

Appendix H



Danielle D'Auria

Lily Pads at Carlton Pond WPA

Finding of No Significant Impact

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Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge and Carlton Pond Waterfowl Production Area Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In April 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published the Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Carlton Pond Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental assessment (EA). The refuge and WPA are both located in Maine.

Sunkhaze Meadows NWR was established in 1988 to preserve the Sunkhaze Meadows peat bog (now the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit) and to ensure public access to this unique environment. Sunkhaze Meadows NWR is currently comprised of three units and about 320 acres of conservation easements. The three units are the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit, the Benton Unit, and the Sandy Stream Unit. The Sunkhaze Meadows Unit is the largest of the three, at 11,484 acres. It is located in the town of Milford in Penobscot County. The Benton Unit is a 334-acre former dairy farm in the town of Benton in Kennebec County. The Sandy Stream Unit is a 58-acre parcel in the town of Unity in Waldo County. Sunkhaze Meadows NWR includes more than 3,450 acres of unique freshwater wetland-peatland habitat, which also provides breeding and migrating habitat for waterfowl and other wetland species.

Carlton Pond WPA was acquired by the Service in 1966 to protect waterfowl and other wildlife associated with this area in central Maine. The WPA is located in the town of Troy in Waldo County. It is 1,068 acres, including about 784 acres of managed emergent marsh and open water habitats. Carlton Pond WPA has historically provided good nesting habitat for waterfowl and other birds. It is also one of the few areas in Maine that provides nesting habitat for the black tern, which is State-listed as endangered. Many other bird species that use Carlton Pond WPA have been listed by the Partners in Flight organization as species that are declining.

The Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA draft CCP and EA outlines three alternatives for managing the refuge and WPA over the next 15 years. It considers their direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the environment and their potential contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). The draft CCP and EA restates the purposes of the refuge and WPA, creates a vision for the next 15 years, and proposes seven goals to be achieved through plan implementation. Because portions of Sunkhaze Stream and its tributaries have been found eligible for listing under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, all of the alternatives include completing a Wild and Scenic River Study.

Alternative B is identified as the Service-preferred alternative. Chapter 3 in the draft CCP and EA details the respective goals, objectives, and strategies for each of the three alternatives. Chapter 4 of the draft CCP and EA describes the consequences of implementing those actions under each alternative. The draft plan's six appendixes provide additional information supporting the assessment and specific proposals in alternative B. A brief overview of each alternative in the CCP follows:

Alternative A (Current Management): The Council on Environmental Quality regulations on implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require a “No Action” alternative, which we define here as “continuing current management.” This alternative 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 and WPA staffing and the biological and visitor programs now in place. We would continue to focus on preserving the freshwater wetland-peatland complex on the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit, which provides habitat for breeding waterfowl. We would also continue to maintain the open water and emergent marsh habitat at Carlton Pond WPA, the grassland habitat at the Benton Unit, and the shrubland and riparian habitat at the Sandy Stream Unit. Public use activities, such as wildlife observation, photography, hiking, snowmobiling, and hunting, would continue to be allowed. We would continue to rely on volunteers to lead environmental education and interpretation programs.

Alternative B (Service-preferred Alternative): This alternative combines the actions we believe would most effectively achieve refuge and WPA purposes, vision, and goals; the NWRS mission; and respond to issues raised during public scoping. Under alternative B, we would focus on the preservation of the wetland-peatland complex and mature forest within the Sunkhaze Meadow Unit. In contrast to alternative A, this alternative includes more inventory and monitoring, as well as research and active management (if warranted) to benefit rare habitats on the refuge. We would continue shrubland habitat management at the Sandy Stream Unit and would expand grassland management at the Benton Unit if feasible. Management of Carlton Pond WPA would remain unchanged, focusing on providing habitat for breeding black terns and waterfowl. We would work to enhance public use activities, such as providing additional parking areas and improving maintenance of some existing public trails. Our environmental education and interpretation program would be improved by providing Service-led environmental education programs, in addition to programming conducted by partners and the Friends of Sunkhaze Meadows.

Alternative C (Increased Shrub and Young Forest Habitat and Increased Public Use): Under alternative C, we would continue to focus on the preservation of the wetland-peatland complex at the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit. However, in contrast to alternatives A and B, this alternative includes shifting management of some mature forest and grasslands to shrubland and young forest habitat within the Sunkhaze Meadow Unit and Benton Unit to benefit species of concern that rely on these habitats. Management of the Sandy Stream Unit and Carlton Pond WPA would be similar to alternative B. Under alternative C, we would also work closely with partners to increase and enhance public use activities, such as expanding the trails at the Benton Unit and providing more environmental education and interpretation programming.

We distributed the draft CCP and EA for a 39-day period of public review and comment from April 23 to May 31, 2013. We received comments from individuals at three of the four public meetings we held on the draft plan, as well as written comments from eight individuals during the comment period. We also received comments from the Maine Department of Inland

Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW). Appendix G in the final CCP includes a summary of the substantive comments we received 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 analyses in the draft CCP and EA are sufficient to support our findings. We are selecting alternative B, as presented in the draft CCP and EA, with the following modifications recommended by the planning team, to implement as the final CCP.

