

U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service

**Record of Decision
for the
Willapa National Wildlife Refuge
Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement
Pacific County, Washington**

September 2011

Through this Record of Decision (ROD), we, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), select the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). This ROD includes brief summaries of our public involvement process, the alternatives we considered, and our rationale for selecting Alternative 2, as described in the Final CCP and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The CCP will provide guidance for managing and conserving the Refuge's natural resources and public use activities over the next 15 years.

Alternatives Considered

In the Draft CCP/EIS, the Service evaluated three alternatives for the Refuge, including a no-action alternative (Alternative 1) as required by the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508). Based upon public input on the Draft CCP/EIS, we modified our preferred alternative, and the changes are reflected in the final document.

Alternative 1. Under Alternative 1, we would maintain current Refuge management programs and where feasible, restore forest, wetland, and beach dune habitats, and improve habitats for Federal and State-listed threatened and endangered species. We would continue to implement the forest management plan with our partners. Existing public uses—hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, environmental education, and camping—would continue. Lands within the Refuge's Presidential Proclamation Boundary would remain closed to waterfowl hunting.

Alternative 2. Under Alternative 2, current wildlife and habitat management would continue and a number of habitat improvements would occur. We would restore the intensively managed pastures and impoundments to historic estuarine conditions, increasing open water, intertidal flats, and salt marsh habitat by 621 acres. On the Leadbetter Point Unit, we would control avian and mammalian predators as necessary, to help meet western snowy plover recovery goals. On the Riekkola Unit, 93 acres of short-grass fields would be managed as foraging habitat for Canada geese, elk, and other grassland-dependent wildlife. Grassland restoration on 33 acres would include establishing the early-blue violet host plant which would serve the future reintroduction of the endangered Oregon silverspot butterfly. We would continue to implement our forest management plan, and maintain managed freshwater wetlands on the Tarlatt Unit. We would expand the approved Refuge boundary by 6,809 acres in the Nemah, Naselle, South Bay, and East Hills areas, and divest the Shoalwater and Wheaton Units (941 acres) from the Refuge.

Improvements to the wildlife-dependent public use program would include developing an interpretive trail and observation deck along the South Bay that ties into our proposed Tarlatt Unit visitor/administrative facility. After estuarine restoration is completed, the waterfowl hunting area would expand to include 5,570 acres. An additional 100 acres and three blinds (including one barrier

free blind) would be available for goose hunting, and two blinds (including one barrier free blind) would be added for waterfowl hunting. Walk-in hunters could access the blinds on a first-come, first-served basis. We would develop a year-round cartop boat launch, parking area, and 0.6-mile Porter Point Trail to access the South Bay. A special permit elk hunt on the Leadbetter Point Unit, and elk and deer hunting in the South Bay and East Hills Unit during State hunting seasons, are also proposed.

Alternative 3. Under Alternative 3, the Lewis and Porter Point Units' intensively managed pastures and impoundments would be restored to historic estuarine conditions, maintaining approximately 878 acres of open water habitat and 4,178 acres of intertidal flats, and increasing salt marsh habitat by 429 acres. On the Leadbetter Point Unit, we would control avian predators as necessary, to help meet western snowy plover recovery goals. We would restore grassland habitat and establish the early-blue violet host plant on 33 acres, to serve the reintroduction of the endangered Oregon silverspot butterfly. We would continue to implement our forest management plan, and maintain managed freshwater wetlands on the Riekkola and Tarlatt Units. We would expand the approved Refuge boundary by 4,901 acres in the South Bay and East Hills areas, and divest the Shoalwater and Wheaton Units from the Refuge.

Improvements to the wildlife-dependent public use program would include developing an interpretive trail and observation deck along the South Bay that ties into our proposed Tarlatt Unit visitor/administrative facility. After estuarine restoration is completed, the waterfowl hunting area would expand to include approximately 5,440 acres. We would provide seven blinds for walk-in goose hunting through a lottery system, a permit-only elk hunt on Leadbetter Point Unit, and elk and deer hunting in the South Bay Unit during State seasons.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

An alternative considered to be environmentally preferable, generally causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment, and best protects, preserves and enhances natural resources. For this CCP/EIS, Alternative 2, our preferred alternative, is also the environmentally preferable alternative. Under Alternative 2, current wildlife and habitat management activities will continue, and we will implement habitat improvement projects for a variety of wildlife species and provide opportunities for the public to learn about and enjoy the Refuge's resources through wildlife-dependent public uses. Under Alternative 2 we would:

Wildlife and Habitat Management

- Restore the intensively managed pastures and impoundments to historic estuarine conditions, increasing open water, intertidal flats, and salt marsh habitat by 621 acres, thereby benefitting salmonids, shorebirds, a host of aquatic species, and other wildlife.
- Manage 93 acres of short-grass fields on the Riekkola Unit as foraging habitat for Canada geese, elk, and other grassland dependent wildlife.
- Restore grasslands, including establishing the early-blue violet host plant on 33 acres, which would serve reintroduction of the endangered Oregon silverspot butterfly.
- Continue to implement our Forest Management Plan with our partners, by protecting 557 acres of late-successional Sitka spruce forest and 6,180 acres of second-growth Sitka spruce forest to improve ecological function and forest health.
- Maintain and protect 1,581 acres of coastal dune habitat on the Leadbetter Point Unit and restore 220 acres.

