INTRODUCTION
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has begun the planning process to prepare an environmental assessment to evaluate a request from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (Department) for a Right-of-Way Easement for the Minnesota Valley State Trail (State Trail) purposes, on the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge).

The environmental analysis process to prepare the environmental assessment will be conducted in accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act. The scoping process ensures that a full range of issues, concerns, and suggestions, related to authorizing an easement for the purpose of the State Trail are identified and addressed in the environmental assessment.

As noted, the purpose of scoping is to ensure that in evaluating the Department’s request for an easement we do not overlook critical items that may inform our evaluation process as it relates to our ability to fulfill the Refuge Mission and the overall mission of the Service.

The purpose of scoping IS NOT to examine whether or not the Department should build a trail in the first place. The State Legislature authorized the Minnesota Valley State Trail (State Trail) in 1969 and segments of the State Trail have been constructed since as funding has become available. In 2018, the Department completed an Environmental Assessment Worksheet, as required by State law, to determine the overall effects on the human and natural environment of the proposed State Trail segment that will pass through the City of Bloomington. https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/input/environmentalreview/mnvalley/index.html
That segment will cross two Refuge Units, City lands, and private lands. Our environmental assessment and scoping will focus primarily on lands owned by the Service.

BACKGROUND
National Wildlife Refuges are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), the purposes of an individual refuge, Service policy, and laws and international treaties. The mission of the Refuge System, as outlined by the Dea, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.), is to: “... to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”
Lands acquired for the National Wildlife Refuge System are managed according to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act. This law states that no person, or entity, shall disturb or possess any real property of the United States, including natural growth, in any area of the System, or use or otherwise occupy any such area for any purpose, unless such activities are permitted (16 U.S.C. 668dd (c)). Persons, or entities, wanting to use or alter Refuge real property or natural resources may seek authorization to do so via a Right-of-Way easement. (340 FW 3). As noted, the Department has requested such authorization.

**Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action:**
The Refuge was established pursuant to the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Act (P.L. 94-466, as amended). The primary purpose of the Refuge is to “… develop and administer the lands, waters, and interests therein, which are acquired for the refuge, in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended. The Secretary may also exercise any other authority available to him for the conservation and management of wildlife and natural resources, the development of wildlife recreational opportunities, wildlife interpretation, and environmental education, to the extent deemed by him to be appropriate to carry out the purposes of this act.”

Our enabling legislation directs us to consider the State Trail in our planning. In addition, the existence of State legislation supporting trail development and the continuing planning, construction, and implementation of the State Trail influences our management activities.

The purpose of this proposed action is to evaluate the Department’s request to establish the Minnesota Valley State Trail on the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge in the context of the Refuge purposes; biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health; and implications for future operations and maintenance costs (funds and staffing).

The need of the proposed action is to:

- respond to the Department’s request, as provided for in the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act;
- … “Ensure that the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, as described at 16 U.S.C. 668dd(a)(2) and the purposes of the Refuge are carried out ” (16 U.S.C. 668dd (a) (4)); and,
- Consider the State Trail as directed in our enabling legislation.

**Alternatives to be Considered**

**Alternative A – Proposed Action Alternative: Issue a Right-of-Way Easement to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for the Minnesota Valley State Trail.**

The Department proposes to develop 13.5 miles of the State Trail, from the Bloomington Ferry Bridge to the Refuge Visitor Center in Bloomington, Minnesota. Our Proposed Action Alternative is to issue a Right-of-Way easement to the Department.

About 7 miles of the 13.5 mile segment will be located on Refuge lands at two locations. About 2 miles of the new segment will be on the Refuge’s Bloomington Ferry Unit. Presently, this Unit supports a narrow (2 – 4 ft. wide) natural surface trail.
About 5 miles of the new segment will be on the Refuge’s Long Meadow Lake Unit on the east end of the larger project. Presently, this Unit supports a wide (10-12 ft. wide) natural surface trail with road gravel at some locations. The Department is requesting a 25 ft. wide easement that will affect about 21 acres of Refuge lands.

The proposed trail will be a multiple-use, non-motorized recreational facility consisting of a 10-foot wide surface with 2-foot vegetated shoulders. The overall grade of the facility will average 5% or less and comply with Americans with Disabilities Act standards. The proposed facility will include several culverts and bridges. A portion of the trail segments on Refuge lands are required by statute to be paved (Minnesota Statue 85.015 Subd. 6 (b)). The Department shall be responsible for the operation and maintenance of the facility via formal agreement. One can reasonably expect that more people will experience the Refuge lands adjacent to the trail facility.

We would select and implement our Proposed Action Alternative and issue an easement to the Department only if doing so is appropriate and compatible with our ability to meet the overall Service mission and fulfill the purposes for which the Refuge was established. Our evaluation of the Proposed Action Alternative includes the beneficial as well as adverse effects of having the trail facility constructed as proposed by the Department. The evaluation includes the extent to which the Department is able to design a facility that avoids, minimizes, and off-sets significant adverse effects of constructing and operating the State Trail.

**Alternative B – No Action Alternative: Not Issue a Right-of-Way Easement to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for the Minnesota Valley State Trail.**

The Department proposes to develop 13.5 miles of the State Trail, from the Bloomington Ferry Bridge to the Refuge Visitor Center in Bloomington, Minnesota. Our No Action alternative is to not issue the Right-of-Way easement to the Department for the 7 miles of trail on Refuge Lands.

