



Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update 1, July 2012



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Sandhill cranes and geese

Comprehensive Conservation Planning Begins at Grays Lake National Wildlife System

Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR/Refuge) is initiating a planning process to develop a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that will guide how the Refuge is managed over the next 15 years. This is the first in a series of planning updates we will distribute to keep you informed and invite your participation in the planning process.

As we work through this two-year CCP process, we have

the opportunity to look at the Refuge’s management from fresh perspectives. The purpose of the Refuge will remain the same as when it was established—primarily to provide habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds.

Through the planning process, however, we will review and refine our management (e.g., fire, grazing, crops, invasive species control) within wetlands, meadows, agricultural lands, and riparian areas, and each of our public

use programs, including wildlife observation and photography, hunting, environmental education, and interpretation.

Your insights and observations are needed to provide us with a more complete and thoughtful process. We invite you to share your ideas with us by attending public meetings in Soda Springs, ID (August 14, 2012), Pocatello, ID (August 15, 2012), or Idaho Falls, ID (August 16, 2012). You may also submit written comments (for contact information, see page 8). Your thoughts are important to the success of this effort!

Bill Smith, Refuge Manager

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Refuge Overview

Grays Lake NWR is located in Southeast Idaho, 30 miles north of Soda Springs, Idaho. The Refuge lies within and adjacent to Grays Lake, which is not actually a lake, but a high elevation, 22,000-acre bulrush marsh. Grays Lake NWR is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to protect the historic Grays Lake marsh and provide nesting and feeding habitat for migrating waterfowl.

Ranches were established at Grays Lake as homesteads during the late 1800s. In 1908, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) acquired private water rights and withdrawals of land in the Grays Lake basin for the

Shoshone-Bannock Tribal use in the Fort Hall Irrigation Project. In 1965, Grays Lake NWR was established as a 22,000-acre refuge authorized by two agreements: the *Memorandum of Understanding* between the Service and BIA, and the *Refuge Use and Cooperative Use Agreement of 1965* with 22 private landowners who owned over 30 tracts surrounding the Grays Lake lakebed.

In 1972, the Refuge boundary was expanded to 32,800 acres to include meadow and upland habitats outside the original overlay Refuge boundary. To date, the Service has acquired approximately 5,000 acres in fee-title lands within this expanded boundary.

Hydrologic modification to Grays Lake began when Clark's Cut was completed to drain the basin to the south in 1924 and the natural north outlet was blocked by a water control structure. The current water drawdown schedule, based on the 1965 agreement among the Service, BIA, and owners of riparian lands, requires rapid drawdown of water from above 6387.4 feet before May 10, to 6386.0 feet by June 24 each year. This annual spring drainage and drawdown removes all but 0.5 feet of water and compels this water level to be maintained through the summer and early fall. The unnatural drainage of the lakebed causes this large montane wetland basin to go dry in many years.

You Are Invited to Our Public Meetings

We'd love to see you at our upcoming public open houses and meetings. It's our chance to hear your thoughts about management of the Refuge for the next 15 years.

Persons with disabilities needing reasonable accommodations to participate in the public meetings are invited to contact Angela Butsch at 1-888-812-5759 (voice) or 503-231-6263 (TTY), or angela_butsch@fws.gov. Reasonable accommodation requests should be received at least 3 business days prior to the meeting to help ensure availability; 2 weeks notice is requested for ASL/ESL interpreter needs.

