

U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service

**Record of Decision
for the
Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge
Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement
Washoe and Humboldt Counties, Nevada, and Lake County, Oregon**

Through this Record of Decision (ROD), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) selects the comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). This ROD includes brief summaries of the alternatives considered, the public involvement process, and the rationale for selecting Alternative 2, as described in the Final CCP and environmental impact statement (EIS), for management of the Sheldon Refuge. The CCP will provide guidance for managing and conserving the Refuge's natural resources and public use activities over the next 15 years.

Alternatives Considered

In the Draft CCP/EIS the Service evaluated three alternatives for the Refuge, including a no-action alternative (Alternative 1) as required under the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508).

Alternative 1. Under Alternative 1, the no-action alternative, we would assume no change from current management; this alternative is considered the base from which to compare the other two alternatives. We would continue to focus our management activities on maintaining relatively stable populations of approximately 800 feral horses and 90 feral burros within the Refuge. Fish populations in Big Spring Reservoir would be maintained through continued stocking of sterile rainbow trout. Our management of Refuge habitats would continue to include the use of prescribed fire and mechanical treatments to achieve habitat management objectives.

Current public uses including hunting, fishing, guiding, research, rock collecting, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation would continue. Few actions would be taken to expand public uses or reduce ongoing resource impacts from public uses. All existing designated campgrounds and roads would continue to be maintained at their current locations. We would continue to manage the Refuge's existing 341,500 acres of proposed wilderness area, to protect and preserve its natural primitive character, opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, and other special resource values. A basic level of inventory, monitoring, and protection for cultural and historic resources would occur within the Refuge.

Alternative 2. Under Alternative 2, our preferred alternative, current fish, wildlife, habitat, and public use management would continue, with the following key enhancements.

- Improvement of native habitat conditions would be facilitated by removal of all feral horses and burros from the Refuge within 5 years.
- Nonnative rainbow trout in Big Spring Reservoir and Virgin Creek would be replaced with trout species indigenous to the region (i.e., Lahontan cutthroat trout, Alvord cutthroat trout, or redband trout), and populations would be maintained through restocking if necessary.

- Increased control of noxious weeds and other invasive plants would be implemented, including increased weed control along road corridors.
- Removal of western juniper would be undertaken where juniper woodlands are encroaching upon sagebrush-steppe habitats.
- Rehabilitation and restoration of degraded habitats would occur, using intensive management techniques (i.e., seeding, erosion control structures, and recontouring).
- Removal of abandoned livestock water developments would occur, along with restoration of spring, playa, wet meadow, and stream habitats to more natural conditions where beneficial to wildlife.
- Improved recreation opportunities would be provided by relocating and enlarging the visitor contact station, improving campground facilities, developing an accessible interpretive trail, creating a self-guided auto tour route, and improving signage of routes open to vehicle use.
- Vehicle access to the Refuge would be improved when we reopen existing routes, following revisions to proposed wilderness area boundaries. More frequent maintenance of improved gravel roads would also occur.
- Relocation of up to nine campgrounds and realignment of road segments would occur, to reduce erosion and impacts to sensitive riparian areas and cultural resources. Seasonal road closures would be implemented as appropriate, to protect sensitive species and habitats.
- Areas managed for wilderness values will include those currently proposed for wilderness designation under Alternative 1, and additional wilderness study areas identified during the 2009 Sheldon Refuge Wilderness Review. As a result, a larger portion of Sheldon Refuge (424,360 acres) would be managed for wilderness character than under the other alternatives.
- There would be increased inventory, protection, and quality of interpretation for historic and cultural resources.

Alternative 3. Under Alternative 3, changes to current management would include removing all feral horses and burros from the Refuge over a period of 15 years; replacing nonnative trout in Big Spring Reservoir with trout species indigenous to the region, but not maintaining the trout population through restocking; and managing habitats by creating conditions where natural processes such as fire could be allowed more frequently with less dependence on prescribed fire and other intensive management actions. Current public uses would continue, but some facilities would be consolidated and some uses would be curtailed. Vehicle access to the Refuge would be reduced due to the closure of two roads, and reduced road maintenance, which would occur on existing primary roads only. Both of these actions would result in fewer miles of primitive routes open to the public. The area managed for wilderness character would include 236,791 acres, which would provide less long-term protection and preservation of wilderness values than the other alternatives. In addition, this alternative would provide the least amount of protection and preservation of historic resources, compared to the other alternatives.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The definition of “environmentally preferable alternative” (40 CFR 1505.2(b)) is different from that of the preferred alternative. The environmentally preferred alternative generally causes the least damage to the environment and best protects natural and cultural resources. For this CCP/EIS, Alternative 2, our preferred alternative, is also the environmentally preferable alternative for the Refuge. Under Alternative 2, we would continue to conduct current wildlife and habitat management, with the following additional actions beneficial to fish and wildlife, and their habitats.

- Remove all feral horses and burros from the Refuge within 5 years to allow recovery of sensitive wildlife habitats.

