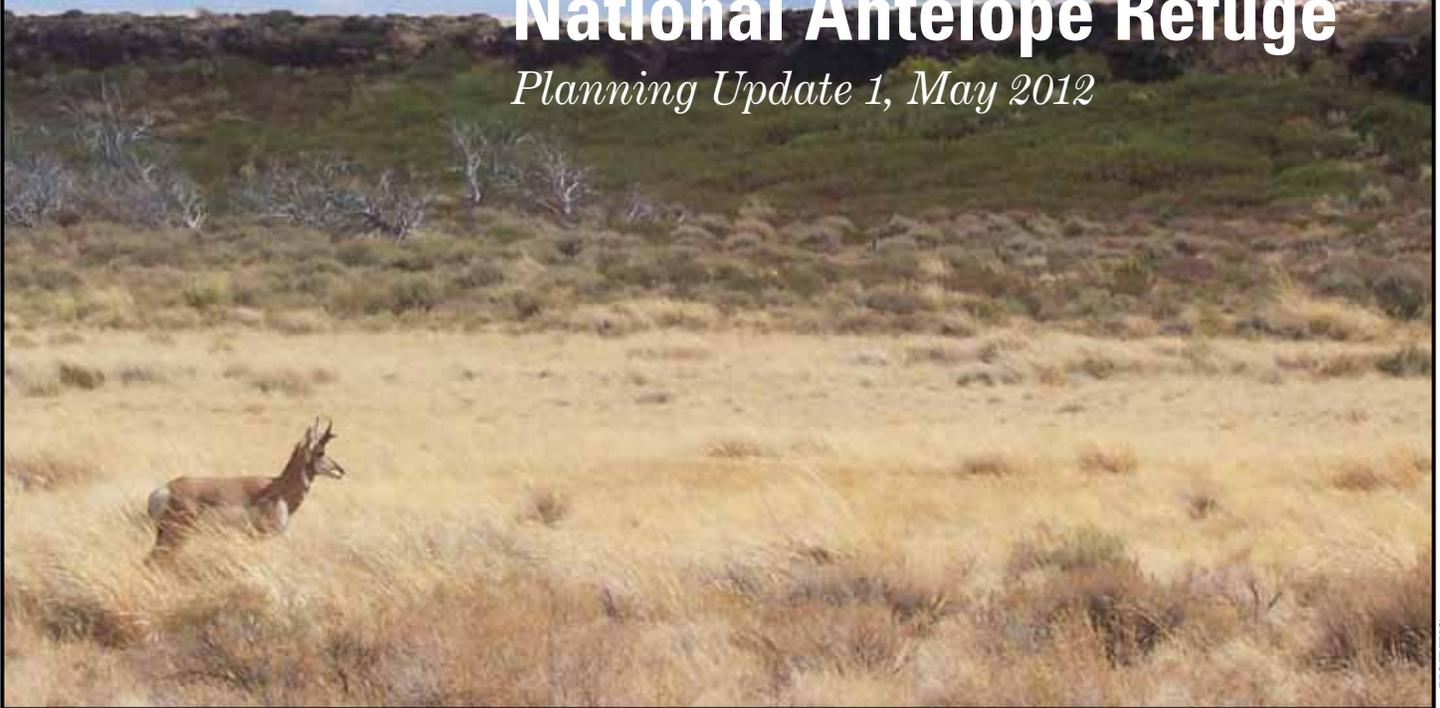




U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge

Planning Update 1, May 2012



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Pronghorn on Refuge habitat

Greetings

Over the next few years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will be seeking input from the public, Tribes, and organizations regarding your interests, concerns, and viewpoints about management issues for Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge (NAR or Refuge). The information we receive from you will be helpful during the revision of our comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) that was published in 1994. We are beginning a new planning process. This is the first in a series of planning updates we will provide to keep you informed and invite your participation in the planning process.

Help Us Plan for the Future

As we begin this planning process, we are provided the opportunity to look at our habitat management and public use programs from fresh perspectives.

