

Environmental Assessment

Parker River National Wildlife Refuge Pink House Removal Plan

November 2023

Prepared by

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Newburyport, MA

*Estimated Lead Agency Total Costs Associated with Developing and Producing
This Environmental Assessment: \$5,000*

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Environmental Assessment for Pink House Removal

Date: November 1, 2023

This Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) is being prepared to evaluate the effects associated with the proposed action and complies with the National Environmental Policy Act in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR 1500-1509) and Department of the Interior (43 CFR 46; 516 DM 8) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (550 FW 3) regulations and policies. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires examination of the effects of proposed actions on the natural and human environment. Appendix A outlines all law and executive orders evaluated throughout this Environmental Assessment.

Proposed Action

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to demolish and remove the Pink House on Plum Island Turnpike in Newbury, MA. The Pink House, previously a private residence, occupies a footprint of approximately 2,000 square feet. The proposed action would include house removal, site restoration, a small gravel parking lot at the existing driveway, and a public viewing area into the adjacent salt marshes.

A proposed action may evolve during the NEPA process as the agency refines its proposal and gathers feedback from the public, tribes, and other agencies. Therefore, the final proposed action may be different from the original. The proposed action will be finalized at the conclusion of the public comment period for the EA.

Background

National wildlife refuges are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), the purposes of an individual refuge, Service policy, and laws and international treaties. Relevant guidance includes the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, and selected portions of the Code of Federal Regulations and Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.

Parker River NWR was established in 1942, under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, “... *for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds*” (MBCA; 16 U.S.C. 715). In 1948, Presidential Proclamation 2817 closed 1,753 acres of tidal waters surrounding the refuge to pursuing, hunting, taking, capture, or killing of migratory birds, or attempting to take, capture, or kill migratory birds. In 1962, the Refuge Recreation Act expanded the purposes of Parker River NWR to include: “...*(1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreation development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species and threatened species...*” (16 U.S.C. 460k-460k-4).

The mission of the NWRS, as outlined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (NWRSA), as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.), is

“... to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans”

Additionally, the NWRSA mandates the Secretary of the Interior in administering the NWRS (16 U.S.C. 668dd(a)(4)) to

- Provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats within the NWRS;
- Ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the NWRS are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans;
- Ensure that the mission of the NWRS described at 16 U.S.C. 668dd(a)(2) and the purposes of each refuge are carried out;
- 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 NWRS are located;
- Assist in the maintenance of adequate water quantity and water quality to fulfill the mission of the NWRS and the purposes of each refuge;
- Recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority general public uses of the NWRS through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife;
- Ensure that opportunities are provided within the NWRS for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses; and monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

The Pink House is situated in a highly visible location en route to the Plum Island portion of Parker River NWR, at 60 Plum Island Turnpike in Newbury, MA (Figure A). Constructed in 1925, it has become a local landmark. Initially purchased by the Service to protect the surrounding salt marsh and for possible staff housing, the deteriorated condition and presence of contaminants such as asbestos led staff to propose demolition of the structure. In response, a grass roots group – Support The Pink House, Inc. (STPH) – was formed to advocate for its preservation. The Service agreed to attempt an exchange of the property for higher-value wildlife habitat either at Parker River NWR, and when that proved difficult, at other refuges in the Northeast Region. Below is a timeline of the significant events throughout this process:

- Sept. 2011: USFWS acquires the Pink House along with 9.29 acres of marsh and tidal creek for \$375,000. The Massachusetts Historical Commission concurs with the USFWS (MHC #RC.50722) that the house does not meet the criteria (36CFR60) for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and is therefore ineligible.

