



Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update 2, February 2013



Trumpeter swans

Donna Dewhurst/USFWS

Thank You for Participating!

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR or Refuge). This plan will guide management of the Refuge for the next 15 years. As part of this process, we have been seeking public input on management issues, concerns, and opportunities.

This planning update provides information on the status of the planning process and what we have heard from people so far.

In August 2012, the Service mailed copies of Planning Update #1 to those who had expressed an interest in the planning process. Update #1 described the CCP process, preliminary goals, and preliminary issues to be considered in the CCP. We also

requested your comments and insights about the Refuge.

This second planning update summarizes the comments received and lists primary management issues that will be used to refine goals and objectives and draft management alternatives. We would like to thank everyone who has provided comments and invite you to continue sharing your ideas with us. Your participation continues to be critical to the success of this planning effort.

*William Smith,
Refuge Manager,
Grays Lake NWR*



Red fox pup

Mike Baird/flickr
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In this

Update:

What Were Your Concerns?.....	Page 2
Key Issues	Page 2
Whom to Contact.....	Page 8
What's Next? Upcoming Meetings and Milestones ...	Page 8

What Were Your Concerns for the Refuge?

The initial public scoping period for preparation of a draft CCP and EIS for Grays Lake NWR opened on June 22, 2012, and ended on August 21, 2012. The Service held three CCP open house meetings: Soda Springs, Idaho, on August 14, 2012; Pocatello, Idaho, on August 15, 2012; and Idaho Falls, Idaho, on August 16, 2012.

At these meetings Refuge staff explained the CCP process; Refuge purposes, vision, and management; and preliminary management issues, concerns, and opportunities that had been

identified early in the planning process. They also answered questions from attendees and took written comments.

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. The CCP planning team reviewed and categorized the comments under the major planning issues described in this update. For those who would like to see a detailed description of comments received during scoping,

we have posted a Scoping Report on the Refuge website at <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/main/docs/ID/docsgrayslake.htm>

Most issues will be considered in detail in the CCP. We are currently using your comments to develop preliminary management alternatives and develop draft goals and objectives. Many of your 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.

What are the Key Issues for the Refuge?

Refuge Establishment

Comments: The CCP needs to discuss the history of Refuge establishment and the ensuing conflicts with management and lake bed ownership disputes.

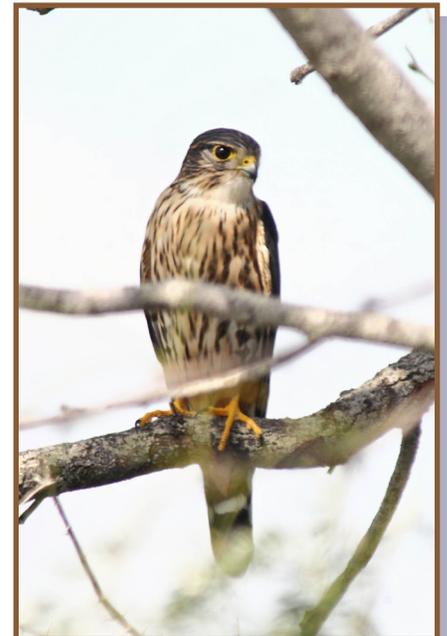
Response: The CCP/EIS will thoroughly describe the circumstance under which Grays Lake NWR was established. We will diligently document issues affiliated with land ownership below the Grays Lake Meander Line and the associated conflict among private landowners, the Service, the State of Idaho, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)/Shoshone-Bannock Tribe.

The CCP/EIS will further document that the 2011 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administrative determination concluded the lakebed was a non-navigable waterway. Since

Grays Lake is non-navigable, the land is not reserved to the State of Idaho under the equal footing doctrine, and the lakebed is owned proportionately by the upland owners, as an incident of their riparian rights.

The Service expects that the acquisition of lakebed lands from willing sellers will be a strategy consistent among all alternatives considered in the CCP/EIS.

Beyond the scope of the CCP: The CCP/EIS will document private landowners' beliefs that damage has occurred to their property. However, a determination of whether a claim against the Government may be allowed is the responsibility of the Office of the Solicitor and will not be addressed in this document.



