

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
AND DECISION
NEW NORTHWEST MONTANA WETLAND MANAGEMENT DISTRICT
ADMINISTRATIVE FACILITIES**

**NORTHWEST MONTANA WETLAND MANAGEMENT DISTRICT
AND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES**

LAKE COUNTY, MONTANA

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is proposing to acquire land to construct new administrative facilities for the management of four national wildlife refuges (Ninepipe, Pablo, Lost Trail, and Swan River); two conservation areas (Swan River and Lost Trail); the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District (NWMT WMD; or District), which comprises 15 Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs; Blasdel, Smith Lake, McGregor Meadows, Batavia, Flathead, Kicking Horse, Crow, Anderson, Duck Haven, Ereaux, Johnson 80, Montgomery, Sandsmark, Herak, and Cruz); and a network of easements, due to the transfer of the current Bison Range facilities to the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). The new administrative facilities will include a multipurpose building, shop, storage, residences, and associated roads and utilities. Construction for the proposed project will impact approximately 12 acres of land. The USFWS must examine the potential effects of this construction project on Refuge and surrounding lands and has written an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze possible environmental consequences of this action. The EA is incorporated by reference into this decision document.

Selected Action

Alternative E – Proposed Action Alternative: Purchase Property and Construct Facilities

Under this alternative, the USFWS will acquire land in the Mission Valley for the purpose of constructing replacement facilities and potentially increasing conservation land using Land and Water Conservation Funds and Migratory Bird Conservation Funds. Acquisition will focus on the most cost-effective option that meets management needs. Suitable buildings present on the acquisition site that meet the needs of the USFWS will be used and retrofitted if necessary to meet requirements; however, new facilities may need to be constructed for administration of the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas. The number, size, type, and use of the facilities constructed on this location would be the same as those described under Alternative B in the EA.

This alternative was selected over the other alternatives because Alternative E will best fill the USFWS needs while preserving the open space, wildlife habitat, public recreation areas, and conservation lands on the WPAs. In addition, any excess land on an acquisition could be restored and protected for wildlife, habitat, education, interpretation, and public use.

If the USFWS is unable to acquire land for the construction of facilities, Alternative C will be implemented instead.

Under Alternative C, the USFWS will construct new facilities on the Brome 80 unit of Crow WPA to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

Alternative C was selected over Alternatives B and D as the secondary alternative through the implementation of a decision matrix that accounted for presence of wetlands, past restoration efforts, impact to open space, use by species of concern and trust species, access to utilities, geotechnical results and topography, safe ingress and egress, impact to public use, public opinion, central location, equipment safety, and impact to roads. After Alternative E, Alternative C best fills the USFWS needs while preserving open space, wildlife habitat, public recreation areas, and conservation lands on the WPAs.

The USFWS will continue to work towards the acquisition of new conservation land within Lake County regardless of the alternative implemented.

Other Alternatives Considered and Analyzed

Alternative A – No Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, the USFWS will no longer have facilities available for the continued administration of the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas once the CSKT assumes full management of the Bison Range and will lose the ability to effectively manage conservation lands.

Alternative B – Construct New Facilities on Anderson WPA

Under Alternative B, the USFWS would construct new facilities on the southern part of Anderson WPA to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

Alternative D – Construct New Facilities on Herak WPA

Under Alternative D, the USFWS would construct new facilities on Herak WPA to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

Summary of Effects of the Selected Actions

An EA was prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide decision-making framework that (1) explored a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives; (2) evaluated potential issues and impacts to the refuge, resources, and values; and (3) identified mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts. The EA evaluated the effects associated with each alternative.

