

Scoping Report

**Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and Bear River Watershed
Conservation Area Comprehensive Conservation Plan**

August 2023

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS or “Service”) is developing a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) that will cover the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area (BRWCA) and will provide a foundation for the management and use of the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge (Refuge or BRMBR).

The Bear River Watershed Conservation Area, which encompasses Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, and Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge, was established in 2016. The Bear River is the largest river in the Western Hemisphere that flows into an inland sea—the Great Salt Lake. The river originates in the Uinta Mountains and flows north and west in an arc from Utah, through Wyoming and Idaho, and back into Utah. During its 500-mile journey, the Bear River passes through the three previously mentioned national wildlife refuges.

This conservation easement program has the potential to protect up to 920,000 acres of wetland, grassland, and agricultural land in the Bear River Watershed.

The Refuge encompasses 77,102 acres and is comprised of deltaic wetlands that make up numerous wetland impoundments, wet meadows, and uplands. Located in Northern Utah at the terminus of the Bear River, and part of the Great Salt Lake (GSL) ecosystem, the Refuge is a priority area within the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area and plays a critical role in providing habitat for migratory birds along the Central and Pacific Flyways.

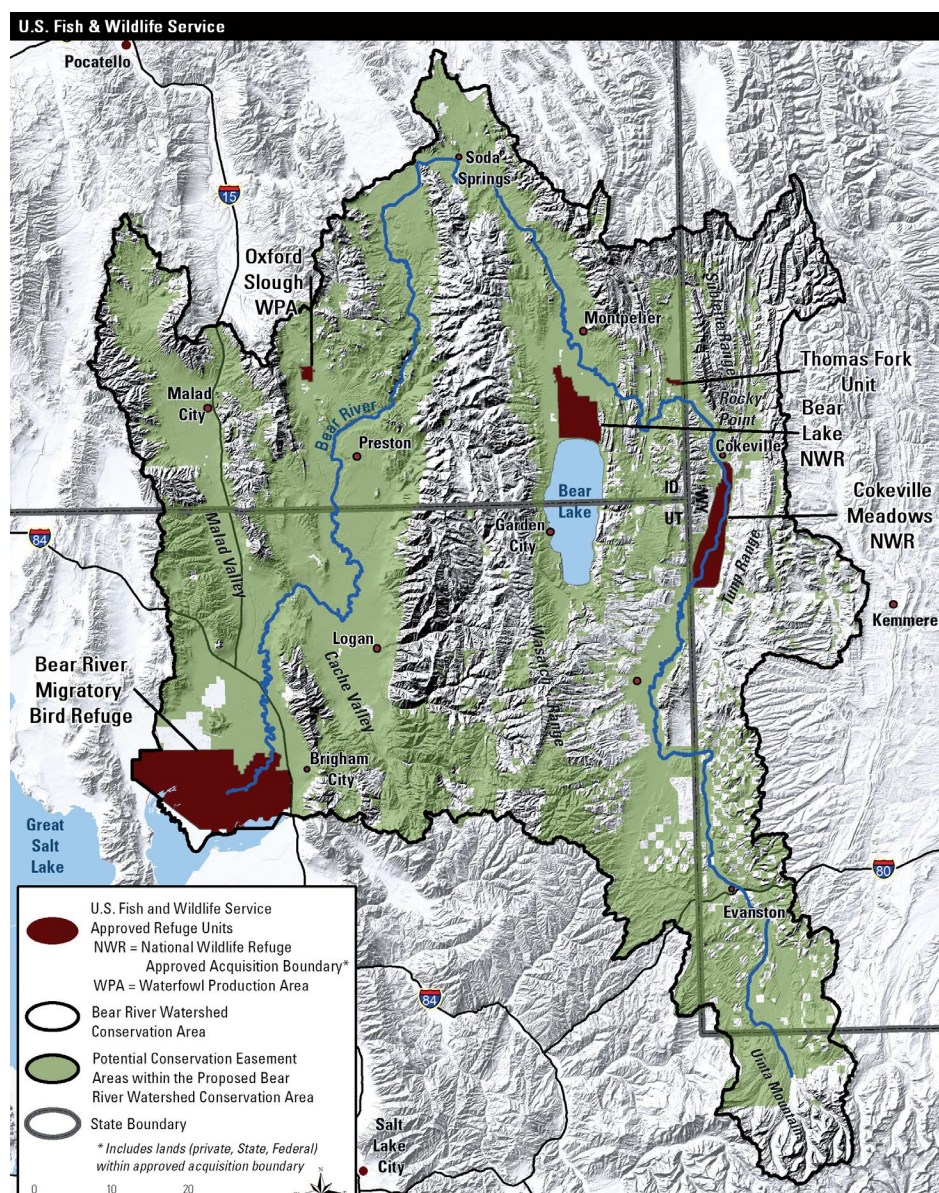


Figure 1: General location of the BRWCA and the encompassed National Wildlife Refuges

CCP POLICY AND CHANGES

The CCP is being developed as required by and in compliance with the *National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997* (also known as the *Improvement Act*, 16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.). Once completed, additional step-down plans that develop objectives and strategies to implement on the Refuge will begin. There will be opportunity for public comment on any future step-down plans.

PLANNING AND SCOPING PROCESS

The Service began the preplanning process for the CCP in January 2022 with the creation of a planning team comprised primarily of Service staff from the Refuge and the Region 6 Division of Refuge Planning. Service staff began thinking about planning issues and problems throughout the Refuge and BRWCA and how to potentially address issues within the context of the new CCP policy. A third-party facilitation organization was contracted to assist the Service with the public engagement and visioning process. A series of focus groups were conducted with individuals representing an array of partners, stakeholders, community members, and local and state agencies. The input provided from these individuals was incorporated into a visioning workshop and used by Refuge staff to create a draft vision statement for the CCP. In the fall, the Service hosted two public listening sessions to provide an opportunity for comments on the draft vision and the planned CCP. A Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in February 2023 followed by a 30-day public comment period.

Focus Groups

The public scoping process is an important component of the planning process for the CCP. Early in the preplanning phase, a process was outlined that would be inclusive of many interests, would ensure meaningful public input and involvement, and would keep the public informed about the CCP planning process. The Service identified a diverse group of individuals who represented partners, stakeholders, community members, and local and state agencies. These individuals were invited to participate in a series of focus groups to gather input and opinions to inform the CCP process. Participating in the focus groups was an opportunity for the public to help shape the future of the Refuge and assist the Refuge in meeting community needs. Participants were led through a SWOT analysis where they provided feedback on Refuge strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The results of this SWOT analysis can be found in Appendix A. The final exercise prompted small groups of participants to work together to draft language that could be incorporated into a Refuge vision statement. Three focus groups were held, two on June 23rd, 2022, at the Refuge visitor center in Brigham City, Utah and one on June 24th, 2022, at the Eccles Wildlife Education Center in Farmington, Utah.

