

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

Comprehensive Conservation Planning Update

Progress to Date

On September 17, 2010, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register to begin preparations and gather information for developing the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and associated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs). Since then, we conducted the initial public scoping period. This included holding public meetings to gather input from the local residents, visitors, and conservation partners. We have begun reviewing the scoping responses and forming a draft vision statement, draft goals, and draft alternatives that will be presented in subsequent planning update newsletters. We have also been working on a number of parallel efforts that will inform the process, including a structured decision-making process for determining the best location of the recreational beach and a socioeconomic study to more fully understand the relationship between the Town of Chincoteague and Chincoteague NWR.



Marshland on the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

Mike Dyer/Volpe

Background Information

Chincoteague NWR was established under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act on May 13, 1943 for the protection and management of migratory birds, especially migrating and wintering waterfowl. Encompassing 14,032 acres, the refuge is located in Maryland and in Accomack County on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The refuge's location along the Atlantic Flyway makes it a vital resting and feeding spot for a large number and diversity of birds.

Objectives have been expanded to protect and manage threatened and endangered species and other wildlife, and to provide for wildlife oriented public use.

The refuge supports breeding populations of the federally endangered Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel and the threatened piping plover, and the Atlantic loggerhead sea turtle is a threatened species that nests occasionally on the refuge. The refuge also provides access to several bicycle and walking trails and a recreational beach, which is managed in partnership with the National Park Service.



Refuge Manager giving presentation at public scoping meeting

USFWS

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Piping plover nest

Wallops Island NWR was created on July 10, 1975 and its 373 acres are comprised mainly of salt marsh and woodlands. It is located east of Wattsville in Accomack County. No public use, except for hunting, is currently permitted and the refuge is managed as a satellite of Chincoteague NWR.

Summary of Public Scoping

Public Involvement Process

We conducted a public scoping period from September 17, 2010 through January 18, 2011 to gather public input and identify key issues and concerns to consider during the CCP process. We invited the public to submit comments through news releases, the refuge website, and flyers made available at the refuge. Although the official public scoping period is over, we still welcome comments in the future.

As part of the scoping process, we held an open house on August 25, 2010 on the public beach, two public meetings on September 21, 2010 in the town of Chincoteague, and one public meeting on January 13, 2011 in Snow Hill, MD. Over 150 participants attended these meetings and wrote down over 200 discrete comments. In addition, 134 written comments were received, including official

comments from the Town of Chincoteague’s Chincoteague to Assateague Beach Access Committee, the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce, the County of Accomack, the Citizens Beach Committee, the Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, and Defenders of Wildlife.

Summary of Comments, Issues, and Ideas Collected

We are grateful to all those who participated in the discussion at the meetings and open houses, and submitted written and email responses. The comments are constructive in helping us identify issues to consider throughout the CCP process.

We conducted an initial, preliminary review of comments and identified several major themes or categories, summarized below.

Transportation

The majority of comments were associated with transportation, primarily related to the issue of parking at the beach, predicted loss of parking due to beach erosion, and the introduction of transit service between the Town of Chincoteague and the refuge. Many participants favored maintaining the current

parking size and either relocating the existing parking further north or keeping the status quo and continuing to rebuild the parking after storms. Many participants also expressed concerns about the ability of transit to accommodate beach gear, the attractiveness of transit to visitors, and safety issues related to sudden storms and the evacuation of transit riders. A number of participants requested improvements to the bicycle network. Finally, several participants recognized the priority of protecting wildlife and offering transportation options that favored this focus, such as transit and expanded bicycle access.

Beach Management

Many comments pertained to beach protection for recreational purposes and to protect the parking. Suggested strategies included building dunes, using beach replenishment, and constructing jetties and shore armor. Other comments called for preserving the natural state of the beach.

Grazing Animal Management

There were a number of comments related to the management of grazing animals on the refuge, in particular the Chincoteague ponies, but also the sika elk and deer. Many participants requested that the number of current ponies be maintained in the future, although some participants suggested reducing the herd size. Other participants expressed concern about the available habitat and water for grazing animals and requested a more detailed management process.



