

# **Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge**

## **Scoping Report CCP/EA**

**January 2007**

This scoping report summarizes the issues, concerns, and opportunities identified by the Service, its partners, and the public during the public scoping phase for the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge CCP/EA. Early in the planning process, the Service developed a list of preliminary issues, concerns and opportunities for the CCP. These planning issues were presented at public scoping meetings on September 14 and 20, 2006 as well as in a Planning Update (newsletter) and in the Federal Register Notice. Information gathered through these and other sources of information is reflected in this public scoping report.

### **Public Outreach**

On August 2, 2006, the Notice of Intent to Prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Plan and associated NEPA document was published in the Federal Register. The first Planning Update was published, with a comment form, and was distributed in August of 2006 to a mailing list of approximately 450 recipients. In addition, the Planning Update and comment form were posted on the Refuge website, and copies were available at the CCP open houses, the refuge office and entrance, the hunter check station, and at the Refuge information table at the annual BirdFest event on October 14-15. The comment form distributed with the Planning Update posed the following questions:

- Why is Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge special to you?
- Why do you primarily visit the refuge?
- Which activities are the most important to you and appropriate for the Refuge?
- What changes or improvements to our public use programs and facilities would you suggest to provide better service to the public?
- What primary management issues, concerns, or opportunities do you think need to be addressed in the CCP?
- What strategies would you suggest to address or solve these issues, concerns, and opportunities?

The Service held two CCP open houses, in Ridgefield, Washington on September 14 and Vancouver, Washington on September 20. Press releases notifying the public of the open houses were sent to four daily newspapers (the *Oregonian*, the *Columbian*, the *Longview Daily News*, and the *Camas-Washougal Post-Record*) and two weekly papers (the *Reflector* and the *Woodland-Kalama Daily News*). In addition the *Columbian* published an article describing changes at the Ridgefield NWR Complex and the CCP process.

At the open house Refuge staff and the lead planner 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. A total of 44 private citizens and representatives from various organizations attended the open houses, providing comment on the issues and opportunities presented. 28 people attended the event in Ridgefield and 16 people attended the event in Vancouver.

During scoping a total of 91 responses were received from individuals or organizations in writing from September through November 3, 2006. 70 of these were comment forms returned by mail or fax, at the public meetings, or hand delivered to the Refuge. 21 of the responses were letters (one of which was signed by 21 individuals) sent by e-mail or mail.

## **Summary of comments received in scoping**

### **Most appropriate uses of the refuge**

Several respondents felt that providing habitat for wildlife was the most important use of the refuge, and should take priority over other uses of the Refuge. Several respondents felt that maintaining wildlife habitat should be balanced with providing recreational opportunities. Several respondents stated that both wildlife observation and hunting were appropriate uses of the refuge in accordance with the original stated refuge purposes, and should remain so prioritized in the future CCP. Several respondents indicated that they agreed with the refuge purposes as stated in public scoping meetings.

***Response:** Providing quality wildlife habitat will be a priority in the development of the CCP/EA, since this is both the purpose of the Refuge and part of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Likewise, providing compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses is also part of the mission of the Refuge System and will also be a priority in the development of the CCP/EA.*

## **Wildlife and Habitat**

### **Habitat for Migratory Waterfowl**

Several respondents stated that maintaining quality habitat for migratory and overwintering waterfowl habitat should be a primary management concern for the refuge. Several respondents stated that the amount of waterfowl habitat, or the refuge's carrying capacity for waterfowl, should be increased. Several respondents stated that creating more wetlands, especially shallow-water habitat, would benefit both waterfowl populations and hunters. They stated that currently many of the wetlands were too deep—attracting shovellers but not other species of dabbling ducks. One respondent questioned how maintaining habitat for the more common subspecies of Canada geese supported recovery of the dusky Canada goose.

***Response:** The CCP/EA will address the issue of goose management in detail, since providing habitat for dusky Canada geese and other migrating and overwintering waterfowl are establishing purposes of the Refuge.*

*In the CCP, the Service will explore the most appropriate options for improving wildlife habitat. We will consider alternatives which allow the wetlands to flood more naturally, in order to maximize shallow water habitat early in the season. Creation of new wetlands has been attempted on Bachelor Island and has had limited success because new ponds do not hold water well. At current river levels, Bachelor Island is too high to create more functional wetlands. All available basins on the River S Unit are already being used as wetland habitat.*

### **Restoration of Floodplain Habitat/Function**

Several respondents requested that the CCP team explore dike breaching to restore the historic floodplain on the Refuge. (Currently most of the Refuge is separated from the Columbia River by dikes, while a smaller portion remains connected to the river.) They stated that this would address a number of habitat and management issues (invasive species, pumping operations/costs, habitat improvement, restoration goals, etc.) They noted the loss of original floodplain forest habitat on the lower Columbia River and the importance of this habitat to neotropical migrants and other native species.

