

Chapter 2



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The Planning Process

- The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process
- Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities

2.1 The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process

FWS Policy (602 FW 3) establishes an eight-step planning process that also facilitates compliance with NEPA (see figure 2-1 below). The full text of the policy and a detailed description of the planning steps can be viewed on the Web at <http://policy.fws.gov/602fw3.html>. We followed the process depicted in the figure below in developing this CCP.

Our refuge planning began informally in 2008 to become familiar with the planning process and to start collecting information on refuge resources and public use. Subsequently, we initiated State and Tribe involvement in September 2008. An initial strategy meeting between the refuge staff and Regional Office staff was held at the refuge in July 2009. We assembled our core planning team, which consists of refuge staff, Regional Office staff, and a representative from the NJDFW. One major outcome of this meeting was a timetable for accomplishing the major steps in the planning process.

In July 2010, our public scoping period began. We mailed approximately 500 copies of the initial CCP planning announcement newsletter to local conservation and interest groups; research organizations; local, State and Federal government agencies; federally recognized Tribes; and interested individuals. We also posted the July newsletter on the refuge's website to reach a broader audience. Announcement of the CCP/EA was published in the *Federal Register* on July 19, 2010 (Volume 75, Number 137). We also held two public scoping meetings at the Chatham Township Municipal Building on July 28, 2010 at 1:00 and 6:00 PM. These meetings were advertised in news releases, our first newsletter, and local bulletin boards. A total of 31 attendees, including six organizations, participated in the public scoping meetings. A total of 21 written comments from both individuals and organizations were received, including seven comments via email and 14 comments via standard letter or comment card. Public comments included concerns and suggestions on maintenance, public use and access; natural resource management; endangered and threatened species; hunting and animal welfare; and regional or global environmental issues, including water quality, air quality and global warming. These comments influenced the development of issues and alternatives in the draft CCP/EA.

In September 2010, our core planning team was expanded to include Amy S. Greene Environmental Consultants, Inc. (Flemington, New Jersey).

In October 2010, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) began conducting a visitor survey at the refuge, which included two sampling periods, one of which was completed in the fall of 2010 and the other in the spring of 2011. The survey is designed to help us gain further insight into visitors' desires and concerns regarding public use opportunities and facilities at Great Swamp NWR. A total of 336 visitors agreed to participate in the survey during the two sampling periods. In all, 219 visitors completed the survey for a 67 percent response rate and ± 5 percent margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level.

In January 2011, we released a second planning update newsletter to everyone on our mailing list. This update summarized the public comments we had received from meetings and by mail, and provided an update on the progress of the CCP planning process.

In March 2011, we hosted a 2-day alternatives workshop to discuss ideas, issues, and opportunities for the refuge as part of the planning process, with one day focusing on ecosystems and natural resources and the other focusing on public use and visitor services. Participants of the ecosystems and natural resources

workshop included the core planning team, other refuge staff, and representatives from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Friends of Great Swamp NWR, The Nature Conservancy, and The Land Conservancy of New Jersey. Participants of public use and visitor services workshop included the core planning team, other refuge staff, and representatives from the Somerset County Park Commission Environmental Education Center, The Raptor Trust, Friends of Great Swamp NWR, NPS Morristown National Historical Park, Alliance of New Jersey Environmental Education, and American Museum of Natural History. Comments from the workshops were carefully considered in the development of the CCP.

In February 2012, we distributed our third planning update newsletter. This newsletter provided a status update on the CCP planning process, a summary of draft alternatives, an updated vision statement, and a planning timeline.

In June 2012, we submitted the draft CCP/EA to the FWS Regional Office for review.

In May 2014, we released our fourth planning update newsletter to everyone on our mailing list. This newsletter announced the release of the draft CCP/EA. It also provided a summary of draft alternatives, an updated vision statement, draft refuge goals, and public scoping meeting locations, dates, and times. On May 14, 2014, we published a Notice of Availability (NOA) in the *Federal Register* announcing the release of the draft CCP/EA to the public for a 45-day comment period from May 14 to June 30, 2014.

Two public scoping meetings were held to provide a presentation on the draft CCP/EA and to give attendees the opportunity to ask questions and submit comments. Meetings were hosted at the Chatham Township Municipal Building on June 11, 2014 at 10:00 AM and at the Long Hill Township Municipal Building on June 12, 2014 at 6:30 PM. In addition, hardcopies of the draft CCP/EA were made available for the public to review at Headquarters, the Visitor Center, and four local libraries, including Bernards Township, Long Hill, Library of the Chathams, and Harding. We received 80 letters, calls, or emails representing individuals, organizations, and State agencies, and had approximately 40 people attend the two public meetings. We reviewed and summarized all comments received, wrote responses, and revised the CCP during July, August and September 2014. Our responses to public comments are in appendix G.

We submitted the final CCP to our Regional Director for approval in September 2014. The Regional Director determined that a FONSI was warranted (see appendix E), and that our analysis was sufficient to simultaneously issue a decision adopting this CCP for the refuge. We announced the final decision by publishing a NOA in the Federal Register of the final CCP.

We will evaluate our accomplishments under the CCP each year. If future monitoring or new information results in the prediction of a significant impact, it will require further analysis.