Red knot

Refuge Purposes

- Protection and management of migratory birds, especially migrating and wintering waterfowl.
- Protect and manage threatened and endangered species and other wildlife.
- Provide wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities.

Public Process

Comments related to the public process included suggestions for using social media, sharing additional information and documentation, and having additional dialogue about beach parking.

Wildlife/Habitat

Comments on wildlife focused on appreciation of the wildlife management and environmental education provided by the refuge. Some participants expressed support of prioritizing wildlife needs over recreational needs.

ORV Use

A number of comments addressed off road vehicle (ORV) use on the refuge. Some requested that the refuge maintain current access while others asked for reduced access to protect wildlife.

Economic Impact

A number of comments addressed the economic importance of tourism to the Town of Chincoteague

and County of Accomack. Participants expressed concern about how changes to access, especially to provision of parking at the beach or transit, and changes to management of the Chincoteague ponies, would negatively impact visitation, and thus the economy of the Town and County.

Other Comments

The remaining comments covered a number of issues, including hunting and fishing, pets, smoking, climate change, signage, trash, handicap access, and educational programs.

All comments are being reviewed and a summary of those comments will be incorporated into the draft CCP through the creation of the various management alternatives.

Next Steps

February 2011 to April 2011

Over the next three months, the Planning Team will be completing additional research and developing a draft vision statement, draft goals, and various draft management alternatives, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Each of the alternatives represents a different way in which the refuge could meet its purposes, draft vision, and draft goals.

After we draft alternatives, we expect the draft alternatives to be available in the Summer of 2011.

Contact Information

For additional information on Chincoteague NWR, please visit the refuge website at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/chinco/>. You may also reach refuge staff by:
Telephone: 757/336-6122
Fax: 757/336-5273

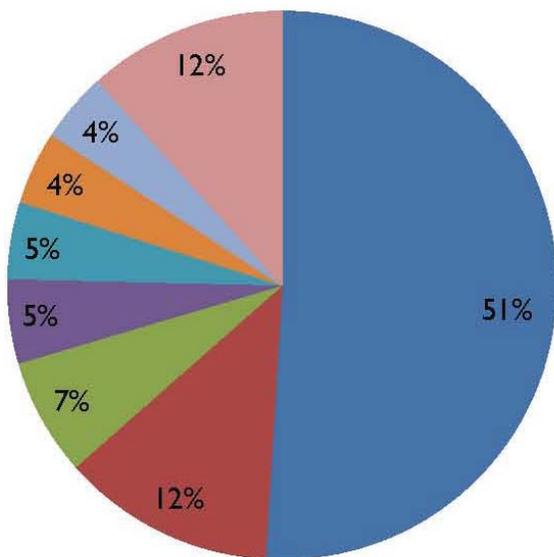
Please send mail to:
Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 62
Chincoteague Island, VA 23336

For more information on the planning process please contact:

Thomas Bonetti, Refuge Planner
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035
Phone: 413/253-8307

Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov
Please put "Chincoteague NWR" in the subject line.

General categorization of comments



- Transportation/access/parking
- Beach management/replenishment/protection
- Management of grazing animals, including ponies
- Public process
- Wildlife preservation and prioritization
- ORV use
- Economic impact of Refuge on Town
- Other

Including: hunting and fishing, pets, smoking, climate change, signage, trash, handicapped access, and educational programs

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov>



February 2011

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
National Wildlife Refuge System
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035-9589



Example Comments

“Public transport will be a problem if there is a storm and is also inconvenient for bringing umbrellas and other beach gear to the beach.”

“I think encouraging public transportation and alternative transportation (biking) is essential to preserving all wildlife and land.”

“There should be more concern for the wildlife in the conservation plan. This is a wildlife refuge, consideration for wildlife should be primary!”

“Work on beach restoration and preservation.”

“Chincoteague will lose their tourism! People will go to other beaches!”

“It seems to me sharing ALL the information, acting ethically with transparency, building relationships with the stakeholders and speaking directly to their concerns during discovery would be key to the development of such a plan.”