*Response: In developing a range of refuge management alternatives we will consider returning floodplain function on portions of the Refuge as long as it will not adversely affect adjacent landowners and our ability to manage for purposes species. However, dike breaching in some areas*

*may not prove feasible because it would limit the Refuge's ability to provide feeding and wintering habitat for Refuge purposes species, and would also limit public use of the Refuge.*

## **Restoring Native Habitats**

A recurring theme in comments received was the proper balance between intensively managed habitats such as emergent wetlands, pastures, and croplands (which primarily support waterfowl) and native habitats, for example riparian forests and wooded wetlands. A large number of respondents, and one organization, stated that the Refuge should provide nesting and wintering habitat for a variety of bird species, in addition to waterfowl. They supported maintenance of pasture and wetland for waterfowl habitat, but also strongly supported restoring or creating habitat for migratory songbirds and shorebirds. One respondent suggested that the team use the pre-acquisition map of the Sevier farm on the River S Unit as a goal for restoring more riparian forest, and that we increase amount of riparian forest based on the prior extent of that habitat on the refuge. Another suggested that riparian habitat on the River S unit be increased by 50%.

***Response:** The CCP and associated NEPA document will address the issue of providing riparian habitat, wooded wetlands, and grassland habitat to support a diversity of migratory birds in detail. The percentage of refuge acreage where native habitats will be maintained or restored, versus managed habitats, will be considered in developing alternatives. We will examine alternatives that restore native riparian forest and wooded wetlands where good opportunities to do so exist, and such restoration will not adversely impact the Refuge's ability to manage for purposes species. The Refuge does currently contain large stands of wooded wetlands, especially on the Roth Unit, however many visitors may be unaware of this since this is outside the public use area.*

*For the past decade, the Refuge has taken steps to provide or enhance habitat for nesting and migrating migratory birds of many species, in addition to purposes species, as resources have permitted. The Refuge adopted its riparian management plan in 2001. This ~~step-down~~ plan will be reviewed and revised after the CCP is completed.*

## **Gee Creek Watershed**

Several respondents expressed concern over the cumulative effects of recent development on Gee Creek, especially erosion along the banks of the creek, excessive sediment loads, low flow and high temperature in summer, flashy flow regimes, nutrient loading from farm and household land uses, and other pollutants. Changes and impacts to natural watershed conditions are expected to significantly

increase over the next 20 years due to population growth in the area. One respondent felt that tidal flushing of the Columbia River up Gee Creek needed to be restored. One respondent wrote that watershed coordination and management, especially for Gee Creek, should continue to be recognized as an integral part of managing the Refuge. With base support funding for watershed coordination, grant funds for watershed restoration could be leveraged to execute projects. Another respondent stated that it was very important that the watershed coordinator position continued to be funded.

***Response:** The CCP and associated NEPA document will address watershed and anadromous fish issues in detail. The Gee Creek Watershed Restoration Project was developed by the FWS in 2005 and the Gee Creek Watershed Coordinator position was hired in March 2006 through Washington State University Clark County Extension. The program will expand watershed-wide restoration efforts to maintain and improve water quality and stream habitat in Gee Creek with the assistance of the community and partnering agencies and organizations.*

## **Oregon white oak habitat**

A few respondents noted the need to maintain Oregon white oak habitat on the refuge.

Fire was suggested as a management strategy to maintain oak woodland habitat. One wrote, “Work closely with neighbors and other agencies to write burn plans—[there is] no reason why the refuge can’t find several burn windows despite the hold-ups.”

***Response:** In the CCP/EA prescribed burning will be considered as a management strategy for invasive species control and habitat enhancement in oak and grassland habitats, within constraints imposed by regulatory agencies within the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan airshed.*

## **Invasive Species**

A number of respondents stated that control of invasive/exotic species is a primary management issue for the Refuge. Invasive species that were of particular concern included Himalayan blackberry, reed canarygrass, and nutria. Two respondents felt that the Carty Unit was being overrun by blackberry and reed canarygrass. One respondent expressed concern that English ivy will become a problem in the future. One suggested that non-persistent herbicides and biological control be used to control invasive species. One respondent felt that nutria should be trapped and relocated but not killed.

