



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge *and* Oxford Slough Waterfowl Production Area Planning Update 2, November 2010



Hundreds of Sandhill cranes gather on Bear Lake Refuge in September / Wyman Meinzer, USFWS

Thank You for Participating!

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge and Oxford Slough Waterfowl Production Area (WPA). When the CCP is completed, it will guide management of the Refuge and WPA for 15 years.

As part of the CCP planning process, we have been seeking public input on management issues, concerns, and opportunities. In June 2010, we distributed approximately 200 copies of Planning Update 1 to the public, including interest groups, conservation and research organizations, local, state, and Federal government agencies, Tribes, and others who have expressed an interest in the

planning process. The update was also available on our Web sites and at the Refuge office.

In Planning Update 1 we described the CCP process, the purposes of the Refuge and WPA, the draft wildlife, habitat and public use goals, and the preliminary issues to be considered in the CCP/EA. Fifteen people submitted comments describing their concerns and providing suggestions for managing the Refuge.

In this second planning update we provide information on the status of the planning process, and summaries of the comments we received and primary management issues we will consider, as we develop draft management alternatives and refine goals and objectives.

We would like to thank everyone who has provided comments, and we invite you to continue to share your ideas with us. Your participation continues to be critical to the success of this planning effort.

*Annette deKnijf
Refuge Manager*

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What are your concerns for the Refuge?

As part of our CCP planning and public involvement process, we held a public comment period to invite comments on the scope of issues we should include in the CCP/EA. The public scoping period began on June 23, 2010, and ended on July 23, 2010.

During scoping, we held a public open house meeting on July 1, 2010, in Montpelier, Idaho. Refuge staff explained the CCP process at the meeting, and the Refuge's and WPA's purposes, vision, and management; and the preliminary management issues, concerns, and opportunities we identified early in the planning process. Staff also answered questions from the attendees and collected written comments on the issues and opportunities presented.

We received comments from individuals and organizations. Some comments were about broad or long-range issues, while others suggested

very specific or detailed strategies that could be used to achieve biological or public use objectives. Most of the comments provided suggestions for changing public use programs on the Refuge, such as:

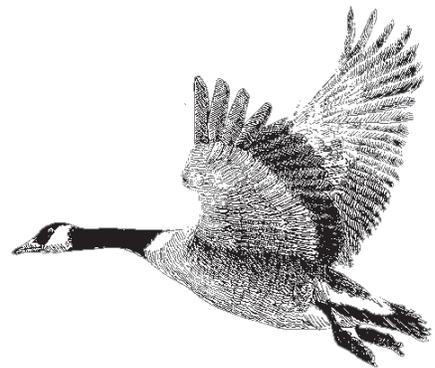
- Expanding the areas where wildlife observation and photography, waterfowl hunting, and hiking are allowed.
- Expanding interpretation and environmental education programs.
- Partnering with other agencies and organizations that have common goals for the Bear Lake and Bear River Ecosystem.

We also received suggestions related to wildlife and habitat, including improving wetland habitat quality, managing water levels, using livestock grazing, managing agriculture crops for waterfowl, improving or expanding waterfowl

habitat, and preparing for climate change. Concerns about water rights and water rights oversight were expressed as well.

We will examine all of these topics in the CCP. We are currently reviewing the comments as we develop preliminary management alternatives and develop draft goals, objectives, and strategies. Comments will also be helpful in developing strategies to meet the Refuge's biological and public use goals and objectives as the CCP process continues.

The CCP planning team reviewed and categorized the comments under four primary topics, which are described on the following pages. A detailed description of the comments we received during scoping is available in a Scoping Report on our Web site: <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/>.



The Refuge provides excellent habitat for Canada geese.

A small number of moose are present on the Refuge year-round / Ronald L. Bell, USFWS

Vision Statements

We drafted the following vision statements in an effort to describe and share with you the desired future conditions we would like to create at the Refuge and WPA. We pictured them teeming with wildlife in healthy native habitats, with high quality public use programs provided at the Refuge. We welcome your comments.

Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Nestled in the Bear Lake Valley of southeastern Idaho, Bear Lake Refuge continues to be a paradise for wildlife. Historically, native peoples, explorers, farmers, and ranchers were drawn to the valley's plentiful natural resources—wildlife, land, and water. Today and tomorrow, visitors and residents alike enjoy a beautiful landscape that supports the modern-day dichotomies of small towns and rugged wilderness, farm fields and natural meadows, diversion canals and marshes, livestock and wildlife.

The carefully managed, flowing waters of Bear River and Bear Lake are an integral part of this landscape, providing sustenance for humans and wildlife. Visitors to the Refuge can hear the laughter of coots, the trilling of marsh wrens, the soft wind through the grass, the splash of arriving ducks, and the crack of expanding ice that follows the exodus of geese.

