

Appendix F



Section of Ted's Trail
Lelaina Marin/USFWS

Summary of Public Comments and Service Responses

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Introduction

In March 2007, we completed the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (draft) for the Wapack National Wildlife Refuge (refuge). The draft proposes two alternative scenarios for managing the refuge over the next 15 years, and identifies alternative B as our “Service-preferred Alternative.” We published the draft for 37 days of public review from March 25, 2008, to May 1, 2008.

This appendix summarizes all written, verbal, or electronic correspondence we received during that public comment period and our responses to the comments that raised issues and concerns within the scope of this CCP. We have modified alternative B, which remains our Service-preferred alternative, to include some corrections and clarifications of our preferred management actions; however, none of those changes warrants publishing a revised or amended draft.

Our final CCP includes several changes of the draft:

1. We mention the annual Wapack Trail Race, and approve it as an allowed activity, with some stipulations. Appendix A, “Compatibility Determinations,” describes those in detail. Other jogging activities would not be allowed.
2. We clarify the role of the New Hampshire Fish and Game (NHFG) state conservation officer. That officer will assist primarily in search and rescue operations and enforcement against illegal hunting activities. We would not expect the officer to enforce specific refuge regulations that lack a complementary state regulation, such as the restrictions on dogs-on-leash only or on jogging.
3. We correct our misstatement that the Ted’s and Carolyn’s trails were not formally approved by the Service before 2007. We have since learned those trails were reviewed in the field and approved during the tenure of a previous refuge manager.

If our Regional Director affirms that the final CCP achieves the purposes for which the refuge was established, helps fulfill the mission of the Refuge System, and would not result in a significant impact on the human environment, he will issue a Finding of No Significant Impact and approve the final CCP. Once he has approved it, we will publish a notice of its availability in the “Federal Register,” and announce it in a newsletter and e-mail to the people on our project list. That will complete the planning phase of the CCP process, and we can begin the implementation phase.

Summary of Comments Received

During the comment period, we received both oral and written responses.

We received oral comments at our public meeting at Shieling State Forest in Peterborough, New Hampshire on April 17, 2008. We transcribed the comments of the 14 people who attended. We also received 11 hard-copy letters or electronic mailing (email) correspondences.

We received written or emailed comments from the following state and local governmental agencies, including the

New Hampshire Department of Fish and Game,
 New Hampshire Department of Resources and Economic Development, Division of Parks and Recreation,
 and
 Town of Temple, New Hampshire, Conservation Commission

We also received written or emailed comments from the

Friends of Wapack,
The Nature Conservancy,
Mountain View Hiking Association, and
Five individuals

In the following discussions, we summarize the substantive issues raised during the public comment period and our responses to them. In several instances, we refer to the draft, and indicate how the final CCP reflects our proposed changes.

You have several options to receive a copy of either the draft or final CCP. They are available online at <http://library.fws.gov/ccps/wapack/>. For a print copy or CD, contact the refuge headquarters.

Parker River National Wildlife Refuge
6 Plum Island Turnpike
Newburyport, MA 01950

Phone: 978/465-5753
Fax: 978/465-2807
Email: fw5rw_prnwr@fws.gov

Service Response to Comments by Subject

General Support for the Planning Process and our Preferred Alternative

Comment: Several people wrote us with compliments on our public involvement process and the proposed action. One said, “I would like to take this opportunity to say what a splendid job of planning has been done for the Wapack Refuge. I think you have struck an excellent balance between protecting wildlife and the environment and, and encouraging people to appreciate these things through reasonable usage.” The Town of Temple, New Hampshire, Conservation Commission wrote us in support of alternative B, the Service-preferred alternative, “Let us know if we can be of service in helping to carry out any aspects of the Conservation Plan.” Several others, including the Friends of Wapack (FOW), the Mountain View Hiking Club, New Hampshire State Parks, and The Nature Conservancy, also expressed support in working with us to implement the plan.

Response: We appreciate the compliments on our planning process, and are very pleased to hear people say they were glad to be involved and are looking forward to helping us implement the plan. We tried to engage everyone interested in or affected by the process, to the extent they wanted to be involved. We recognize that not everyone is entirely satisfied with our final decision; however, it is important to us that everyone had the opportunity to express their opinions. We look forward to implementing the plan with all those who expressed an interest in working with us.

Land Conservation

Comment: Several comments related to the importance of conserving land in the region, and recognized the refuge’s strategic location in ongoing efforts to develop land conservation corridors in the area. One said “Open space will eventually vanish if the public does not value it....” Some encouraged the Service to take an active role in those land protection partnerships.