Soda Springs

Date: **August 14, 2012**
 Time: 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
 Location: Soda Springs Senior Center
 60 S Main, Soda Springs, ID 83276

Pocatello

Date: **August 15, 2012**
 Time: 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
 Location: Wood River Dining Room
 Second Floor, 797 East Humbolt Street, Building 14, Pocatello, ID 83209

Idaho Falls

Date: **August 16, 2012**
 Time: 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
 Location: Hotel on the Falls
 Sawtooth Room, 475 River Parkway, Idaho Falls, ID 83402



Avocet

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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Bonneville and Caribou Counties, Idaho

Land Ownership

R 42 E R 43 E

R 43 E R 44 E

111°30'0"W

111°22'30"W

43°7'30"N

43°7'30"N

T 3 S

T 3 S

T 4 S

T 4 S

T 4 S

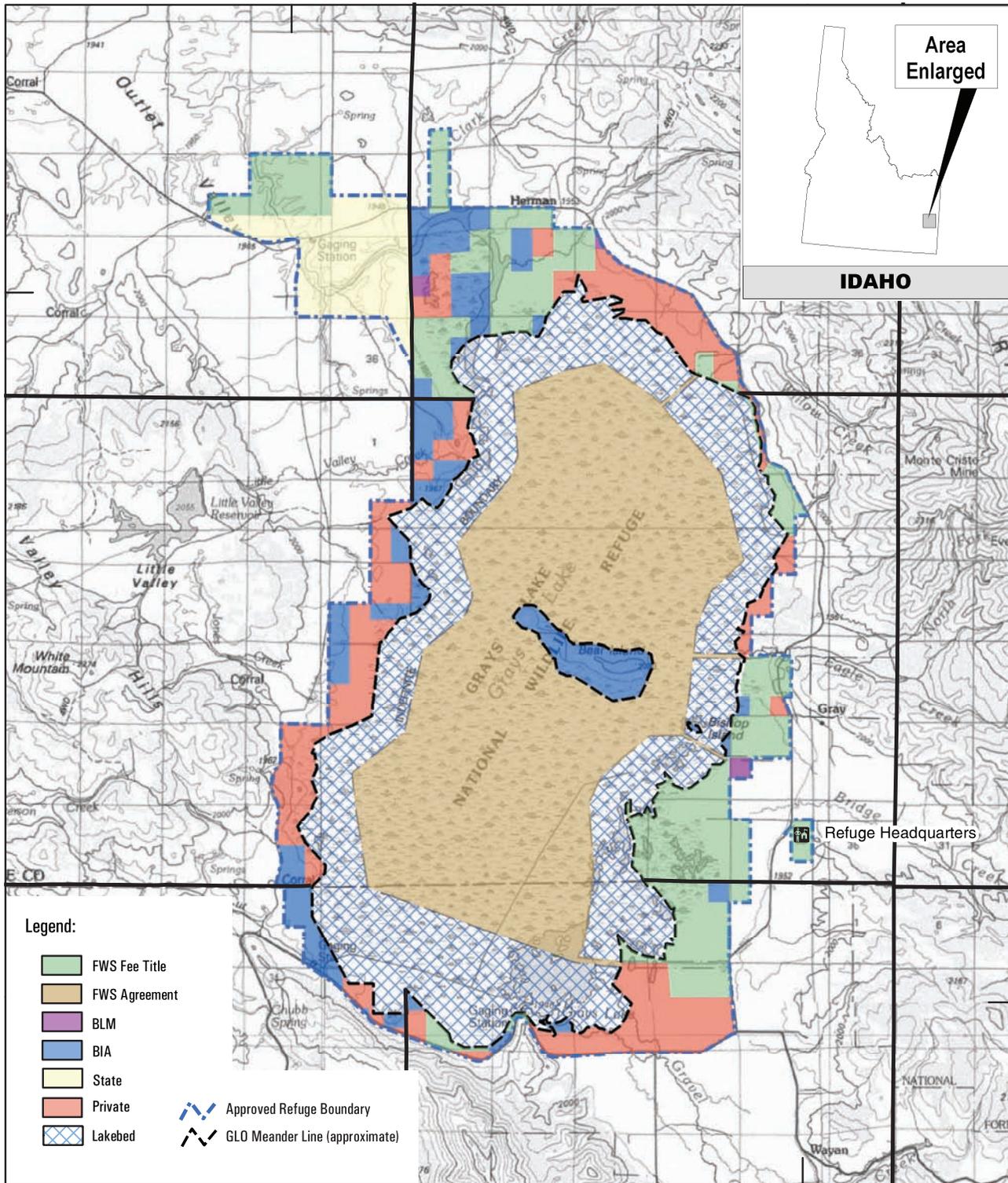
T 4 S

T 5 S

T 5 S

43°0'0"N

43°0'0"N



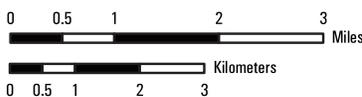
Legend:

- FWS Fee Title
- FWS Agreement
- BLM
- BIA
- State
- Private
- Approved Refuge Boundary
- GLO Meander Line (approximate)
- Lakebed

PRODUCED IN THE DIVISION OF REFUGE REALTY
 PORTLAND, OREGON
 LAND STATUS CURRENT TO: 2/4/04
 MAP DATE: 4/1/04
 BASEMAP: DRG 100K
 MERIDIAN: BOISE
 FILE: MUNO21.MXD

R 42 E R 43 E

R 43 E R 44 E



UTM ZONE 12
NAD 83

Preliminary Goals

Goals are broad statements intended to provide direction for future management of the Refuge. They are based on Refuge purposes, the mission and policies of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), input received through this planning process, and key issues identified as most significant to the Refuge. The planning team has developed the following preliminary goals for the Refuge and would like your input on them.

Preliminary Wildlife and Habitat Goals

Goal 1: Maintain and protect the existing integrity of functional native habitat and restore the natural range of variability and resiliency of degraded habitats.

Goal 2: Provide high quality forage and cover habitat to increase fitness (e.g., physical condition, survival, reproduction) of migratory birds.

Goal 3: Provide a supplemental on-Refuge forage base for carbohydrate and protein requirements of migratory waterfowl and landbirds within

the Pacific and Rocky Mountain migratory corridors.

Goal 4: Collect, synthesize, and manage science-based information to guide the management of Grays Lake NWR and the NWRS at multiple geographic scales.

Goal 5: Increase public understanding and appreciation of wildlife and build support for Grays Lake NWR by providing opportunities for all visitors to participate in safe, quality, wildlife-dependent recreation and education programs, while minimizing wildlife disturbance or other impacts to wildlife populations or habitats.

Management Issues, Challenges, and Opportunities

As part of the CCP process, a range of possible alternative management approaches will be explored and evaluated, including current management practices. The effects of the various alternatives on the biological resources and local communities

will be evaluated in an EIS that is prepared concurrently with the CCP, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. The planning team has identified some potential issues to be considered. We encourage you to provide us with written

comments on these issues and other concerns and to meet us at our public open houses. If you are not able to attend the meetings, please submit your written comments (see page 8 for contact information.)



Cranes in flight

Habitat Management

At Grays Lake, water levels are the overriding factor affecting most habitat management strategies for nesting birds and wildlife, particularly water birds and muskrats. Current lakebed vegetation (bulrush, cattail, and robust sedge) is very dense and has limited open water as a result of unnatural water level manipulations and reduced muskrat populations. Most species that utilize the emergent marsh would benefit greatly from any effort to increase the interspersion of open water within the dense marsh vegetation.

Riparian habitats comprise a small but important component of Refuge ecosystems. Native fishes historically present within Refuge waters include Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Since these creeks do not originate on Refuge lands, and significant portions of the watersheds lie outside the Refuge, upstream activities have major impacts on Refuge water quality and quantity.

Widespread population and habitat declines have been projected for numerous sagebrush-

associated species. A growing sense of urgency over the outlook for sagebrush-dependent wildlife has spawned sagebrush planning and restoration efforts within Idaho. Grays Lake Refuge supports distinct communities of silver, three-tip, and mountain big sagebrush communities.

Short-cover areas at Grays Lake NWR provide valuable foraging habitat for key bird species, such as cranes, geese, and curlews. With the introduction of tall, non-native pasture grasses, active Refuge management (e.g., grazing, haying, mowing) is undertaken to provide short-cover habitat to support focal Refuge bird populations.