- Dec. 2014: A preliminary environmental survey of the building is completed, finding accessible asbestos-containing building material. The Service determines that the building is not suitable as housing for seasonal staff, and that no other use for the refuge is feasible.
- March 2016: The Service proposes demolition of the structure to take place that spring. ‘Support the Pink House’ group forms and the refuge receives letters from local and federally elected officials suggesting a stay in demolition.
- August 2016: The Service agrees to delay demolition, working with partners to affect a land exchange.
- 2017-2019: An Agreement to Initiate Exchange was signed, and an appraisal completed. However, in September 2019, the exchange fell through due to terms in a conservation easement making it impossible for the Service to hold the lands in fee title.
- November 2019: The Acting USFWS Regional Director, in response to a letter from Congressman Seth Moulton, set a date of Nov 1, 2020, as the deadline to accomplish a property exchange.
- July 2020: Two additional parcels were evaluated for exchange with a willing landowner, both of which were significantly below the appraised value of the Pink House and were therefore removed from further consideration.
- December 2020: with options proximate to the refuge exhausted, suitable exchange parcels were sought elsewhere in the Northeast Region as a final effort. Another Agreement to Initiate a Land Exchange was signed after the Service located an exchange parcel in another state. The closing date was set for September 2022. The Service extended the prior Nov 1, 2020 deadline to pursue this favorable lead.
- August 2022: STPH receives approval from the MA Historical Commission for a perpetual preservation restriction to be put on the house. The Newbury Historical Commission agrees to hold and enforce the PR. The USFWS was not a party to this agreement.
- September 2022: The out-of-state landowner backs out of the deal at a late stage, again leaving no viable exchange parcel for the Pink House.
- In addition to the above-listed exchange parcels for which an agreement was formally initiated, the refuge and its partners reached out to numerous adjacent landowners and those within 1 mile of refuge boundaries – public and private – to gauge interest in being a party to a land exchange. No viable sellers were located through these efforts.

In the intervening years, the house has continued to deteriorate and has been vandalized on several occasions, as recently as May 2023. It requires constant patrols as well as interior and exterior monitoring and maintenance to ensure no major deficiencies – such as roof leaks – lead to catastrophic damage.

Now that – after working for 7 years in good faith to exchange the property – a land-for-land exchange that would add higher-value wildlife habitat to the refuge system is not feasible, restoring approximately half the site to its natural condition and building a viewing platform on the other half is the preferred option. The driveway footprint would remain the same.

In addition to the wildlife and public access benefits associated with the proposed action, there are also aesthetic, operational, and long-term financial benefits. The Pink House is surrounded by an area that is already prone to flooding, and recent sea level rise projections indicate that this area will flood with much greater frequency and intensity as soon as 2030 ([Horsley Witten Group 2021](#)). Such specific dire projections were not available when the process to exchange the property began in 2016.

Purpose and Need for the Action

The purpose of this proposed action is to partially restore the site where the Pink House presently exists while reducing the infrastructure footprint and future maintenance costs at Parker River NWR. A secondary purpose is to improve public access and wildlife observation opportunities.

The need of the proposed action is to meet the Service's priorities and mandates as outlined by the NWRSA to restore fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats while enhancing compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses (16 U.S.C. 668dd(a)(4)).

Alternatives

Alternative A – Current Management: Continue efforts to maintain the Pink House and seek a land exchange.

Under the No Action alternative, the Refuge would not remove the Pink House nor restore a portion of the habitat on which it is located. The house would continue to deteriorate, and resources (staff time and federally appropriated funds) would be required to manage and maintain the property, until such time as a suitable exchange is located and the house is transferred out of federal ownership, suffers a catastrophic loss, or becomes condemned due to safety concerns. The house and surrounding lands would continue to be closed to all public uses.

Alternative B – Remove the Pink House, restore the site, and open it to public use – Proposed Action Alternative

Under the Proposed Action Alternative, the Service would hire contractors to remediate contaminants and Service maintenance crews would remove the structure in late fall or winter of 2023-2024. Heavy equipment would be used, the debris transported off-site for disposal, and the foundation would be filled and compacted over a 2-week period (weather and other factors permitting). The existing driveway and foundation area would be used to create a parking lot for up to 4 vehicles and include an ADA-compliant observation platform for the public to view the adjacent Great Marsh from an elevated position. Interpretive panels would be installed to educate the public about marsh habitats and restoration. The property would be open to public use and enjoyment for wildlife-dependent recreation, including bird watching and photography, environmental education and interpretation.

During demolition, local and refuge officers will be available as needed to direct and manage traffic flow. The project would avoid the busier summer season as well as critical wildlife

breeding periods to mitigate impacts to flora and fauna. Construction crews would take all necessary precautions to ensure that debris does not enter adjacent sensitive wetlands.

The proposed action would satisfy both the purpose and need listed above. It will improve public access opportunities and contribute to overall health of the surrounding salt marsh.

This alternative fulfills the Service's mandate under the NWRSA. The Service has determined that removal and restoration (Alternative B) is compatible with the purposes of Parker River NWR and the mission of the NWR.

Alternative(s) Considered, But Dismissed From Further Consideration

Service staff considered whether to surplus only the house and have a competitive bidding process for a contractor to relocate the structure to an off-site location, thereby saving the house from demolition while fulfilling the purpose and need for the action. However, nobody willing to relocate the house has been identified, nor has a suitable off-site location been found. Further, the cost associated with relocating the house would exceed the economic value of the structure itself.