Refuge purposes will remain the same. The way we manage and implement actions, however, may change as a result of analyzing current management programs and practices, along with potential new alternatives to meet Refuge purposes and the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) mission and goals. We view the CCP process as an opportunity to examine our public programs, such as

hunting, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education; our facilities, such as trails, campgrounds, and signs; and our management of habitats, such as sagebrush steppe, meadows, and seasonal shallow playas. Public input and feedback is an important part of our process and will result in a better plan for Hart Mountain NAR.

Please provide your ideas, questions, and comments on the issues we should cover in the CCP. See below for public meeting information and the back page for ways to contact the Refuge.

Please share your ideas with us at our upcoming public open house meetings. The first is scheduled for May 31, 2012, in Lakeview, Oregon; the second is June 4, 2012, in Plush, Oregon. See pages 7 and 8 for more details and for ways to contact the refuge or submit written comments.

About the Refuge

Located in the high sagebrush desert of south central Oregon, Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge (NAR) was established in 1936 as a national wildlife refuge to protect and conserve the American pronghorn antelope. Pronghorn were saved from extinction through the establishment of Hart Mountain NAR and other national wildlife refuges (like its companion Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in Nevada), and through a concerted effort by other federal agencies, state governments, and organizations such as the Boone and Crockett Club and Audubon.

The Refuge encompasses just over 270,000 acres. The massive

fault block ridge known as Hart Mountain ascends abruptly almost three-quarters of a mile above the Warner Valley Wetlands. It extends along nearly the entire western edge of the Refuge in a series of rugged cliffs, steep slopes, and knife-like ridges. The eastern slope descends gradually in a series of hills and a broad gentle plain.

Refuge habitats primarily include various sagebrush uplands interspersed with meadows, seasonal shallow playas, and pothole lakes. Aspen line the few perennial streams, and western juniper cover steep canyon slopes along the mountain escarpment.

The Refuge provides important but seasonal habitat for its signature species—the American pronghorn antelope—and also for mule deer, bighorn sheep, and a wide variety of raptors and smaller migratory birds. The Refuge also provides habitat for year-round resident wildlife which includes a wide variety of sagebrush steppe mammals, amphibians, fish, invertebrates, and birds, and provides some of the most intact and important remaining habitat for the imperiled greater sage-grouse.

What is a Comprehensive Conservation Plan?

When Congress amended the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (Refuge Administration Act) in 1997, it incorporated an underlying philosophy that “wildlife comes first” on Refuges. The Refuge Administration Act provides the Service with guidance for managing refuges to ensure the long-term conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats.

It also established six priority public uses on national wildlife refuges (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and environmental education) and strengthened the compatibility determination process for assuring that these and other activities do not conflict with refuge management purposes.

The Refuge Administration Act requires all lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) to be managed in accordance with a CCP. The CCP for Hart Mountain NAR will outline refuge goals, objectives, and management strategies for achieving the purposes for which the Refuge was established. Most importantly, a CCP ensures that the management of each refuge reflects the purposes of that refuge and the mission, policies, and goals of the Refuge System. The planning process is also an opportunity to strengthen current partnerships and forge new ones.

Hart Mountain NAR’s CCP planning process includes an Environmental Impact Statement pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which will evaluate management alternatives.

In general, the CCP will:

- Ensure that the purposes for which the Refuge was established and the mission of the Refuge System area being fulfilled
- Ensure national policy direction is integrated with Refuge management direction
- Provide opportunity for public participation in developing management guidance
- Provide a step-by-step process for making and recording Refuge decisions
- Establish a broad management direction for Refuge programs and activities
- Provide a way to evaluate accomplishments over time

Refuge Purposes

The purposes for which Hart Mountain NAR was established and shall be managed include:

“... as a range and breeding ground for antelope and other species of wildlife ...”

“... for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.”

