

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuges Clark and Skamania Counties, Washington

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and the Environmental Assessment (EA) for Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuges (Refuges). The CCP will guide management of the Refuges for the next 15 years. The CCP and EA describe the Service's proposals for managing the Refuges and their effects on the human environment under three alternatives, including the no action alternative.

Decision

Following comprehensive review and analysis, the Service selected Alternative B for implementation because it is the alternative that best meets the following criteria:

- Achieves the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Achieves the purposes of the Refuges.
- Will be able to achieve the vision and goals for the Refuges.
- Maintains and restores the ecological integrity of the habitats and populations on the Refuges.
- Addresses the important issues identified during the scoping process.
- Addresses the legal mandates of the Service and the Refuges.
- Is consistent with the scientific principles of sound wildlife management and endangered species recovery.
- Facilitates priority public uses which are compatible with the Refuges' purposes and the Refuge System mission.

Alternatives Considered

Following is a brief description of the alternatives for managing the Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuges, including the alternative selected for implementation (Alternative B). While full and equal consideration were given to Alternatives A and C, these alternatives were not selected for implementation. The Service's comprehensive analysis found that Alternative B better supported the aforementioned criteria. For a complete description of each alternative, see the CCP/EA.

Alternative A:

This alternative is the No Action Alternative as required by National Environmental Policy Act regulations. Selection of this alternative would maintain the status quo; there would be no major change to current management practices. The Service would continue to protect, maintain, and, where feasible, enhance habitat for priority species, with an emphasis on Canada geese, waterfowl, and State and Federally-listed species. Habitat management would continue to concentrate on maintaining short grass fields and managing emergent wetlands for wintering waterfowl. The Service would maintain existing levels of public use on the Refuges. Visitation and wildlife observation at Steigerwald Lake Refuge would be accommodated along the Columbia River Dike Trail (Dike Trail), with a segment of Dike Trail closed to horseback riding, dog, bicycles, and jogging. All alternatives assume that a Gateway Center and interpretive trail would be constructed upon appropriation of funds, as approved in a separate planning process. Refuge staff and volunteers would continue to offer a small number of guided tours and limited environmental education opportunities. Current staffing and funding needs for the Refuges would remain the same. Alternative A was not selected for implementation because it does not include needed restoration to better support populations of native flora and fauna, in particular, species of conservation concern, rare or declining species, and their habitats. Habitat restoration, surveys and monitoring would continue to be minimal and may not meet Refuge goals and objectives, particularly those objectives associated with maintaining biological integrity. Alternative A continues a reactive approach to invasive species management and fails to support surveillance and response to new threats. Additionally, this alternative may not adequately support the growing demand for wildlife-dependent recreation.

Alternative B:

This alternative has been selected by the Service for implementation for the reasons noted above. As in Alternative A, the Service would continue to protect, maintain, and enhance habitat for priority species. However, this alternative expands Refuge management to restoring and maintaining biological diversity, with an emphasis on a broader range of conservation targets, as identified in the CCP. Objective development, based upon the biological needs of a suite of conservation targets, identified opportunities to improve the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of

the Refuges. This alternative identifies habitat deficiencies and sets specific habitat objectives to improve function of many habitat types to benefit conservation targets. Levels of inventory, monitoring, and research will increase. The Service will seek partners to improve fish passage and water quality throughout Refuge watersheds. The Service will initiate actions to detect new invasions of nonnative species on the Gorge Refuges, track established invaders, and implement a coordinated control program. Opportunities for wildlife viewing, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation will increase. Recreation activities along Refuge segments of the Dike Trial will be expanded to include compatible uses by pedestrians, leashed dogs, bicycles, horses, and joggers. Based on comment received during the public comment period, the Service and its partners will investigate the potential to design a waterfowl hunt that is compatible with the establishing legislation and goals for Steigerwald Lake Refuge.

Alternative C:

This alternative has many features in common with Alternative B. The primary difference is that under Alternative C, the Service would seek to restore more of the historic vegetation cover. Restoration methods would rely upon natural regeneration and use various methods to reestablish periodic disturbance regimes. Managed wetlands and moist soil units would be modified and reduced to recreate riverine wetlands. Short grass fields managed for Canada geese would be reduced at Steigerwald Lake Refuge and eliminated at Pierce Refuge to accommodate native plant communities and old field conditions. A Research Natural Area would be established at Franz Lake Refuge. Alternative C would represent a moderate increase in compatible public uses relative to Alternative A; however, would offer fewer environmental education and interpretive opportunities than Alternative B. Alternative C would allow compatible uses by pedestrians, leashed dogs, bicycles, horses, and joggers along Refuge segments of the Dike Trial. Alternative C was not selected partially because it reduced emergent wetland acreage and habitat suitability for waterfowl, breeding amphibians, western pond turtles, and other species of local interest. Additionally, Alternative C may not adequately maintain sufficient goose and waterfowl habitat to achieve Refuge purposes and goals, accentuate migratory bird conservation, and support Pacific Flyway management plans.

Effects of Management of the Refuges on the Human Environment

Implementing the selected alternative will have no significant impact on any of the environmental resources identified in the EA. A brief summary of the rationale used to conclude that the effects were not significant follows.

Effects on the Physical Environment

Water managed for emergent vegetation will be impounded behind existing dikes at depths and hydroperiods designed to suppress nonnative vegetation, promote native vegetation, and support the biological needs of conservation targets. Improvements to a small dike at Steigerwald Lake intended to expand willow scrub will not measurably affect flood protection for adjacent private lands. In addition, construction techniques will be employed to keep erosion minimal and localized. Implementation of State plans to cleanup Gibbons Creek will provide modest improvements to water quality in the watershed, which is experiencing continued degradation and development. Prescribed burns will be implemented on a limited basis as a habitat management strategy. All burning will be conducted pursuant to a burn plan which complies to State and Federal regulations regarding listed species, smoke management, cultural resources, and public safety. Smoke from prescribed burns will have a temporary negative effect on air quality; however, no significant long-term impacts to air quality are anticipated. New facilities and select management activities may have minor impacts to the visual resources of the area. Visual standards for the Refuges are subject to regulations within the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Management Plan. Site-specific analysis of detailed proposals will ensure that projects in the plan meet scenic standards and requirements of the Scenic Area Management Plan.

Effects on Refuge Habitats and Associated Species

Management under the selected plan will protect, maintain, and enhance habitat for priority species and conservation targets. Full implementation of the selected plan will restore and maintain emergent wetlands, riparian forests, scrub-shrub, oak communities, grasslands, and wet meadows. Although implementing the plan will improve habitat conditions on the Refuges, this restoration is minor and localized in the context of wildlife declines and habitat degradation caused by development, diking, and damming within the lower Columbia River ecosystem. The Service will implement various strategies to achieve target conditions for restored habitats including water management, grazing, haying, mowing, disking, tilling, and planting. These techniques, applied separately or in various combinations, may have short-term non-significant impacts to wildlife, visual resources, and water quality. Herbicide application will be guided by national and regional Service guidelines, which include development of an integrated pest

management plan, use only of approved chemicals in their appropriate environment; application according to chemical label and product instructions; and consultation with endangered species offices when application may affect listed species.

Effects on Threatened and Endangered Species

Implementation of the selected plan will increase vegetative buffers along streams benefiting listed anadromous fish by providing shade, stabilizing streambanks, contributing large woody debris and organic litter, filtering sediments and contaminants, and providing source food for aquatic invertebrates. Partnerships will be established to facilitate the removal or modification of physical barriers to fish migration. The Service will monitor water quality entering Hardy Creek from Pierce Lake and evaluate options to reduce turbidity within portions of the creek supporting chum salmon redds. Although implementing the plan may benefit native salmonids in Refuge watersheds, these actions are not significant in the context of reduced fisheries and lost habitat in the lower Columbia River. The Service will continue to support efforts to establish a self-supporting population of 200 western pond turtles at Pierce Refuge. The expanded environmental education program at Pierce Refuge is expected to increase interest in turtles with possible benefits to turtle conservation. Although disturbance to both bald eagle and turtles are anticipated with increases in research, monitoring, restoration, education, and interpretive programs, these disturbances are likely to be infrequent and of short duration.

Public Review

The planning process incorporated a variety of public involvement techniques in developing and reviewing the CCP. This included two public workshops, three planning updates, and public review and comment on the planning documents. The details of the Service's public involvement program are described in the CCP.

Conclusions

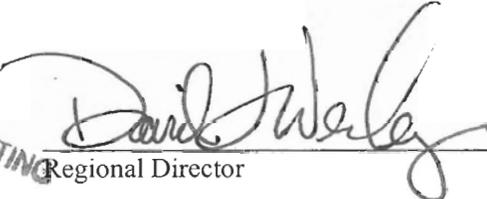
Based on review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, I have determined that implementing Alternative B as the CCP for management of the Gorge Refuges is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment, within the meaning of section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Accordingly, the Service is not required to prepare an environmental impact statement.

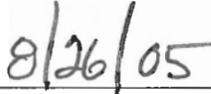
This Finding of No Significant Impact and supporting references are on file at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex, 301 N. 3rd Avenue, P.O. Box 457, Ridgefield, Washington, 98642 and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Refuge Planning, 911 NE 11th Avenue, Portland, Oregon, 97232. These documents can also be found on the Internet at <http://pacific.fws.gov/planning/>. These documents are available for public inspection. Interested and affected parties are being notified of our decision.

Supporting Reference

U.S. Fish and Wildlife. 2004. *Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment, Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Franz Lake National Wildlife Refuge, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuge.*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife. 2005. *Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Franz Lake National Wildlife Refuge, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuge.*


ACTING Regional Director


Date

STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE
for Implementation of the
Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuges,
Clark and Skamania Counties, Washington
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The following executive orders and legislative acts have been reviewed as they apply to implementation of the Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuges (Gorge Refuges).

- **National Environmental Policy Act (1969).** The planning process has been conducted in accordance with National Environmental Policy Act Implementing Procedures, Department of Interior and Service procedures, and has been performed in coordination with the affected public. The requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. §4321 et seq.) and its implementing regulations in 40 CFR Parts 1500-1508 have been satisfied in the procedures used to reach this decision. These procedures included: the development of a range of alternatives for the Gorge Refuges' CCP; analysis of the likely effects of each alternative; and public involvement throughout the planning process.

An environmental assessment was prepared for the project that integrated the CCP management objectives and alternatives into the NEPA document and process. The Draft CCP/EA was released for a 30-day public comment period on August 20, 2004. The affected public was notified of the availability of these documents through a Federal Register notice, news releases to local newspapers, the Service's refuge planning website, and a planning update. Tribal governments were contacted directly for comments. Copies of the CCP/EA and/or planning updates were distributed to an extensive mailing list. In addition, the Service gave presentations on the Draft CCP/EA at public meetings held by the Columbia River Gorge Commission and Skamania County Commissioners, and met with staff from the Washington State Department of Wildlife, City of North Bonneville, and the City of Washougal. The Final CCP was revised from the Draft CCP/EA based on public comment received on the draft document. Comment letters and Service response to comments are contained in Appendix O of the Final CCP. A Final CCP and FONSI were issued.

- **National Historic Preservation Act (1966).** The management of archaeological and cultural resources of the Gorge Refuges will comply with the regulations of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. No historic properties listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places have been identified on the Gorge Refuges. No historic properties are known to be affected by the proposed action based on the criteria of an effect or adverse effect as an undertaking defined in 36CFR800.9 and Service Manual 614FW2, however, determining whether a particular action has a potential to affect cultural resources is an ongoing process that occurs as step-down and

site-specific project plans are developed. Should historic properties be identified or acquired in the future, the Service will comply with the National Historic Preservation Act if any management actions have the potential to affect any these properties.

- **Executive Order 11988. Floodplain Management.** Under this order Federal agencies "shall take action to reduce the risk of flood loss, to minimize the impact of floods on human safety, health and welfare, and to restore and preserve the natural and beneficial values served by floodplains." The CCP is consistent with Executive Order 11988 because CCP implementation would protect floodplains from adverse impacts as a result of modification or destruction. The CCP supports an Army Corps of Engineers feasibility study of a project to reestablish hydrologic connections between the historic Steigerwald Lake, the Columbia River, and Gibbons Creek. The study is currently not funded; however, the Service intends to pursue funding and other technical support to examine the feasibility of restoring floodplain function to portions of Steigerwald Lake.
- **Executive Order 11990. Protection of Wetlands.** The CCP is consistent with Executive Order 11990 because CCP implementation would potentially enhance and restore up to 290 acres of emergent wetlands. Additionally, plant communities in close association with wetlands would be protected and restored including 418 acres of riparian bottomland forest, up to 218 acres of riparian scrub-shrub habitat, and up to 20 acres of wet meadow.
- **Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) and Secretarial Order 3127.** No contaminant or hazardous waste materials are known to exist on the properties proposed for acquisition. A pre-acquisition Level I survey would be required and performed prior to the purchase of any property.
- **Executive Order 13175. Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments.** As required under Secretary of the Interior Order 3206 American Indian Tribal Rights, Federal-Tribal Responsibilities, and the Endangered Species Act, the Refuge Manager consulted and coordinated with area tribal governments; Yakima, Cowlitz, Chinook, Warm Springs throughout the CCP process.
- **Executive Order 12372. Intergovernmental Review.** Coordination and consultation with affected Tribal, local and State governments, other Federal agencies, and the landowners has been completed through personal contact by Service Planners, Refuge Managers, and Supervisors.
- **Executive Order 12898. Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority and Low-Income Populations.** All Federal actions must address and identify, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations, low-income populations, and Indian Tribes in the United States. The CCP was evaluated and no adverse human health or environmental effects were identified for minority or low-income populations, Indian Tribes, or anyone else.

- **Executive Order 13186. Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds.** This Order directs departments and agencies to take certain actions to further implement the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. A provision of the Order directs Federal agencies to consider the impacts of their activities, especially in reference to birds on the Fish and Wildlife Service's list of Birds of Conservation (Management) Concern (BCC). It also directs agencies to incorporate conservation recommendations and objectives in the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan and bird conservation plans developed by Partners in Flight (PIF) into agency planning. Species selected as focal conservation targets by the CCP were identified from multiple sources including pertinent BCC lists, applicable Flyway Management Plans, and regional PIF conservation plans. The effects of all alternatives to focal conservation targets were assessed within the CCP/EA.

- **Endangered Species Act.** This Act provides for the conservation of threatened and endangered species of fish, wildlife, and plants by Federal action and by encouraging the establishment of state programs. It provides for the determination and listing of endangered and threatened species and the designation of critical habitats. Section 7 of the Act requires refuge managers to perform consultation before initiating projects which affect or may affect endangered species. Intra-Service consultation involves seeking concurrence that plan implementation will have 'no affect' on northern spotted owls and plan implementation is 'not likely to adversely affect' bull trout and bald eagle. Inter-Service response from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries supported full implementation of the preferred alternative and will offer consultation on specific projects prior to implementation.

- **National Wildlife Administration Act of 1966, as amended by The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee).** The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (Public Law 105-57, Improvement Act) requires the Service to develop and implement a comprehensive conservation plan for each refuge. The Final CCP/EA identifies and describes Refuge purposes; Refuge visions and goals; fish, wildlife, and plant populations and related habitats; archaeological and cultural values of the Refuge; issues that may affect populations and habitats of fish, wildlife, and plants; actions necessary to restore and improve biological diversity of the Refuges; and opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation, as required by the Improvement Act.

Compatibility determinations have been prepared for the following uses: environmental education, interpretation, wildlife observation and photography; horseback riding, jogging, bicycling, and dog-walking on the Columbia River Dike Trail; research and monitoring; grazing and haying; and transportation of sewage treatment plant biosolids over a Refuge dike. All of these uses were found to be compatible with Refuge purposes and the System mission with stipulations specified in each of the compatibility determinations.

- **Wilderness Act.** The Service has evaluated the suitability of the Refuge for wilderness designation (Appendix G) and has found that it does not meet wilderness criteria. The Gorge Refuges are not recommended for inclusion in the Wilderness System.
- **Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act.** The Scenic Area was established to 'protect and provide for the enhancement of the scenic, cultural, recreational, and natural resources of the Columbia River Gorge' (PL 99-663, Sec. 3). The U.S. Forest Service's Scenic Area Office reviews proposals on federal lands within the Scenic Area to ensure that proposed uses and developments are consistent with the Revisions to the Management Plan for the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. During the development of the CCP, the Scenic Area Office and its staff have received planning updates, attended various meetings, and reviewed the Draft CCP/EA. In addition, the Service gave a presentation requesting review and comment of the Draft CCP/EA at a public meeting before the Columbia River Gorge Commission. Comment was received from the Forest Service during the public comment period and the Draft CCP/EA was revised. The Forest Service will not conduct official consistency reviews for programmatic documents, such as the CCP. As projects identified within the CCP are developed, the Forest Service will review these specific proposals for consistency with the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Management Plan.



Chief, Branch of Refuge Planning

Date 8/5/05