Visioning Workshop:

Following the completion of the focus groups, a visioning workshop for Refuge staff was held on August 17th, 2022. Participating staff were given a document containing the feedback from the focus groups to review beforehand and reference during the workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to prepare a draft vision that would anchor the CCP for the Refuge, enable the creation of appropriate and meaningful step-down plans, and leverage the input from the community to understand and address their needs. Similar to the focus groups, staff were led through a series of

exercises to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Refuge. Together, staff were then led to create a draft vision that combined the input from the focus groups with the responses from the workshop. Following the workshop, that draft vision statement was edited slightly to improve the wording and structure.

Listening Sessions

After the Refuge staff were satisfied with the draft vision statement, two public listening sessions were hosted on September 22nd and 27th, 2022 in Farmington, Utah and Brigham City, Utah, respectively. Emails were sent to focus group participants, and other partners, stakeholders, community members, and agencies that invited them to participate and included the date, time, and place of the listening sessions. In addition, a news release and social media announcements were posted with the listening session details. The listening sessions provided an opportunity for members of the public to provide their comments and feedback on the BRMBR and BRWCA CCP and the draft vision statement.

The listening sessions started with Service staff giving a brief welcome statement and introduction followed by a short, interactive presentation. The presentation included a short video and some guidance about the type of feedback the Service hoped to hear from the attendees. Following the presentation, attendees were allowed to move between various stations set up and staffed by Service members for informal discussion on a variety of different topics. Station topics included education and outreach, water management, habitat management, recreation, easements and private lands, and hunt and fish. Each station included comment forms, maps of the Refuge, and other relevant material for each topic. The discussions were productive, and attendees informed the Service about their issues, concerns, and suggestions for management of the Refuge.

Notice of Intent

The official public scoping period began in February 24, 2023 with the publication of a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register and a news release in local print media to notify the public of the Service's intent to begin the CCP process and to solicit public comments. Emailed and written comments were received until the end of the 30-day comment period on March 27, 2023.

The objective of the scoping process was to gather the full range of comments, questions, and concerns that the public had about management of the Refuge or about the planning process. It should be noted that public scoping is not a voting process, and each comment is of equal importance. All comments, whether from email or written submissions or recorded at the listening sessions, are contained in appendix A.

Requests for information contained in comments are handled in accordance with the *Freedom of Information Act*, NEPA (40 CFR 1506.6(f)), and other Department of the Interior and USFWS policies and procedures. In compliance with the policies of the Service regarding disclosure of personal information, any names, addresses, or other personal information of individuals (does not apply to agencies or organizations) who commented have not been published in this document.

FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL AGENCIES

In accordance with the Service's planning policy, the scoping process initiated by the NOI included formal notification to other federal and state agencies with a land management interest and invited them to participate as cooperating agencies and members of the planning team. Congressional members were also notified of the publication of the NOI.

NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES

The Service sent letters of notification about the planning process, including an invitation to participate on the planning team, to the following tribes:

Northwest Band of Shoshone Nation of Utah, Skull Valley Band of Goshute Indians, Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah, Ute Indian Tribe, Northern Arapaho Tribe, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, Eastern Shoshone Tribe, and the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Reservation.

The Service will continue to engage the Native American tribes throughout the process.

ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The scoping comment period has passed, but there will be an additional opportunity for people to be involved in the planning process. The public, Native American tribes, and federal, state, and local agencies will have an opportunity to review the draft CCP and provide comments on that document. In addition, at any time during the planning process, any questions or concerns can be emailed to [BearRiverCCP@fws.gov](mailto: BearRiverCCP@fws.gov).

Appendix A. SWOT Analysis Results from Focus Groups

Strengths

- Regional planning efforts – materials coming out of it benefit the whole community.
- Erin – engaged in community, restoring the Refuge to its full potential.
- Resource management – ability to do a lot with very little.
- Large size – benefits hundreds of species.
- Working with partners to fill gaps.
- Name recognition – keeps people curious.
- “Oasis in the desert.”
- Research capability and history.
- Sense of place – connection to our center.
- Build service work into recovery program.
- Benefits Refuge (volunteers) +.
- Volunteers impact vision of the world (benefit of community service).
- Staff – reaching out to partners, being part of the plan and the process.
- Communication with community.
- Maintenance – roadways, fences – make it a positive experience.
- Continuous improvement mindset.
- Willingness to partner.
- Proactive about meeting challenges.
- Fueling station for migratory birds.
- Size – makes it a key breeding area – significant, makes a difference.
- The fact that it exists.
- Expand research project – open for research.
- Science – allow science on the refuge – haven’t always had a scientist.
- Areas are closed to access because people are idiots.
- Social media – better communication (status, activities, access updates, etc.).
- Nature – not just birds!
- Protecting things we might not know are there.
- Nice job of reaching out to partners – DU + various others, state agencies, etc. to gather perspectives.
- Learn best practices.
- Education and outreach to public (e.g., visitors center).
- Destination within GSL.
- Maximizing limited resources.
- Great Salt Lake exists as a riparian habitat for species.
- Refuge doubles down on protecting bird health and populations and the entire ecosystem.

Weaknesses

- Water rights aren’t 12 months a year – no access to water.
- Transportation required to get here.
- Size – also a weakness – lots to manage with a high size-to-staff ratio.
- Federal – lots of things are over the local staff head.
- Wetlands should be managed as a whole, not independently.
- Equity.
- Manage based on need for species represented in flyway.
- Manage for diversification within box.
- Lack of staff.
- Limited funding.
- HMP elements are not included – need to get everyone on same page – need an overarching plan.
- Minor waterways choked off by invasive species.

- Carp management.
- So many water control structures (not enough staff/boards to capture water).
- Staff contracted out to keep carps out while we could have water control structures that incorporate fish management.
- Invasive vegetation – efforts to improve on dam; too much focus on phragmites.
- Lack of proper equipment to deal with phragmites.
- Staffing limitations prevent some community outreach.
- Rely heavily on friends' group and volunteers.
- Refuge forgets core constituents (e.g., duck hunting); scared to play up hunting, even though it is a source of funding.
- Water management – too many water control structures.
- Unit 9 – only 1 flow; more beneficial water management technique.
- Lack of discretionary water usage.
- Water to keep GSL full and keep crops.
- Critter population to return to levels of 1930's and 1940's.
- Hours at VC are limited.
- Employee turnover.
- New employees that are unfamiliar with established best practices.
- Low institutional knowledge.
- Low trust in local knowledge.
- Not enough capacity to manage/ (need more effective studies on numbers).
- Keeping contacts to know who is in what position.
- Communication lacking – interacting with public.
- Hard to get information.
- What is going on.
- What to expect.
- Bathroom - midway on auto tour is needed.
- Effort into partnership with Eccles Center and others.
- Despite ignorance, educate to enable better access.
- Need to get out of car and get hands dirty.
- Increase controlled access (guided?)
- More energy spent on managing property well.
- Too much on their plate.
- Many new staff – takes time to learn GSL ecology (very different from other refuges).
- Inexperience.
- Contracting hurdles – process is complex and lengthy.
- Haven't been there and have never heard of it as a recreation destination; not a place known to visit for a hike or a bike ride.
- Under-marketed; communities of color in Utah and the Wasatch Front can access them, but they are not well-known.
- Perception problem – could be more welcoming with partnerships and addressing transportation.