Response: We are impressed by the many local and regional efforts aimed at conserving lands in this part of New Hampshire. We also recognize that the refuge is a critical link in two major land conservation projects: the Quabbin to Cardigan Conservation Collaborative, and the Temple to Crotched Community Conservation Corridor. In chapter 2 of the CCP, under “General Management Direction,” we mention our continued support for those efforts, but also state, “Despite our interest in seeing those lands conserved for wildlife, we are not proposing to acquire additional lands for the refuge at this time. Other Service land protection priorities will take precedence in the near future in the Northeast region.” However, we also mention that if conditions change and more land acquisition funding becomes available, we could evaluate additional lands with high wildlife or natural resource value.

Habitat Management

Comment: One person expressed concern about invasive plant and pest species and suggested a monitoring program. They recommended we seek the involvement of state and local conservation partners in that monitoring program.

Response: We are also very concerned about the potential for invasive plants or insect pest species to compromise the integrity of refuge habitats. Our final CCP includes the continued partnership with the Forest Service’s Forest Health Protection Program, who will complete a forest health assessment on the refuge. Its results will give us a better indication of the risk level. Our plan also includes the provision for intervention should a catastrophic risk to the refuge forest arise.

Comment: One person encouraged us to pursue biological inventories and surveys and research to the extent possible so we can improve our limited knowledge of refuge resources. They mentioned some of the partners that may be interested in assisting us, including the state’s Natural Heritage Bureau, NHFG, and the University of New Hampshire—Manchester. Another person suggested we check with the Town of Greenfield Conservation Commission, because they might have the results from a natural resource

inventory useful to the refuge. That person also supported additional research as long as “it is done safely and humanely” and provides baseline information.

Response: We welcome assistance in our biological inventory and monitoring program, since our staff and funding are limited. We hope our final CCP will serve as a basis for identifying those opportunities. As we develop our inventory and monitoring step-down plan, we will pursue the potential partnerships identified in the comments. Other suggestions should be shared with the refuge manager, who is stationed at the Parker River refuge. (See the contact information on the back cover of this plan.)

Public Use and Access

Comment: Opinions were mixed about whether to allow jogging. Some people see it as a minor activity with little to no impact. One person told us that they did not think the activity disturbed wildlife. One person mentioned that they did not think there were impacts at the current level of jogging. Others expressed concern that the presence of joggers detracts from their wildlife-observing experience, and they do not view it as an appropriate activity for a wildlife refuge where a single trail is the focal point for all visitor activities. One commenter described it this way, “it is a wildlife refuge, and it [jogging] would be disturbing to wildlife to condone people thundering through the trail. Further to the point, it doesn’t fit the deed restrictions and goal of the refuge.” The Town of Temple, New Hampshire, Conservation Commission wrote us in support of a restriction on jogging.

Response: We evaluated the range of opinions on jogging, and the refuge manager determined that jogging was not an appropriate use for this refuge. A finding of appropriateness in appendix A documents that decision.

Comment: We also got a mixed response when we asked for specific comment on a compatibility determination to allow the annual, one-day Wapack Trail Race. We heard from people who thought the race was a good opportunity to provide recognition of the refuge and the partnerships involved in maintaining a 21-mile trail. In addition, it was mentioned that some of the race receipts go to the FOW for trail maintenance. One person mentioned that several people train on the Wapack trail in preparation for the annual race and for other trail races. On the other hand, we heard from one person who stated, “I wish to go on record as saying that, in my opinion, road races of any kind should not be allowed in a NWR. I believe it is damaging to the trail and disturbing to wildlife.”

Response: We carefully evaluated the opinions we received on whether or not to allow the annual, one-day Wapack Trail Race on the refuge. We issued our final determination that the race was both appropriate and compatible, and we would allow it under a special use permit with certain stipulations. The compatibility determination in appendix A outlines those stipulations.

Comment: Opinions varied on whether to allow dogs on the refuge and, if so, whether to require leashes. With one exception, everyone we heard from supported a decision to allow dogs; but they did not agree on whether we should require dogs to be on leash. A couple people felt that was an unnecessary restriction. One person who walks more than one dog mentioned this requirement would totally hamper her ability to walk her dogs on the refuge, which has been her favorite place for years. The FOW stated they had not heard any reports or complaints from other trail hikers about dogs, and encouraged us not to make an overly restrictive decision, such as eliminating dogs. They encouraged us to think about our decision’s “implications on the balance” of the entire trail given the multiple ownerships along its length and the confusion that will result from inconsistent restrictions. The FOW and several other people did express support for the dogs on leash requirement specifically because it was consistent with policies on adjacent ownerships along the Wapack Trail, such as the Miller State Park and The Nature Conservancy preserve. Some who supported the dogs on leash policy also expressed the concern that people not picking up after their dogs was an issue that should be addressed. One person recommended we eliminate dog walking entirely because of its potential to affect wildlife.

