

Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges

Summary of Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement - May 2014

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is pleased to announce the release of a draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) for public review and comment.

In this newsletter, we briefly summarize the three management alternatives that we evaluated for the draft CCP/EIS. For full details of these alternatives, please refer to the complete draft plan. On page 7 of the newsletter, we explain where to get a copy of the draft plan and how to submit comments. The public comment period ends on July 15, 2014.

Refuge Background

Chincoteague NWR was established in 1943 to provide habitat for migratory birds. Since that time, objectives have been expanded to protect and manage threatened and endangered species and other wildlife, and provide for wildlife-dependent public use. Currently spanning more than 14,000 acres, the refuge provides habitat for waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, songbirds, and many other species of wildlife and plants.

We manage this barrier island habitat for many species of wildlife. Two priority species are the federally endangered Delmarva fox squirrel



Steve Maskowski
Least Tern



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Birdwatching at Chincoteague NWR

and the threatened piping plover. Additionally, the Atlantic loggerhead sea turtle is a threatened species that nests occasionally on the refuge.

The Herbert H. Bateman Educational and Administrative Center, an energy-efficient facility that opened in 2003, is the refuge's visitor center and offers 5,000 square feet of interpretive natural history exhibits, educational programming, a 125-seat auditorium, and a classroom/wet laboratory. The refuge also provides wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities such as fishing, hunting, and wildlife photography. The refuge offers over 12 miles of walking trails that provide wildlife viewing opportunities.

Wallops Island NWR was created in 1971 under an agreement between the FWS and NASA. The 373-acre refuge, comprised mainly of salt marsh and woodlands, contains habitat for a variety of species, including upland- and wetland-dependent migratory birds. Public use opportunities include white-tailed deer hunting.

CCP Planning Process

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, which requires a 15-year CCP for each national wildlife refuge to guide all aspects of refuge management, including habitat and wildlife, recreation, and administration. Each CCP is designed to be consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife management, conservation, legal mandates, and FWS policies.

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Seabeach amaranth

Public Outreach

We started the CCP process for Chincoteague and Wallops Island NWRs in August 2010. We had a formal public scoping period to solicit comments from the community and other interested parties on issues and impacts they felt should be evaluated in the draft plan.

Preliminary draft alternatives were developed in summer 2011. Throughout the process, we employed a number of outreach strategies to keep people informed about the planning process, including newsletters, a web site, radio interviews, and traditional media coverage.

Alternatives Development

The draft CCP/EIS describes and evaluates three alternative management scenarios for the refuges. Alternatives are different approaches or combinations of management objectives and strategies. The draft plan details each alternative's objectives and strategies to conserve wildlife, conduct habitat management, and provide visitor opportunities. It also identifies the staffing and facilities to implement these programs.

We also evaluated a range of reasonable alternatives, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). We developed alternatives to achieve the vision and goals of the refuges and fulfill the need and purpose for a CCP. The three alternatives carried forward in the draft CCP/EIS for detailed analysis evolved through the planning process, and will likely be revised again after the public comment period and before a final decision is made.

The process of developing alternatives under NEPA and the Refuge Improvement Act is designed to consider the widest possible range of issues and potential management approaches. During this process, many different solutions were considered. Some components, like beach nourishment and

elimination of hunting, were considered but not selected for detailed study in this CCP/EIS for reasons described in the draft plan.

Actions Common to All Alternatives

Although the three alternatives differ in many ways, there are similarities among them, including:

Wallops Island NWR Habitat Management and Public Use

We would manage sea-level fen and uplands on Wallops Island NWR similarly across all three alternatives. Public access would also be similar; except that we propose a boardwalk and kiosk under alternative B. We would also continue to offer white-tailed deer hunting at Wallops Island under all alternatives.

Chincoteague NWR Habitat Management

We would manage the following habitats the same, regardless of alternative: maritime forest on Assateague Island and natural coastal processes and habitats on Assawoman, Metompkin, and Cedar Islands.