Questions to Consider

- *What are the best means to attain productive marsh habitats for Refuge wildlife, while assuring*

Tribal water rights are preserved in perpetuity?

- *How can the Service protect and improve the quantity and quality of Refuge water for fish and wildlife resources?*
- *What can the Service do to prevent the introduction and dispersal of invasive plants and animals and facilitate their removal from the Refuge?*
- *What should the Refuge's role be in supporting native fish and riparian habitat restoration?*
- *How can the Refuge assist in minimizing sandhill crane conflicts with small grain farms?*
- *What are the most appropriate management techniques (e.g., fire, livestock, hay, idle) for the Refuge's wet meadow and upland habitats to maximize habitat values for key short-cover wildlife*

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White-faced ibis mid-flight

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Habitat Management

Continued from page 5

species (e.g., sandhill cranes, Canada geese), while assuring other native wildlife cover and forage requirements are still satisfied?

- How should the Refuge best address nest predation on Refuge lands?*
- How can the Refuge best contribute to conserving rural character and open space in the Grays Lake basin?*
- How can the Refuge resolve longstanding issues associated with the ownership of the Grays Lake lakebed?*

• Should the Refuge attempt cooperative and joint watershed management strategies for resource management within Grays Lake?

- How can the Refuge engage or adaptively manage in response to predicted and unpredicted challenges faced by climate change?*
- How can the Refuge inventory and monitor biotic and abiotic resources to improve understanding and better manage the Refuge?*

• Given limited budgets and manpower, how can the Refuge most appropriately assess the efficacy of management actions at the appropriate scale?

- How can the Refuge best participate in large-scale land protection and help to prioritize adjoining lands that are most critical for protection of Refuge water quality and quantity, have the highest quality habitat, and provide the best opportunities for habitat restoration?*



Franklin gulls in flight

Public Use of the Refuge

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (as amended) identified six priority refuge uses: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. These uses receive enhanced consideration in planning and management over all other general public uses on refuges.

When compatible, these wildlife-dependent recreational uses are to be strongly encouraged. These uses, as well as other current or proposed uses, receive an extensive compatibility review in the CCP before being allowed. Under Service compatibility policy (603FW2), refuges with limited staffing and funding are required to make efforts to obtain additional resources or outside assistance to provide wildlife-dependent recreational uses, and to document those efforts before determining that any of these uses are not compatible.

Grays Lake NWR must manage an ever-increasing request for visitation and demand for visitor services programs with a very small staff. Currently, the visitor services and public hunting program at Grays Lake NWR is mostly “self-serve,” with informational kiosks and interpretive displays. To date, the visitor services emphasis is placed on maintaining visitor and hunter facilities, welcoming and orienting visitors, answering information requests, and law enforcement

patrols during the waterfowl hunting season.

Questions to Consider

- *Should existing public uses be continued, reduced, or eliminated?*
- *Should Grays Lake NWR improve and expand its Refuge visitor services program?*
- *What actions should be taken to minimize wildlife disturbance from public visitation and recreation?*



Elk cow and calves

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Planning Schedule

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

Planning Update 1.....	July 2012
Public Open Houses	August 2012
Planning Update 2 (Public Scoping Report).....	September 2012
Planning Update 3 (Preliminary Alternatives).....	February 2013
Public Review/Comment on Draft CCP/EIS	August 2013
Final EIS/CCP	December 2013
Record of Decision	February 2014



Southeast Idaho National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge
74 Grays Lake Road
Wayan, ID 83285

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How Do I Contact the Service or Provide Comments?

As we plan for the future, we need to hear from you. We're interested in your thoughts on the preliminary Refuge goals and issues described in this planning update, or others that you think the CCP should address. Please write to us at:

Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge
74 Grays Lake Road
Wayan, Idaho 83285

Or email your comments to:
FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov
or william_smith@fws.gov
(Please place "Grays Lake NWR CCP" in the subject line.)