Also considered was the possibility of disposing the property. However, authority of the US Fish and Wildlife Service to dispose of lands (if not part of an equal value land exchange) is limited (NWRSA, 43 U.S.C. § 1714(j)). To do so, the Secretary of Interior must determine that the lands are no longer needed, and the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission must approve of the disposal. However, the Pink House is situated within refuge salt marsh and upland; priority habitats identified in the recent draft Habitat Management Plan. Further, the property is in a highly visible and accessible location, with great potential to serve the refuge's mission of providing high-quality environmental education and interpretation. Therefore, the property is not a suitable candidate for this type of disposal.

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

This section is organized by affected resource categories and for each affected resource discusses both (1) the existing environmental and socioeconomic baseline in the action area for each resource and (2) the effects and impacts of the proposed action and any alternatives on each resource. The effects and impacts of the proposed action considered here are changes to the human environment, whether adverse or beneficial, that are direct, indirect, or cumulative. This EA includes the written analyses of the environmental consequences on a resource only when the impacts on that resource could be more than negligible and therefore considered an "affected resource." Any resources that will not be more than negligibly impacted by the action have been dismissed from further analysis.

The refuge consists of approximately 4,700 acres in Essex County, MA (see map, Figure B).

Parker River NWR is composed primarily of salt marsh, which, along with the Plum Island Turnpike, also surrounds the Pink House (Figure C).

For more information regarding and the general characteristics of the refuge's environment, please see the draft Habitat Management Plan, available for review at the visitor center or by contacting parkerriver@fws.gov.

The following resources either (1) do not exist within the project area or (2) would either not be affected or only negligibly affected by the proposed action:

- Threatened or endangered species, or other trust species
- The project footprint would occur only in already-developed uplands and would not affect adjacent wetlands.
- Geology and soils
- Air quality
- Water quality
- Environmental Justice

Natural Resources

Terrestrial Wildlife and Aquatic Species

Affected Environment

Description of Affected Environment for the Affected Resource

The project site is situated along a busy turnpike and is already within a developed area. No aquatic species occur on the project site, nor any terrestrial species of conservation concern.

Impacts on Affected Resource

Alternative A

Allowing the structure to further degrade could negatively impact surrounding aquatic species as paint chips, shingles, and other debris fall off the house and may enter the wetlands.

Alternative B

Removing the structure would provide a net benefit to aquatic and terrestrial species as debris would not enter sensitive areas and the site would be restored to a more natural state.

Threatened and Endangered Species, and Other Special Status Species

Affected Environment

Description of Affected Environment for the Affected Resource

There are no federally threatened or endangered species occupying this area. Salt marsh sparrows – an at-risk species and candidate for listing – nests in nearby salt marshes, but not during the late fall/winter months when demolition is proposed. Further, the house is an adequate distance from the marsh to not have any direct or indirect negative effects on sparrows or their habitat.

Habitat and Vegetation (including vegetation of special management concern)

Affected Environment

Description of Affected Environment for the Affected Resource

The area immediately surrounding the Pink House consists of grasses and shrubs, including sumac and invasive species such as bittersweet. The existing driveway occupies areas immediately to the west and south of the house, but a 20-ft swath of grasses and shrubs will need to be cleared from the north and west sides to accommodate heavy equipment (excavator) and dumpsters. Therefore, the entire project footprint will include the driveway, the house, and a 20-ft equipment operation zone on all sides; in total, about 7,000 sq ft. No special status plant species are known to occur within this footprint, and being developed, it is not high-priority habitat. The site would be restored and, if necessary, re-planted with native vegetation during the growing season.

Description of Cumulative Impacts, Environmental Trends, and Planned Actions

The Pink House property is known to contain several invasive plant species, including Oriental bittersweet, perennial pepperweed, and honeysuckle. All equipment will be thoroughly pressure-washed before and after mobilization to ensure invasive species do not spread within or outside of the project area.

The entire subject property is highly susceptible to the effects of climate change, including increased flooding due to sea level rise and increased storm intensity. The house is not resilient to floodwaters nor intense storms, so replacing it with a lower-profile and resilient elevated observation platform is the best use for the property.

Impacts on Affected Resource

Alternative A

The only current vegetation management has been to mow directly around the house and control invasive pepperweed. Allowing the structure to further degrade could negatively impact surrounding habitat and vegetation.