With the No Action Alternative, the State Trail, as proposed by the Department, would not be located on Refuge lands. The 21 acres within the requested trail corridor would remain as is. The existing natural surface trails and service roads will remain and will received limited, as needed maintenance by Refuge staff. One can reasonably expect that about the same number of people will experience the Refuge lands on the Bloomington Ferry and Long Meadow Lake Units.

We would select and implement our No Action Alternative and not issue an easement to the Department if issuing the easement is not appropriate or compatible with our ability to meet the overall Service mission and fulfill the purposes for which the Refuge was established. If the Department is unable to design a trail that avoids, minimizes, or off-sets significant adverse effects of constructing and operating the State Trail, we would select and implement the No Action Alternative.

**AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

The Refuge is part of a corridor of land and water stretching nearly 70 miles along the Minnesota River, from Bloomington to Henderson, Minnesota. Comprised of more than 14,700 acres (nearly 23 square miles), the Refuge has 13 management units in 7 counties (Ramsey, Hennepin, Carver, Scott, Dakota, Sibley and Le Sueur). The Refuge provides valuable habitat for a diversity of waterfowl and other migratory birds, fish, and resident wildlife. In addition, the Refuge offers a variety of free outdoor recreational experiences for individuals and families.
The project area consists of a range of habitats and vegetation types. The majority of the site is a combination of former agricultural fields and floodplain forest. Some former agricultural fields consist of early successional forest while others are dominated by herbaceous vegetation. Some of the current floodplain forests were previously impacted by row crop agriculture. Other portions of the project area consist of wet meadows, bulrush marshes, and terrace forests. Short-term inundation due to stormwater runoff and river flooding is common in the project area and strongly influences vegetation and soils. The project area also includes access roads and trails, former dredge spoil material placement areas, and impounded wetland basins. The proposed State Trail would cross topography ranging from relatively flat floodplains to steep, sandy slopes.

RESOURCES AND ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED OR EVALUATED
The environmental assessment will evaluate the environmental consequences of the proposed action on each affected resource or issue, including direct and indirect effects.

Effect Types:
- Direct effects are those that are caused by the action and occur at the same time and place.
- Indirect effects are those that are caused by the action and are later in time or farther removed in distance, but are still reasonably foreseeable.
- Cumulative impacts result from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such other actions.

Examples of Resources or Issues
- Resident and Migratory Wildlife
- Threatened and Endangered Species or Other Special Status Species
- Special Plant Communities and Habitats
- Geology and Soils
- Water Resources, including natural springs and stormwater facilities
- Climate Change
- Land Use
- Socio-economics
- Mitigation Measures including avoiding, minimizing, and off-setting measures
- Wildlife Observation and Photography
- Environmental Education and Interpretation
- Hunting and Fishing
- Historic and Cultural Resources
- Environmental Justice
- Refuge Operations and Management including Monitoring
- Notification and Coordination with Other Entities and Public
**WHAT IS NEXT?**
The scoping period begins on December 5, 2019, and will end on January 3, 2020 (30 days). Please submit your comments so they are received or postmarked by January 3, 2020. A draft environmental assessment for the easement will be written after the close of the scoping period and will address any issues identified during scoping.

The draft environmental assessment will be distributed in the spring for public review and comment. A press release and a message on the Refuge’s website will provide notification of the availability of the draft environmental assessment. If you provide comments during scoping, you will receive an email or postcard notification that provides a website link from which you can download that document. There will be a 30-day review and comment period on the draft environmental assessment.

The Service will review all public comments it receives on the draft environmental assessment and adjust the document, as needed, based on those comments. Once the environmental assessment is finalized, the next step will be approval of a “Finding of No Significant Impact” if the Service determines it to be the appropriate conclusion to the environmental analysis process for the Department’s Request. Then the selected alternative will be implemented – that is, the Service will issue an easement for the State Trail. If an easement is not issued, the Department may revise their request and we will consider that revision as a new request.

**SUBMITTING COMMENTS**

**Things to Consider**
Here are some ideas to consider as you develop your comments.

- Do you have concerns about specific wildlife species or other resources (e.g., plants, water, soils) on the Refuge that should be analyzed in the environmental assessment?
- Do you have concerns about public use activities (e.g., accessibility, multiple use) on the Refuge that should be addressed in the environmental assessment?
- Do you have suggestions or other information (e.g., maintenance, development) that should be considered in the environmental assessment with regard to the State Trail on the Refuge?

**How to Comment**
There are 3 ways to submit comments after your review of this scoping information.

1. **Attend an Open House**
The Refuge will host an open house on December 5, 2019, at the Refuge offices from 4:30 pm to 7:30 pm. The Office address is 3815 American Blvd. E., Bloomington, Minnesota 55425. Refuge staff will be available to provide additional information regarding areas of the Refuge likely affected by the proposed State Trail and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Right-of-Way easement process to help you formulate your comments.

2. **Email**
Send comments regarding the issuance of a Right-of-Way easement to gerry_shimek@fws.gov. Please use the subject line: Scoping comments for the Minnesota Valley State Trail Easement Environmental Assessment.
3. U.S. Postal Service
Mail your comments via the U.S. Postal Service to:
Gerry Shimek
Attn: State Trail Easement Environmental Assessment
3815 American Blvd. E.
Bloomington, MN 55425

EA MAILING LIST
If you wish to be on the mailing list for the Minnesota Valley State Trail Easement Environmental Assessment, please send a request to the above email address or U.S. postal address (include your name and address in the email) and state “please put me on the mailing list.” If you submit a scoping comment, you will automatically be placed on the mailing list.