U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Chincoteague

National Wildlife Refuge

Comprehensive Conservation Planning Newsletter August 2012

A team of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service planners are developing a new 15-year management plan, known as a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The plan will address many important and complex issues that affect wildlife and habitat management, administration, and public uses of the refuge. The planning team is developing alternatives that will guide management of the refuge to accomplish our wildlife conservation mission, while promoting sustainable, compatible enjoyment of the refuge by over one million people who visit annually. We anticipate that a first draft of the proposed plan will be published for public review and comment at the end of 2012.

Since we published the last CCP newsletter, citizens of the Town of Chincoteague and Accomack County, along with refuge visitors, have engaged in discussion and asked questions about the status of the CCP and the preliminary alternatives that were presented in 2011. We know that it is important to work with local governments to protect the refuge and to provide recreation and beach access for our visitors. We will continue to work in partnership with Chincoteague stakeholders to work through the details of the plan to meet the needs of both the community and wildlife.

Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

Great blue heron feeding

We appreciate the feedback and comments we've received about the preliminary alternatives. We are listening, and we welcome your involvement in the months to come. Let's keep working together to maintain a healthy environment and a healthy local economy.

In the CCP, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will:

- Evaluate options to manage coastal, upland and wetland habitat on the refuge to conserve threatened and endangered species;
- Propose ways to cultivate effective partnerships to protect and restore populations of migratory and resident wildlife, fish and native plants and their habitats found on the Delmarva Peninsula;
- Evaluate and propose ways to expand our visitor services program to provide people with recreation opportunities and a unique refuge experience; and
- Evaluate management options to provide a recreational beach in light of the dynamic nature of coastal barrier islands, severe weather and sea-level rise.

Originally, the Service was planning to evaluate four alternatives in the draft CCP. These were the preliminary alternatives we presented in 2011, labeled A, B, C, and D. However, after hearing public concerns, we eliminated the original Alternative C in order to focus our analysis on management options that reflect our legal mandates to manage the refuge, and have clear differences that can be evaluated and compared.

Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

Chincoteague ponies at Assateague Island

Draft alternatives at a glance

Draft alternative A: *Current Management*

Alternative A, a "status quo" approach required under the National Environmental Policy Act for evaluation, would continue current management strategies as established by the Master Plan approved in 1992. Under this alternative, the refuge would continue to protect and maintain all lands it administers, primarily focusing on the needs of threatened and endangered species, with additional emphasis on the needs of migratory birds and resident wildlife. The current location and capacity of beach parking would remain as long as the land base supports it. The current opportunity, but not the obligation, for the Service to purchase land for off-refuge parking will remain in effect until May 2013, unless the private landowners request a release from the purchase and sales agreement prior to that time.

Draft alternative B: *Balanced Approach*
Alternative B would continue established habitat and wildlife management strategies but would also focus them to align with the new goals and vision established by this CCP, and pursue additional management activities of resources and public use. This alternative would integrate public uses and wildlife conservation into a desired combination of species protection, habitat management, public use and access, and administration of the refuge. The recreational beach and parking would be relocated 1.5 miles north of the current recreational beach. We would not pursue the existing opportunity to purchase land for off-refuge parking and we would allow the current purchase option to expire in May 2013.

Draft alternative C: *Reduced Disturbance*
(Presented originally as "Alternative D" in August 2011)
The reduced disturbance alternative would direct staffing and funding towards maximizing habitat and wildlife management strategies. As a result of prioritizing habitat and wildlife management, public use activities and access, including the number of beach parking spaces, would be reduced. Under this alternative, the recreational beach and parking would be relocated 1.5 miles north of the current recreational beach. As in the balanced approach alternative (B), we would not pursue the existing opportunity to purchase land for off-refuge parking and we would allow the current purchase option to expire in May 2013.

Regardless of which alternative is selected:
- People will still be able to drive, bike or walk to Assateague Island;
- The Service, in cooperation with the National Park Service, will continue to provide a one-mile recreational beach on the refuge;
- Parking will be as close to the beach as possible, given terrain, design, shore dynamics, storm event considerations and wildlife needs;
- The Service will not purchase any land for off-site parking, or use any grant funds until after the CCP is complete; and only if the area for off-site parking is included in the approved CCP; and
- The Chincoteague pony herd will remain on the refuge at the current population of 125 to 150 ponies, consistent with the existing partnership agreement with the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department.

At this point in the CCP process, it is important that we clearly establish the three alternatives so we can effectively evaluate and describe the anticipated environmental consequences of each alternative. Once the draft CCP is published, which we anticipate will be in December 2012, we will provide ample opportunity for everyone who is interested to comment. We will hold public meetings and open houses to explain the various parts of the draft plan and listen to your suggestions and ideas during the 60-day public comment period.