Opportunities

- Partner on transportation – getting here.
- Active transportation – multi-use pathways for biking, hiking, etc.
- Increase partnerships – quantity size of partner programs.
- Adaptive recreation – rides with adaptive equipment (partnership with Aviary).
- Build economic partnerships – perception of refuge as an economic asset (e.g., tourism).
- Outreach (e.g., D-Line) transparency:
 - What are they doing?
 - What opportunities are there to help?
- Informing people about the impact of lack of water:
 - Generate community support.
 - Waterfowlers.
 - Major perception problem.
- Develop solid invasive species plan (plants, fish, predators).

- Collaborative grant writing (more).
- LWCF – ton of money to use for easement acquisition (physically grow).
- Opportunity to educate how our decisions impact Cache Valley and Bear River.
- Someone to do educational classes for us.
- Combined projects with private landowners that benefit both (e.g., sheetwater habitats and selective cattle grazing).
- Manage for nesting habitat as well as migratory.
- Make more of refuge accessible (if possible).
- Cross-agency work – access to state money through conservations FFSL and UDWR.
- Purchase more uplands.
- Work with livestock producers for mutual benefit.
- Dedicated programming for marginalized groups (partnerships, e.g., Utah Pride Center).
- Master naturalist courses @ Swanner – partnering to provide.
- VC department – more training for external naturalists.
 - Outreach.
- Create resource for naturalists.
- Sharing science data and methods/monitoring (collaboration).
- Partnering to create larger exhibits – share between locations.
- Water - \$40M water trust (Audubon conservancy) – need refuge to help build conduit to lake.
- Well managed phragmites program – collaboration.
- Community outreach about zoo (Utah, not local).
- Community science opportunities.
- Participate in new GMA plan (e.g., Willow Spur).
- Acknowledge/advertise blog articles (Jeff) (BR and DNR).
- Data to support effects of climate change on birds and greater specificity on management.
- Urban sprawl – impact on refuge – buy more land.
- Zoo has new exhibit – local wildlife – zoo can promote local additional resources.
- Develop a cadre of partners who understand challenges of ecology.
- Tremendous amount of press = opportunity to raise funds and garner support to get work done- “don’t let a crisis go to waste.”
- Members are waterfowl hunters – provide opportunities for hunters and recreating public in general – land use.
- Shared objectives – educating public on habitats – partner to proffer a unified voice and strengthen message.
- Invasive species management.
- Leverage DU expertise to assist with biology/engineering.
- UTA running public transit line to refuge to connect more people to and from.
 - Include weekends for equitable access.
 - Latinos- 25% more likely not to have access to private vehicle.
- Be more vocal to state and decision makers regarding water conservation and appropriation for GSL; as a federal agency, they have an opportunity to work with state officials to create a future for a full Salt Lake.
- Research and analysis – know the demographics of the population – have equitable and diverse long term conservation plan that serves Americans, who is and has been using the Refuge.

Threats

- Water.
- Climate change.
- Invasive species.
- Ignorance.
- Politics at every level.
- Lack of funding.
- General decrease in outdoor activities (interest in outdoors among youth).
- Bear River water project/ Diversion.
- Taking refuge for granted.
- Drought.
- Development:
 - Housing development next to Refuge.
 - Urban sprawl.

- Dewatering of Bear River.
- Distractions - do I have enough energy to care about this too?
- Diminishing space and opportunity.
- Overutilization – new technologies developed eliminate bird sighting/need seclusion for hunting, bird watching, etc.
- For sale signs along auto tour (Utah sensitivity to land grabs).
- Increased visitation – edge effects on habitats.
 - Wild land – urban interface issue.
- Take lesson from Big 5 National Parks – loved them to death.
- Lack of data.
- Low trust in science.
- Proliferation of disdain for federal public land.
- Invasive species:
 - don't provide habitat value (phragmites).
 - we are losing land (equivalent to paving).
 - use of water.
 - limits diversity of plant life.
- Water quality concerns – algae development, high nutrient loads.
- Heat wave.
- Learn about the future of ALL the species it supports.
- Inequitable access to jobs (e.g., who gets to be biologist and interpreters and land managers).

Appendix B. Scoping Comments and USFWS Responses to Comments

SCOPING COMMENTS

Comment #1:

I would like to suggest that in the future a portion of the refuge that is open to hunting be set aside for non-motorized boats and walk-in hunting only. I have nothing against mud motors, I own one. The mud motors have continually gotten more ubiquitous and at times disruptive, a quieter option might be nice.

This would put paddlers and walk-ins on more equal footing with those that spend a large amount of money on specialized boats. I would be glad to offer further explanation if requested.

Comment #2:

I cannot attend the listening session in person. One thing that I would love to see would be a guided birding tour on the water. I wonder if a commercial operation could be allowed to run a weekly float or something like that. I understand not wanting to disturb the wildlife, so it would be nice to do some testing to see if it could be done quietly, with minimal disturbance. It would just be a fascinating experience to spend several hours slowly floating through a portion of the refuge.

I'm guessing that suggestion may not even be considered, so here is one that is more feasible: some boardwalks that end in bird blinds for photographers at a couple of places along the auto tour. Perhaps a bird blind could be built as a tower of sorts so people could photograph from different heights.

Lastly, perhaps there are some opportunities for citizen science. I teach biology for USU Brigham City and could get some students collecting data if there were particular questions you would like to address.

Those are my thoughts on the matter. Thanks for listening!

Comment #3:

First off, thanks for the opportunity to comment. Unfortunately, I'm unable to attend one of the listening sessions but I wanted to provide my comments regarding the future of the refuge. I do believe that overall the refuge does a remarkable job in managing BRMBR given resource constraints and thanks to the staff for their efforts.

My comments revolve mostly around the volunteer aspect of the refuge and ways to maximize this resource. A suggestion as it relates to the CCP is making sure that the CCP emphasizes the maximum use of community, volunteer, and partnership resources. BRMBR in particular has a history of making maximum use of volunteer efforts, and indeed much of the refuge was restored after the 1980's floods with volunteer resources. This is part of the local culture and history of BRMBR, so I believe that the CCP should explicitly call out the creative and expanded use of volunteer, community, and partnership resources.

Second, I wanted to touch on the issue of leveraging partner effectiveness with equipment. While this is of course a generalization, I'm of the view that refuges have a much more difficult time obtaining employees to perform mission tasks than they do obtaining necessary equipment. For small partner organizations, they typically have the opposite problem: they have or can obtain sufficient volunteers, but don't have the resources to obtain equipment. So I would suggest that the refuge take advantage of that and allow volunteers to get qualified on heavy and other equipment so that they can perform environmental restoration tasks more efficiently on the refuge.

Finally, I think that BRMBR needs to take more of a predator management emphasis in the future. As organizations such as Delta Waterfowl are noting, their own efforts to expand and improve wetlands are not providing the desired results unless they're coupled with predator management. While the emphasis of many BRMBR partners is specifically on waterfowl, nuisance predators such as raccoons also predate ground nesting songbirds and other water birds. Given resource constraints I would also like to suggest that the CCP address allowing volunteers and partners to trap predators on the refuge, by permit. That way specific species can be targeted as a condition of the permit as well as outlining acceptable trapping areas, and species targeted.

Comment #4:

I would like to make the following recommendation for the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge.

1. Increase access points for non-motorized boats.
2. Widen the boat pull over into unit 3 and leave the winches removed
3. Leave the natural water flow when the dike in unit 3 is removed. This will increase boat access to the lower (Southern portion) of the unit.
4. Leave a portion of the parking lot in 2A for bird watchers and hunters who access unit 3 by crossing the channel.
5. Dredge out boat ramp in unit 2C
6. Install handicap blind in either Yates or unit 5C drainage
7. Whenever possible dredge (or some other means) sediment at the end of the channels that dump into unit 2D.
8. Clear out Eastern channel in unit 3. It is overgrown
9. Clear out channel running South in unit 9 center (across from unit 2D boat ramp). This would allow increase in water flow and hunter access. You have a boat ramp that is not being used, because the Southern flow goes no where.
10. Dredge channel in 1A North of boat ramp and remove dog leg or at least mow down vegetation to prevent potential boat collisions.

Please feel free to reach out to me if you need clarification on any of these suggestions.

Comment #5:

I attended the listening session this week about the vision statement for the Migratory Bird Refuge. I greatly appreciate the care that went into the process of developing it and believe that the statement as written is clear, but I did have some feedback and was asked to share it by email. My primary concern is just that it is long. I wish it were a bit more concise so that it is not only inspirational, but even usable - say as a tshirt or a sign that inspires people to be involved with the refuge. In other vision crafting work, I have been taught that the vision should encapsulate the way you want the world to look if you accomplished your mission. For instance, "The world's greatest migratory bird refuge connecting the Bear River watershed and the Great Salt Lake" seems to

communicate the message and be aspirational. The rest of the vision statement could easily become a list of values, "We value science, education, and partnerships," for instance, that accompany the mission and vision, but keeps the vision statement a bit simpler. I don't know if this will be at all helpful and I know a lot of work has gone into crafting the current one so if it is approved, it isn't a bad thing, I just feel something shorter could become useful in more ways.

Comment #6:

INTRODUCTION: As volunteers, we have the unique opportunity to interface with the public on a daily basis. With 170,000 visitors in 2013, it is easy to see that we hear numerous comments from other volunteers and the public who visit Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge (BRMBR). Through these conversations, we receive a great deal of feedback from public user groups about how we can better provide refuge programming for the "Big 6 wildlife-dependent recreationists. As a group we wanted to sit down together to see how we could help the refuge in shaping programs where the public has expressed interest. Given the recent budget cutbacks and staff reductions, we discovered that we, as a group, are willing and able to offer time and resources toward developing and leading new opportunities at the Refuge. We also know that we have the resources, working in partnership or alliance with Friends of Bear River and BRMBR staff, to enhance the use of social media and marketing strategies to attract a larger contact group. After collaborating with a core of volunteers including Jennifer Bunker, Dickson Smith and Brian Ferguson on some ideas for several months, we are submitting the following proposal for your consideration and discussion.

For the past year or so there has been much discussion between volunteers, refuge visitors and refuge staff concerning opportunities for all visitor groups, specifically wildlife observations and photography. With declining budgets and the cancellation of the summer guided tour program in 2013 and most recently the "government shutdown" we see a decline in opportunities to showcase the major fresh water marsh in northern Utah and one of the crown jewels in the US Fish and Wildlife Refuge System.

On December 12, 2013 the core group of volunteers met with Lee Shirley, representative from the Friends of the Bear River, to discuss concerns and opportunities we believe can help enhance the visitor experience, domestic and international, at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. We discussed ideas and suggestions that might be helpful to refuge staff to further meet the needs and desires of the public. We also see this effort as an opportunity to build a stronger alliance between BRMBR, the Friends, and the volunteers.

We centered our discussion on the "Big Six" wildlife dependent opportunities currently offered at BRMBR. We commend the hard work of the refuge staff during very trying budget and restrictive times to ensure some level of service to the public while maintaining the high professional standard of excellence in managing valuable refuge resources. The acquisitions of the Canadian Goose Club, Yates Tracts, etc. over the past three years have added valuable wetlands and uplands to the refuge boundary. We were pleased to hear of the decision to reinstate the summer guided tour program with one tour per week during the 2014 season. We feel that it is time for the volunteers and Friends working in conjunction with refuge staff, to step up and help showcase this wonderful resource to the world.

We realize there are potential user group and/or management conflicts that need to be addressed and coordinated with refuge staff to ensure a safe experience for visitors as well as maintaining appropriate protection for the resources on the refuge. We know that additional funds may not be available and that work time impacts on the staff have to be minimized. We step into this proposal knowing that the volunteers and Friends are going to have to provide the leadership and

coordination for a high quality recreation experience. We will also have to develop a plan identifying those volunteers and members of the “Friends” that will assist with those required tasks. This will not only include getting programs scheduled and volunteers to lead programs but also we will assist in marketing and social media outreach to assure the highest level participation possible. Any new activities will be coordinated with education and visitor services staff and law enforcement. Volunteers will provide recruitment and training of volunteers to implement activities at the high standard the refuge has set.

As we discussed the opportunities available we felt that the refuge has done a great job of mixing hunting opportunities and safe refuge zones for waterfowl during the waterfowl season. We also see good use of the river resource during the warmer months for fishing and applaud the installation of the fishing line depositories. The environmental education program is second to none in the country and the Education Center is the foundation for that program. There is a desire to expand this program to reach underserved audiences in our nearby urban centers with the “Urban Initiative” centered on the importance of watershed health and impacts to BRMBR. We are sure that the volunteers involved in this area will continue to assist in that program as well. Our primary focus for this proposal is to create opportunities for the other user groups to provide high quality comparable opportunities (Interpretation, Photography, and Wildlife Observation). We want this proposal to support long standing existing partnerships with the local businesses, community, neighbors adjacent to the refuge, State and Federal agencies, Wasatch Audubon, Great Salt Lake Bird Festival, and the research community. We want to be a part of sharing this great resource while maintaining high quality habitat and protection for the wildlife on the refuge.

We feel that a strong marketing plan and the use of social media will enhance public involvement in recreation programs on the refuge. Our marketing plan would serve to reintroduce the Refuge to locals who may not be aware of the ongoing and new recreational opportunities on the Refuge. Further, this campaign would attract new audiences, local volunteers and new financial supporters to the Refuge via the offering of activities that engage and educate this much needed segment of the local population. Additionally, new programs would provide balance to those individuals who do not partake in hunting or fishing but participate in other wildlife dependant opportunities. We have seen a large increase of interest in photography this past year as evidenced by the receipt of 111 entries in the photo contest. The Refuge has updated its social media strategies for 2014 and as a result, the Refuge currently has a reach of over a half million potentially interested parties per month, and rising. The BRMBR Social Media team has implemented a long range strategy to reach the Northern Utah market which includes varied coordinated posts over three social media platforms designed to inform, engage, and activate the public's interest in current and new programs such as the ones being proposed here. Record attendance at both Bald Eagle Day and Owl Day are partially due to the success of the new and organic (low cost) marketing strategies currently in place. We feel that we have the ability to reach new volunteers, supporters, patrons, families, tourists, and every other group via technology and the offering of interesting events at the Refuge. We are willing and able to facilitate these new programs.

The primary user groups we considered include; birders, hikers, bikers, photographers, canoe/kayakers, other fishing opportunities and eco-tourism. We also looked at primary zones to be considered; tour loop, behind the gates, the river area and new acquisitions through the seasons. We present the following concepts for consideration and discussion.

1. Opportunities in the area of the auto tour loop. We realize that any proposal in the area of the tour loop during the hunting season could conflict with that use. These opportunities could be implemented this year with volunteer leadership.

- a. Dates outside the hunting season could allow for the use of portable terrestrial hunting blinds, especially in Units 1A, 2, and 2C.
 - b. Work with the biologist and other staff to select a better location for the handicap blind
 - c. In the past, there have been many complaints received from visitors that hunting activities are not compatible with wildlife viewing. An alternate route could be developed to alleviate this conflict by traveling south on "O" line from Forest Street then west on "D" line and the north on "H" line.
 - d. We would also like to see a new viewing platform at the Old Duckville site. The area around the current viewing deck, just north of "H" line on the tour loop, could be improved by treating vegetation to create more open water. With more open water this would improve wildlife use and viewing opportunities.
2. Behind the gates provides one of the greatest opportunities for wildlife viewing on refuge and gives visitors a better understanding of the vast area being managed. We know that the summer breeding season and rearing of young is the biological priority for the area. Coordination with the biologist can ensure the best experience for the visitor with minimum impact to the wildlife. With other activities; bird counts, water quality monitoring, research and regular refuge operations, the number of days available would be limited.
 - a. This year, during the hunting season, offer behind the gates tours on Saturdays, led by volunteers.
 - b. Consider other educational opportunities in coordination with the education and visitors services staff for seasonal outings to show the variations in species diversity and wildlife numbers so our visitors will better understand the complexities of the refuge. These groups may include, but not be limited to: photographers, bird watchers, and elderly residents from the community who don't otherwise get out much.
3. The river and some canals provide excellent opportunities for more diverse activities. Many of these activities can be implemented this field season.
 - a. From time to time there is a good amount of litter in the more popular fishing areas. We would like to establish opportunities for seasonal clean up of these areas. We could sponsor certain days for these events or establish an "adopt a river section" program where individuals or groups, i.e. boy scout/youth service projects, would have responsibility for litter patrol.
 - b. We know that exotic elements on the refuge can be devastating to habitat. We would propose a fun day program for awareness of the carp problem by hosting a "carp-a-thon" fishing adventure. We could also have a weed day where visitors would pull dyers woad or other invasive plants.
 - c. While opportunities already exist for boating on the Bear River, we would like to develop a pamphlet highlighting canoe/kayak adventures from Corrine to the Duckville boat ramp. We could take advantage of the new kiosks to highlight this and other activities.
4. We are aware that some work from the staff will be required before decisions are made on uses for the new acquisition areas. As a part of the analysis (NEPA) process we would like for the staff to consider recreational opportunities in these areas. These areas can present some new opportunities with little improvement or oversight well into the future.
 - a. Prepare and establish a hiking program especially on the new acquisitions adjacent to town. Open the Gary Slot area adjacent to town to hikers. There may be some long term opportunities for improved trails and photo blinds. Allow the use of portable

photo blinds. Some projects could be established for scout groups, civic groups, or school projects.

- b. Consider the possibility for a trail along Whistler Canal and/or Reeder Canal for hikers, birders, and photographers. Allow the use of portable photo blinds. Consider canoe/kayak activities where practical.
- c. Following the acquisition of the Canada Goose Club the area south of Forest Street could be opened to non consumptive use only (photography, hiking, birding, field trips, etc). The old club house could be used for educational events including overnight experiences. We realize some work may be required to bring the facility up to code and the volunteer are willing to help with that effort.

Finally, we would also like to establish a greater photography presence on the refuge. There are a good number of visitors that come to the refuge with the sole purpose of capturing wildlife (wild birds) in their native habitats. We need to nurture this activity in our younger visitors. Through marketing and social media we can gain support from local businesses and others to support the already popular annual photo contest. We could also establish a "Kids Photo/Bird Workshop". Initiate a kid's photography club to instill and nurture a love of nature on the refuge. Conduct photo safaris 4 times a year to coincide with migration and activities that are already in place, such as hunting activities. We need to be pro-active to establish photo opportunities for all ages, and we have made good strides with the current photo contest. We should try and establish a photography club for interested visitors to exchange ideas and build a photo file showcasing the refuge on our website and twitter.

Some of the programs will require the use of refuge vehicles, especially the van. Volunteers, the Friends, other cooperators and refuge staff need to coordinate the use, maintenance and fuel costs for these activities.

We feel that if we take advantage of the opportunities we have we can not only showcase our great Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge but also strengthen our relationship with our local community, volunteers and other groups.

We thank you for the opportunity to volunteer on this great resource and we look forward to working with the refuge staff and "Friends" in implementing these projects.

Comment #7:

I was talking with a guy at the BRBR and he invited me to provide comments for the comprehensive conservation plan (CCP). Here are a few comments for your consideration:

1. Allow canoes and other light weight, non-motorized boats on all areas of the refuge for recreational use and access to hunting areas.
2. Section off an area of the refuge that is open to "primitive" hunting only. Primitive would be defined as 15 shells max, no motorized boats, and no motorized decoys for those people that would like a quality hunt and not have to put up with sky-busting fools.
3. Make the loop two ways.
4. Limit the numbers of hunters on any given day.
5. Open up more hunting areas that are not motor boat accessible.
6. Outlaw E-bikes (motor cycles) if you have not already done so.
7. Require a duck Identification test that requires a person to 100% identify the common duck around here in hunting conditions (low light, fast moving, oblique angles, etc.). In this test,

emphasize the importance of not sky busting (wound less ducks, able to identify them, don't piss off other hunters, don't waste shells - 7 shells, 7 ducks).

Comment #8:

I fully support that this area in Wyoming, Utah, Idaho be protected for birds to live peacefully. That means there should be no hunting in this site, nor any trapping at any time. Let them live there in peace. They need areas to live in peace and tranquility. What is really grating is the way the public comes last in your consideration of who is to comment on this proposal. According to the US constitution, from Hillsdale college, the public comes first in consideration of being heard on govt proposals, not last, you always put the public last and list other govt agencies first. The intention of the founding fathers was never to treat the us public with disrespect. The other agencies are servants of the people, not lords of the realm so that you consider them first. We need a whole sea change of who makes our govt. You disrespect the public and put servants of the people at the top of your list to consult. You have it ass backwards. Please change your consultation arrangements. The public comes first. This comment is for the public record please receipt.

Comment #9:

American Bird Conservancy, which works to conserve birds throughout the Americas, thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and Bear River Watershed Conservation Area Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).

Both areas addressed in the impending CCP are vital bird habitat. The Migratory Bird Refuge and Watershed Conservation Area (MBR) provides resources to more than 250 bird species and is an integral part of the central flyway. The MBR is also open to hunting and fishing in certain areas, and it is eligible for cooperative agriculture and grazing, both of which introduce risk factors which should be included in scoping the CCP.

Agriculture on Refuge Lands

Cooperative agriculture is a commonly used tool on Refuges to provide enough forage and resources for migratory birds, especially waterfowl. ABC does not oppose this practice but recognizes the dangers which may be posed by conventional agricultural practices on Refuge lands. Refuges, especially ones like MBR, are intended for conservation and recreation, both of which are threatened by conventional pesticide use in agriculture.

According to a report from the Center for Biological Diversity, many drift-prone herbicides which have profoundly negative impacts on wildlife and human health, such as 2,4-D and dicamba, are used for crop production on Refuges in some parts of the country.

A 2014 memorandum from James Kurth, then-Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge system, called for the phase-out of neonicotinoid insecticides and GMO crops on Refuges.¹ The provisions in the memorandum were enacted, but the memorandum was rescinded in 2018.²

We recommend examining the impacts of conventional on-Refuge agriculture as part of the CCP scoping process and would like to see recommendations for organic, regenerative, or other non-synthetic pesticide-dependent agricultural practices employed.

Pesticide Drift

As the CCP is being prepared, we recommend a focus on pesticide drift and contamination into Refuge lands and waters. Enacting regulations which require significant barriers between treated farmland or pesticide-treated livestock is an effective method of reducing unintentional pesticide exposure.

According to the EPA “wildlife (such as mammals, birds, fish, insects and plants) can experience unintentional exposure to pesticides” from a wide variety of vectors, including:

When too much pesticide is applied to pets or domestic livestock.

When wildlife consume pesticide-contaminated water or food.

When agricultural pesticide runs off or drifts from the agricultural area into water or other wildlife habitat.³

It may be that no such pesticide application occurs near MBC lands, but, if it does, it should be accounted for during the CCP scoping process.

Lead Toxicity

American Bird Conservancy strongly supports the phase-out of lead ammunition and fishing tackle on National Wildlife Refuges. We strongly urge that lead toxicity risks from spent lead ammunition and fishing tackle are included in the CCP scoping process, and that recommendations are made to phase out the use of lead ammunition and fishing tackle from MBR lands.

Bald Eagles are well known residents of MBR and are facing population-level declines from lead toxicity.⁴ Liver samples from Bald Eagles in Utah revealed chronic levels of lead from exposure following hunting seasons. The North America Non-lead Partnership, a group of sportspeople dedicated to wildlife conservation through reduction of the use of lead ammunition, has phenomenal resources prepared on their website and offers sportsperson training programs.

The impact of lead fishing tackle should also be mitigated. The ingestion of a single lead lure, jig, or other piece of tackle is enough to kill waterfowl.⁵ Many states such as New Hampshire, Minnesota, and Maine have instituted non-lead fishing tackle requirement and have not seen a reduction in fishing on refuge or other lands.

The Utah Division of Wildlife recognizes the threats posed to birds, such as the California Condor, from spent lead ammunition and offers programs to exchange shot.⁶ We are grateful for their leadership on this issue and consider this to be evidence that there is an appetite for this type of mitigation in the state.

Nine Refuges proposed phase-outs last year and will include those proposals again in the 2023-2024 station specific hunt/fish regulations this year. Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge in Indiana has already enacted its lead phase out rule and will have all hunting and fishing on the Refuge be lead free by September 2027.

We have prepared some resources on the lead issue at the links below:

<https://abcbirds.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ABC-Non-Lead-Materials-Letter-to-State-Wildlife-AgenciesFINAL.pdf>

<https://abcbirds.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/NL-Fishing-Tackle-Content.pdf>
<https://abcbirds.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/NL-Ammunition-Content.pdf>

Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation

MBR provides important habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse, an imperiled bird species which based on analysis by the US Geological Survey is on a trendline towards extinction. The Grouse are currently exempted from endangered species protections despite its low and declining population numbers due to a Congressional rider. Grouse are also the focus of an Interior Department-wide planning and conservation initiative led by the Bureau of Land Management and supported by the US Fish and Wildlife Service to stabilize and recover the species. We ask that the CCP take protection of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat into special consideration during the scoping and planning processes.

Conclusion

American Bird Conservancy thanks the MBR for the opportunity to provide input during the planning and scoping process for the CCP. We are extremely grateful for the work Refuge staff do and all the important habitat and resources it provides to migratory birds.

1. https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/pesticides_reduction/pdfs/2014-decision.pdf
2. https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/pesticides_reduction/pdfs/2018-8-2-FWS-memo-GMO-Neonics-on-wildliferefuges.pdf
3. <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-incidents/common-causes-pesticide-incidents>
4. Slabe et al. (2022). Demographic implications of lead poisoning for eagles across North America. *Science* 375. Pp. 779-782.
5. Grade, T. et al. (2019). Lead poisoning from ingestion of fishing gear: A review. *Ambio*, 48(9), 1023–1038. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-019-01179-w>
6. <https://wildlife.utah.gov/hunters-helping-condors.html>
7. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/09/16/2022-20078/2022-2023-station-specific-hunting-and-sport-fishingregulations>
8. <https://www.sciencebase.gov/catalog/item/5755d2f1e4b023b96ec1eb7c>

Comment #10:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the Department of the Interior U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge (Refuge), Box Elder County, Utah, and Bear River Watershed Conservation Area in Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming. In accordance with our responsibilities under Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) we are providing scoping comments. These comments convey important topics that we recommend addressing during the NEPA process.

According to the NOI, the Service proposes to gather the information necessary to prepare a CCP for the Refuge and the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area. The CCP will describe the desired future conditions of the Refuge; provide a 15-year strategy for achieving Refuge purposes and contributing toward the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System; maintain, and where appropriate, restore the ecological integrity of the Refuge; help achieve the goals of the National Wilderness Preservation System; and meet other mandates, such as NEPA. The Refuge purposes are to provide suitable refuge and feeding, and breeding grounds for migratory wild fowl and for the establishment and maintenance of migratory waterfowl refuges. The NOI states the Refuge

encompasses 77,102 acres and is comprised of deltaic wetlands that make up numerous wetland impoundments, wet meadows, and uplands. It also notes the Refuge is located at the terminus of the Bear River, is part of the Great Salt Lake ecosystem, is a priority area within the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area and plays a critical role in providing habitat for migratory birds along the Central and Pacific Flyways. The Bear River Watershed Conservation Area encompasses the Refuge, Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, and Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge, and is part of the greater 7,500 square mile Bear River Watershed.