Threatened and Endangered Species

We would continue to provide protective conservation measures for federally listed species, including Delmarva fox squirrels, piping plovers, and seabeach amaranth, and their habitats on the refuge as indicated in recovery plans and relevant regulations.

Exotic, Invasive, and Nuisance Species Management

We would continue to survey and remove invasive species such as Phragmites and Asiatic sand sedge by chemical, mechanical, or other means. We would also continue to use refuge education programs and outreach efforts to educate visitors about how they can help decrease the spread of invasive plants.

Archaeological and Historical Resources

We would continue to enforce all applicable Federal and State laws to protect known archaeological and historical sites on the refuges. We would also raise awareness and increase protection of these resources through education.

Regional Conservation

We would work with partners to conduct research and continue joint management of the southern barrier islands. We would also explore establishing a regional conservation network for the lower Delmarva Peninsula that would seek to expand the connected network of protected lands.

Economic Development

We would work with the town of Chincoteague and regional organizations to support economic development by partnering with the surrounding community and local businesses and considering the economic impacts and opportunities for the town in future management practices.



Ducks flying at Chincoteague NWR

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Community Resiliency

We would work with the town of Chincoteague and other agencies and partners to explore potential impacts and ways to address hazard mitigation. We would also work with partners research and develop practices to sustain the resiliency of this unique barrier island system in the face of dynamic coastal processes and climate change.

Climate Change and Sea Level Rise

The refuges have facilities and resources that may be vulnerable to sea level rise and storm surge, including the National Park Service (NPS) recreational beach parking area. To minimize facility damage, maintenance costs, and access disruptions in the future, we consider potential risks and strategies to mitigate impacts from climate change when making long-term decisions about infrastructure.

Access for Space Tourism Viewing

We would work with the tourism industry, NASA, and the Virginia Commercial Space Flight Authority and Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport to provide access to the refuge for public viewing of rocket launches from the NASA-Wallops Island launch complex. The carrying capacity of parking areas for this purpose would need to be defined once the alternative decision is made.

Commercial Uses

Although commercial harvest of horseshoe crabs has been a traditional use, it has never been sanctioned on the refuge. We determined that the commercial harvest of horseshoe crabs on refuge lands does not contribute to the refuge’s migratory bird purpose and is not an appropriate use of the refuge. Consequently, the use cannot be permitted.



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Fishing at Chincoteague NWR

CCP/EIS Organization

What is in the draft CCP/EIS?

The draft CCP/EIS is organized into the following 6 chapters and 17 appendixes:

Chapter 1. Introduction, Purpose and Need, and Planning Background

Explains why and how we must prepare a draft CCP/EIS for the refuges. The chapter also documents the mission, policies, mandates, and relevant plans that affect the development of the CCP; presents the vision and goals that will direct refuge management; and, identifies issues and opportunities for consideration in the alternatives.

Chapter 2. Alternatives Considered

Describes three management alternatives that offer different strategies in fulfilling the refuges’ goals and objectives, and responds to key issues. We include information on the process by which we developed and evaluated alternatives and a description of the alternatives or components considered, but dropped from further analysis. Finally, we describe in detail the three alternatives that were retained for detailed analysis in the CCP/EIS, including elements or actions common to all alternatives and those that are unique to each alternative.

Chapter 3. Affected Environment

Describes the physical, biological, and human environment of the refuges.

Chapter 4. Environmental Consequences

Evaluates the foreseeable consequences of implementing each of the three management alternatives. The chapter is organized by resource category, with the discussion focused on the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of both beneficial and adverse effects likely to occur over the 15-year life span of the CCP.

Chapter 5. Consultation and Coordination with the Public and Others

Describes public and partner involvement during the planning process, and includes a chronology of public outreach activities we conducted while preparing the document.

Chapter 6. List of Preparers

Lists those who helped develop the plan.