Merlin

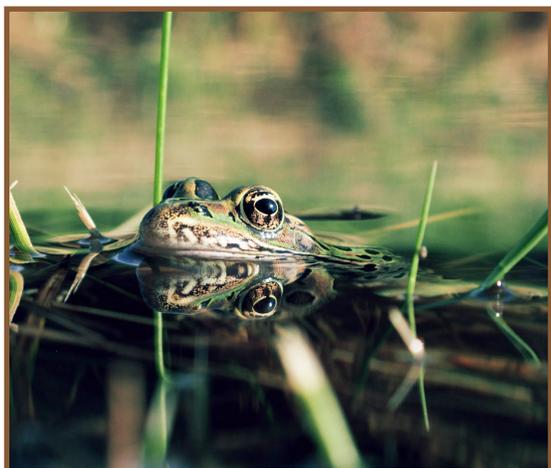
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Refuge Purposes, Vision, and Alternatives

Refuge Purposes

Comments: Concern was expressed over the method the Service used to establish the purposes for Grays Lake NWR. Since Grays Lake was established by agreements with local landowners and BIA, some feel that the Refuge should re-examine Refuge purposes to ensure the fulfillment of promises made to local landowners in the 1960s and 1970s regarding cattle grazing.

Response: Beyond the scope of the CCP: By law, refuges are to be managed to achieve their purposes. The purposes of a refuge are specified in or derived from the law, proclamation, executive order, agreement, public land order, donation document, or administrative memorandum establishing, authorizing, or expanding a refuge, refuge unit, or refuge subunit. When a conflict exists between the Refuge System mission and the purpose of an individual refuge, the refuge purpose may supersede the Refuge System mission. While we recognize the concerns about Grays Lake NWR's purposes,



Northern leopard frog

revising the purposes is outside the scope of the CCP.

Refuge Vision

Comments: BIA and the Service have conflicting visions for Grays Lake. It is crucial that the CCP highlight the original intent of the 3-way cooperation between the Service, BIA, and abutting landowners to improve habitat for wildlife, water management, and provide lands for grazing and haying. The Refuge vision should support healthy wildlife habitats, while providing viable ranching operations.

Response: A unique opportunity exists within this CCP/EIS to incorporate a vision statement that describes the enduring qualities to be passed on to future generations. We will work with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, BIA, and Grays Lake residents to craft a collective vision for the conservation of natural resources and wildlife within the Grays Lake Valley.



American avocet with chick

Ingridtaylor/flickr
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Management Alternatives

Comments: The Service must ensure that it is managing the area to conserve and enhance biodiversity and should aim to restore Grays Lake NWR to its original biological functions and natural flow regimes to the extent possible.

Until the Department of the Interior acquires lakebed lands from private landowners, the Refuge cannot draft a CCP for the core marsh within the lakebed.

Response: The CCP/EIS alternatives will consist of different sets of objectives and strategies for management of the Refuge. The CCP/EIS will discuss actions or alternatives raised during scoping, including increasing and enhancing biodiversity, and the restoration of natural hydrology. Issues that are outside the scope of the document, do not meet the purpose and need, or would violate a law, policy, or regulation will be listed but not further evaluated in the CCP/EIS.

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continued on page 4

Water Management

Divergent Interpretations on Grays Lake's Natural Hydrology

Comments: Some felt the Grays Lake marsh was naturally drier than it is now and the Refuge makes too much of the drawdown schedule as being un-natural. While flow of water has been altered from the north to the south, the drawdown schedule still essentially mimics the depth and duration of water that would have occurred in the natural marsh.

Conversely, others felt that the marsh is now much drier in the summer than it would be naturally due to the BIA water withdrawal into the Fort Hall Irrigation Project.

Manage Water Levels to Increase Natural Processes and Hydrology

Comments: Water is essential to the Refuge and must be the

central theme for the CCP/EIS. How can the Service maintain wildlife on a National Wildlife Refuge without a more favorable water management agreement?

Restoring natural flow regimes, water elevations, and natural biological functions to the Refuge is in the best conservation interest of wildlife. The EIS should analyze the impacts of water withdrawal on wetlands and wildlife and identify improved water management regimes to fulfill the Refuge mission.

Response: The highest priority within this CCP/EIS will be the consideration of water for improving wildlife habitat. However, the Refuge readily acknowledges that management of Tribal water rights for Grays Lake water is the purview of BIA and

the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes and that the primary use of this water is for the benefit of agricultural production in the Fort Hall Irrigation Project.

We believe that water level management in the Grays Lake basin is the primary factor affecting nesting and foraging habitat for many Refuge wildlife species. The Refuge expects to assess and fully document the effects of both the natural and altered hydrology of Grays Lake within the CCP/EIS. Subsequently, we will present an array of objectives and strategies to BIA and Shoshone-Bannock Tribe with the hopes of developing a mutually beneficial water drawdown schedule that satisfies the needs of irrigators, ranchers, and wildlife.