Based upon the information in the NOI and our preliminary understanding of the planning area and goals, EPA has identified the following topics that we recommend analyzing and discussing in the NEPA document for the CCP: (1) aquatic resources, including surface water, groundwater, and wetlands; (2) air resources; (3) climate change; (4) environmental justice; (5) tribal consultation; and (6) mitigation and monitoring. Our detailed recommendations are provided for your consideration in the enclosure. UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY REGION 8 1595 Wynkoop Street Denver, CO 80202-1129 Phone 800-227-8917 www.epa.gov/region08 2 Thank you for the opportunity to provide recommendations for this project at this early stage in the NEPA planning process. If we may provide further explanation of our comments, please contact me at (303) 312- 6155, or Shannon Snyder of my staff at (303) 312-6335 or snyder.shannon@epa.gov.

Comment #11:

Let me start by saying that we love having the refuge in our community. We would be interested in coordinating our planning efforts and enhancing trails/recreation in the county and refuge area. In 2017 the county completed an award winning active transportation plan that includes a trail located west of I-15 stretching from Willard Bay State Park to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. There is an old railbed from Point Perry (the commercial area on 1100 South) which extends north to the refuge property and connects to Forest Street adjacent to the refuge visitor center. The adopted plan proposes a non-motorized trail along that historic railbed. The plan was a joint effort supported by the mayor's offices in Willard City, Perry City, and Brigham City, as well as the Box Elder County Commission. We would love to work with you to make this trail part of your refuge plans moving forward. Please let us know how we can participate and assist in any way. Thank you for your time!

Linked is the adopted county plan. The trail referenced can be found on pages 7 and 10 of the plan.

Comment #12:

The State of Utah ("State"), through the Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office, in coordination with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources ("DWR"), the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands ("FFSL"), and the Utah Division of Water Rights ("DWRi"), has reviewed the Fish and Wildlife Service's ("Service") notice of Intent to Prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Box Elder County, UT, and Bear River Watershed Conservation Area in UT, ID, and WY, (sometimes referred to herein as "the Notice") published in the Federal Register February 24, 2023. The State provides the following general comments regarding the scope of issues to be considered in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan ("CCP") process, while reserving its right to provide more specific comments while reviewing the draft CCP:

First, the State is an active partner in the achievement of the purposes of the National Refuge System ("System") and asks for explicit recognition of that partnership in the forthcoming CCP. Regarding cooperation, the National Wildlife Refuge System Act of 1966, as amended by the

National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, expressly states the policy of the Refuge System is to “ensure effective coordination, interaction, and cooperation with owners of land adjoining refuges and the fish and wildlife agency of the States in which the units of the System are located.” Such coordination and cooperation must occur in both the management of refuges and the acquisition and management of land designated for the same. The State therefore asks for recognition as a cooperating partner in the development and implementation of this CCP.

Second, there are several issues that must be considered within the scope of this review. Specifically, conservation of the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area requires wholesale consideration of water management throughout the watershed. This necessarily includes upgrades to the water management system within the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. More specifically, the State Engineer, through DWRi, has relied upon USGS stream gauge station 10126000 on the Bear River near Corrine (Corrine Gauge) to approximate the amount of water available for diversion to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge – recognizing that the refuge is the likely recipient of additional return flows below the gauge. Until recently, reliance on the Corinne Gauge to approximate the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge’s diversion of the Bear River (1,000 cfs under water right 29-1014) has been adequate to satisfy distribution requirements. However, the mounting distribution and modeling demands on the Bear River – coupled with the critical levels of Great Salt Lake – warrant further refinement to this approach.

Accurate measurement and reporting of actual diversions are critical to ensuring that water users are able to divert and use the water to which they are entitled. This is especially true when priority regulation requires the State Engineer to curtail junior water rights in an effort to satisfy senior rights or when the State Engineer is required to distribute flows beyond the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge under an approved change application. Unfortunately, the existing absence of measurement devices on the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge’s points of diversions and outlets hinder the State Engineer’s ability to manage the distribution efforts of the lower Bear River.

Consequently, the State recommends that the Service incorporate within the scope of the CCP a measurement device installation plan that addresses the measurement and reporting of all refuge points of diversions and all corresponding outlets. Additionally, the State recommends consideration of telemetry technology on water gates throughout the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge to ensure more active management of water flows.

The State also notes there is litigation pending between the State of Utah, by and through FFSL, and the United States regarding a dispute over land ownership within the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. The quiet title litigation involves two phases – the first phase is complete and established the ordinary high-water mark (“OHWM”) of the Great Salt Lake within the refuge boundaries. The second phase involves determining ownership of disputed lands above and below the OHWM. Further, the State of Utah owns the beds of navigable bodies of water, including portions of the Bear River. To the extent the Service’s planning efforts implicate either the disputed lands within the refuge or the bed of the Bear River, FFSL requests the Service coordinate those efforts with FFSL to ensure consistency with FFSL’s management.

Finally, the State requests that the CCP takes a hard look at any potential for increases in invasive species throughout the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area as a whole, with particular emphasis in the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. Invasives such as phragmites and saltcedar, for instance, can both be significantly affected by sheetflows and changes in water flows/diversions. To the extent the CCP includes an evaluation of the removal and/or alteration of existing

infrastructure, the State requests consideration of how changes in water flow can affect the proliferation of invasives. Moreover, although potentially useful in some instances, the emulation of natural hydrology alone may not be sufficient to address invasives throughout the watershed. The State requests the inclusion of an aggressive plan for the control of invasive species throughout the CCP, which should include the use of all available tools including grazing.

Each of the recommendations above require active management and the State requests the CCP recognizes this need and allows for continued cooperation and coordination with the State in this regard. This includes management for the conservation of wildlife and habitats, in concert with DWR, but also includes management for recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and environmental education and study. The CCP should work collaboratively with the State to ensure that each of these objectives can continue to be achieved throughout the existence of this CCP.

The State appreciates the cooperative relationship it has with the Service and the consideration of the concerns outlined herein. Please direct any written correspondence to the Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office at the address below or call to discuss any questions or concerns.

Comment #13:

Add signs at both boat ramps at Willard Spur showing boarding areas. Markers at the C & D blocks on dog ear of Bear River off of Willard Spur. Important for goose zones. Have an ONX use class taught by USFWS for hunters so that they learn the app plus learn the refuge.

Comment #14:

Dedicated area for “no motor” boats or walk in only. 2C, 3 wench over. More consideration for non-consumptive use: kayak on the river and some canals, hiking on Yates and Canadian Club, pollinator gardens where rocky mountain bee plant exists, photo opportunities where they don’t conflict with hunting, photo blinds or allow portable blinds where it doesn’t conflict with nesting birds, education and research to benefit key issues phrag and water management

Comment #15:

Suggested education: certificate or birding minor through USU, continued class on birding through USU, paint or drawing or bird photography

Comment #16:

More non-consumptive and educational opportunities are greatly needed to help bring more awareness to the refuge and nature in general. Suggested items are as follows:

1. Add a portion to the auto route away from the open hunting areas to give birdwatchers and photographers better interaction opportunities during hunting season
2. More locations for photo blinds on Unit 2 or nearby vicinity
3. Allow portable photo blinds to be used in a variety of areas
4. Add Kestral boxes, burrowing owl nests, etc... to allow the public to get involved building and maintaining nests for educational purposes
5. Open a nature trail somewhere down or by the auto loop
6. Restrooms on the far west portion of the auto loop
7. Areas for canoes and kayaking

Overall, more access and opportunities for non-consumptive users (non-hunt, non-fish) needs to be given but unfortunately most of those areas are already taken by hunting and fishing, especially during fall migration when many bird watchers want to come see the migrating birds but without having to watch birds being shot. Closing unit 2 to hunting and moving that acreage elsewhere would be best but understandably nearly impossible but something needs to be done to give more to birdwatchers and photographers on the refuge.

The Refuge could use some short to medium length biking trails down near the auto tour loop, possibly on the unit south of the Forest Street boat launch and on the newer parcel east of the Reeder canal with the paved parking lot or the section just west of I15 (that trail could connect to the visitor center trail).

Comment #17:

Handicap blind on Yates or SC drainage.

Comment #18:

What is the long range plan to manage invasive species – plants, frag, etc.

Comment #19:

For 10 years I have been wanting to suggest that you put a very visible “Visitors Welcome” sign out on the road with the hours posted. This fantastic facility is not known by people when they drive by. They think it is a research lab or they don’t “know what it is”. (Someone at my work told me that today). Thanks for a beautiful building and for grading the road. Oh - and can enlarge the movie screen.

Comment #20:

It would be good to have a restroom/porta about halfway along the route. Thank you.

COMMENT RESPONSE

Introduction:

The Service would like to thank all the organizations and individuals for taking the time to provide written comments on the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge (Refuge or BRMBR) and Bear River Watershed Conservation Area (BRWCA) CCP. The public comment period is an essential aspect of the Service's Comprehensive Conservation Plan process.

The Service received 20 correspondences from 18 separate commenters, including organizations and individuals. These comments were submitted as written comments at the two listening sessions hosted by the Service in September 2022, via the visitor service desk at the Refuge, and electronically in the form of emails to [BearRiverCCP@fws.gov](mailto: BearRiverCCP@fws.gov). No comments were received by mail. The 30-day public comment period began on February 24, 2023, and ended on March 27, 2023. The public comment period was announced in a news release by the Service on February 24, 2023, and posted on social media and the Refuge's website. In addition, notices were sent by email or letter to members of Congress, Native American Tribes, and other stakeholders.

All comments received were carefully considered by the Service with respect to possible additions to the CPP and comment responses were developed. The following responses identify, as appropriate where additions or changes to the CCP will be made or provide an explanation for why a comment does not warrant an addition or change in the CCP.

Changes to CCP Policy and Content:

The Service appreciates the time and thought put into each of those suggestions. All feedback from commentors regarding resource areas to analyze or specific projects and actions to improve the Refuge will be fully considered and incorporated as appropriate in the development of the CCP core document, as well as any future CCP step-down plans for the Refuge, such as a Visitor Services Plan, Inventory and Monitoring Plan, and future Habitat Management Plans. However, the CCP will include a baseline description of existing conditions for some of the requested resources.

Multiple commentors requested changes to current Refuge programs and management that would expand the use of volunteer, community, and partnership resources. A few commentors suggested and outlined specific ways these resources could better assist the Refuge in meeting their mission and serving the public. The Service agrees that creative and expanded uses of these resources is needed and plans to adopt these suggestions into the future Visitor Services Plan as appropriate. This CCP core document will briefly describe the current visitor services programs, the associated threats and opportunities for visitor services, and associated long-term goals.

One commentor requested the vision statement be shortened. The BRMBR vision was created in collaboration with community members, partners, and staff members. It was important to the Service that the contributions of each person would be captured in the drafted vision statement. While some agreed that the vision statement was too long, overall, the consensus was that the vision statement would stay at the length to represent the input of all collaborators.

Future Step-down plans:

Multiple commentors requested the Service incorporate plans for addressing specific issues such as invasive species management or water flows into the CCP. Management plans for specific resources will be addressed in future step-down plans.

Bear River Watershed Conservation Area:

The land within the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area is protected through the purchasing of conservation easements. Conservation easements are a voluntary legal agreement between a willing landowner and the Service that conserves that property by placing consensual permanent restrictions on the use of a property. Restrictions often include prohibiting or limiting subdivision, surface mining, and commercial or industrial uses. However, landowners retain many of their rights, including the right to use the land (for purposes such as agriculture or hunting) and to sell it or pass it on to their heirs.

One commentor requested that hunting and trapping not be allowed within the Bear River Conservation Area. However, due to the nature of conservation easements, the Service does not have the authority to restrict or prohibit those uses within the BRWCA and cannot manage or dictate land-owner actions past the restrictions listed in the easement agreements.

State of Utah:

The State of Utah requested that they be recognized as a cooperating partner on the CCP. The Service recognizes the State's contribution to the mission and purpose of the National Wildlife Refuge System and values their collaboration, coordination, and partnership. It is the intent of the Service to continue engagement with the State during the CCP development and implementation. This partnership is specifically mentioned in the draft CCP.

The Service appreciates the ongoing coordination and discussions surrounding water management of the Refuge. These discussions include seeking ways to provide information to the State Engineer, through the Division of Water Rights (DWRi), options to measure water flows at desired locations. These conversations are ongoing and will continue until a mutually agreed solution is developed. The State has also asked for a measurement device installation plan. That plan will not be a part of the CCP as it doesn't fall within the scope or purpose of the CCP, however, the Service will continue discussions on water management and once an agreed upon solution is developed, this plan will be provided to the State as requested. Development of this plan will include consideration of all water management technology available and feasible for the Refuge.

Title to the lands within the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge boundary is beyond the scope of this planning effort. Nonetheless, the Refuge will continue to closely coordinate with FFSL to ensure consistency with the respective agencies' management plans.

The State requested an integrated invasive management plan be included in the CCP as well as an evaluation of all infrastructure and how water flow affects invasive species. In 2021, the Refuge completed a Habitat Management Plan for the impounded units of the Refuge containing an evaluation of most of the infrastructure. This plan was developed by evaluating the habitat, invasive species, and the best practices needed to meet the mission of the Refuge. This plan is available on the Refuge's website. Future habitat management plans of the upland and riparian areas will also include analysis of infrastructure and water flows and the State will be invited to participate in the development of these plans at that time.

The Service thanks the State for their recognition that all their recommendations require active management. The Refuge has a good partnership and relationship with many programs and people with the State of Utah programs and look forward to continuing this partnership in the future not only on this CCP, but many other efforts as well.