 6 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

7. *How does the refuge plan to improve its public use programming, including environmental education and interpretation?*

Environmental education and interpretation are two priority public uses outlined under the Refuge Improvement Act and are important ways of reaching out to the public. Currently, we provide a limited number of presentations upon request. In the absence of staff, the Friends of Sunkhaze Meadows provide an important role in connecting people to the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit by providing regular environmental interpretive programming on refuge lands. The Service would like to improve its support for the Friends organization and programming, as well as create additional Service-led programs, if resources are available

Others are interested in the possibility of additional environmental education or interpretive programs at Carlton Pond WPA, Benton Unit, or Sandy Stream Unit. Providing programming at these units would require refuge staff or a partnership with local organizations to develop and lead events. How the refuge will respond to public use programming concerns are noted in goals 4 through 6 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

8. *How does the refuge plan to address cultural and historic resources related to the refuge?*

The lands and waters comprising Sunkhaze Meadows Unit have been important to the Penobscot Indian Nation for thousands of years. The refuge continues to have cultural and historic significance to the Penobscot Nation. Other Tribes such as the Passamaquoddy Tribe, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, and Aroostook Band of Micmacs also have historic or cultural connections to refuge units. Sunkhaze Meadows Unit is known to contain at least one archaeological site and others may exist. Preservation and interpretation of these resources is an interest to many of those who provided initial comment during scoping.

To date, no cultural or historic resources have been identified at Carlton Pond WPA or at Benton or Sandy Stream Units. Still, their locations may provide opportunities for future interpretation of Native American or early European settlement cultural history.

How the refuge will respond to cultural and historic resource concerns are noted in goals 4 through 6 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

9. *How will the refuge utilize partnerships with area agencies, businesses, and organizations to benefit resource conservation and visitation?*

Regardless of the alternative, the Service would not be able to accomplish all its desired management for the refuge and WPA alone. To achieve its management goals, the Service will need to rely heavily on partnerships with Tribal, State, and local agencies, and other organizations.

Members of Tribal and State agencies have offered suggestions for ways the Service can partner on its biological management and public use goals. Local municipalities and non-governmental

organizations have offered recommendations for ways partnerships can improve refuge visitation and public use offerings.

How the refuge will respond to potential partnerships is noted in goal 7 for each alternative discussed in chapter 3.

### **Issues and Concerns Outside the Scope of this Analysis**

The following issue was raised during public meetings. It is outside the jurisdiction and authority of the Service and will not be addressed further within the CCP.

- 1. Can the refuge harvest natural resources from refuge lands in order to fund refuge staff positions?*

Several comments were received during scoping inquiring into what opportunities might be available for resource harvesting on the refuge with the specific intention of using funds generated to support a refuge staff position. Resource harvesting is occasionally allowed in circumstances where it is deemed to be compatible with refuge goals and to fulfill wildlife habitat objectives. To date, no commercial resource harvesting has been allowed on the refuge.

According to Service policy, national wildlife refuges cannot use funds generated on the refuge for staff positions or other onsite improvements. Funds obtained from the sale or harvest of timber, peat, or other resources on a refuge are deposited into the national budget. They are then distributed as part of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Program, which distributes these funds to municipalities to offset losses in tax revenue from any tax-exempt Federal lands in their jurisdiction. Staffing levels at Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA are subject to approval of the Service's Northeast Region Assistant Regional Director of the Refuge System and are based on Federal budget allocations.

### **Plan Amendment and Revision**

Periodic review of the CCP will be required to ensure that objectives are being met and management actions are being implemented. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will be an important part of this process.

Monitoring results or new information may indicate the need to change our strategies. At a minimum, CCPs will be fully revised every 15 years. We will modify the CCP documents and associated management activities as needed and we will follow the procedures outlined in Service policy, the Refuge Improvement Act, and NEPA requirements, and other Federal mandates.