Willet

Mike Baird/flickr
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Snowshoe hare

DenaliNPS



Redhead male and female

USFWS

Wildlife Management

Refuge Wildlife Populations are in Dramatic Decline

Comments: Crane, goose, duck, and muskrat numbers are much lower than the 1980s. Others commented that there were more nesting cranes and geese on Grays Lake in the 1970s.

Some Species Deserve Special Refuge Management Attention

Comments: Managing habitat for Sandhill cranes would also benefit a wide variety of species. Rebuilding a viable swan nesting flock at Grays Lake should be a high priority. Yellowstone cutthroat trout and eagles are “species of special concern”

warranting special protections. Rebuilding a thriving muskrat population is ecologically significant.

Implementing Policy-Based Planning Approaches for Wildlife

Comments: Providing “a diversity of habitats” is insufficient for Grays Lake’s

unique species-specific needs. The Service should review several regional plans, including the Idaho Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, to determine which, if any, of the 229 “species of greatest conservation need” inhabit the Refuge and how the Service can manage to protect these species.

Response: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has adopted Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC) as the model for setting and achieving conservation objectives at multiple scales. Because it is impractical and inefficient to conserve landscapes by considering requirements for

all species present, selecting a subset of focal species to serve as surrogates for a broader array of biological outcomes is a practical first step and helps fulfill an important step in the biological planning component of SHC.

The CCP/EIS will assess local and regional population trends of wildlife, use focal species as surrogates to identify where on the landscape-scale or Refuge-scale to target conservation efforts, the types of actions to take, and how much effort is needed.



Snowy egret

USFWS

Habitat Management

Varied Opinions on the Compatibility and Management of Livestock Grazing

Comments: Livestock grazing only benefits a few select species and these benefits are outweighed by the impacts grazing imposes on most other wildlife (e.g., ground nesting birds and wetlands). The Service should use its authority to curtail all uses of Refuge lands that are not compatible with conservation goals for biodiversity.

Rest-rotation grazing regimes currently utilized by the Refuge were ineffective for livestock operations and wildlife; grazing should be managed continually on Refuge units to assure predictable short-cover areas for wildlife and the most palatable and nutritional forage for livestock. There is no value to Refuge wildlife by rotationally idling lands or not grazing some units at all.

Response: Grazing has been a contentious issue at Grays Lake NWR. From 1997-2000,

a 4-year U.S. Geologic Survey study was conducted to assess grazing, haying, prescribed fire, and idle management practices on the Refuge. The CCP/EIS will fully incorporate the research findings from 1997-2000 and address the appropriateness and compatibility of grazing at Grays Lake NWR. This will provide the most appropriate management techniques for the Refuge’s wet meadow and upland habitats to maximize habitat values for key wildlife species (e.g., Sandhill cranes, Canada geese) while assuring other native wildlife cover and forage requirements are still satisfied.

Comments: Drainages adjacent to the Refuge have been severely damaged by water delivery methods, but the Service could achieve one of the largest wetland/riparian improvement efforts in the Intermountain West by restoring hydrology at Grays Lake. Grazing is known to have significant adverse impacts on

wetlands and riparian areas and the restoration of these degraded areas is of utmost importance

Response: The CCP/EIS will address the issues associated with providing habitat to support a diversity of wildlife. We will examine alternatives that restore native habitats where good opportunities exist. The Refuge will concurrently assess the benefits of maintaining and increasing non-native wildlife habitats in comparison to the benefits of restoration. Cost effectiveness will be included in our analysis of all management alternatives.

Managing the Effects to Habitat from BIA Water Management

Comments: Varied opinions were received on utilizing “passive” natural processes or “active” physical management and manipulation to attain wetland habitat objectives. Some remarked

continued on page 6

Habitat Management *continued*

that Refuge habitat issues would be best addressed through excavation or prescribed burning in bulrush habitats. Others commented that a reliance on physical management had more negative than positive effects and detracted from restoration of natural system processes.

Response: The Refuge will evaluate multiple options in the CCP/EIS to provide more productive wetland habitats within the Grays Lake marsh. Options may include natural-process-oriented approaches for returning Grays Lake, to the maximum extent practicable, to the ecological condition that existed prior to the loss or degradation. Additionally the Refuge will assess the practicality of rehabilitating one or more of the original Refuge habitat functions through active manipulation of the physical environment.

Agricultural Crop Management

Comments: Comments on the role of agricultural crops on the Refuge varied from suggesting dramatic increases in crops grown for wildlife to eliminating all farming practices.

Response: In the CCP/EIS, the Service will explore the most appropriate strategies for providing food for migratory waterfowl. Farming is one of the strategies that the Refuge may use to meet its goals and objectives, and will be considered during development of management alternatives.

Increase Water Resource Management

Comments: The Service should increase the Refuge's ability to properly manage Refuge riparian water rights and ensure protection of the water quality needed to meet the purposes of the Refuge.

Response: The CCP/EIS will address the issue of riparian water rights management and Refuge water quality. We will develop and evaluate alternatives and strategies and describe the best application of water infrastructure to manage Refuge water rights consistent with Idaho water law.

Improve Invasive Species Management Capability

Comments: The greatest threat to biodiversity is the spread of noxious weeds. The Refuge does

a poor job controlling invasive species and that Canada thistle is increasing rapidly.

Response: The CCP/EIS will address invasive species issues in detail. The control of invasive species has been, and will continue to be, a major management priority for the Refuge.

Increase Inventory and Monitoring Efforts

Comments: The CCP should identify and describe specific indicators of climate change and foster monitoring strategies to inform management actions through the principles of adaptive management. It takes significant resources to manage grazing on an NWR and the Service needs to ensure that range conditions are monitored accordingly.

Response: Inventorying and Monitoring (I&M) are vital elements of Grays Lake NWR efforts to support science-based conservation planning and management. An I&M Plan will be developed and included in the Grays Lake NWR CCP that specifies objectives and identifies the staffing and funding needed to establish an effective I&M program on the Refuge.

Collaboration and Economics

Viable Wildlife and Economy

Comments: The CCP should embrace the cooperative conservation approach the Refuge was founded upon to solicit collaborative partnerships and foster an approach to enhance the whole community and its residents—not just wildlife.

Response: Ensuring effective conservation of the diverse fish, wildlife, and plant resources for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans is a complex and daunting task. The Refuge System must



Tiger salamander

USFWS

Collaboration and Economics *continued*

look beyond its boundaries and work with a variety of partners to achieve broad conservation goals beyond individual refuges. A landscape-level approach to resource concerns, using a foundation of science-based management, will be assessed in the Grays Lake CCP/EIS as the Refuge explores ways to work with other agencies and private partners to manage resources of concern on a landscape level.

Land Conservation and Refuge Acquisition Strategies

Comments: Lands adjacent to the Refuge are threatened with development.

The CCP should prioritize areas within the Refuge authorized boundaries that are currently unprotected, as well as a plan for future acquisitions and potential boundary expansions. The Service should work to acquire Tribal water rights and rights to surrounding land that would further the conservation mission of the Refuge.

Response: Through the CCP process the Service will prioritize lands within the current approved Refuge boundary that are of potential acquisition interest. Lands



Muskrat

USFWS

identified will be those that have the highest potential to increase habitat values of the Refuge. Land or water rights purchases will be from willing sellers only.

Public Use and Recreation

Wildlife Viewing, Photography, and Environmental Education

Comments: Grays Lake NWR has little public access in comparison to other NWRs.

Response: The CCP will balance the needs of wildlife with our legal mandate to provide compatible wildlife-dependent public uses. Adverse impacts to wildlife and habitats will be considered when analyzing the environmental

impacts of each alternative, as well as in compatibility determinations which will be updated as part of the final CCP. Increasing public awareness and appreciation of the Grays Lake NWR will be a priority in the CCP/EIS.

Hunting

Comments: The principles of wildlife management should not be compromised for hunting opportunities. Conversely, others thought hunting increases the health of wildlife populations and decreases crop depredation and would encourage hunters to volunteer at the Refuge. Special hunt permits

could be offered to people who volunteer.

Response: Hunting will be considered in detail in the CCP/EIS. Expanding or contracting the hunting program on the Refuge by increasing or changing location of huntable areas will be considered in development of Refuge management alternatives. This will include an analysis of the effects of hunting on wildlife and non-consumptive users, while considering the staffing and funding required to implement each alternative.

Beyond the scope of the CCP: While the Refuge will continue to encourage and promote volunteer efforts within the CCP, the Refuge will not grant special access for those who participate in Refuge volunteer efforts.



Sandhill crane and colts

© Joe Zinn



Southeast Idaho National Wildlife Refuge Complex
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 Chubbuck, ID 83202

Comments or Suggestions? Contact Us

Address comments, questions, and requests for further information to:

William Smith, Refuge Manager
 Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge
 74 Grays Lake Road
 Wayan, ID 83285

Or email your comments to:

FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov
 or william_smith@fws.gov

(Please place “Grays Lake NWR CCP” in the subject line.)

What’s Next? Upcoming Meetings and Milestones

Planning Update #3 (Preliminary Alternatives).....Spring 2013
 Public Review/Comment on Draft CCP/EA.....Spring 2014
 Final CCP/EISSummer 2014