Trumpeter swans escort their broods through the emerald-green marsh, while school children quietly observe mule deer, moose, badgers, beavers, trout, garter snakes, leopard frogs and other residents of the Bear Lake Refuge.

Thomas Fork Unit

The Thomas Fork Unit of Bear Lake Refuge is located in the bucolic Thomas Fork Valley at the border of Wyoming and Idaho. This lovely valley, bordered by the Preuss and Sublette Ranges, harkens back to the days of rugged pioneers traveling the Oregon Trail, attempting to ford the Thomas Fork Creek, and trading goods and services with American Indians. The Refuge's hay and willows, cranes and herons, chub, trout, and pronghorns, will ever share this diverse panorama with neighboring farms and ranches.

People who love the scenic beauty of the Thomas Fork Valley continue to work together to improve the quality of the creek and its surrounding lands. Healthy waters and lands will always be the backbone of sustainable agriculture and ranching as well as key for providing food and home for wildlife. As part of the larger Bear River Watershed, the vigor of the Thomas Fork Unit will remain integral to the overall quality of the landscape.

Oxford Slough Waterfowl Production Area

Oxford Slough Waterfowl Production Area is situated in a lush valley surrounded by the Caribou National Forest with the Oxford Peak and Bannock Range in the background. Oxford Creek is one of the many streams that flow into the valley to create the Oxford Slough, which acts as a natural catchment for runoff from the adjacent mountain ranges.

Oxford Slough will persist as a small but important part of the Bear River Watershed, providing water for wildlife and humans. Franklin's gulls, sage grouse, and coyotes continue to coexist in this peaceful valley drenched in morning mist. Ducks and white-faced ibis decorate the skies on their feeding flights between the marsh and wet meadows. Landowners and land managers continue to collaborate to provide optimal water quality and quantity, for the health and well-being of the valley's critters and people.



Trumpeter swan pair / Donna Dewhurst, USFWS

What are the key issues for the Refuge?

Issue 1. How will the Refuge manage public use opportunities while ensuring protection of fish, wildlife, and their habitats? Several comments on this issue were received. We organized them into three subcategories—Public Access and Wildlife Disturbance; Hunting and Fishing; and Environmental Education, Refuge Interpretation, and Wildlife Observation and Photography.

Public Access and Wildlife Disturbance.

We identified the following concerns and issues in public comments:

- The growing human population is exerting pressure on wildlife.
- Access to more areas of the Refuge should increase as long as wildlife are not affected.
- Public use and access to the Refuge is adequate, however, off-refuge opportunities could be increased.
- The Refuge should work with Bear Lake County to increase wildlife observation opportunities outside the south and east boundaries of the Refuge for pedestrians, bicyclists, and others.

Our Response. Given current trends, Refuge visitation will likely increase over the next 15 years. In the CCP,

we will balance the needs of wildlife with our legal mandate to provide wildlife-dependent public uses. We will consider any adverse impacts to wildlife and habitat when we are analyzing alternatives, and determining compatible uses. Key questions we will address include: Which areas of the Refuge should be open to public use and which areas should remain undisturbed sanctuary for wildlife? How much public use can the Refuge accommodate? How should Refuge usage be balanced between different user groups?

Hunting and Fishing. We received comments in favor of maintaining a high quality waterfowl hunt. Other hunting and fishing suggestions follow.

- Expand the hunt area into the Bloomington Unit.
- Control carp and hold a carp fishing tournament to reduce habitat and water quality impacts.
- Plant grain or corn to attract waterfowl.
- Allow boater access to the hunt area in September, prior to waterfowl season.

- Manipulate water levels to provide a quality waterfowl hunt.
- Eliminate all hunting and fishing.

Our Response. We will consider changing, expanding, and/or improving the waterfowl hunt program during alternatives development. The environmental effects, staffing, and funding required for each alternative will be analyzed in the alternatives. The Refuge currently provides limited fishing and bow-fishing opportunities. We will analyze the feasibility of expanding the Refuge's fishing opportunities in the Draft CCP/EA.

Environmental Education, Refuge Interpretation, and Wildlife Observation and Photography.

Commenters noted that certain bird species can be observed at the Refuge, that do not frequent other places in the Bear Lake Valley, and that the Refuge is a good destination for visitors. Other comments included: Information about the wildlife that use the Refuge is lacking; and more photography blinds and interpretation and recreational opportunities are needed.

The Refuge's cold winter weather forces most waterfowl, such as redhead ducks (right) to migrate south by late November; however, hooded mergansers (far right) can be spotted on the Refuge until Dingle Marsh freezes for the winter / Redhead duck, Donna Dewhurst, USFWS; Hooded merganser, Lee Karney, USFWS



Our Response. We will review all public uses for appropriateness and compatibility in the CCP/EA. We will consider expanding public programs on the Refuge by increasing the area or timing of each use. As with hunting, the environmental effects of each alternative, and staffing and funding needs will be analyzed.