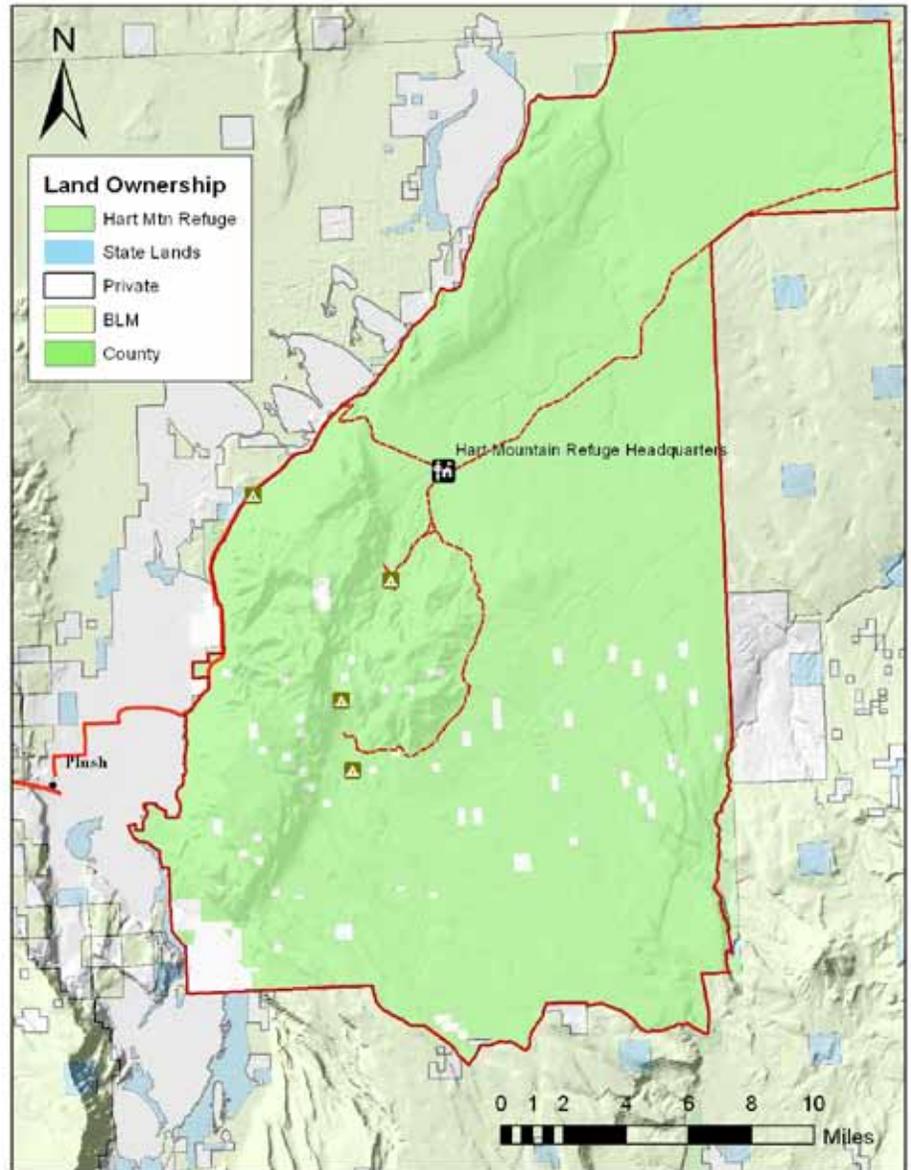
“... for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources ...”

“... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services”

“... suitable for— (1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species ...”

Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge

Lake County, Oregon



Bird watchers look for new spring arrivals in the Warner Valley wetlands

Why Revise the Plan?

The Service is required to prepare and periodically review Comprehensive Conservation Plans for each refuge. The original plan for the Hart Mountain Refuge was completed in 1994, and over time we have completed some actions, and not begun others. Meanwhile, changes have continued to occur.

Results from inventories, research, and monitoring over the past 18 years have improved our knowledge and understanding of the relationships between wildlife and their habitats as well as the influence of landscape-scale influences such as climate change, wildfire, and human development. These data have changed how we view management and will better inform our decisions and future direction. In addition we have recently completed a similar plan for the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge and we feel now is an appropriate time to incorporate new information, evaluate our progress, and where appropriate, maintain consistency in our management direction for the Sheldon-Hart Mountain Refuge Complex.



Healthy aspen line waterways

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Noxious weeds like Canada thistle can quickly take over areas

© USFWS

What Long-Term Direction Did the 1994 Plan Provide and How Successful Were We in Implementing the Direction?