Response: Where dogs are allowed on a national wildlife refuge, they are required to be on leash as stipulated in the Code of Federal Regulations (50 CFR Part 26–Section 26.21, and Part 28–Section 28.43). The only exception is hunting dogs during hunting season, and they must be under the command and control of their owner at all times. Since we do not allow hunting on this refuge, that exception is not an issue.

We believe responsible dog walking on leash, including the stipulation that all owners clean up after their dogs, does not detract from the refuge purpose or its management. The compatibility determination for dog walking in appendix A details our decision.

Comment: We heard from one individual concerned about the impacts of cross-country skiing on wintering deer. In their opinion, cross-country skiers disturb deer and other wildlife, especially during harsh winters, by making the animals “spend precious calories in unnecessary escapes. As for deer, cross country skiers make tracks that enable predators to access the deer.” That commenter suggests that, instead of eliminating cross-country skiing altogether, we monitor winter conditions and restrict access “during severe winters when conditions call for it.”

Response: We would be concerned about any refuge activity that adversely affects wintering deer populations, especially in an area the NHFG considers a deer winter yard. No yards are identified on the refuge. During severe winters, however, we will consult with the NHFG to determine whether there is an elevated likelihood that the level of cross-country skiing, combined with other winter activities, is expected to stress deer that are already compromised. We have full authority to curtail winter activities on the refuge if there is a concern. Fortunately, based on our limited winter reconnaissance and reports from FOW, use by cross-country skiers, in particular, is very low. Snow-shoeing is a more popular winter activity on the refuge.

Comment: The FOW noted they occasionally conduct “minimal and judicious trimming of trees as they have grown and block some especially picturesque views. The policy of the FOW is to minimize the trimming, to just allow a framed peek of the vista, and any significant cutting is always reviewed with the property ownership prior to approval.”

Response: All tree trimming, other than what is required for trail safety or tread maintenance, should be reviewed and pre-approved by the refuge manager.

Law Enforcement

Comment: One person suggested we increase our law enforcement capacity, and especially enforce illegal hunting activities to the full extent of the law.

Response: We agree that increased law enforcement capability is desirable, which is why we highlight in goal 3, objective 3a, the importance of our partnership with the NHFG state conservation officer. We also plan to increase our presence and outreach on the refuge in the hope that raising awareness of the refuge purpose, its management and regulations, will curtail illegal and restricted activities.

Refuge Facilities

Comment: The FOW expressed concern that “there is no distinct parking area to support this [trail] entry, so that cars park along the side impinging upon the travel way of the road. This has become a safety factor, especially in winter time with the snow banks and reduced road widths. The contour of the land at or near the base of the trail on the south side of the road is not conducive to establishing a parking area....” They advocate we seek to acquire a small parcel of land to facilitate trail access and improve safety. They mention, “Its usefulness will substantially increase as the ‘Crotched to Temple Conservation Corridor’ continues to develop, and the recreational opportunities in the vicinity are expanded.” The Town of Temple, New Hampshire, Conservation Commission also wrote us in support of constructing a small parking area.

Response: We fully agree that, for all the reasons mentioned, it is important to resolve the trailhead parking issue. We mention this under goal 2, objective 2b. Unfortunately, at this time we cannot make a specific proposal without further evaluations. We state in objective 2b that we will work with partners and adjacent landowners to evaluate and pursue viable options.

Comment: Several people supported an improved Wapack Trailhead sign and regular refuge boundary signs. However, others cautioned, about too much signage detracting from the rural, natural character of the area. They ask that the Service be judicious in erecting signs.

Response: We agree that it is important to maintain the rural character of the area and not contribute to “sign pollution.” At the same time, however, we have a responsibility to make our boundaries clear and recognizable. The NHFG has requested that we post boundary signs more regularly along the boundary so that both refuge visitors and adjacent land users know when they cross onto refuge lands. The NHFG also encourages more signage to enhance their capability in enforcing regulations.

Concerning the trailhead sign, we will work with the FOW to design an unobtrusive informational sign in keeping with the undeveloped character of the area.

Clarifications and Corrections

Comment: The NHFG recommended several corrections in our appendix C, “Species Lists,” and suggested we drop the modifier “lowland” from our discussion of the spruce-fir forest.

Response: We made those corrections in appendix C.

Comment: One reviewer noted several typos or suggested clarifications, primarily in our draft chapter 4, “Environmental Consequences.”

Response: We appreciate the thoroughness with which some reviewers evaluated the document. We incorporated all the typos and clarifications that were suggested and apply to this final CCP. However, those edits recommended for chapter 4 are not included, because the discussion of impacts is not part of the final CCP.