



Minidoka National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update 2, May 2012



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Bald eagle pair

Thank You for Participating!

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Minidoka National Wildlife Refuge (NWR/Refuge). This plan will guide the 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 October 2011, the Service mailed Planning Update #1, along

with a comment form, to local conservation and interest groups; research organizations; local, State, and Federal government agencies; Tribes; and other members of the public who have expressed an interest in the planning process. The planning update was also posted on the Refuge website and was available at the Refuge office and at public meetings.

Update #1 described the CCP process; Refuge purposes; draft wildlife, habitat, and public use goals; and preliminary issues to be considered in the CCP. One hundred and forty-nine people or

organizations submitted comments describing their concerns and providing suggestions for managing the Refuge.

This second planning update categorizes 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 we invite you to continue sharing your ideas with us. Your participation continues to be critical to the success of this planning effort.

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Draft Vision Statement

Minidoka NWR

Over 100 years ago, the lake and wetlands produced by Minidoka Dam created an oasis for waterbirds in Idaho's arid Snake River Plain. President Theodore Roosevelt's vision to preserve and enhance special places led to the creation of Minidoka National Wildlife Refuge. Here, ducks, geese, and grebes gather during

molting season; colonial waterbirds raise their young; and untold numbers of migrating birds stop to rest. Upland species such as sage and sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer, elk, and antelope also thrive. The Refuge provides opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to connect with nature, and pass

on outdoor traditions to future generations. We will honor and build upon President Roosevelt's vision and work with partners to ensure that the Refuge continues to be an oasis for wildlife for another 100 years.

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President Theodore Roosevelt



Birders enjoy the Refuge



American white pelicans

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What Were Your Concerns for the Refuge?

The initial public scoping period for preparation of a draft CCP/EA for Minidoka NWR began in October 2011 and ended on January 31, 2012. Two public meetings were held: the first in Pocatello, Idaho, on October 25, 2011, and the second in Burley, Idaho, on October 26, 2011. 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. Those citizens who attended the meetings provided comments on issues and opportunities associated with management of Minidoka NWR.

A total of 149 comments were received during initial scoping. Comment forms were returned by mail or hand delivered to the Refuge; responses also came in by email and by phone. Three State of Idaho agencies responded: the Department of Fish and Game (IDFG), Department of Parks and Recreation, and Water Resource Board. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provided comments, as did the offices of Senator Mike Crapo and State Senator Dean Cameron. We also received responses from local community agencies.

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/docsminidoka.htm>.

Issues Summarized

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. Many comments came from people who visit the Refuge to boat and fish, or as visitors to Lake Walcott State Park. Some opposed closing Lake Walcott to boating. Others suggested changes to public use programs on the Refuge, for example, expanding the areas open for boating,

Concerns for the Refuge...continued from page 2

extending boating seasons, and allowing greater public access to the Refuge. Additional comments addressed the desire for increased hunting opportunities, larger hunting areas, and improved accessibility for disabled hunters. There were also comments regarding the condition of Refuge roads, from opening new or previously closed roads to improving the quality of existing access roads.

Comments were also received on topics related to wildlife and habitat, including reducing American white pelican and carp numbers, and working closely with the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) to manage water levels for benefits to migratory birds. Comments also addressed the need to protect river shorelines and riparian habitat by eliminating access by cattle that graze on adjacent State and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. Other comments addressed such issues as invasive species control and improving and increasing waterfowl habitat.

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?

Public Access and Boating

Nearly 80 percent of the overall comments received were about boating, fishing, or overall access to Lake Walcott. The majority of the comments simply stated, “Don’t Close Lake Walcott to Boating.” Some commenters requested that more of Lake Walcott be opened to boating, that watercraft have unimpeded access to the entire lake, or that

limited access (e.g., during bass tournaments) be allowed in currently “closed to boating” areas. Others (primarily anglers) felt that the current open and closed areas of the lake provided a good balance between recreation and wildlife sanctuary and should be changed little, if at all. Some respondents were not in favor of expanding public recreation at Minidoka because they felt this would detract from the peaceful and uncrowded experience they currently enjoy. Several comments requested boating seasons be extended beyond the current September 30th end date, extending until first ice. Comments were also received regarding moving current buoy lines, allowing fishing boats only, not allowing personal watercraft, creating “No Wake” zones, and providing more float tubing in areas of low current.

Some commenters felt that managers of Minidoka NWR have decreased access in the last several years, making it difficult to get to favorite fishing holes and previously available points. Suggestions were made to re-open closed roads and improve existing roads.

Consumptive Uses (Hunting and Fishing)

As mentioned above, many of the comments received involved boating; however, many people who commented on boating also commented on fishing. Many anglers encouraged the Refuge to retain the current “closed to boating” areas, and were not in favor of opening significantly larger areas to boating traffic, fearing it would have a negative impact on the

Refuge’s smallmouth bass fishery. Several individuals suggested slight adjustments of existing buoy lines. Additional comments included allowing fishing boats with trolling motors into closed areas during fishing tournaments, opening boat fishing access from Minidoka Dam upstream to Gifford Springs, planting more fish, and allowing ATV access for ice fishing. IDFG also suggested the Refuge consider redefining watercraft allowed into areas closed to boating, suggesting they be open to “all non-motorized water craft,” not just float tubes.

Commenters suggested additional areas be created for waterfowl and upland game hunting and allowing big game hunting. The possibility of opening up a limited black powder season was mentioned. The Refuge was encouraged to provide greater accessibility and opportunities for disabled hunters, and to expand and modernize accessible hunting facilities and better mark open and closed areas. Concerns were expressed that habitat quality in the hunt area had deteriorated, making the area difficult to hunt.

Non-Consumptive Uses (Environmental Education, Interpretation, Wildlife Observation, and Photography)

We received comments citing the value, uniqueness, and



Smallmouth bass

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importance of quality wildlife viewing opportunities offered at Minidoka NWR—that Minidoka NWR provides a place to get away from the crowds where one can watch wildlife while fishing from shore.

Other respondents described bringing family and friends to the Refuge to birdwatch and hike the shorelines. A number of individuals told of growing up in the area, bringing their children and grandchildren to the Refuge to not only fish and boat, but also to teach them about wildlife.

Key issues to be addressed in the

CCP: *The CCP will address the needs of wildlife (the purposes for which the Refuge was established) and our legal mandate to provide compatible wildlife-dependent public uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation). All public use activities will be evaluated for appropriateness and compatibility. Changes may be proposed to the timing, location, and manner of public uses if it is determined that without these changes, the uses would be incompatible with Refuge purposes. The fundamental questions are: Which areas of the Refuge should be open to public use and which areas should remain undisturbed sanctuary? How much use can the Refuge accommodate while meeting needs of focal wildlife species? How and when should Refuge usage be managed between different user groups?*

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

Migratory Birds

Several respondents, including IDFG, cited the importance of the Refuge in providing stopover habitat for migrating birds. Comments stressed the need for protection of nesting habitat. Some commenters questioned the protection of American white pelican nesting areas, saying that they had unacceptable impacts on fisheries. Removal of nesting habitat as a means to lower pelican numbers was suggested. The Refuge was reminded of the need to work with BOR officials to fluctuate water levels to create mudflats for migrating wading birds.

Invasive Species

Comments were received encouraging the Refuge to continue its fight against invasive species. It was stated that habitat quality in the hunt area was degraded due to invasive species, making the area difficult to hunt and more prone to wildfire.

Livestock Trespass

Respondents expressed concerns about the negative impacts to shoreline habitats caused by trespass of cattle from adjacent State and Federal lands. They suggested the Refuge explore opportunities to eliminate the impacts of grazing that currently take place on nearby lands.

Key issues to be addressed in the CCP: *Providing quality wildlife habitat for a variety of migratory birds will be a priority in the development of the CCP/EA, as the purpose of the Refuge is as a preserve and breeding grounds for native birds. The control of invasive species has been, and will continue to be, a major*

management focus for the Refuge. One of the central questions that will be considered in developing management alternatives is which areas will be prioritized for treatments and whether those treatments will involve eradication or suppression. Cattle trespass and its impacts will be analyzed in detail in the CCP.

Issue 3: How will the Refuge manage habitat and public uses, given changes to BOR's reservoir management?

In 2010, BOR issued a final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision for replacement of the spillway and headgate structures at Minidoka Dam. With the spillway replacement, BOR would be able to hold consistent water levels in Lake Walcott year round. Several commenters were concerned that this could have undesirable impacts to habitat for fall-migrating waterfowl and shorebirds and public uses (e.g., ice fishing).

Key issues to be addressed in the CCP: *BOR manages Lake Walcott for irrigation purposes. The Service has no control over water management of the lake, but would consult with BOR on manipulating water levels, where feasible and consistent with management for irrigation purposes, to facilitate migratory bird feeding. Alternatives for habitat management and public uses in the CCP will take changes in reservoir management into consideration. Issues that will be addressed in the CCP include how can we work within BOR's new water management framework to provide quality habitat for*

Concerns for the Refuge...continued from page 4

waterbirds and improve riparian habitat? How should we manage boat and ice fishing access under BOR's new water management framework?

Issue 4: What role will the Refuge play in management of resources at the landscape scale?

Climate Change

The EPA made extensive comments on climate change, including the following:

- The CCP must consider and analyze the impacts of climate change.
- The Refuge Vision Statement should incorporate the role of climate change in shaping future conditions.
- The CCP should outline a plan to inventory and monitor climate change-related variables and trends.
- The CCP should include climate change information in environmental education programs.
- The CCP should address ongoing environmental threats, including the synergistic effects of climate change and other stressors.

Refuge Expansion

A few comments were received encouraging the Refuge to explore the possibility of acquiring adjacent lands, and expanding the Refuge boundary if possible.

Work with Partners

The EPA commented that the Refuge should work closely with BLM on surrounding lands and with their land management plans for the benefit of both wildlife and water resources.

Key issues to be addressed in the CCP: *Through the CCP process, the Service will assess what is known about global climate change and how it affects the species and ecosystems that depend on the Refuge, as well as which issues can be further studied at the Refuge and ecosystem level, and how this information can be incorporated into Refuge management. The Service will also identify lands that are of potential acquisition interest. Lands identified will be those that have the highest potential to add to the habitat values of the Refuge, or that simplify the Refuge boundary to improve management efficiency. Options include exchange of land and water rights with the State, private landowners, or the BLM; withdrawal from BLM; or purchase from willing sellers.*

In all management alternatives, the Service will work with State and Federal partners to manage adjacent lands for the benefit of fish and wildlife.

All of these issues and any others identified will be considered in detail in the CCP. We are considering your comments as we develop preliminary management alternatives and to develop draft goals and objectives. Your input will also be helpful in developing strategies to meet the Refuge's biological and public use goals and objectives as the CCP process continues.



Canvasback hen

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Issues Outside the Scope of the CCP

Commenters suggested the spraying of mosquitos within Lake Walcott State Park (Park). Several commenters made a correlation between fees paid to enter the Park, or register boats, and the use of Lake Walcott. Although Lake Walcott State Park is located within the boundaries of the Refuge, it is managed and run by the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation (IDPR) under a management agreement between the Service, BOR, and IDPR. The Refuge does not charge fees for entrance to, or use of, the Refuge, nor does it receive funds from Park entrance fees or boat registrations. These are fees charged by the State of Idaho. Therefore, these comments will not be addressed in the CCP. However, we intend to update the management agreement between the Service, BOR, and the State regarding the management of Lake Walcott State Park.

The Refuge received comments regarding the use of water and water rights outside the scope of recreation. Commenters were concerned about surface water rights and the use of water for irrigation purposes. They encouraged the Refuge to work with local irrigation districts to establish an injection well on the Refuge to aid in recharging the local aquifer. Due to the specific nature of these requests, this issue is outside the scope of the CCP, and will be addressed separately.



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Comments or Suggestions? Contact Us

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

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 Rupert, Idaho 83350

Visit us online at
www.fws.gov/minidoka

or our Complex website at
www.fws.gov/grayslake/seidaho/index.html

-or our Complex Office-

Southeast Idaho
 National Wildlife Refuge Complex
 4425 Burley Drive, Suite A
 Chubbuck, ID 83202

Email your comments to:
FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov or
jeffrey_krueger@fws.gov
 (Please place “Minidoka NWR CCP” in
 the subject line.)

What’s Next? Upcoming Milestones

Planning Update 3/Alternatives..... Fall 2012
 Public Review/Comment on draft CCP/EA...Winter/Spring 2012-13
 Final CCP Spring 2013