- Replace nonnative rainbow trout in Big Spring Reservoir and Virgin Creek with trout species indigenous to the region.
- Determine population trends, distribution, and migratory patterns of priority species such as pronghorn, greater sage-grouse, and other sagebrush obligate species, to better inform future management strategies.
- Initiate baseline surveys and/or increase monitoring for bats, reptiles, and amphibians.
- Increase weed-control efforts to include road corridors.
- Increase emphasis on removal of western juniper where it has encroached into sagebrush habitats, to restore the relative abundance of juniper woodlands and sagebrush-steppe habitats to pre-Euro-American settlement conditions.
- Relocate up to nine designated campgrounds to reduce impacts to riparian habitats and cultural resources.
- Realign 12 miles of roads to reduce soil erosion, and implement seasonal road closures to reduce impacts to sensitive habitats and wildlife.
- Rehabilitate and restore damaged and degraded habitats using intensive management techniques (i.e., seeding, erosion control structures, and recontouring).
- Where possible, use only native seed in rehabilitation activities.
- Initiate baseline surveys and increase monitoring for aspen, rare plants, microbiotic crusts, and other identified plants and habitats.
- Restore and rehabilitate at least 1 mile of Virgin Creek habitat.
- Submit a recommendation through the Department of the Interior to Congress, to revise the Refuge areas previously proposed for wilderness designation. The revision would include areas with less evidence of human development and disturbance, where fewer repeated management activities would be needed to restore and maintain biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health, which would provide the best opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation.

Public Involvement

We initiated the public scoping phase of our planning process in May 2008 by announcing our intention to complete a CCP/EIS in the Federal Register. Simultaneously, we issued a press release and distributed Planning Update 1 announcing the planning process and a series of open house meetings, and requesting public comments. We held five public open house meetings in 2008, and several additional meetings with county, state, and federal agencies, and key stakeholder groups.

Planning Update 2 was distributed in April 2009. We summarized the scoping comments we received and the significant planning issues we identified, in the update. We developed a preliminary set of draft management alternatives based on scoping comments, expert opinion, and Service policy. We released the preliminary draft alternatives, including the Service's preferred alternative, for public review and comments in June 2010, in Planning Update 3. Additional meetings with the State of Nevada and key stakeholder groups followed. Based on the comments we received, we modified the alternatives and presented them in the Draft CCP/EIS.

In September 2011, we announced the availability of the Draft CCP/EIS in the Federal Register and simultaneously sent a news release to local media. We also distributed Planning Update 4 to more than 4,500 interested individuals, organizations, and agencies. We included descriptions and a summary table of the alternatives in Planning Update 4, including our preferred alternative, and provided information for obtaining a copy of the Draft CCP/EIS and submitting comments. We addressed the public comments we received on the Draft CCP/EIS in the Final CCP/EIS. In our

response to comments, we clarified the rationale for a number of management actions and objectives. We also modified our preferred alternative to include additional fish species for stocking, to allow use of nonnative seed for habitat restoration under certain circumstances, to allow a greater use of helicopters and motorized equipment in the maintenance of water guzzlers, to provide for greater coordination with the Nevada Department of Wildlife prior to removal of abandoned water developments and restoration of spring and playa habitats, and to minimize disturbances to and displacement of wildlife, by leaving certain historic routes closed to vehicle use.

In July 2012 we released the Final CCP/EIS through a notice in the Federal Register. We also issued a press release and mailed Planning Update 5 to interested individuals, organizations, agencies, and local media. We informed the public that the Final CCP/EIS was available and a Record of Decision would be issued no sooner than 30 days. During the 30-day review period we received a number of comments, most related to horse and burro management and maintenance of artificial water sources, substantially similar to comments we received on the Draft CCP/EIS and addressed in the Final CCP/EIS. Other comments requested the Service to select an alternative presented in the Final CCP/EIS. Based on these comments, no changes to the Final CCP/EIS were made.

Interested and affected parties are being notified of our decision, and we are making this Record of Decision and supporting references available for public review through our Web site and at our offices in Portland and Lakeview, Oregon.

Decision

The Service has selected Alternative 2 as described in the Final CCP/EIS for implementation on the Refuge. Alternative 2 is the most effective alternative for addressing key issues identified during the planning process and will best achieve the purposes and goals of the Refuge, as well as the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Implementation of the CCP will occur over the next 15 years.

Factors Considered in Making the Decision

In reaching this decision, the Service reviewed and considered the following: Impacts identified in Chapter 6 of the Draft and Final CCP/EIS; relevant issues, concerns, and opportunities presented by agencies, organizations, and individuals throughout the planning process, including comments on the Draft and Final CCP/EIS; and other relevant factors, including the purposes for which the Refuge was established, and statutory and regulatory guidance.

Alternative 2 was selected for implementation for the following reasons.