***Response:** The CCP/EA will address invasive species issues in detail. The control of invasive species has been, and will continue to be a major management issue for the Refuge. One of the key questions that will be considered in developing refuge management alternatives is which areas will be prioritized for treatments and whether those treatments will involve eradication or suppression. In the case of nutria, the Refuge has an existing approved plan which allows for the control of this species.*

## **Grazing and Resource Extraction**

One respondent stated that farming, grazing, and resource extraction should be allowed only when designed primarily to benefit wildlife. One respondent stated that grazing or resource extraction should not be allowed on the Refuge.

***Response:** Under current management policy, cooperative farming and grazing are allowed when they are compatible with Refuge purposes. Farming and grazing have been, and continue to be used as management strategies on the Refuge to provide high quality food for migrating waterfowl and sandhill cranes. These strategies may continue to be used when they are compatible with Refuge purposes, and provide a benefit to wildlife.*

## **Croplands**

There was interest in planting more crops to provide food for migrating and wintering waterfowl, from respondents who identified themselves as waterfowl hunters. Two respondents suggested using the Sauvies Island cropping system (Oregon Dept of Fish and Wildlife) as a model to emulate.

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

*In the past, cooperative farmers planted large acreages of clover, corn, and winter wheat on Bachelor Island and the River S Unit. Currently the Refuge plants 100 to 150 acres of corn or wheat annually, depending on available funding. Acreage once devoted to crops is now in pasture or in some cases, wetlands. This change in management direction occurred primarily as a result of an evaluation of the refuge's farming and grazing program in the late 1990s. In this review it was noted that while corn and other crops attracted large numbers of waterfowl early in the season, by January the croplands were mud. In the Oregon/SW Washington Canada Goose Agricultural Depredation Control Plan (1998), Ridgefield NWR was mandated to address the agricultural depredation issue by providing sustained green forage for geese. This plan has been implemented, and will be integrated into the CCP/EA as appropriate throughout the process.*

## **Endangered Species/Native Species Reintroduction**

One respondent proposed that the western pond turtle be reintroduced to the Refuge. Another proposed that Columbian white-tailed deer be reintroduced to the Refuge.

*Response: In keeping with the Service's mandate to restore native biodiversity where feasible, we will consider the reintroduction of native vertebrates in developing refuge management alternatives, where habitat is suitable and reintroduction will not affect management for refuge purposes species.*

## **Research/Monitoring**

Two respondents stated that surveys were needed to document what species and populations were on the Refuge currently. Two respondents stated that research was needed to document the effects of public use and development of the surrounding area on the Refuge's wildlife and habitats. Such research would provide data needed to design and manage public use programs, and resolve conflicts between users and wildlife needs.

*Response: Survey and research needs will be considered in detail in the CCP/EA. While the vertebrate species of the Refuge are well documented (with a few exceptions, i.e. small mammals and reptiles), there is a need for plant surveys to reverify what was located in the past. This is especially true of the Carty Unit and the Blackwater RNA. Research to understand the impacts of public use on wildlife would also be useful. Involving universities to work on projects directly applicable to refuge management would be desirable. Additional staff time would be required to manage a cooperative research program. An analysis of the funding and staffing needed to implement alternatives will be prepared as part of the Draft CCP.*

## **Goose Depredation**

One respondent suggested that the Refuge address the goose depredation issue by providing incentives for farmers to farm for geese. He stated that the depredation problem is due to geese losing native habitat and turning to farmlands; and re-establishment or expansion of Pacific Flyway populations.

*Response: In the current Oregon/SW Washington Canada Goose Agricultural Depredation Control plan (1998), Ridgefield NWR is mandated to address this issue by providing green forage for geese. This plan has been implemented, and will be integrated into the CCP/EIS as necessary throughout the process. Providing incentives to farmers is however, outside the scope of the CCP.*

## **Land Protection**

Several respondents were concerned about the impact of development and habitat loss in area on wildlife. Several respondents suggested purchasing land to provide a buffer between the Refuge and adjacent developed lands. This would help protect the Refuge from hazards such as toxic spills, and other impacts to wildlife.

*Response: The Refuge's priority for expansion is for acquiring lands inside its existing approved acquisition boundary should funding become available and there are willing sellers.*

## **Recreation and Other Public Uses**

### **General Comments**

More than half of the respondents reported that they visited the refuge primarily to observe wildlife or birds, and about a third of these individuals also visited the refuge to photograph wildlife. About a third of the respondents visited the refuge primarily to hunt waterfowl, and about a third visited the refuge to walk or hike the trails. Smaller numbers reported that they visited the refuge to participate in environmental education or volunteer activities.