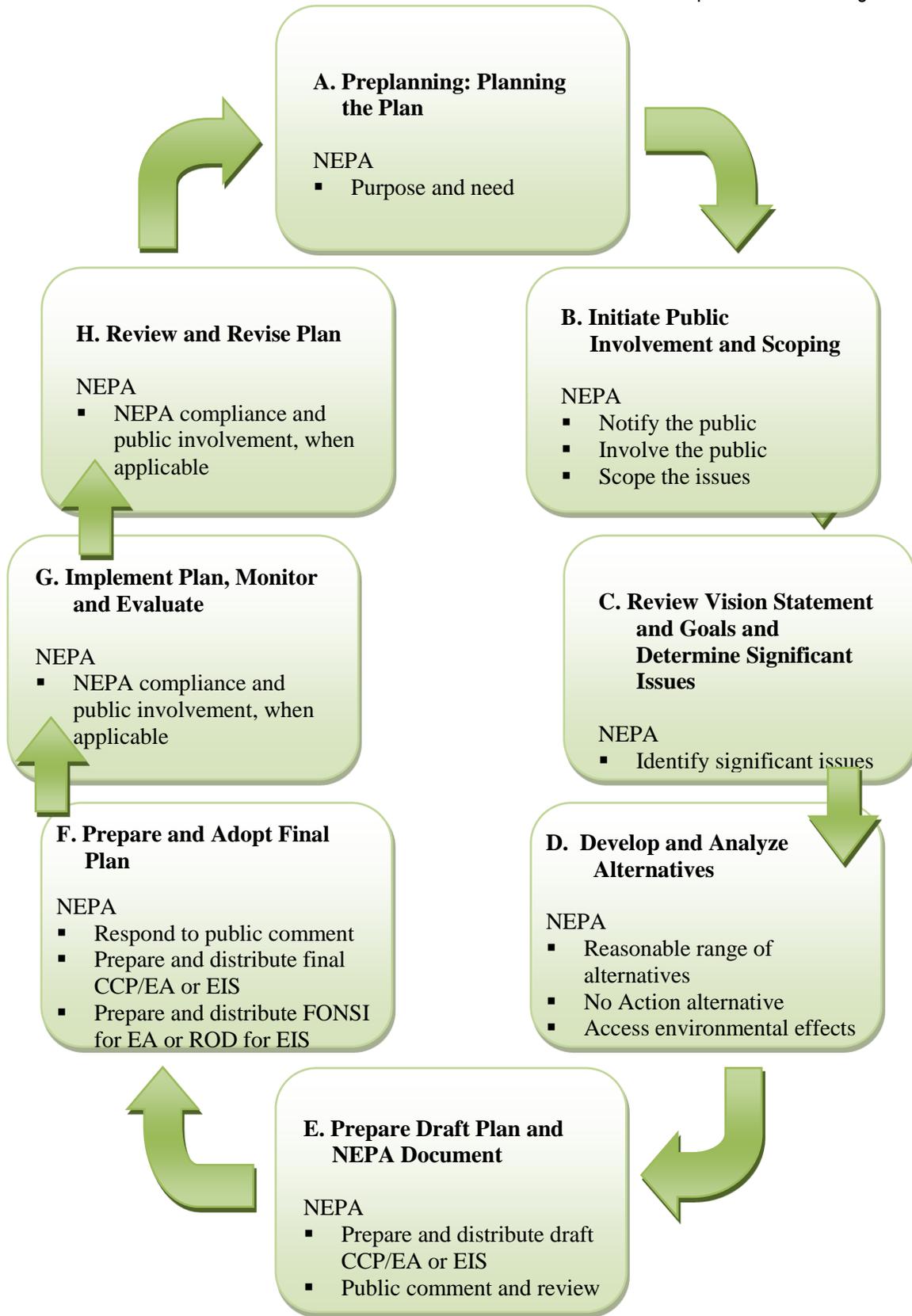


Figure 2-1: The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process and its Relationship to the NEPA.

2.2 Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities

We define an issue as “*any unsettled matter requiring management decision.*” Issues can include an “*initiative, opportunity, resource management problem, threat to a resource, conflict in use, or a public concern.*” Issues arise from many sources, including refuge staff, other FWS programs, state agencies, other Federal agencies, our partners, neighbors, user groups, or Congress. One of the distinctions among the proposed management alternatives is how each addresses those issues.

We developed a list of issues, concerns, opportunities, and other items requiring a management direction from public meeting and planning team discussions. The following summary provides a context for the issues that arose during the planning process.

Habitat and Species Management

- How to manage and maintain habitat for priority species, such as waterfowl.
- How to balance management of and maximize the benefits from various habitat types, including opportunities to improve grassland bird habitat.
- How to best manage habitat for endangered and threatened species.
- How to prioritize invasive species management.

Public Use

- How to expand outdoor education opportunities, including opportunities to connect with regional urban populations.
- Whether or not to expand the trail system.
- How to achieve additional public outreach and connect with local populations that are not currently engaged with the refuge.
- Where there may be opportunities to improve wildlife viewing opportunities, especially waterfowl.
- Whether or not to expand existing hunting programs, including opportunities for additional hunted species or methods.

Regional Issues

- How can refuge management continue to improve water quality in the region.
- What role does the refuge play in regional hydrology
- Identify/address climate change concerns impacting the refuge.