The 1994 conservation plan set overall guidance for meeting requirements of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act and for fulfilling the purposes of the Hart Mountain NAR. Specifically, the 1994 Plan provided direction for the following:

Habitat Improvement: We set specific targets for the predominant habitats across the Refuge to be achieved primarily with wild and prescribed fire.

How did we do?—We used fire to meet objectives for more than 27,000 acres of habitat to benefit grassland species; cut and removed encroaching western juniper to meet objectives for more than 600 acres of sagebrush species; and met objectives on several thousand additional acres through wildfire suppression and removal of livestock grazing. Overall, we met nearly all targets set in the 1994 plan.

Noxious Weeds: We targeted weeds such as white top, Canada thistle, and Mediterranean sage for control using a variety of tools and techniques.

How did we do?—We controlled weeds at a number of locations across the Refuge, primarily through protection of habitats from wildfire, but also through

site-specific use of herbicides. Noxious weeds are still abundant on areas surrounding the Refuge and weed invasion, especially from cheat grass, remains a serious threat.

Feral Animals: We made removal of all feral horses from the Refuge a management priority.

How did we do?—We successfully removed all cattle and feral horses and from Hart Mountain NAR and have replaced or constructed several miles of fence along the Refuge boundary to prevent livestock and horses from entering the Refuge. With assistance from the Bureau of Land Management, wild horses that enter the Refuge from adjacent Herd Management Areas are periodically removed.

Campgrounds: We identified the size, location, and appropriate development for campgrounds necessary to support compatible wildlife-dependent public uses on the Refuge.

How did we do?—With support from volunteers and partners, we completed construction of a new campground at Camp Hart Mountain, and improved the Hot Springs and Post Meadow campgrounds. Relocating camping away from Guano Creek was not implemented.

Roads: We identified new locations or closure for certain roads to eliminate impacts to sensitive riparian areas and stream habitats or to better manage traffic and congestion.

How did we do?—Our road maintenance has focused on upgrading and maintaining the two primary roads in the Refuge (Frenchglen and Blue Sky roads). We have not begun work to relocate roads and impacts continue to occur.

Wilderness: We identified three areas for additional study as potential Wilderness Study Areas.

How did we do?—We have managed the three areas to maintain or improve their wilderness character. We will identify Wilderness Study Areas suitable for recommendation as Wilderness in the CCP.



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Using prescribed fire to benefit species

What Will Not Be Addressed in the CCP?

Hunting and fishing season dates and harvest limits: For hunting and fishing seasons within Hart Mountain NAR, we strive to maintain consistency with Oregon State regulations. We will continue to work cooperatively with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to assess wildlife populations and make recommendations to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission for adjustments as necessary.

Livestock grazing: Our decision in 1994 to end livestock grazing within Hart Mountain NAR was controversial, but necessary. As intended, we re-evaluated this decision several years after implementation and have concluded that habitats within the Refuge continue to recover from past grazing practices. They can be better managed to meet habitat objectives using less intensive and more natural methods, such as prescribed fire. Therefore, we have determined livestock grazing does

not contribute to the purposes for Hart Mountain NAR and is not an appropriate Refuge use.

Public Vehicle Access: The 1994 plan designated roads to support wildlife-dependent public uses which are compatible with the purposes and management goals for Hart Mountain NAR. With the exception of areas added to the Refuge following the 1994 decision, no changes have occurred which would require this decision to be re-evaluated.

What Are the Key Topics for Hart Mountain NAR?

Even with all the progress we have made over the past 18 years, we foresee several topics that still need to be addressed, and a few which did not exist before. We have included a short description of these preliminary issues and want to hear from you about them and other topics important to you.

Wildlife Management: Our objectives from the 1994 plan have mostly been met and we consider current habitat conditions to be more natural and to better meet the ecological needs of fish, wildlife, and plants. But fish and wildlife need more than Hart Mountain NAR alone can provide. Pronghorn and mule deer, for example, migrate off the Refuge each year to their winter habitats, and sage-grouse seasonally depend upon habitats outside the Refuge.

The Service continues to acquire inholdings from willing sellers, but what actions should we pursue

to proactively coordinate with the State, private landowners, and other partners to improve long-term conservation of important migration routes and necessary winter habitats—especially on lands not managed by the Service?