A number of respondents said that RNWR was one of the best, if not the best, local areas to enjoy birdwatching and hunting. One respondent wrote, "RNWR has been and is currently, one of the last public access areas for the viewing, harvesting, and providing a secure resting place for the migratory and related species in SW Washington." Several respondents had been visiting the refuge for many years (25 years or more). Several respondents said that it was important to be able to bird-watch or hike in a quiet, peaceful, undisturbed area. Several also mentioned that this is one of the only places locally where an "unattached shooter" (not a member of a private club) can hunt. One respondent said that it is important to have places where seniors can get out and enjoy nature without having to spend a lot of money. Proximity of the refuge to major urban areas was noted as both a plus (it makes the refuge convenient to visit, and many respondents were frequent or repeat visitors) and a minus (user conflicts, habitat degradation, and loss of buffer areas were noted as potential issues associated an increasingly "urban" wildlife refuge).

Most of the respondents wanted a larger area of the refuge to be open to public use, and requested additions and/or alterations to facilities and programs to support that use. A minority of the respondents (but still a significant number) were concerned about loss of habitat in the surrounding area or disturbance to wildlife caused by public use, and stated that public use should remain at current levels. A few respondents did not mention disturbance specifically, but stated that the current public use programs and facilities were appropriate and did not need to be changed. Specific comments and responses follow.

## **Funding and staffing for public use programs**

A number of respondents stated that more staffing was needed for public use programs. Several said that a full time staff position should be dedicated to environmental education and interpretation programs. Two respondents said that a full time law enforcement officer was needed, especially during the hunting season. Several respondents wanted the information booth or the Plankhouse to be open and staffed more hours.

**Response:** Needs for public use programs will be considered in detail in the CCP/EA. An analysis of the funding and staffing needed to implement each alternative will be prepared as part of the Draft CCP.

## **Wildlife disturbance caused by public use**

A significant number of respondents were concerned about disturbance to wildlife caused by public use. This was a particular area of concern because “there are fewer off-refuge areas for wildlife to go.” While these respondents stated that some level of public use on the refuge was appropriate, some stated that disturbance should be minimized by restricting further development and access. Others stated that disturbance to waterfowl could be minimized, while increasing the footprint of public use, by concentrating most of the increased access in wooded areas of refuge. They did not agree that the only way to protect wildlife is to minimize access to refuge. A few respondents stated that the current facilities and level of public use were appropriate and should not be increased. One wrote, “Keep [the] present mix of visitor opportunities . . . special concessions for birders, particularly those that are costly or damaging to habitat, are totally unnecessary. Added turnouts, structures and trail access will only increase traffic and degrade the site. Leave the site as is and disregard requests for increased access and [facilities] development.” Two respondents suggested that research and monitoring be done to evaluate the disturbance caused by public use.

**Response:** The CCP/EA will review all public use activities for appropriateness and compatibility. We recognize that any public use causes some degree of disturbance to wildlife. At the same time, providing wildlife-dependent public uses can increase public awareness of, and support for the mission of the Refuge System. We are mandated by law to provide wildlife-dependent public uses if such uses are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. The CCP will balance the needs of wildlife with the legal mandate to provide wildlife-dependent public uses. Disturbance to wildlife caused by public use 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. The acreage where public uses are allowed versus the acreage of undisturbed

*sanctuary areas, and timing of use, will also be considered in developing refuge management alternatives. Retaining current public use facilities (no expansion of public use facilities or footprint of public use) will be considered as part of the “No Action” alternative.*

### **Nonconsumptive Uses (Wildlife Observation/Photography, Hiking)**

Seventy-five of the respondents indicated that they visited the refuge to observe birds and other wildlife. Seventeen respondents indicated that they visited the refuge to photograph wildlife (most of these also visited the refuge to observe wildlife.) Nearly half of these respondents, and one organization, suggested that the area, timing, and facilities dedicated to nonconsumptive public uses on the refuge be expanded, and had numerous suggestions for how this would be accomplished. A few mentioned that this could, and should be done without increasing disturbance to wildlife through careful design of facilities and programs.

***Response:** Public use programs will be considered in detail in the CCP/EA. Alternatives will vary in the area and times of year when various public uses are allowed and the facilities needed to support these uses. An analysis of the funding and staffing needed to implement each alternative will be prepared as part of the Draft CCP. The CCP/EA will review all public use activities for appropriateness and compatibility. Responses to specific comments are noted below.*

A large number of respondents advocated for the following changes to facilities and programs:

- Expand the area where nonconsumptive uses are allowed. Most of these respondents wanted access to Bachelor Island, at least “at some times of year, allowing for sanctuary areas for geese, and reasonable buffers around heron and egret colonies.” Guided or “by appointment” tours were suggested. Respondents also requested more access to the Roth Unit, the Ridgeport Dairy Unit, and Post Office Lake.
- Allow increased foot access to the River S Unit and the Roth Unit, both during and outside of the hunting season. Most of these respondents requested foot access on dikes and service roads between May 1 and Sept 30, at a minimum, “for some distance north and south from the refuge entrance near the vehicle bridge that crosses Lake River,” but preferably, “to all dikes around River S Unit along Lake River and Bachelor Slough.” Hunt areas should be accessible to non-hunters on non hunt days. Some suggested that foot access be allowed on dikes and service roads on Sundays; this would preserve a waterfowl rest day between hunt days. However, one organization opposed the idea of Sunday access because hunting is

allowed on Sundays on State and private lands; foot traffic on dikes and service roads would scare birds into guns.

**Response:** *Allowing foot access to dikes and service roads on the River S and Roth Units will be considered during development of refuge management alternatives. In regard to allowing access during the hunting season, a key question to be considered is the rest period (time free from disturbance) needed by waterfowl between hunt days. In terms of providing “equal access” to the refuge for consumptive and nonconsumptive users, it should be recognized that currently, hunting is not allowed in public use areas outside the River S Unit.*

- Allow more out of car access on the auto tour route (confined to specific marked areas) between Oct 1 and April 30, to allow better usage of spotting scopes and telephoto lenses.
- Create more pullouts or passing lanes on auto tour route (visitors stay in car) so that vehicles can pass more easily, rather than getting stacked up behind stopped vehicles.
- Construct an elevated viewing platform on Rest Lake.
- Make improvements to the existing viewing blind on Rest Lake to make it easier for photographers and wildlife viewers to use. Make changes to adjacent habitat, to improve quality and quantity of bird sightings. Modify Rest Lake to create more open water close to the blind.
- Create areas for shorebird observation, along with steps to increase shorebird habitat.

A smaller, but significant number of respondents advocated for the following changes to facilities and programs:

- Construction of additional trails or creating more opportunities for hiking and exploring the Refuge. Several suggestions for trail siting were included, including a trail connecting the River S Unit to Carty Unit; trails connecting to other trails in Clark County; a year-round walking trail through Long Meadow and back through the forested area along Lake River; an ADA approved trail from the bridge to the Plankhouse (preferably extending some way onto the refuge to include the shore of Duck Lake and a bit of the oaks part of the Oaks to Wetlands Trail); and a foot trail through wooded portions of Roth and other presently closed areas of the refuge.
- Construction of additional photography/viewing blinds, overlooks, or platforms.
- Allowing the use of hunt blinds for wildlife viewing/photography on non hunt days, and charging a fee for use of blinds.

- Allowing access to the maintenance area.

**Response:** *This area is currently only used as a hunter check station. The Refuge is considering moving the hunter check station to the visitor contact station used by all visitors in development of refuge management alternatives.*

- Increase areas that visitors can access by car. This will allow persons with disabilities to have more wildlife viewing/photography opportunities. Possibly create another driving loop in the Roth unit.

- Create viewing areas on bluff/uplands adjacent to refuge

**Response:** *Persons interested in off refuge viewing areas would need to work with the City of Ridgefield or private landowners. The Fish and Wildlife Service has no jurisdiction over adjacent lands.*

## **Waterfowl Hunting**

About 1/3 of the respondents said that they visited the refuge primarily to hunt waterfowl. A few hunters stated that they also visited the refuge to observe or photograph wildlife. Most of the respondents who identified themselves as hunters wanted hunting opportunities on the Refuge to be expanded. They had numerous suggestions as to how this would be accomplished, which fell into three major categories:

- Expand the hunt area
- Increase number of blinds
- Increase hunting capacity of refuge by increasing waterfowl habitat, or providing more/better food for waterfowl

**Response:** *Waterfowl hunting will be considered in detail in the CCP/EA. Expanding the hunting program on the Refuge by increasing the huntable area, increasing number of blinds, or a combination thereof, will be considered in development of refuge management alternatives. This will include an analysis of the effects of the alternatives on wildlife and the staffing and funding required to implement the alternatives. Responses to specific comments are noted below.*

A large number of respondents advocated for the following changes to the hunt program or facilities:

- Expansion of hunt area.

Two-thirds of respondents who identified themselves as hunters wanted to see the huntable area of the refuge expanded. None wanted to see the area decreased. The largest single group

wanted to open Bachelor Island to goose hunting. (Two of these respondents suggested that duck hunting only be allowed on River S, and goose hunting only on BI. They reasoned that this could be a win-win: dusky geese are better protected because they prefer habitat found on River S unit, while harvested subspecies prefer the more open habitat of BI.) A small number of hunters wanted Post Office Lake, the Roth Unit, the Ridgeport Dairy Unit, or all of River S open to hunting. Two respondents stated that the current hunt area fell well below the 40% allowed by law and that this should be revisited.

**Response:** *In the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission Memorandum #1 dated May 18, 1965, which established Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge, it states: "A portion of the area in line with management finding but not to exceed 40%, will be considered for waterfowl hunting in the future." The law allows hunting on up to 40% of lands purchased with Migratory Bird Conservation funds. The percentage may be less than 40% if management findings indicate that a larger sanctuary area is needed. Since the dusky Canada goose is one of the purposes species for the Refuge, habitat and sanctuary requirements for this species will be a strong consideration in developing alternatives. The habitat requirements of other species and funding and staffing needed to implement an expanded program will also be considered.*

- Improve blinds or habitat adjacent to blinds to increase hunter success.

Many of the respondents who identified themselves as hunters felt that hunting success could be increased by creating more shallow water areas adjacent to blinds. They stated that the current situation favored shovellers but not more desirable species. They also stated that the blinds could be improved to be more accessible and user-friendly.

**Response:** *We will consider alternatives that will allow wetlands on the River S Unit to fill more naturally, maximize shallow water habitat early in the season, and give hunters better access to shallow-water habitat. See section of this report on Wildlife and Habitat.*

- Plant more crops for waterfowl.

Many of the respondents who identified themselves as hunters advocated for planting more crops to attract more waterfowl to the Refuge. One felt that more grazing would improve waterfowl habitat.

A smaller number of respondents advocated for the following changes to the hunt program or facilities:

- Increase number of blinds.  
Several respondents suggested adding blinds, and one requested restoring blinds on River S to their “original number, or more, within confines of current hunt area.”
  
- Remove blinds where most of duskys are taken and replace with goose blinds on Bachelor Island.  
One respondent felt that the number of duskys taken could be reduced, while maintaining current hunting opportunities, by removing blinds 14-18 (which have higher dusky harvest rates) from the River S Unit, and put 5 goose blinds/pits on the part of BI closest to the bridge.
  
- Improve/enhance opportunities for hunters with disabilities.  
One respondent said that geese bypass handicapped blind due to traffic and other hunters.  
One respondent said that more blinds could be accessible if hunters could get their gear to the blinds.  
***Response:** The Refuge currently plans to improve access to Blind 8. In the future the Refuge will look at the placement and construction of future blinds to make them as accessible as possible. All alternatives will provide for public use opportunities for people with disabilities.*
  
- Blind Reservations and Fees. Several comments were received about blind reservations and fees:
  - Make Blind 8 available to non-handicapped hunters if no handicapped hunters are using it.  
***Response:** Blind 8 is already available to non-disabled hunters if it is not in use by disabled hunters.*
  - Make Blind 1A available to general shooters if no handicapped shooters are in morning lineup.  
***Response:** This is currently the only blind on the refuge that is reserved exclusively for hunters with disabilities all day long. The Refuge must provide such a blind in order to meet accessibility requirements.*
  - Keep current lottery system—concern that without it the refuge will become a “private club” for locals if it’s “first come first serve.”
  - Questioned why reservation application fee has gone up 10X (to \$30)  
***Response:** The fee has gone up by a factor of 3, not 10. Hunters currently get 10*

*blind picks for \$10 (formerly they got 10 picks for \$3). The fee increases were instituted as part of an approved plan in order to keep pace with the increasing cost of administering the hunt program, and all fees go directly back into the hunt program. The fee plan will be up for review and revision in [date.]*

- Enhance youth hunting activities (one respondent).
- Ensure that hunters will be able to use the refuge in the future. Have a charter (one respondent).

***Response:** Hunting is already a refuge purpose. The Service cannot enter into a binding agreement in perpetuity with any user group.*

## **User Group Conflicts**

A significant number of the respondents who identified themselves as hunters stated that hunting and use of the auto tour route were at cross purposes and that vehicle traffic on the tour route decreased the quality of the hunting experience. Interruptions due to traffic on the tour route were noted as a problem, especially at the accessible blind. Some felt that nonconsumptive users did not like to see birds being shot. Closing the auto tour route on hunt days, or modifying the auto tour route during the hunting season were suggested as ways to resolve this conflict.

A small number of respondents who identified themselves as wildlife observers stated that hunting on the refuge should be deemphasized or eliminated, but none complained specifically about hunting along the tour route. As noted in a previous section, a significant number of non-hunters stated that they should get “equal access” to the River S unit during the hunt season.

***Response:** The Refuge will consider alternatives that will decrease conflicts between hunters and users of the auto tour route during the hunting season. Providing waterfowl hunting opportunities is one of the purposes for which the refuge was established. It is not within the scope of the CCP to change an establishing purpose of the refuge. The areas used for, and timing of, consumptive and nonconsumptive uses will be considered in detail in the CCP/EA.*

Several hunters questioned why the weekend of Bird Fest coincided with the hunt season opening and requested that Bird Fest be moved to the weekend before hunt season opens.

***Response:** The hunt opening date is set by the State and is outside the Refuge’s control. The date of Bird Fest has been set to coincide with the first weekend of Refuge Week; moving it later would*

*increase the chances of bad weather while moving it much earlier would decrease opportunities to see sandhill cranes and other wildlife on the tours. We will consider options for resolving this conflict, for example moving Bird Fest to spring, or starting the hunt earlier (within the Federal framework) with a mid-season break.*

## **Environmental Education and Interpretation**

Many respondents and one organization advocated for an expanded environmental education program on the refuge, including adding staff devoted to this program, and building an open-air outdoor classroom structure. They felt that today's youth are tomorrow's users/supporters of the Refuge; getting their interest/support now is critical to future of the refuge. They felt that youth are becoming increasingly disconnected from nature and need to have direct, physical contact with nature as well as computer contact. Other suggestions included partnering with Ducks Unlimited to start a Greenwings program, and developing an EE program for vision impaired children on identifying birds by sound.

Several also advocated for an expanded interpretation program (including more facilities such as interpretive signage), to increase public awareness of the critical role of the refuge as a feeding/rest stop on the Pacific Flyway, impacts of overuse and invasive species, and the value of hunting and why it is allowed on the Refuge. One respondent suggested using Web sites and/or Web cams to provide experience of the refuge to people who can't visit frequently, or at all. One respondent noted that with changing demographics, it's essential to do outreach to a more diverse, increasingly urban population that does not have the outdoor knowledge/skills we have taken for granted in the past.

Several respondents stated that cultural resources interpretation and education (using the Plankhouse) was very important, and would like to see the Plankhouse open or staffed more often. One wrote, "Cathlapotle Plankhouse is a great regional asset which should continue to be developed and expanded as a historical and educational site."

***Response:*** *Environmental education and interpretation will be considered in detail in the CCP/EA. The CCP/EA will review all public use activities for appropriateness and compatibility. The Friends of Ridgefield NWR has decided to make environmental education their focus through their "Naturalist Corps" program.*

## **Volunteers and Partnerships**

There was considerable interest in expanding opportunities for volunteers on the Refuge to help the Refuge achieve its wildlife, habitat and public use goals. A number of respondents stated that the Refuge should involve groups such as Vancouver Audubon, Washington Waterfowlers, Ducks Unlimited, the Scouts, and schools to restore, maintain or improve habitat and public use facilities. From comments received there appears to be a perception that volunteers are an underutilized resource; many individuals and organizations want to help but have limited opportunities to do so. A few respondents stated that the potential for volunteer labor by hunters is being underutilized, and that more hunters would volunteer if they felt that their input/concerns were being addressed.

***Response:** The Refuge currently relies on volunteers to help accomplish its goals, and will continue to do so in the future. However, the Refuge's ability to fully utilize volunteers has been limited by lack of staff time available to manage the volunteer program. Recently the Refuge's Friends Group voted to take a greater role in volunteer coordination. Even so, staff time will be needed to create a work plan for volunteers and develop training and certification. Staffing and funding needed to increase the Refuge's volunteer program will be noted in the implementation analysis of the CCP/EA.*

*The Refuge is currently working through Washington Waterfowlers to set up a volunteer program. Volunteers would work on two projects per year. Substantial coordination will be required since there is a narrow window of timing when this work can occur.*

There was also considerable interest in developing new partnerships or strengthening existing partnerships with local and regional organizations that have common goals for the lower Columbia River ecosystem—Columbia Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, the Ports of Vancouver and Ridgefield, LCREP, LCFEG, and State agencies. Cooperation with local landowners, both public and private, was considered essential to meeting the Refuge's goals, especially in an era where Federal budgets are flat or declining. One respondent suggested creating partnerships between hunters and conservation/birding groups—emphasize their joint interests to create cooperative joint ventures that help the refuge.

***Response:** Partnerships are essential to achieving the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System and Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. Partnerships will therefore be considered in detail in the CCP/EA.*

## **Fishing**

The Service received a few comments requesting more fishing opportunities on the Refuge and accessible facilities to support this use.