Alternative B

There is always a risk associated with using construction equipment near wetlands. Service staff would take all necessary precautions to mitigate risks to the salt marsh. Tracked and wheeled equipment would only be used in the existing driveway and the areas directly adjacent to the house. Fuel and oil spill kits would be on-site for immediate use if needed. Therefore, we expect no direct or indirect negative impacts to the habitat; only positive impacts as the deteriorating structure will be replaced with a lower-profile public observation platform, enhancing public access and the viewshed.

Floodplains

Affected Environment

Description of Affected Environment for the Affected Resource

The area immediately surrounding the Pink House floods at least annually. The basement is always flooded with at least 1 ft of standing water. The entire property is within FEMA Flood Zone AE.

Description of Cumulative Impacts, Environmental Trends, and Planned Actions

Flooding in this area is projected to increase significantly due to increased storm intensity and sea level rise.

Impacts on Affected Resource

Alternative A

Keeping the house in place for an indefinite period increases the likelihood that a major flood will irreparably damage the structure, and that debris will be washed into nearby creeks and the marsh.

Alternative B

Removing the structure will eliminate future risks of catastrophic flooding. Any future infrastructure, such as the proposed viewing platform and small parking area, built within the existing footprint would be minimal and resilient to floodwaters.

Visitor Use and Experience

Affected Environment

Description of Affected Environment for the Affected Resource

The Pink House parcel is currently closed to all public entry. However, artists and photographers use the house as a source of inspiration, and many passersby appreciate the house's character and location within the picturesque salt marsh.

Description of Cumulative Impacts, Environmental Trends, and Planned Actions

Currently, there is no public visitation to the Pink House; the entire property is closed to public access.

Impacts on Affected Resource

Alternative A

The house and property would continue to be closed to all public uses while owned by the Service. If a future land exchange were to occur, the house could be restored either as a single-family residence or for educational purposes.

Alternative B

With the house removed and land restored, members of the public would have access to the area for wildlife-dependent recreation. An ADA-compliant observation platform would provide access to additional user groups. The refuge and its partners would use the area for environmental education and interpretation, and visitors would have an accessible area from which to observe wildlife.

Cultural Resources and subsistence

Affected Environment

Description of Affected Environment for the Affected Resource

There are no known cultural or historic resources at the project site, nor any resources eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. However, there is a preservation restriction on the house held by the Town of Newbury, which was put in place when it appeared likely that a land exchange was going to occur, and the house would have been transferred out of federal ownership. However, as the Service did not transfer any lands, there was no change to the deed, nor was the Service a signatory on the preservation restriction. Therefore, the restriction does not apply to this project.

Impacts on Affected Resource

Alternative A

The Pink House would continue to draw inspiration from local community members and artists, although, over time, its deteriorating condition may lessen this draw.

Alternative B

The Service has already consulted with Regional and State Historic Preservation Officers to ensure Section 106 compliance. A full report of the house, to include recent and historic photos, would be included for documentation purposes.

Refuge Management, Operations and Administration

Land Use on the Refuge

Affected Environment

Description of Affected Environment for the Affected Resource

The Pink House and its driveway are the only pieces of infrastructure on the parcel. Refuge staff monitor and patrol the property regularly and make minor repairs as needed to maintain integrity of the house exterior.

Description of Environmental Trends and Planned Actions

No planned actions nearby are relevant to this action, nor are there any known cumulative impacts.

Impacts on Affected Resource

Alternative A

Maintaining the house indefinitely until such time as an exchange occurs would continue to place a burden on staff and resources to manage the property. As the property is closed to public use and is vandalized on occasion, it requires significant law enforcement management. The house would continue to deteriorate and will become more of a safety hazard for refuge staff. Total annual maintenance costs – currently about \$4,000 in labor and materials – would increase significantly. If the Pink House and its 1-acre subdivided parcel were to be exchanged, refuge administrative access to the additional 8 acres surrounding it would be more difficult.

Alternative B

Approximately 2 weeks in staff time would be required to demolish the structure, with an additional 2 weeks to construct the observation platform and create a 4-car public parking area. The estimated cost to demolish and remove the structure, fill the foundation, and restore the habitat would be \$24,000 in staff time, materials, and rental equipment. The estimated cost to construct the multi-level, ADA-compliant viewing platform is \$12,000 in labor and equipment. All projects would be completed by in-house maintenance action teams. After these projects, impacts to refuge management and operations would be minimal, requiring periodic patrols of the area and maintenance to the observation platform. Signage would be needed to indicate that parking is temporary and only for refuge visitors (e.g., not for access to nearby businesses and attractions).