Appendices

- Appendix A: Assateague Wilderness
- Appendix B: Other Relevant Plans, Mandates, and Initiatives
- Appendix C: Laws and Executive Orders Applicable to Refuges*
- Appendix D: Interim Chincoteague Pony Management Plan*
- Appendix E: MOA with Assateague Island National Seashore*
- Appendix F: Biological Opinion for Threatened and Endangered Species*
- Appendix G: Notes on Sea Level Rise and Projected Impacts on Refuge*
- Appendix H: Adapting Now to a Changing Climate*
- Appendix I: Summary Costs of Draft Alternatives
- Appendix J: Analysis and Costs for Maintaining Existing Parking and Beach
- Appendix K: Staffing Charts
- Appendix L: Species Lists for Chincoteague and Wallops Island NWRs
- Appendix M: Chincoteague NWR Economic Analysis
- Appendix N: Locating the Best Site for a Recreational Beach and Parking Lot*
- Appendix O: Section 7 Consultation for Threatened and Endangered Species
- Appendix P: Compatibility Determinations
- Appendix Q: Findings of Appropriateness

*Only available online or on CD-ROM.

Description and Comparison of Alternatives

Here we provide a short description of the three alternatives we evaluate in the draft plan. The table on the next page compares and contrasts some of the major differences between the alternatives. For full descriptions of the alternatives, please see chapter 2 of the draft CCP/EIS.

Alternative A: Current Management

Alternative A continues current management and describes existing habitat management and public use and access established by the 1992/1993 Master Plan and EIS. Alternative A serves as a baseline for comparing alternatives B and C.

Alternative B: Balanced Approach

Alternative B is the Service's preferred alternative. This alternative balances habitat management with public use and access. We would continue to manage habitat for waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, song birds, other migratory birds, and threatened and endangered species.

We would also enhance and expand some public use opportunities, as well as construct a new joint FWS and

NPS visitor contact station. Under alternative B, we would also relocate the recreational beach and parking area 1.5 miles north. We would continue to maintain 961 parking spaces.

Alternative C: Reduced Disturbance

Alternative C would direct staffing and funding towards maximizing habitat and wildlife management strategies. As a result of prioritizing habitat and wildlife management, some public use activities and access would be reduced.

Similar to alternative B, we propose a joint FWS and NPS contact station and would relocate the recreational beach 1.5 miles north. However, under alternative C, we provide fewer parking spaces.

How to Get a Copy of the Draft CCP/EIS

You may view and download the draft CCP/EIS online at: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/chincoteague/what_we_do/conservation.html.

You may also request a CD-ROM or hard copy of the draft plan from FWS staff:

Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov
Phone: 757/336 6122

Vision Statement

Our vision statement for the refuges is a synthesis of their refuge purposes, the Refuge System mission and goals, and other biological, legal, and social concerns in which the refuge has a role. It is intended to express what the refuges will be like in the future in terms of natural resources and visitor experience. Our vision for the refuges, as developed for this CCP/EIS, helps provide the core component of management strategies:

Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges encompass extraordinary and ever-changing lands at the edge of the sea, a place where unique habitats and wildlife flourish. In partnership with others, the refuges are a vital part of a larger system of protected lands and waters on the Delmarva Peninsula critical to migratory birds. People from around the world can visit the refuges to learn, recreate, refresh themselves, be inspired by wildlife and wild lands, and renew their connection with nature.



Sunset at Tom's Cove

Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C
Coastal Habitats		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to manage barrier beach and dune habitat for piping plovers, coastal nesting birds, shorebirds, and loggerhead sea turtles. Continue to manage salt marsh for wading birds, shorebirds, and waterfowl. 	<p>In addition to alternative A:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow natural geologic processes to restore and overwash the former recreational beach and parking areas on Assateague Island in order to increase nesting habitat for plover, least terns, sea turtles, and other nesting shorebirds. This would occur in conjunction with the relocation of the recreational beach (see next page). In cooperation with USACE and other partners, develop strategies that will improve tidal flow to Swan Cove Pool (F Pool). This may be accomplished by engineering new water control structures. 	<p>In addition to alternative B:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Return footprint of current public beach parking area to wildlife habitat and reduce parking impact on habitat by reducing the size of public beach parking and relocating it to areas less sensitive for wildlife habitat and more stable to the forces of the tides and storms.
Impoundments		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to manage impoundments for migrating and wintering waterfowl and shorebirds, and breeding shorebirds and waterbirds. Continue drawdowns, prescribed burns, and maintenance of impoundment dikes. 	<p>In addition to alternative A:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> North Wash Flats would no longer be needed as a piping plover mitigation area due to the relocation of the recreational beach, and the annual pumping operation will no longer be required to create additional piping plover nesting habitat. Management of North Wash Flats would be improved for spring and fall migratory shorebirds and waterfowl. 	<p>Same as alternative B</p>
Upland Habitats		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to manage coastal shrublands for breeding, migrating, and wintering land birds. Continue to manage coastal loblolly pine forests for Delmarva fox squirrels and breeding brown-headed nuthatch and Eastern towhee. 	<p>In addition to alternative A:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Within the North Wash Flats there is a 704-acre mitigation area that would be allowed to succeed to scrub shrub habitat on approximately 300 acres. This will significantly offset the loss of scrub shrub habitat contained within the 27 acres of habitat lost due to development at the proposed new recreational beach. Develop silvicultural prescriptions to manage the biological integrity and diversity of mature loblolly pine forest. 	<p>Same as alternative B, except:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce non-native sika deer population.

Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C
Recreational Beach at Chincoteague NWR		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to allow NPS to manage a 1-mile recreational beach, and maintain 8.5 acres (961 spaces) for parking at the existing beach, as long as a suitable land base remains behind the recreational beach. Continue pursuit of bicycle trail development via Beach Road to recreational beach to replace the temporary Swan Cove Trail. Allow hiking/intertidal zone access north of recreational beach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relocate the 1-mile recreational beach and parking 1.5 miles north of existing beach. Provide parking spaces for 961 vehicles (8.5 acres). Continue to allow NPS to manage the recreational beach. Allow hiking/intertidal zone access north of recreational beach. Allow pedestrian access south of recreational beach outside of breeding season, between approximately September 16 and March 14. 	<p>Same as alternative B, except:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce beach parking to 480 spaces (4.25 acres). Coordinate with NPS and the town of Chincoteague to identify a suitable off-site beach parking area, as close to the beach as possible, and institute a shuttle service from off-site parking to recreational beach for use during specific times of the year (anticipated to be every weekend in May and September and every day from Memorial Day through Labor Day weekend).
Fishing and OSV Use		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain current access and closures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create fishing access (e.g., crabbing dock) at new Beach Road terminus. Develop a new designated area for fishing from south of the relocated recreational beach for approximately 0.5 miles that includes OSV parking. Expand OSV zone, continue to keep open from September 16 to March 14. Close OSV zone to public access March 15 to September 15 or thereafter, until last shorebird fledges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discontinue OSV use. Close Assawoman Island to all forms of public use, including fishing, from March 15 through September 15, or until the last shorebird fledges.
Horseback Riding		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain current horseback riding access. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow horseback riding within OSV zone, and develop horse-trailer parking area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discontinue horseback riding.
Hunting		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain current big game and migratory bird hunting on Chincoteague NWR. Maintain current big game hunting on Wallops Island NWR. 	<p>Same as alternative A plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce non-migratory Canada goose and light goose hunting within Assateague Island impoundments. Add mourning dove hunting in areas outside of Assateague Island, and add turkey to big game for youth hunting. Pursue opening for fox and raccoon hunting on Assateague Island. 	<p>Same as alternative A plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce non-migratory Canada goose and light goose hunting within Assateague Island impoundments. Pursue opening for fox and raccoon hunting on Assateague Island. Work to eliminate sika deer and reduce non-migratory Canada goose populations.
Pony Management		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to allow current pony population of up to 150. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement revised Chincoteague pony management plan, and continue to allow for current pony population of up to 150. Work with the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department to create new viewing area(s) associated with the new recreational beach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Within 15 years, phase in requirement for Chincoteague pony population to consist of no more than 125.

How to Provide Comments

We invite you to share your comments about the draft plan in writing or in person at a public meeting. We will accept letters, faxes, and e-mails. To be considered, all comments must be received or postmarked by July 15, 2014. Please put "Chincoteague NWR CCP" in the subject line of your e-mail.

Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov
 Mail: Thomas Bonetti
 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 300 Westgate Center Drive
 Hadley, MA 01035
 Fax: 413/253 8468

Please be aware that if you include your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment that it may be made publicly available at any time.

Public Meetings

You may also wish to participate in our public meetings. We will have three open house events where individuals can come by and ask questions about the CCP. We will also hold a formal public hearing where oral comments will be recorded on June 26, 2014.

Open Houses Dates and Times

Date: Tuesday, June 24, 2014
 Time: 4 PM to 7 PM
 Place: Delmarva Discovery Center
 2 Market Street
 Pocomoke City, MD 21851

Date: Wednesday, June 25, 2014
 Time: 4 PM to 7 PM
 Place: Eastern Shore
 Community College
 Great Hall
 29300 Lankford Highway
 Melfa, VA 23410

Date: Thursday, June 26, 2014
 Time: 1 PM to 4 PM
 Place: Herbert H. Bateman Center
 (Refuge Visitor Center)
 8231 Beach Road
 Chincoteague, VA 23336

Public Hearing Date and Time

Date: Thursday, June 26, 2014
 Time: 6 PM to 9 PM
 Place: Chincoteague Center
 6155 Community Drive
 Chincoteague, VA 23336

Draft Goals

Goal 1: Coastal Habitats. Manage quality coastal habitats for biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of refuge barrier beach and dunes in concert with natural processes as part of the Delmarva Peninsula coastal barrier island system to provide habitat for species of conservation concern.

Goal 2: Managed Wetlands (Impoundments). Manage refuge impoundments to support native wildlife and plant communities, including a diversity of waterbirds, aquatic species, and other species of conservation concern.

Goal 3: Upland Habitats. Manage upland habitats for biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of coastal forests and shrublands to sustain native wildlife and plant communities, including species of conservation concern.

Goal 4: Southern Barrier Islands Unit (Assawoman, Metompkin, Cedar). Perpetuate the biological integrity, diversity, and long term viability of natural habitats that support native avian communities and turtles on Assawoman, Metompkin, and Cedar Islands through a partnership approach.

Goal 5: Partnerships. Working with partners, protect and restore vigorous, viable populations of migratory and resident wildlife, fish, and native plants and their habitats found on the Delmarva Peninsula and identified in state, national, and international treaties, plans, and initiatives. Take a leadership role in collaborative regional efforts to achieve broader conservation goals and serve as a catalyst for achieving a multi-state eco-regional partnership. The refuge will continue to work with partners to explore how best to sustain the resiliency of this unique barrier island system, its communities, and its economy, consistent with the refuge's mission and in the face of dynamic coastal processes, climate change, and storm events.

Goal 6: Visitor Services. People of all ages and abilities develop a stewardship ethic while enjoying their refuge experience and increasing their knowledge of the USFWS, Refuge System, and refuge.

Goal 7: Refuge Administration. Maintain and enhance refuge infrastructure and operations responsibly and sustainably for the safety and well-being of the wildlife, cultural resources, public, and employees.

People with disabilities who need special assistance to participate in these meetings, please contact refuge staff at 757/336-6122 or the Federal Relay Service at 1-866-377-8642. Requests for accommodations should be made at least 5 days in advance.

What's Next?

After this comment period ends, we will analyze comments and address them in a final CCP/EIS. The final CCP/EIS will be available for a 30-day review, after which the FWS's Northeast Regional Director will select an alternative to implement.



**U.S. Fish and
 Wildlife Service**
May 2014



Snowy Egret



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges
Accomack County, Virginia and Worcester County, Maryland