- Maintain and protect 17 acres of seasonal managed freshwater wetlands on the Tarlatt Unit, 27 miles of riverine habitat, and 545 acres of naturally occurring permanent and semi-permanent freshwater wetlands which are important for a variety of wildlife species.
- Control avian and mammalian predators on the Leadbetter Point Unit, only as necessary to help meet western snowy plover recovery goals.

Refuge Boundary Expansion

- Expand the Refuge acquisition boundary by 6,809 acres in the Nemah, Naselle, South Bay, and East Hills areas contributing to the ecosystem's protection and health.
- Divest the Shoalwater and Wheaton Units (941 acres) from the Refuge to focus on priority Refuge programs.

Administrative/Maintenance and Visitor Facility

- Develop the proposed administrative/maintenance and visitor facility on the Tarlatt Unit, which would improve visitor services, help conserve crucial wildlife habitat, improve staff productivity, consolidate maintenance facilities, serve as an interpretive area, and eliminate increasing operations and maintenance costs for the old facilities.

Wildlife-dependent Public Uses

- Develop an interpretive trail and observation deck along the South Bay (concurrent with estuarine restoration) that ties into our proposed Tarlatt Unit administrative/maintenance and visitor facility.
- Develop a cartop boat launch, parking area, and 0.6-mile Porter Point Trail to access the South Bay for year-round public use opportunities.
- Expand the waterfowl hunting area to include 5,570 acres, after estuarine restoration is completed.
- Provide an additional 100 acres and three blinds (including one barrier free blind) for goose hunting, and two blinds (including one barrier free blind) for waterfowl hunting. Walk-in hunters could access the blinds on a first-come, first-serve basis. These blinds would also be open to all refuge visitors during the nonhunting season.
- Provide a special permit elk hunt on the Leadbetter Point Unit, and elk and deer hunting in the South Bay and East Hills Units during state seasons.

Public Involvement

We initiated the public scoping phase of the planning process in March 2008, by announcing our intention to develop a CCP/EIS in the Federal Register and Planning Update 1. We also explained the planning process and requested scoping comments in Planning Update 1, and announced public meetings. All planning updates were mailed to an extensive list of addressees and posted on the Refuge's website. We also held public open house meetings in March 2008 to obtain comments.

In August 2008, we provided summaries of public comments and a draft vision statement in Planning Update 2. In July 2009, we requested comments on our preliminary alternatives in Planning Update 3. On January 21, 2011, we released the Draft CCP/EIS, with a summary in Planning Update 4, for a 45-day public comment period announced in the Federal Register. We extended the comment period

to 60-days, in response to public requests, and participated in a public hearing sponsored by the local congressional representative.

Numerous national, state, and local organizations; agencies; neighboring landowners; and interested citizens were involved in the review process. All substantive issues raised in public comments have been addressed, either through revisions to the Final CCP/EIS or through our response to comments in Appendix E of the Final CCP/EIS. Most guidelines and actions in Alternative 2 of the Final CCP/EIS remain consistent with those presented in the Draft CCP/EIS, with a few changes. The Final CCP/EIS was released to the public on August 12, 2011, through a Federal Register notice and press release, our Web site, and Planning Update 5.

Responses to Comments Received On the Final CCP/EIS

We received comment letters on the Final CCP/EIS from seven commenters. The comments did not raise new issues; therefore, our analysis and preferred alternative remained unchanged.

Decision

The Service has selected Alternative 2 for implementation, as described in the Final CCP/EIS. Alternative 2 is the most effective alternative for addressing the key issues identified during the planning process and will best achieve the purposes and goals for the Refuge, as well as the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). Implementation of the CCP will occur over the next 15 years. Some actions will require additional funding and will be implemented as funding becomes available.

Factors Considered in Making the Decision

In reaching this decision, the Service reviewed and considered the following.

- Impacts identified in Chapter 6 of the Draft and Final CCP/EIS.
- Relevant issues, concerns, and opportunities presented by agencies, organizations, and individuals throughout the CCP process, including comments on the Draft and Final CCP/EIS.
- Other relevant factors, including the purposes for which the Refuge was established and statutory and regulatory guidance.