Socioeconomics

Local and Regional Economies

Affected Environment

Description of Affected Environment for the Affected Resource

Parker River NWR has over 300,000 visits per year, contributing an estimated \$11.6 million to the local economy (USFWS 2019). Based on 2023 data, most of those visits included hiking/pedestrian use of foot trails, followed by auto touring the refuge. While some visitors do visit the Pink House (from off-refuge property) specifically to view, paint, and/or photograph it, that number is low compared to other wildlife-dependent refuge visits. However, removing the structure and opening the lands to public viewing would enhance accessibility for all user groups. Because the proposed project is not likely to have any effects on local and regional economies, this section was removed from further consideration.

Monitoring

Refuge staff, in addition to work crews, would be on-site during the demolition process to monitor for and mitigate any adverse effects, including debris blowing into adjacent lands and fuel spills, as well as for crowd control as needed. After removal, the habitat would be restored to its natural condition and require no long-term monitoring. After the viewing platform is constructed and the land is open for public viewing, existing staff would monitor and manage public use of this area in the same manner as with other refuge lands, without the need for increase in staff or budget.

Summary of Analysis

Alternative A – Current Management: Continue efforts to maintain the Pink House and seek a land exchange.

As described above, this alternative has been diligently pursued for the past 7 years. Additional resources would be required to maintain the house until such time as a suitable exchange parcel is located, and the likelihood and time frame for that is unknown. Meanwhile, considerable staff

resources would be expended while the house continues to deteriorate, poses an attractive nuisance for vandalism, and poses safety hazards to staff who enter the building and work on surrounding grounds.

Alternative B – Remove the Pink House, restore the site, and open it to public use – Proposed Action Alternative

As described above, this alternative provides additional wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities and increases the safety of refuge staff and visitors by removing an aging and unsafe structure. The Service has determined that the proposed action is compatible with the purposes of Parker River NWR and the mission of the NWRS.

Figures



Figure A. Street-level view of the Pink House surrounded by salt marsh. Photo was taken from the Plum Island Turnpike, Newbury, MA.



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Parker River National Wildlife Refuge