Compatibility determinations for all public uses will be updated as part of the final CCP.

Issue 2. How will the Refuge manage habitats to ensure the conservation of focal resources?

Maintaining the quality of the Refuge's habitat for wildlife is a concern shared by some commenters. Other comments follow.

- The Refuge's deep water bulrush marsh habitats are rare and the habitat values for nesting birds, including trumpeter swans, waterfowl, and other migratory birds should be protected.
- Conduct marsh and upland burns, manage muskrats, and control noxious weeds to improve wildlife habitat.

- The Refuge should continue to farm and plant grain for waterfowl and cranes.
- The Refuge should utilize cattle grazing to improve habitat on the Thomas Fork Unit.

Our Response. Providing quality wildlife habitat (including water quality and quantity) is a priority during development of the CCP/EA, because it is the purpose of the Refuge, and part of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

We will explore the most appropriate strategies for providing forage for migratory waterfowl in the CCP. Raising crops and prescribed burning are some of the strategies we may consider in our alternatives.

Controlling invasive species has been and will continue to be a major management focus for the Refuge. Two of the key questions we will consider in our management alternatives are: Which areas will be prioritized for invasive species treatments? and Will the treatments involve eradication or suppression?

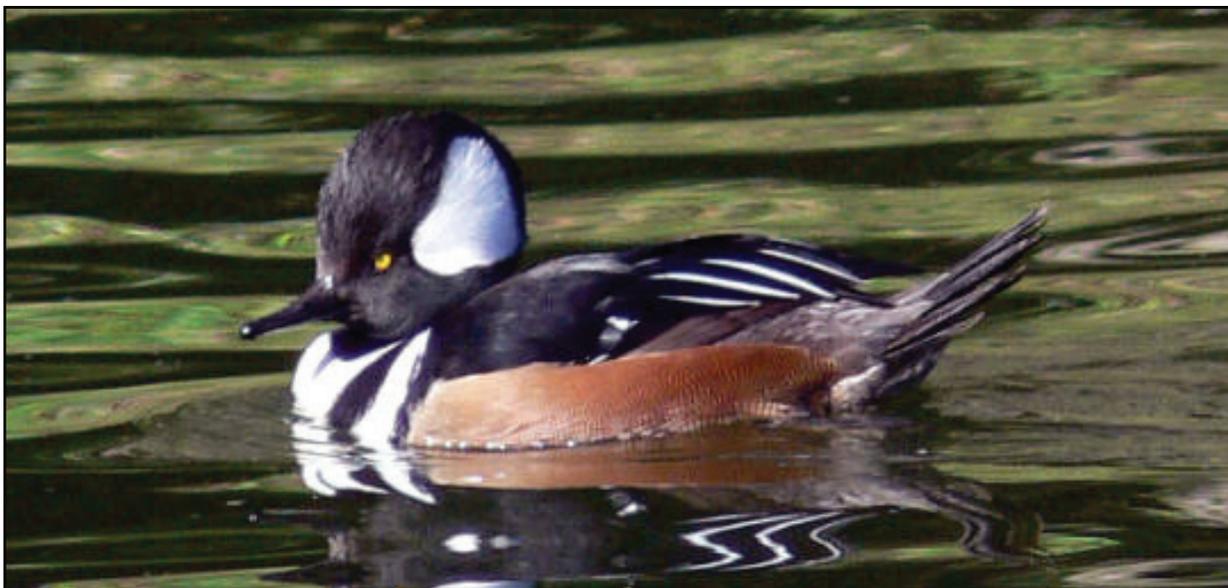
Issue 3: How will the Refuge manage water rights and infrastructure to best accomplish Refuge purposes?

We received recommendations to repair a water control levee, convert an area at the Thomas Fork Unit back to flood irrigation, and raise the levee below the center structure to create more favorable habitat.

Some respondents shared the opinion that the Refuge is not receiving its shares of water at the Oxford Slough WPA and that better oversight and management of water rights is needed. Several others commented on a need for improved water management at Bear Lake Refuge to provide high quality habitat for wildlife, control carp, and provide a quality waterfowl hunt.

Our Response. In the CCP, the Service will explore the most appropriate options for improving wildlife habitat and managing public use through water management. We will consider water management, water rights, and management infrastructure by alternative in the draft CCP/EA.

continued on next page . . .



Key issues continued . . .

Issue 4: What role will the Refuge play in managing natural resources at the landscape scale?

We received a number of comments emphasizing how important it is that we continue the practice of filtering water through the Refuge and into Bear Lake, and how the sediment and nutrient loads are affecting water quality. Holding a symposium of stakeholders in the Bear Lake watershed to address water quality and quantity issues was suggested. Other issues identified in public comments follow.