Implementation of either the agency's primary or backup decisions would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects: long-term, adverse impacts to grassland vegetation, birds, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, invertebrates, hunting, and wildlife observation within the 12-acre project area; and long-term, beneficial impacts to grassland vegetation, wetlands, invasive species control, birds, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, invertebrates, hunting, wildlife observation, education, and interpretation outside of the project area.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the selected action. These measures include the following:

Soil Erosion and Sediment Control – Implementing erosion-control measures and structures such as watering dry soil, installing silt fences, reusing native topsoil from the project site, designating

and marking access points to minimize soil compaction, accessing equipment with mats or boards during wet conditions to prevent rutting and soil loss, fitting grading to the surrounding terrain, timing grading operations to minimize soil exposure, retaining existing vegetation whenever feasible, vegetating and mulching to stabilize disturbed areas, minimizing the length and steepness of slopes, keeping runoff velocity low, preparing drainage ways and outlets to handle concentrated runoff until permanent drainage structures are constructed, trapping sediment on-site, and inspecting and maintaining control measures frequently.

Soil Stabilization – Preserving existing vegetation and hydrologic features when required and feasible; applying temporary soil stabilization to remaining active and non-active areas and reapplying them as necessary to maintain effectiveness; implementing temporary soil stabilization measures at regular intervals throughout the defined rainy season to achieve and maintain the contract’s disturbed soil area requirements; controlling erosion in concentrated flow paths by applying erosion-control blankets, check dams, and erosion-control seeding and lining swales as shown on plans; applying seed to areas deemed substantially completed during the defined rainy season; and applying permanent erosion control to remaining disturbed soil areas as early as feasible and as shown on plans at the completion of the construction.

Other – Following Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Certification requirements for new facilities and complying with bird collision deterrence; identifying and avoiding all wetlands and other significant hydrological areas during site selection and construction; halting construction and notifying the regional archeologist and the CSKT Tribal Historic Preservation Office if paleontological, archeological, or historical remains are encountered; combining multiple buildings or reducing the size and number of buildings when possible to decrease the impact area; and working with the Lake County Roads Departments to direct visitation traffic on paved roads and update signage.

While refuges, by their nature, are unique areas protected for conservation of fish, wildlife and habitat, the proposed action will not have a significant impact on refuge resources and uses for several reasons:

- The action will result in beneficial impacts to the human environment, including the biodiversity and ecological integrity of the WPAs, as well as the wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities and socioeconomics of the local economy, with only negligible, adverse impacts to the human environment, as discussed above.
- The adverse direct and indirect effects of the proposed action on air, water, soil, habitat, wildlife, aesthetic/visual resources, and wilderness values are expected to be mostly minor and short term outside of the 12-acre project area. The benefits to long-term ecosystem health that the presence of USFWS staff will accomplish far outweigh any of the short-term, adverse impacts discussed in this document.
- Planned mitigation measures will contribute to the reduction and elimination of adverse impacts to the analyzed resources.
- The action is not in an ecologically sensitive area.

- The action will not impact any threatened or endangered species, or any federally designated critical habitat.
- The action will not impact any cultural or historical resources.
- The action will not impact any wilderness areas.
- There is no scientific controversy over the impacts of this action, and the impacts of the proposed action are relatively certain.
- The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988.

Public Review

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted included CSKT; Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; Natural Resource Conservation Service; and Lake County.

On September 28, 2021, the Draft EA was made available on the Federal Register for 30-day public review and comment. USFWS received 26 comments on the Draft EA. Appendix D of the Final EA contains each comment and a written response.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based upon a review and evaluation of the information contained in the EA as well as other documents and actions of record affiliated with this proposal, the USFWS has determined that the proposal to implement the purchase of land and construction of new administrative facilities for the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of NEPA (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required.

Decision

The USFWS has decided to acquire for the construction of new administrative facilities in order to continue the management and improvement of the conservation lands entrusted to the USFWS in northwest Montana. If suitable land cannot be acquired in a timely manner, USFWS will build on the Crow WPA.

This action is compatible with the purpose and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The action is consistent with applicable laws and policies.

STACY ARMITAGE

Digitally signed by STACY
ARMITAGE
Date: 2022.06.13 12:19:25 -06'00'

Assistant Regional Director, Refuges, R6