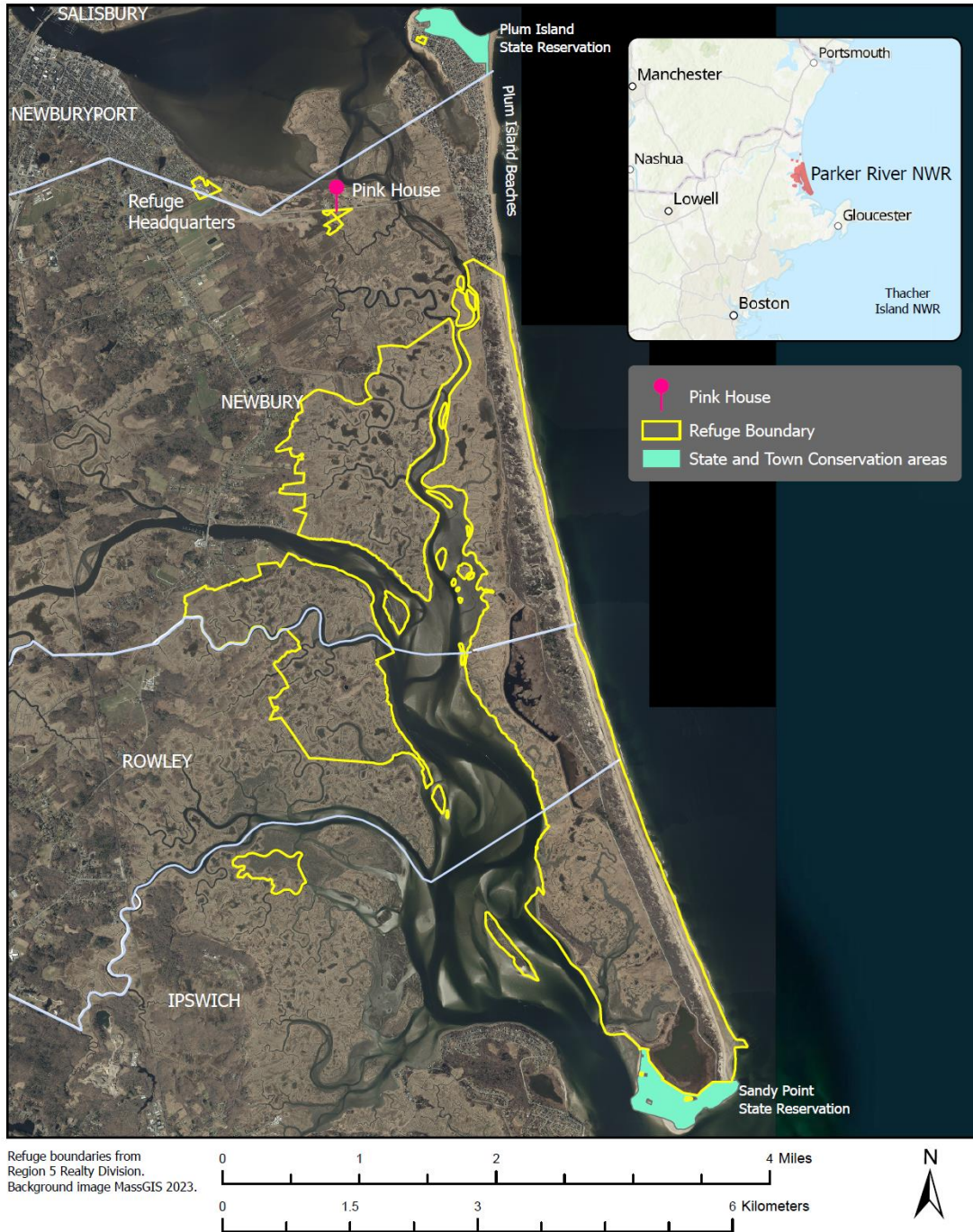


Figure B. Map of the Pink House within Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, Essex County, MA.



Figure C. Aerial view of the Pink House (at center) situated along Plum Island Turnpike, Newbury, MA.

List of Sources, Agencies and Persons Consulted

List of Preparers

Matt Hillman, Refuge Manager

State Coordination

Refuge staff have communicated routinely with state, local, and federally elected officials throughout the years-long process to seek a path forward. The Massachusetts Historical Commission was consulted in 2011.

Public Outreach

The refuge has been communicating and coordinating closely with Support the Pink House group since its establishment to find viable solutions for a land exchange.

The draft EA will be open for public comment for a 30-day period (November 1 through November 30, 2023). Outreach will include press releases to local papers, refuge websites and social media pages.

Determination

This section will be filled out upon completion of the public comment period and at the time of finalization of the Environmental Assessment.

- The Service's action will not result in a significant impact on the quality of the human environment. See the attached "**Finding of No Significant Impact**".
- The Service's action **may significantly affect** the quality of the human environment and the Service will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

Signatures

Submitted By:

Project Leader Signature:

Date:

Concurrence:

Refuge Supervisor Signature:

Date:

Approved:

Regional Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System Signature:

Date:

References

Horsley Witten Group 2021. Plum Island: Exploring the Fiscal and Economic Implications of Sea Level Rise. July

USFWS 2019. The Economic Contributions of Recreational Visitation at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. Division of Economics U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. May.

Appendix A

This Appendix lists applicable statutes, regulations, and executive orders not otherwise addressed in this EA, as well as how the proposed action and EA analysis comply with each, and any additional compliance steps taken by FWS.

Cultural Resources

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 470-470x-6; 36 CFR Parts 60, 63, 78, 79, 800, 801, and 810

The refuge determined that the Pink House does not meet the criteria of evaluation for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and has been deemed ineligible. The Service consulted with the Massachusetts Historical Commission who concurred with this determination.

Fish and Wildlife

National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act, 16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.

The Service manages all its lands – Pink House parcel included – under the regulations and authorities established in this Act for the benefit of wildlife and conservation. The Act also established 6 priority public uses of the NWRs, to include wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation. Refuge staff considered these priority public uses for the preferred alternative to open the restored site to the public for wildlife observation, environmental education and interpretation.

Land Management

Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. Public Law 94–579; Approved October 21, 1976; 43 U.S.C. 1701 through 1782 (as amended through P.L. 117–286, Enacted December 27, 2022)

The Service used the authority granted under this Act to explore opportunities for disposal of the Pink House 1-acre parcel as part of an authorized land exchange. For this to occur, the lands coming into the refuge must be of equal monetary value, and equal or higher ecological value, to the lands being disposed of. Further, there must be a willing landowner with suitable lands for exchange.