Recommended modifications, based on public comments, include:

1. Under objective 4.1, we agreed to maintain the spur trail off of the Johnson Brook Trail in the Sunhaze Meadows Unit.
2. We clarified that we will provide wood duck nesting boxes from existing supplies upon request, as long as volunteers continue to clean, maintain, and monitor use of the boxes. After the existing supply of boxes is depleted, we will phase out artificial wood duck nesting boxes as they deteriorate, or will remove the boxes if volunteers are no longer able to maintain them (see strategies under objective 2.1).
3. We added a strategy under objective 6.1 that we will explore the feasibility of, and interest in, including the Benton Unit in a regional trail system upon request.
4. We modified a strategy under objective 7.2 to include specific reference to working with universities, as well as other partners, to identify research and monitoring projects and needs at each refuge unit to foster partnerships.
5. We modified language in the boating compatibility determination for Carlton Pond WPA to include monitoring for potential conflicts with other authorized public uses on the WPA (e.g., hunting), and will modify this and other compatibility determinations if warranted.

We conclude that alternative B, with the above changes, in comparison to the other two alternatives, will: (1) best fulfill the mission of the NWRS; (2) best achieve the refuge's and WPA's purposes, vision, and goals; (3) best maintain the refuge's and WPA'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 two alternatives, alternative B provides the biggest increase in health and quality of refuge and WPA 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 improve and expand parking areas, interpretive signs, and trails are reasonable, feasible, and will result in the most efficient management of the refuge and WPA and best serve the American public. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) includes the draft CCP and EA by reference.

We have reviewed the predicted beneficial and adverse impacts of alternative B that are presented in chapter 4 of the draft CCP and 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 effect on the environment 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 Sunkhaze Meadows NWR and Carlton Pond WPA. Important examples include measures to protect the unique peatland-wetland complex as well as mature forest within the Sunkhaze Meadow Unit, increase inventory and monitoring efforts so that we have a better understanding of refuge and WPA resources, and research and management to benefit other rare habitats on the refuge. Benefits will not result from any major change in management strategy; rather, they will be incremental to the effects of the current management. Therefore, we do not anticipate these incremental benefits to result in a significant impact on the human environment, nor do we expect a significant adverse impact on the human environment.

(2) Public health and safety - We expect the good safety record of the refuge and WPA to continue based on the protective actions provided in the stipulations of the compatibility determinations for each of the authorized public uses on the refuge and WPA. Habitat management proposed in alternative B is similar in method and quantity as current management. We have no reports of any adverse effects on public health and safety associated with these activities (e.g., brush hogging shrubland at the Sandy Stream Unit and haying at the Benton Unit), and do not anticipate any. The effects of prescribed burns have already been addressed under a previous EA. As stipulated by Service policy and that EA, each prescribed burn will first require a prescribed fire plan that will ensure public safety. Hunting will continue to follow Federal and State regulations. Benefits to public health associated with protecting habitat are expected to continue. Therefore, 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 characteristics of Sunkhaze Meadows NWR are the exemplary natural communities identified in the Sunkhaze Meadows Unit. These include unpatterned fen, domed bogs, northern white cedar woodland fen, and silver maple floodplain forest. The primary, unique characteristic of Carlton Pond WPA is its value as resting, feeding, and nesting habitat for waterfowl and the State-listed black tern. 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 grassland and shrubland management, inventory and monitoring, and authorized public uses are time-tested measures. Their effects on the refuge and WPA 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 unexpected 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 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 and WPA 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 visitation and managing for forest health will be completed over many years. Therefore, we do not expect this plan to set a precedent for any future actions to significantly impact the environment.

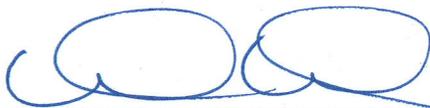
(7) Cumulatively significant impacts - The CCP provides the programmatic, long-term management plan for the refuge and WPA. We plan to coordinate with surrounding land managers to promote common goals such as managing wildlife, habitat, and public use to minimize potential conflicts. Our management jurisdiction is limited, however, to refuge and WPA lands and waters. 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 smaller projects such as building additional trails and small parking areas. Cumulative impacts of these projects have been analyzed in the draft CCP and EA. If other, larger projects are developed, we will examine the cumulative effects of these projects before they are approved. 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 and 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 and WPA. Throughout the implementation of the CCP, we will continue to consult with the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and Tribes on any projects that might affect cultural resources.

(9) Effects on Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species and habitats - As detailed in the final CCP, we have contacted the Service's Maine Ecological Services office and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to ensure compliance with Section 7 of the ESA. There are no known federally listed species on the refuge or WPA. All of the refuge units and the WPA are within designated critical habitat for the federally endangered Atlantic salmon. Our management actions are designed to continue preserving and improving the existing habitat conditions for this species, so we do not expect any significant impacts on designated critical habitat. The CCP also protects the delisted bald eagle. We will consult with appropriate Ecological Services and NMFS staff on additional species if warranted. Therefore, we do not anticipate any significant effects on 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)), we have coordinated closely with MDIFW in developing the CCP and the fish and wildlife regulations for the refuge and WPA. Our hunting and fishing programs require all participants to comply with Federal and State regulations. We do not anticipate 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.



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Date