

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

# **New Northwest Montana Wetland Management District Administrative Facilities**

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*Environmental Assessment Supplement*

*January 2024*

*The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.*



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# 1 Purpose and Need for Action

## 1.1 Introduction

The staff of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have been administering the units of the Western Montana National Wildlife Refuge Complex geographically situated within the Mission, Flathead, and Swan Valleys of Northwestern Montana from facilities on the Bison Range (BR; formerly the National Bison Range), in Moiese, Montana. These facilities included a 4,700-square-foot visitor center with offices; a 2,300-square-foot residence repurposed as offices; a 5,500-square-foot maintenance shop; 2,000 square feet of warm storage; 6,000 square feet of cold storage; a 5-acre equipment yard; and three additional residences for staff and interns.

On December 27, 2020, the BR was restored to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) to be held in federal trust ownership, under Section 12 of the Montana Water Rights Protection Act, signed into law with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. As a result, facilities located on the BR would no longer be available for use, and the USFWS identified a need for replacement (new) facilities to administer the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District (NWMT WMD). Accordingly, a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (42 United States Code [U.S.C.] §§ 4321 et seq.) in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality (40 Code of Federal Regulations [C.F.R.] Parts 1500–1508), Department of the Interior (43 C.F.R. Part 46; 516 DM 8), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) (550 FW 3) regulations and policies.

The draft EA, released for public comment on September 28, 2021, evaluated the potential environmental impacts associated with five alternatives, including the no action alternative. Three of the alternatives were Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) located in the Mission Valley, including Anderson, Crow, and Herak (Alternatives B, C, and D, respectively). Alternative E was the acquisition of property not currently owned by the USFWS.

After reviewing all comments received and responding to those comments, the USFWS released a *Final Environmental Assessment for New Northwest Montana Wetland Management District Administrative Facilities in March 2022* (hereinafter March 2022 Final EA) and signed a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on June 13, 2022, selecting Alternative E for implementation. Under Alternative E, the USFWS would acquire land in the Mission Valley for the purpose of constructing new facilities and potentially increasing conservation land using Land and Water Conservation Funds and Migratory Bird Conservation Funds.

Since the signing of the FONSI, the USFWS has worked diligently to acquire a suitable land parcel in the Mission Valley for the construction of new facilities for the NWMT WMD. The USFWS staff engaged realtors/property owners about the government acquisition process,

looked at 26 properties and showed interest on 15 of those. Appraised offers were placed on three properties. However, the USFWS was unable to acquire any of these properties.

Although the June 2022 FONSI also identified Alternative C (Crow Waterfowl Production Area) for construction of new facilities should a suitable land parcel not be available for acquisition, the USFWS determined that its criteria for siting the new facilities could be broadened to assess building on one of the agency's existing other fee title properties. Accordingly, this supplemental EA evaluates five additional Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) in the Mission Valley for the construction of new facilities for the NWMT WMD. The WPAs include Duck Haven, Johnson 80, Kickinghorse, Montgomery, and Sandmark. Appendix A includes a map of all the WPAs in the NWMT WMD.

These five WPAs were not initially analyzed because the USFWS was concerned about whether the proposed facilities construction footprint could be situated on any of them and meet the identified siting criteria. However, the USFWS has since redesigned the proposed facilities construction footprint so that it could be accommodated at any of the five WPAs, rendering them as potentially suitable for further consideration and environmental analysis.

## **1.2 The Proposed Action**

The proposed action is to construct new facilities for the NWMT WMD. The proposed new facilities would include the same elements as described in the March 2022 Final EA -- a maintenance shop, a multi-purpose building, and cold and warm storage facilities, but one residence (instead of two as previously proposed). This would result in a smaller facilities footprint (less than 12 acres).

## **1.3 Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action**

The purpose and need for the Proposed Action remain the same as stated in the March 2022 Final EA. Accordingly, the USFWS is committed to maintaining a presence within commuting distance of the Bison Range and existing National Wildlife Refuge System managed lands and within the Flathead Indian Reservation in order to ensure the continuation of a strong partnership between the USFWS and the CSKT, to improve the quality and accuracy of cultural messaging across the Western Montana National Wildlife Refuge Complex, and to amplify our ability to incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge into our programs. Additionally, constructing management facilities within the Mission Valley ensures that staff and resources are located centrally within the NWMT WMD.

Replacement facilities are necessary to provide workspace for refuge staff, space for storage and maintenance of property, the ability to oversee and protect equipment and facilities, residence for permanent or seasonal staff, space for USFWS staff to create new partnerships and maintain and collaborate with its current partners, a place for the public to interact with refuge staff, and interpretive opportunities for the public to learn about the mission of the NWRS, the surrounding area, and our wildlife. Without facilities and available space,

partnerships crucial to the management of the NWMT WMD would be difficult to maintain, and the services that USFWS staff offer to local and regional agencies and organizations would likely be compromised.

## **1.4 Tribal Consultation**

Regular updates have been provided to the CSKT's Natural Resource Department staff on results of the USFWS' efforts to acquire land to construct the proposed facilities under Alternative E as identified in the March 2022 Final EA and the need to look at other WPAs to site the facilities. In addition, the USFWS is consulting with the CSKT Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) regarding compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and will complete the Tribal consultation before finalizing this EA if requested by the CSKT THPO.

## **1.5 Public Involvement**

Between September 29 and October 27, 2021, the USFSW made the *Draft Environmental Assessment for New Northwest Montana Wetland Management District Administrative Facilities* available for public review and comment. The USFWS received comments from one organization and 25 individuals. The comments were largely supportive of Alternative E since many of the commenters preferred that the WPA properties be preserved for wildlife habitat rather than be used to construct new infrastructure with additional traffic and air quality impacts. The removal of areas currently open to hunting was another concern. See Appendix D of the March 2022 Final EA.

# **2 Description of the Additional Alternative (Alternative F)**

## **2.1 WPAs Under Consideration as Alternative Sites**

Under this new alternative, USFWS is assessing any of the five following WPAs: Duck Haven, Johnson 80, Kickinghorse, Montgomery, and Sandmark as a potential site for the new facilities. Any of the five could meet the siting criteria, which included the avoidance of wetlands, areas where habitat restoration has been completed, areas of intact native vegetation, and areas that provide critical habitat for species of concern. The Montgomery WPA would meet more of the siting criteria than the other locations for the proposed new facilities. The other WPAs are being evaluated in this EA Supplement should unforeseen circumstances make the Montgomery WPA unfeasible for facilities construction.

All of the WPAs under consideration are relatively flat topographically and are predominantly covered by grassland. The USFWS has restored grasslands to native prairie in some of these WPAs. Each contains wetlands. Access to most of the WPAs is provided via U.S. Highway

93, State Highway 212, or paved secondary roads. The Montgomery WPA has paved access on two sides that is safe, in contrast to the other WPAs that are accessed via dirt or unsafe paved roads like U.S. Highway 93, without a turning lane.

## **2.2 Mitigation Measures and Best Management Practices**

The same mitigation measures and best management practices as identified in the March 2022 Final EA would be applied to any proposed construction. In siting the new facilities footprint, the USFWS would avoid all wetlands and areas where native grasses have been restored.

## **3 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences**

### **3.1 Geology and Soils**

The geology and soils at each of the WPAs under evaluation in the Mission Valley are the same as identified in the March 2022 Final EA. Impacts to the soils at any of the WPAs would be anticipated due to removal of topsoil for new buildings, roads, utilities, and parking lots. However, construction-related impacts would be temporary and only during the construction phase. Soil mitigation measures and BMPs would ensure minimized disturbance at that time and efforts to landscape and restore areas post-construction would minimize long-term impacts. The buildings and other impervious surfaces (e.g., driveways and parking lots) would be permanent changes to the property. No impacts are expected outside of the project area.

### **3.2 Hydrology and Wetlands**

All five WPAs are located within the Mission Valley Charlo hydrogeologic unit, which contains a productive aquifer (CSKT 2020). The placement of a groundwater well in this aquifer would support the needs of the new facility regardless of the WPA selected. Water use by the staff (less than ten, including seasonal hires), would be minimal and not affect groundwater supply. As previously stated, wetlands would be avoided during siting and construction of the proposed facilities. The USFWS would also likely enhance these wetlands.

### **3.3 Air Quality**

The air quality at the Mission Valley is in an area classified as in attainment with air quality standards. Constructing the proposed facilities at any of the WPAs would result in the same direct, temporary impacts to air quality during the construction phase as described for Alternatives B, C, and D (see the March 2022 Final EA), including emissions and dust from the use of heavy equipment and other vehicles during the construction phase. The operation of USFWS facilities at any of the WPAs, is not expected to contribute significantly to or exceed the current impacts of activities and seasonal changes to air quality in the surrounding area. No impacts are expected outside of the project area.

### **3.4 Habitat and Vegetation**

The predominant vegetative cover at all five WPAs is grassland. Although these grasslands can provide some cover for wildlife, they are largely required agricultural and pasture lands dominated by non-native grass and forb species (Borth 1998). The removal of upland vegetation and placement of buildings and other infrastructure, such as roads, utilities, parking lots, and driveways would result in the removal of existing grasses and forbs and ultimately is a loss of currently undeveloped habitat. In siting this infrastructure, the USFWS would avoid areas that have been restored to native grasses and implement best management practices to minimize disturbance and remove invasive species. Again, disturbance of the existing wetlands and any riparian areas on any of the WPAs would be avoided.

### **3.5 Wildlife and Species of Special Management Concern**

The proposed project areas provide moderate nesting cover for some species of waterfowl, upland game birds, and other ground nesting species such as short-eared owls. Other wildlife that potentially use the area include reptiles, small mammals, and invertebrates (e.g., garter snakes, shrews, voles, butterflies, moths, grasshoppers).

Threatened (T), Endangered (E), and Candidate (C)—T&E for short—species whose range overlaps with the proposed action include grizzly bears (T; *Ursus arctos horribilis*), monarch butterfly (C; *Danaus plexippus*), the yellow billed cuckoo (T; *Coccyzus americanus*), Spalding’s catchfly (T; *Silene spaldingii*), and Canada lynx (T; *Lynx canadensis*). The plant water howellia (*Howellia aquatilis*; formerly T) was delisted from the Endangered Species Act in June 2021.

While the federally listed grizzly bear is known to utilize the surrounding areas for passageway and to forage, there is no designated critical habitat for this species on or adjacent to these sites (USFWS 2021). There are sites adjacent to and throughout the NWMT WMD that can serve as habitat for individuals displaced as a result of the proposed action.

Canada lynx occur on the greater Flathead Indian Reservation in montane spruce/fir forests, but there is no habitat at any of the alternative construction sites. None of the other federally listed species described above have habitat on these sites, thus the USFWS anticipates there will be no effect by construction of the proposed facilities.

There are no known environmental trends likely to decrease potential habitat for the previously mentioned species in the vicinity of the proposed action. Similarly, there are no planned actions in the area that, when combined with the anticipated effects of the proposed action, would have a compounded negative impact on the quality or availability of habitat to T&E species.

### **3.6 Visitor Use and Experience**

All of the WPAs in the NWMT WMD have minimal to nonexistent visitation outside of the waterfowl and pheasant hunting season, an activity that is important to the local community. In fact, annual refuge visitation reporting to all the WPAs in the Mission Valley showed 2,000 visits, primarily by waterfowl and upland bird hunters. Wildlife observation and photography activities were found to bring the next highest number of visitors to the district. However, there are there no qualitative visitation data specific to any of the WPAs under consideration for the location of new facilities.

In addition, there are no existing opportunities for interpretation, environmental education, or fishing on any of the WPAs. The creation of a visitor contact station within the multipurpose building, although minimal in size, and enhancement of the wetlands on any of the WPAs would improve visitor use and experience in the NWMT WMD. In addition, the presence of staff at a common office location could also create more opportunities to interact with visitors. However, with the placement of the proposed new facilities on any of the WPAs would result in a direct and long-term reduction in hunting opportunities on the selected WPA. Any other impacts on visitor experience would be comparable to those identified for Alternatives B, C, and D in the March 2022 Final EA.

### **3.7 Cultural Resources**

As identified in the March 2022 Final EA, a variety of cultural resources, including precontact and historic archaeological sites as well as historic built environment resources are present in the Mission Valley. Per established protocol with the boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation, the USFWS is consulting with the CSKT Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) regarding compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and will complete the Tribal consultation before finalizing this EA if requested by the CSKT THPO. Additional clearance requests will be submitted in priority order if Montgomery is found to be unsuitable.

### **3.8 Land Use**

The WPAs under consideration are comprised of open and undeveloped space preserved for the benefit of wildlife and habitat. Many of these WPAs are surrounded by privately held open grassland or cultivated farm field with residences in close proximity, all are within the boundary of the Flathead Indian Reservation.

Constructing the proposed facilities at any of the WPAs under consideration would be consistent with the mission of the NWMT WMD but would change a portion of the property from open space to a developed area. Increased traffic could occur on surrounding roadways with the presence of a maintenance shop, multi-purpose building, and a residence. However, staffing would be less than ten on a daily basis (some of which would be seasonal hires) and the visitor contact space within the proposed facilities would be limited. It is expected that



visitation would be no more than 75-100 visitors annually. As a result, the increased traffic generated by the proposed new facilities would have minimal impact on local residents and road use.

### **3.9 Socioeconomics**

The WPAs under consideration are located in Lake County, Montana. Existing socioeconomic conditions for these WPAs are the same as described for the other alternatives in the March 2022 Final EA. The impacts of constructing the proposed facilities at any of the WPAs under consideration would be comparable to those identified for Alternatives B, C, and D in the March 2022 Final EA.

### **3.10 Environmental Justice**

The 2019 racial composition of Lake County is 67% white, 0.3% African American, 24.3% American Indian, 0.3% Asian American, 4.6% Hispanic American, and 0.2% Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander. According to a 2020 Environmental Protection Agency Environmental Justice (EJSCREEN) Report generated in 2021 for Lake County (Montana), there are no Superfund or Hazardous Treatment and/or Storage and/or Disposal Facilities within the county (EPA 2021). All other data for data for environmental justice parameters for Lake County are identified in the March 2022 Final EA. Environmental justice impacts for constructing the proposed new facilities at any of the WPAs under consideration would be the same as described for Alternatives B, C, and D in the March 2022 Final EA.

### **3.11 Summary of Analysis**

Constructing the proposed facilities at any of the WPAs under consideration would be consistent with the purpose of and need for the USFWS to provide infrastructure and facilities sufficient to support and manage habitat requirements and visitor service activities on the NWMT WMD. Similar to Alternatives B, C, and Devaluated in the March 2022 Final EA, construction-related activities would have minimal impacts on some natural resources including wildlife, air quality, soils, and vegetation. Mitigation and BMPs would minimize impacts on these resources. There would be beneficial impacts on administration, public use, and recreation under the proposed action by enhancing the visitor center and consolidating administrative facilities to support wildlife and habitat management while supporting ecotourism in the region.

## **4 References**

References used are the same as identified in the March 2022 Final EA.

## **5 List of Supplement Preparers**

Ben Gilles, Project Leader

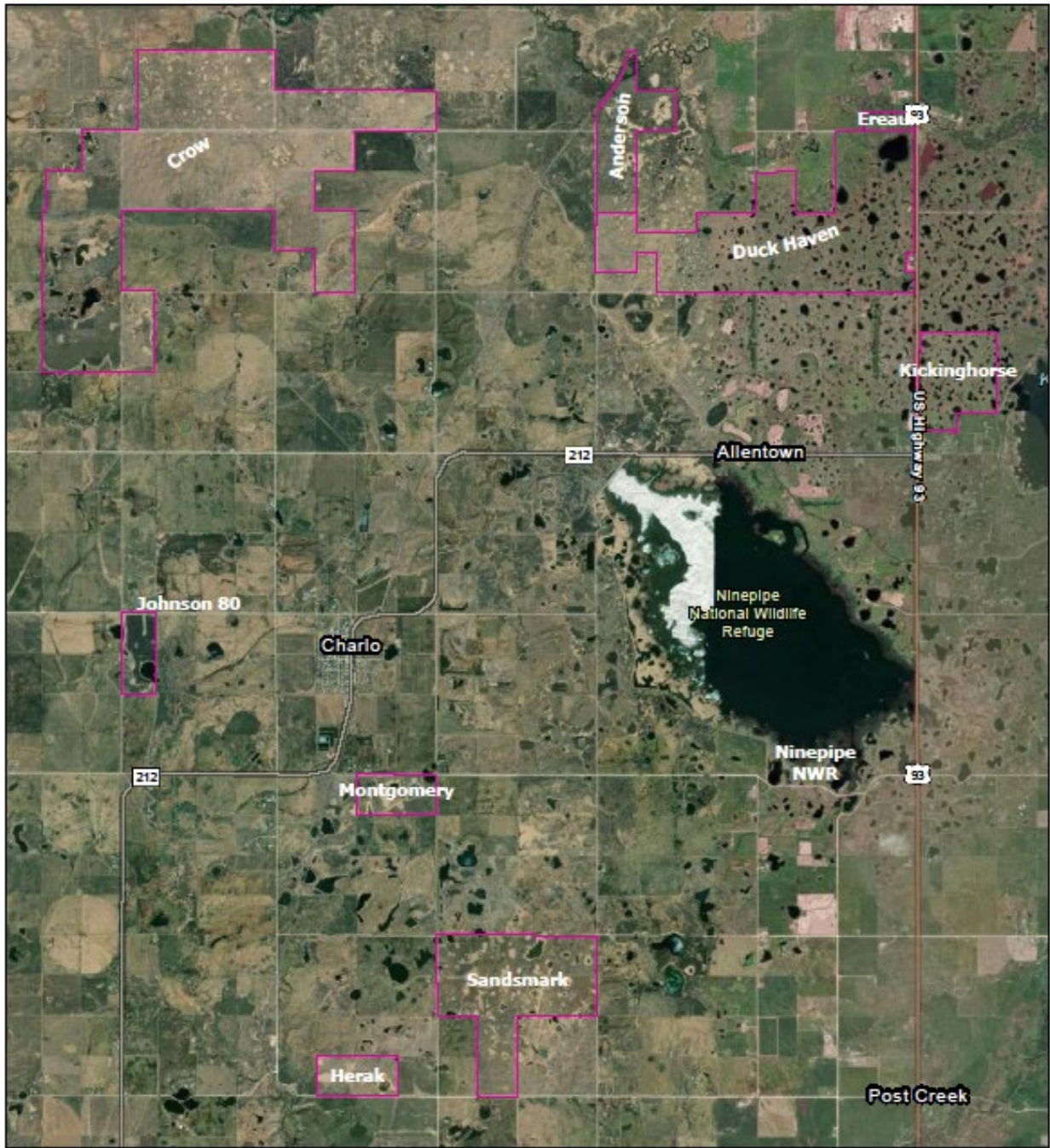
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## **Appendix A**



# Waterfowl Production Areas in the Mission Valley



 Waterfowl Production Area

