

Appendix E



Photo credit: William Bell

Finding of No Significant Impact

Finding of No Significant Impact

In May 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (CCP/EA), which is hereby incorporated by reference. Great Swamp NWR was established in 1960, by Secretarial Action, "...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds." The first lands were donated in 1964. The Great Swamp Wilderness Act of 1968 added a Wilderness purpose; for the "use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave those areas unimpaired to future use and enjoyment as wilderness;" to 3,660 acres of land east of Long Hill Road. Since 1964, the refuge has grown to 7,768 acres.

The Great Swamp NWR draft CCP/EA outlines four alternatives for managing the refuge over the next 15 years. It carefully considers their direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the environment and their potential contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). The draft CCP/EA restates the refuge's purposes, creates a vision for the next 15 years, and proposes five goals to be achieved through plan implementation. Alternative B is identified as the Service-preferred alternative. Chapter 3 in the draft CCP/EA details the respective goals, objectives, and strategies for each of the three alternatives, and chapter 4 of the draft CCP/EA describes the consequences of implementing those actions under each alternative. The draft plan's appendixes provide additional information supporting the assessment and specific proposals in alternative B. A brief overview of each alternative follows:

Alternative A (Current Management)

This alternative satisfies the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirement of a "no action" alternative, which we define as "continuing current management." It describes our existing management priorities and activities, and serves as a baseline for comparing and contrasting alternatives B and C. It would maintain our present levels of approved refuge staffing and the biological and visitor programs now in place. We would continue to manage for and maintain a diversity of habitats, including forests, wetlands, grasslands, and scrub-shrub on the refuge. The refuge would continue to provide an active visitor use program that supports environmental education and interpretation, hunting, and wildlife observation and photography.

Alternative B (Enhance Biological Diversity and Public Use Opportunities)

This alternative is the Service-preferred alternative. It combines the actions we believe would most effectively achieve the refuge's purposes, vision, and goals, and respond to the issues raised during the scoping period. It emphasizes the management of specific refuge habitats to support species of conservation concern in the Great Swamp region. In particular, it emphasizes habitat for priority bird species and Federal trust species, including the bog turtle and Indiana bat. This includes the consolidation of small patches of managed grassland and scrub-shrub habitat to promote wildlife use, increase connectivity, decrease fragmentation, increase maintenance efficiency, and reduce associated costs. In addition, alternative B strives to promote wildlife-dependent public uses, including additional deer and turkey hunting opportunities; expands wildlife observation, and photography opportunities; initiates new opportunities to reach nearby

urban populations; and increases the number of interpretive program and environmental education opportunities.

Alternative C (Emphasis on Maximizing Natural Regeneration)

Alternative C would focus on allowing natural succession or regeneration to occur to maximum extent practical. This would require active management in areas known to support priority refuge species and consolidation of managed grassland and scrub-shrub habitats to areas along Pleasant Plains Road for wildlife viewing. Alternative C focuses on those wildlife-dependent public uses that are currently offered.

Alternative D (Focus on Expansion of Priority Public Uses)

Alternative D would focus on allowing additional public uses and focusing habitat management on maintaining wildlife viewing opportunities. We would emphasize managing for open habitats, maintaining open water habitat within impoundments, and aggressively expand partnerships for conservation initiatives. We would open specific areas of the refuge to fishing, expand deer and turkey hunting opportunities, expand the public use infrastructure, and increase outreach and publicity.

We distributed the draft CCP/EA for a 47-day period of public review and comment from May 14 to June 30, 2014. We received 88 letters, calls, or emails representing individuals, organizations, and State agencies, and had approximately 40 people attend two public meetings held on June 11 and 12, 2014. Appendix G in the final CCP includes a summary of those comments and our responses to them.

After reviewing the proposed management actions, and considering all substantive public comments and our responses to them, we have determined that the analysis in the EA is sufficient to support our findings. We are selecting alternative B, as presented in the draft CCP/EA with the following changes recommended by the planning team, to implement as the final CCP. Changes we made in the final CCP include the following:

- We determined that we will not move forward on the proposed parking area on White Bridge Road.
- We corrected all format and typographical errors that were brought to our attention.

We conclude that alternative B, with the above changes, in comparison to the other two alternatives will: (1) best fulfill the mission of the Refuge System; (2) best achieve the refuge's purpose, vision, and goals; (3) best maintain and, where appropriate, restore the refuge's ecological integrity; (4) best address the major issues identified during the planning process; and (5) be most consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management. Specifically, in comparison to the other three alternatives, alternative B provides the biggest increase in the diversity, integrity, and health of high-quality habitats through enhanced habitat management. It also provides the most reasonable and effective improvements to existing public use programs that are in demand, with minimal impacts to wildlife and habitats. The plans to increase staffing and improve and expand infrastructure are reasonable, feasible, and will result in the most efficient management of the refuge and best serve the American public.

We have reviewed the predicted beneficial and adverse impacts with alternative B that are presented in chapter 4 of the draft CCP/EA, and compared them to the other alternatives. We specifically reviewed the context and intensity of those predicted impacts over the short- and long-term, and considered the cumulative effects. The review of each of the NEPA factors to assess whether there will be significant environmental effects is summarized here (40 C.F.R. 1508.27).

(1) Beneficial and adverse effects: We expect the final CCP (alternative B) management actions to benefit both the wildlife and habitats at Great Swamp NWR. Important examples include efforts to reduce forest fragmentation, and management of a variety of other habitats on the refuge to benefit breeding and migrating songbirds, waterfowl, and raptors, as well as amphibians, reptiles, and mammals of conservation concern. Except for restoring some habitat to a natural state and consolidation of smaller managed parcels into larger contiguous patches, benefits will not result from any major change in management strategy; rather, they will be incremental to the effects of current management. As stated in the draft CCP/EA, we will complete any additional compliance with applicable laws before implementing any restoration of the impoundments. Therefore, we do not anticipate any significant beneficial or adverse effect on the human environment.

(2) Public health and safety: We expect the good safety record of the refuge to continue based on the protective actions provided in the stipulations of the compatibility determination for each of the authorized public uses on the refuge. There should be no significant impact on public health and safety from the implementation of the CCP.

(3) Unique characteristics of the area: The primary, unique characteristic of Great Swamp NWR is its large forest tracts in the highly urbanized and suburban nature of New Jersey as well as in proximity to New York City. The environmental interpretation and education opportunities in this location provide unique opportunities to reach urban populations with a wildlife conservation message. As in (1), the benefits will be incremental to the effects of the ongoing management measures originally instituted to protect these resources. Thus, we do not expect these incremental benefits to result in a significant impact on the human environment.

(4) Highly controversial effects: The management actions in the final CCP such as invasive species control, habitat restoration, deer control, and wildlife-dependent recreational uses are time-tested measures. Their effects on the refuge are widely known from past management and monitoring. There is no scientific controversy over what these effects will be; thus, there is little risk of any unexpectedly significant effects on the environment.

(5) Highly uncertain effects or unknown risks: The management actions in the final CCP are evolutionary. They are mostly refinements of the existing management measures that we have used for many years. We will implement a comprehensive monitoring program to reassess the effectiveness of each planned improvement. With the data available on the current management results and the system in place to adjust for any unplanned effect, we do not find a high degree of uncertainty or unknown risk that the CCP will cause any significant impact on the environment.

(6) Precedent for future actions with significant effects: The purpose of the CCP is to establish the precedent for managing the refuge for up to 15 years. The effects of that management are designed as gradual improvements over the existing conditions, not global changes. For example, strategies such as expanding environmental education and forest will be completed over several years. Therefore, we do not expect this precedent to cause any significant impact on the environment.

(7) Cumulatively significant impacts: The CCP provides the programmatic, long-term management plan for the refuge. We plan to coordinate with surrounding land managers to promote common goals such as managing wildlife, habitat, and public use to minimize potential conflicts. Our management jurisdiction is limited, however, to the refuge lands, and we do not foresee any of the coordinated activities rising to the level of a significant effect on the environment. Within the term of the CCP, we intend to pursue additional projects such as constructing a boardwalk, wildlife observation tower, additional trails, and expanding the refuge administrative offices. We will examine the cumulative effects of all projects under the CCP before they are approved, and we will conduct whatever level of additional NEPA review is warranted.

(8) Effects on scientific, cultural, or historical resources: Evaluation of archaeological resources presented in the draft CCP/EA showed no significant impacts on these resources from the planned management activities. Service archaeologists in the Northeast Regional Office keep an inventory of known sites and structures, and ensure that we consider them in planning new ground-disturbing or structure-altering changes to the refuge. Throughout the implementation of the CCP, we will continue to consult with the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office on any ground-disturbing activities (e.g., expanding administrative offices) and other projects that might affect cultural resources.

(9) Effects on Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species and habitats: We have contacted the Service's New Jersey Ecological Services Field Office under Section 7 of the ESA. The ESA-listed, bog turtle and Indiana bat have been documented to occur on the refuge. Our management actions are designed to preserve and improve the existing habitat for these species. Therefore, we anticipate that CCP actions are not likely to effect ESA resources.

(10) Threat of violating any environmental law: Our habitat management actions are designed to benefit the environment. They will comply with all applicable protections such as the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act. Pursuant to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (16 U.S.C. 668dd(e)(3), 668dd(m)), our public hunting and fishing programs under the CCP requires all participants to comply with State regulations. We do not anticipate a threat that the CCP will violate any environmental law or cause any significant impact on the environment.

Based on this review, we find that implementing alternative B will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, in accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. Therefore, we have concluded that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required, and this FONSI is appropriate and warranted.



Deborah Rocque
Acting Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Hadley, Massachusetts

6 OCT 2014

Date