- Alternative 2 will best achieve the Refuge's purposes and fulfill the Service's mission, is consistent with the principles of sound wildlife management, and will facilitate priority public uses that are compatible with the purposes of the Refuge.
- Habitat conditions will improve and provide benefits to native wildlife populations quicker, by removing all feral horses and burros from the Refuge as soon as it is practicable.
- The Refuge will be managed for a natural mosaic of Great Basin habitat types and the native species that depend on them. We will incorporate several new components to current habitat management, and focus on restoration of natural processes and rehabilitation and restoration of degraded habitats. A broad range of management tools will be available for application including prescribed and natural fire, mechanical treatments, and water management as necessary to meet the life history requirements of native wildlife species. The combination of these components will contribute to achieving the Refuge's vision, purposes, and goals.

- We will provide an achievable balance of opportunities for priority and compatible public uses (hunting, fishing, guiding, research, rock collecting, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation), while providing sufficient protection for wildlife and their habitats.
- We will protect Refuge resources by monitoring wildlife population trends and distribution, improving public information, and inventorying biological, cultural and historic resources.
- A larger portion of the Refuge will be managed for wilderness character, and the overall quality of the Refuge's wilderness resources (as measured by naturalness, untrammelled character, opportunity for solitude, and opportunities for primitive or unconfined types of recreation) will be improved.

Alternative 1 was not selected as the preferred alternative for the following reasons.

- We would continue to maintain feral horse and burro populations over the long-term under Alternative 1. The existing feral horse and burro management program is not adequate to reduce populations and would continue to result in major adverse impacts to fish and wildlife habitats throughout the Refuge.
- Limited habitat restoration and improvement would be conducted, whereas the preferred alternative expands upon current management activities and provides needed habitat improvements through the use of a broad range of management tools and increased efforts to control and remove invasive and nonnative species.
- The majority of water control structures would remain abandoned and unmaintained, whereas under our preferred alternative we will remove abandoned livestock water developments throughout the Refuge and restore spring, playa, wet meadow, and stream habitats, and wilderness character to more natural conditions beneficial to native fish, wildlife, and plant species, and wilderness recreation.
- Public uses such as overnight camping and vehicle use in sensitive habitats and cultural sites would continue, with few actions to minimize adverse impacts to wildlife.

Alternative 3 was not selected as the preferred alternative for the following reasons.

- Removal of feral horse and burro populations from the Refuge would have occurred over a longer timeline, resulting in continued and greater adverse impacts to native fish and wildlife and their habitats, compared to actions in Alternative 2.
- Only minimal use of mechanical habitat management tools such as mechanical thinning, mowing, and prescribed fire would have occurred.
- Alternative 3 would have resulted in a more gradual recovery of degraded habitats by emphasizing natural recovery, often with an expected low probability of success.
- Alternative 3 also would have maintained a limited focus on minimizing public use impacts and improving public use opportunities, interpretation and educational materials, and cultural resource protection.

Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm

Public concerns, potential impacts, and measures or stipulations to mitigate impacts are addressed in the Final CCP/EIS. Practicable measures to avoid or minimize environmental harm that could result from implementation of Alternative 2 have been identified and incorporated into Chapter 2 (Alternatives, Goals, Objectives, and Strategies), Chapter 6 (Environmental Effects), Appendix D (Compatibility Determinations), and Appendix G (Wilderness Minimum Requirements Decisions and Analyses) of the Final CCP/EIS. The stipulations identified in the compatibility determinations in Appendix D ensure that public and other uses are compatible with the National Wildlife Refuge

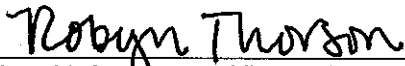
System mission and Refuge purposes. The alternatives identified in the Wilderness Minimum Requirements Decisions and Analyses in Appendix G ensure our management actions are necessary to meet the minimum requirement for administering proposed areas as wilderness and necessary to accomplish the purposes of the Refuge. The stipulations and other mitigation measures identified in the preferred alternative in Chapter 2, Appendix D, and Appendix G are adopted by the Service in this ROD, and will be implemented by Refuge and Service staff members, partners, and volunteers.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Executive Orders

The proposed action complies with all federal laws and executive orders related to the CCP planning process. A compliance statement has been prepared, which explains how the selected alternative complies with the requirements of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, as amended (16 U.S. Code [U.S.C.] 688dd-688ee); the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.); the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. 1531-1544, 87 Stat. 884); the National Historic Preservation Act (16 U.S.C. 470-470b, 470c-470n); the Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964; Executive Order 11644, Off-road Vehicles; Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management; Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands; Executive Order 12372, Intergovernmental Review; Executive Order 13186, Protection of Migratory Birds; and Executive Order 12898, Environmental Justice.

For Further Information

Questions about the Final CCP/EIS may be directed to John Kasbohm, Project Leader, Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex, P.O. Box 111, Lakeview, Oregon 97630, phone number (541) 947-3315, fax number (541) 947-4414, and email Sheldon-Hart@fws.gov.



Regional Director, Pacific Region
Portland, Oregon

SEP 27 2012

Date

Supporting References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. *Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Lakeview, OR.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2012. *Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Lakeview, OR.

Note: This ROD and supporting references are available for public review at the Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex, 20995 Rabbit Hill Road, Lakeview, Oregon 97630, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Planning, Visitor Services, and Transportation, 911 NE 11th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97232. These documents can be found on the internet at <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/main/docs/NV/docssheldon.htm>.