Invasive and Noxious Weeds: With help from partners and volunteers, we have made great strides in containing and controlling infestations of noxious weeds, but seeds and plant parts continue to be carried onto the Refuge through a variety of avenues, such as visitors, pack stock, dogs, equipment, wildlife, and even the wind. What additional steps should we consider for not only control of weeds, but also prevention?

Mule Deer and Bighorn Sheep Hunting: Some hunters continue to express dissatisfaction with the numbers and size of mule deer and bighorn sheep available for hunting on Hart Mountain

NAR. Opportunities are tightly regulated, and people often must apply for years before finally getting a permit to hunt on the Refuge. Both the Service and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife strive to maintain high quality hunting opportunities consistent with other management goals for Hart Mountain NAR.

Our goal is to maintain healthy populations of both big-game and predators. What steps can the Service take to improve the knowledge and understanding about wildlife ecology on Hart Mountain NAR and confirm our assumptions about changes in big game population?

How should we define “quality hunting”? What actions are needed to provide those opportunities and what monitoring should we implement to measure improvement in hunter satisfaction?

Key Topics for Hart Mountain NAR...continued from page 6



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Bighorn sheep hunters

Additional Hunting

Opportunities: We allow hunting as a secondary public use through specific pronghorn, mule deer, bighorn sheep, and chukar hunting seasons. Information suggests current wildlife populations and visitor facilities could support additional hunting opportunities for wildlife such as California quail and waterfowl.

If there are sufficient population data, should the Service expand hunting opportunities on Hart Mountain NAR?

Road Access: Certain

roads, specifically the Guano Creek, Barnhardy, Warner Pond, and Petroglyph Lake roads, were identified as causing erosion and impacts to riparian and stream habitats—even when only used seasonally. Through the 1994 plan the Service decided these roads (or portions of them) should be closed to vehicle use.

These actions have not been implemented, in large part due to the lack of sufficient funding, staff, and equipment to re-route certain roads, and we do not expect this situation to change within the next 15 years. Since the 1994 plan was completed, other lands with existing routes have been added to the Refuge.

What options for public access should we consider for these popular areas which would still provide protection for streams and riparian areas?

Other Topics and Issues? Are there other important topics, ideas, or issues related to management of Hart Mountain NAR we missed? If so, let us know by submitting your comments (refer to the back page of this update for comment information).

What is the Next Step?

Our process for planning the Hart Mountain NAR Comprehensive Conservation Plan includes a number of steps designed to meet not only our commitment to public involvement in developing refuge comprehensive plans, but also requirements of NEPA. At each step in the process, public participation and involvement is key to crafting a plan with clear direction, that is easily understood, and can realistically be implemented.

The first step in this process is identifying key issues. We identify these key issues based

upon your input and feedback on this newsletter and at public workshops.

Once key issues are identified; we will develop alternative approaches for addressing those issues. We will summarize these preliminary alternatives in future planning updates for additional input and feedback, followed by a full set of draft alternatives presented through a Draft CCP and Environmental Impact Statement. We anticipate completing our Draft CCP in 2013, and we will seek additional public comment. We plan to publish our final CCP in 2014.

Public Workshops

Lakeview, Oregon
May 31, 2012, 6:00 p.m.
Daly Middle School
220 South H Street

Plush, Oregon
June 4, 2012, 6:00 p.m.
Plush Elementary School



Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge
Sheldon-Hart Mountain
National Wildlife Refuge Complex
P.O. Box 111
Lakeview, OR 97630

In this issue:

Your comments on Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge are requested. What issues are important to you?

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Your Comments are Important!

Mail your comments to:
John Kasbohm, Project Leader
Sheldon-Hart Mountain
National Wildlife Refuge
Complex
P.O. Box 111
Lakeview, OR 97630

OR

Send us your comments online—
it's easy!
[www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/
main/docs/OR/docshartmtn.htm](http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/main/docs/OR/docshartmtn.htm)

To learn more about Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, visit our website:

www.fws.gov/sheldonthartmtn/hart/

Our mission...“to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”