*Response: The Refuge provides limited fishing opportunities (only on Lake River). The Refuge has no jurisdiction over navigable water areas to build piers or other structures. Developing an accessible fishing program would require building structures down a long steep dike. An analysis of the staffing and funding required to expand fishing opportunities on the Refuge will be included in the Draft CCP/EA.*

## **Bicycling**

Two respondents stated the Refuge should promote more hiking and biking on the refuge and be less dependent on vehicles. The auto tour route should be open to bikes and walking.

*Response: The Refuge will do an appropriate use determination, and if necessary a compatibility determination, for bicycling as part of the CCP.*

## **Dog Walking**

Two respondents requested that dogs (on leash) be allowed on walking trails.

*Response: The Refuge will do an appropriate use determination, and if necessary a compatibility determination, for dog walking as part of the CCP.*

## **Horseback Riding**

One respondent recommended that equine trails be established, and horseback riding be allowed on the Refuge.

*Response: The Refuge will do an appropriate use determination, and if necessary a compatibility determination, for horseback riding as part of the CCP.*

## **Public Use Facilities**

A large group of respondents and one organization requested more restroom facilities, “at a minimum add one restroom at SE corner of Rest Lake where road make 90 degree N turn and parallels E side of [Rest] Lake.” Currently once people are past the blind they must drive all the way to entrance to use facilities. The other major facility need noted in the responses was for an accessible bridge to the Carty Unit and Plankhouse. Other requests for facilities (in addition to those needed to support expanded public uses, noted in preceding sections) included:

- Staffed visitor center or welcome station (even a small add on) at the refuge entrance
- More benches along walking trails
- Picnic area with tables
- Put-in for kayakers

***Response:** An analysis of the funding and staffing needed to implement public use programs will be prepared as part of the Draft CCP. This will include cost estimates for facilities.*

## **Fee Program**

A few respondents did not like having to pay a refuge entrance fee. About an equal number supported the fee program. A group of 21 respondents asked for a location to buy annual passes on weekends—many visitors who work weekdays have no way to purchase the \$15 annual pass and are stuck paying the \$3 daily fee. They also suggested a fee-free parking area near the entrance for visitors who arrive separately but then carpool to tour the refuge.

***Response:** The Refuge is operating under an approved fee plan. Entrance and blind reservation fees collected by the Refuge go directly back to the refuge. The fees are used to operate public use programs and improve public use facilities. Fees have already allowed the refuge to make improvements in public use facilities. The refuge is continually working to make its fee program more user-friendly.*

## **Issues Outside the Scope of the CCP**

- Several respondents and one organization expressed concern about the proposed utility easement across RNWR for wastewater from the City of Ridgefield. They believed that a utility easement across the Refuge is not compatible and limits habitat management options. They felt that a wastewater pipeline would expose the Refuge to risk of a spill in case of earthquake (since the Refuge is in red zone for liquefaction).

***Response:** The proposed utility easement is being addressed under a separate planning process; the lead agency is the City of Ridgefield., and therefore is outside the scope of this CCP.*

- A number of respondents and one organization expressed concerns about the proposed construction of a new entrance bridge that would serve both the Refuge and the Port of Ridgefield. However most of the respondents were not opposed to it, if does not reduce habitat, infringe on the existing hunting area, or allow unauthorized access to the Refuge.

***Response:** The proposed bridge project is being addressed under a separate planning*

*process; the lead agency is the Port of Ridgefield, and therefore is outside the scope of this CCP. However recently the Port withdrew its proposal to cooperatively build a bridge with the Refuge, and is pursuing an overpass which will solely serve the Port.*

- Erosion of the dike road at the south boundary of the Refuge.

***Response:** The dike and road are owned by Clark County and therefore are outside of the Service's jurisdiction.*

- The long term impacts of development surrounding the refuge on refuge resources; effects of disturbance, invasive species, free-roaming dogs and cats, lighting and noise pollution, and plate glass windows.

***Response:** The Refuge staff will coordinate and communicate with FWS Ecological Services Division on all issues regarding potential negative impacts to refuge resources due to industrial or other developments adjacent to refuge lands as appropriate. The Refuge will take surrounding habitat into account when developing habitat management alternatives. Otherwise, this topic is outside the scope of the CCP/EA because it is outside the jurisdiction of the Refuge.*

- The potential for pollution or toxic spills by local industry and development adjacent to the refuge.

***Response:** The Refuge staff will coordinate and communicate with FWS Ecological Services Division on all issues regarding potential negative impacts to refuge resources due to industrial or other developments adjacent to refuge lands as appropriate. Otherwise, this topic is outside the scope of the CCP/EA because they it is outside the jurisdiction of the Refuge.*