- Acquire key habitat for the Refuge through cooperative management or conservation easements.
- Influence land use practices in the upper Bear River watershed.
- Consider and analyze the impacts of climate change on the Refuge.
- Incorporate the role of climate change in shaping future conditions in the Refuge's vision statement.
- Include a plan to inventory and monitor climate change-related variables and trends in the CCP.
- Include climate change information in environmental education programs.
- Address ongoing environmental threats including the synergistic

effects of climate change and other stressors.

- Include an assessment of water resources.

Our Response. Providing high quality wildlife habitat, including water quantity and quality, will be a priority in the development of the CCP/EA. Additionally, we will examine function and processes at the Refuge and ecosystem levels, and how this information can be incorporated into management of the Refuge and WPA.

During development of the CCP/EA, we will assess the Refuge's acquisition boundary for potential land acquisition opportunities. We will also assess global climate change, its predicted affect on the species and ecosystems that depend on the Refuge and WPA, and how to incorporate this information into management of the Refuge.

General Comments. One respondent remarked on the need for financial sustainability during challenging budget years and suggested that we charge admission or undertake local fundraising to secure a more stable

budget. We also received requests to write in plain English, and prepare an Environmental Impact Statement to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Our Response. An analysis of the funding and staffing needed to implement each alternative will be prepared as part of the Draft CCP. While the Refuge is not currently operating under an approved fee plan, we will evaluate the feasibility and effects of implementing a fee program, in the CCP. Under a fee plan, Refuge entrance fees would go directly back to the Refuge for operating public use programs and improving public use facilities. We will make every effort to write in plain English.

We are developing a Draft CCP/EA, in compliance with NEPA, that will include our evaluation of a range of management alternatives and their effects on the human environment, to determine if we need to prepare an EIS.

An EA, as described in Section 1508.9 of the Council of Environmental Quality's NEPA regulations, is a concise public document that serves three defined functions, it:

- Briefly provides sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an EIS;
- Aids an agency's compliance with NEPA when no EIS is necessary, i.e., it helps to identify better alternatives and mitigation measures; and
- Facilitates preparation of an EIS when one is necessary (Section 1508.9(a)).

We anticipate that the Draft CCP/EA will be available for public comments in summer 2011.

Mule deer can be observed on the Refuge in the winter / Gary Zahm, USFWS



Issue Outside the Scope of the CCP. Under current management, domestic livestock grazing is not allowed and was deemed incompatible with the Bear Lake Refuge's purposes in 1995. Grazing appropriateness and compatibility will not be re-evaluated in the development of the CCP/EA as a future management strategy on the Refuge.



Bald eagles winter at the Refuge / Steve Hillebrand, USFWS

What's Next?

Currently, we are considering public comments as we draft preliminary alternatives.

In the next update, Planning Update 3, we will provide summaries of our preliminary alternatives for your review and comments.

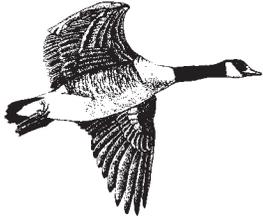
Planning Schedule

Planning Update 1	June 2010 completed
Public Open House.....	July 1, 2010 completed
Planning Update 2	November 2010 completed
Planning Update 3 (Preliminary Alternatives)....	Spring 2011
Public Review/Comment on Draft CCP/EA	Summer 2011
Final CCP	Fall 2012

(Schedule dates are tentative and subject to change as the planning process progresses.)



Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge
PO Box 9
Montpelier, ID 83254



In this issue:

Review summaries of the comments we received.

Visit our Web sites:

www.fws.gov/bearlake/

www.fws.gov/oxfordslough/

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How Do I Contact the Refuge?

To be included on the mailing list, provide comments, ask questions, or request information, please contact us as follows:

Mail:

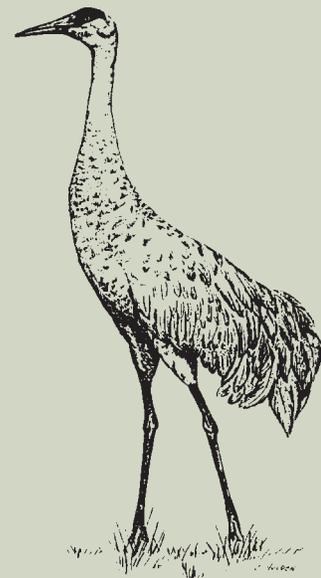
Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 9
Montpelier, Idaho 83254

Phone: (208) 847-1757

Fax: (208) 847-1319

Email: FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov
or annette_deknijf@fws.gov
(Please use "Bear Lake NWR CCP" in the subject line.)

Drop us a line, your comments are welcome any time.



Sandhill crane