Any management changes considered in the plan would not begin until a final plan is published in late 2013. Until a new plan is in place, current management will continue. The public beach and beach parking at Chincoteague NWR will remain open as usual for visitors to enjoy.

The issue of beach access has generated discussion and some confusion of the intentions of the Service. We want to reassure those who are concerned about continued beach access and parking:

Recreational beach:
As provided for in federal legislation, the Service will work with the National Park Service to maintain a one-mile recreational beach at Chincoteague NWR. The balanced approach (B) and reduced disturbance (C) alternatives

Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

Egret preening

evaluate moving the recreational beach 1.5 miles north to a more stable area.

If the balanced approach alternative (B) or the reduced disturbance alternative (C) were chosen, the existing beach would be available as it is today, while the new beach is being prepared. Preliminary discussions with regulatory agencies, including the Army Corps of Engineers and the Service's Ecological Services Division, indicate no insurmountable obstacles to building the necessary infrastructure to relocate the recreational beach 1.5 miles to the north. If new or unforeseen policy and regulation requirements prevent the Service from relocating the recreational beach, the status quo alternative will continue to be implemented as it is now, until those issues are addressed through the regulatory process.

Beach parking:
Every alternative maintains beach parking. The status quo (A) and balanced approach (B) alternatives both include 961 parking spaces at the recreational beach. The reduced disturbance (C) alternative includes 480 parking spaces at the recreational beach.

The alternatives address a proposed voluntary shuttle system in different ways. Under the balanced approach (B) alternative, we would work with the Town of Chincoteague to develop a response plan for beach access during periods when existing beach parking is unavailable due to storm events, and during peak periods when existing beach parking is inadequate to meet demand. Under the other alternatives, any alternative transportation system that we evaluate would be voluntary, and connect visitors from multiple off-site locations to the beach and refuge. The shuttle would operate primarily during the summer months and personal vehicles would be permitted year round. In the case of inclement weather, safe shelters for shuttle riders, hikers and cyclists would be provided at the recreational beach.

Funds from the $1.5 million grant the refuge received from the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit in Parks program would not be spent towards off-refuge parking, until after the final CCP is complete, and only if off-refuge parking is approved in the final CCP.

Next Steps:
Over the next four months, we will continue to analyze the predicted environmental and economic consequences of each draft alternative. The draft document will be assembled, edited, formatted, reviewed for legal compliance, and approved by Service leadership for release. The draft CCP/environmental impact statement is expected to be complete at the end of the year. Upon its release, all stakeholders will have 60 days to comment on the document and based on this feedback, we will revise and update the plan before moving forward with a final CCP.

Please visit our website at www.fws.gov/northeast/chinco for the most recent information about the refuge and the CCP process.

Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

Snow geese

Steve Hillebrand/USFWS

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New CCP Team Member Added

In order to provide additional regional support for the Chincoteague CCP, Scott Kahan, Northeast Regional Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, has appointed Joe McCauley as the new regional lead of the refuge CCP core team. Over the course of a 29-year career with the National Wildlife Refuge System, McCauley has served as deputy refuge manager at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, and refuge manager at James River, Plum Tree Island, Presquile, and Rappahannock River Valley national wildlife refuges in Virginia. He oversaw completion of the CCP at Rappahannock River Valley refuge and currently serves as regional chief of the Division of Realty at the Service's Northeast regional office in Hadley, Massachusetts. He can be reached at joseph_mccauley@fws.gov.

Upcoming Events

September 15: *Annual Beach Cleanup, 9am*
Visit the refuge website at fws.gov/northeast/chinco to register for the beach cleanup

September 29: *National Public Lands Day*
Fee-free day at national public lands

50th Anniversary of the Chincoteague to Assateague Bridge Celebration, 10am-4pm
Join the Kiwanis Club of Chincoteague and the Chincoteague Island Community in celebrating the bridge that has connected Chincoteague and Assateague islands for 50 years. A parade kicks off the celebration, leading to the Herbert H. Bateman Educational and Administrative Center, where all may enjoy a 60's sock hop, historic cars, a nostalgic slide show, family games and activities, live animal shows, and a variety of displays and interactive exhibits about the plants, animals and history of Assateague Island.

October 6-13: *National Wildlife Refuge Week*
Celebrate over 550 national wildlife refuges with events at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. Come build a birdhouse, see a live animal presentation or try your luck at fun activities such as Hooligan Heron's Habitat Hunt. Numerous family friendly activities will be available for birders and wildlife lovers of all ages.
Call the refuge at 757.336.6122 for more information.

November 10-12: *Veteran's Day Weekend*
Fee-free days at national public lands

November 22-25: *Waterfowl Weekend*
The refuge will be celebrating the marvel of fall migration. It's a special time of year! From noon to 3:30pm, Thanksgiving through the following Sunday, personal vehicles are permitted to be driven on the Service Road, providing a unique opportunity for wildlife viewing. A variety of guided walks and auditorium programs will also be offered during this time.

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