Alternative 2 was modified from the Draft CCP/EIS and selected for implementation for the following reasons:

- Alternative 2, with acreage changes from the draft, provides the greatest amount of estuarine restoration of the three alternatives, and restores the intensively managed freshwater impoundments to historic estuarine conditions. A large portion of estuarine habitat has been lost to diking, channelization, dredging, and filling. Restoration of this amount of estuarine habitat will result in a 30 percent increase in intertidal emergent (salt marsh) habitat in Willapa Bay. This action will be an important contribution to providing salmonid rearing habitat and will benefit a variety of migratory birds, including waterfowl, shorebirds, seabirds, and wading birds.
- Alternative 2 provides the greatest amount of Refuge expansion and the highest potential to improve protection of the south Willapa Bay ecosystem. Areas identified within the

expanded boundary would provide us with opportunities to conduct wildlife-dependent public uses, and provide fish and wildlife habitat for a variety of migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and salmonids. The expanded boundary will help us improve and protect habitat quality and connectivity, water quality, forest ecosystem function, and wildlife corridors throughout the south Willapa Bay ecoregion. This alternative best responds to the increasing threat of development, habitat fragmentation, forest fragmentation, and other human pressures in the surrounding areas.

- Through Alternative 2, we will assist in the recovery of the threatened western snowy plover by maintaining and enhancing existing breeding and wintering habitat, preventing sources of disturbance at nesting sites, enforcing regulations designed to protect areas used by nesting plovers, and preventing excessive predation through an integrated predator management strategy. Of the six Washington locations identified in the plover's Federal recovery plan as breeding areas, only two are currently occupied; the largest is located at the Refuge's Leadbetter Point Unit.
- Through Alternative 2, we will work with partners to establish and maintain suitable habitat for future reintroduction of the Oregon silverspot butterfly (currently extirpated in the State) while supporting a variety of other grassland dependent wildlife species.
- Alternative 2 was changed from the Draft CCP/EIS to provide and manage short-grass field habitat adequate for Canada geese and Roosevelt elk, while minimizing the potential for depredation on private lands.
- Alternative 2 provides an achievable balance of various opportunities for all six wildlife-dependent priority public uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, and interpretation), while providing sufficient protection and sanctuary habitat areas for fish and wildlife.
- Alternative 2 provides for an integrated waterfowl hunting program and was modified from the Draft CCP to provide walk-in access to waterfowl hunting blinds. It also provides hunting in the expanded open water area, which will be concurrent with estuarine restoration. Other modifications from the Draft CCP include boat access to the South Bay Units by a cartop boat ramp at Dohman Creek, and a 0.6 mile trail from the parking area that will provide year-round access to Porter Point. The big game hunting program will be expanded, providing opportunities to hunt elk and deer, including a special permitted elk hunt on the Leadbetter Point Unit.
- Through Alternative 2 we will greatly enhance the quality of the environmental education and interpretation programs and will increase the number of students and visitors currently served by the program, with the construction and location of the proposed administrative/maintenance and visitor facility and the addition of an education specialist.
- Alternative 2 will strengthen our fish, wildlife, habitat, and public use monitoring efforts. It is the best alternative to ensure that the Refuge can make the greatest contribution to fish, wildlife, and habitat needs within the south Willapa Bay watershed and Willapa Bay ecosystem.

Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm

Public concerns, potential impacts, and measures or stipulations to mitigate those impacts are addressed in the Final CCP/EIS. All practicable measures to avoid or minimize environmental harm that could result from implementation of Alternative 2 have been identified and incorporated into the Final CCP/EIS, Chapters 2 and 6, and Appendix C. The stipulations identified in the Compatibility Determinations in Appendix C, ensure that public and other uses are compatible with the National

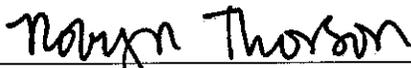
Wildlife Refuge System mission and the Refuge purposes. These stipulations and other mitigation measures identified in the preferred alternative in Chapter 2, are adopted by the Service in this Record of Decision and will be followed or enforced by Refuge staff members, partners, and volunteers.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Executive Orders

The proposed action complies with all Federal laws and Executive Orders related to the CCP planning process. A Compliance Statement has been prepared which explains how the selected alternative complies with the requirements of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 688dd-688ee); NEPA (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.); the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. 1531-1544, 87 Stat. 884); the National Historic Preservation Act (16 U.S.C. 470-470b, 470c-470n); Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964; Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management; Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands; Executive Order 12372, Intergovernmental Review; Executive Order 13186, Protection of Migratory Birds; and Executive Order 12898, Environmental Justice.

For Further Information

Interested and affected parties are being notified of our decision. Questions about the CCP/EIS may be directed to Charlie Stenvall, Project Leader, Willapa National Wildlife Refuge Complex, 3888 SR 101 Ilwaco, Washington 98624, phone number (360) 484-3482, fax number (360) 484-3109, and e-mail Charlie_Stenvall@fws.gov. This ROD and supporting references are available for public review at the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, 3888 SR 101, Ilwaco, Washington 98624, and on our Web site: <http://www.fws.gov/willapa/>.



Regional Director, Region 1
Portland, Oregon

SEP 29 2011

Date

Supporting References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. August 2011. Willapa National Wildlife Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. January 2011. Willapa National Wildlife Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement.