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Wildlife refuge plan stirs debate

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must complete a required Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge around Lake Lowell and the Snake River.

Conservation process required

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, approved by Congress in 1997, requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop and enact a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for each of the more than 550 refuges in the national system by 2012.

A CCP is a 15-year plan that identifies issues, goals, objectives and strategies for refuge management. The plan is intended to provide refuge managers with a blueprint for management, and to offer the public a clear picture of how the service intends to manage habitat, protect wildlife and provide a place where people can enjoy wildlife-dependent activities. Deer Flat is one of six Idaho refuges scheduled to begin the process this year, along with Bear Lake, Camas, Grays Lake, Minidoka and Oxford Slough. Planning for Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge began in 2009.

Officials follow a five-step process to develop the plans:

- Gather information
- Identify issues
- Develop management alternatives and evaluate their impacts
- Draft a plan for public review
- Revise and release the final plan

Why is recreation at issue?

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act reinforced that the refuge systems primary mission is wildlife conservation.

The law also laid out the criteria officials must use to evaluate uses through the planning process: appropriateness and compatibility.

Generally, a use is considered appropriate if it contributes to the public's understanding and appreciation of a refuge's natural or cultural resources or is beneficial to the refuge's natural or cultural resources.

A use is considered compatible if it will not materially interfere with, or detract from, fulfillment of the specific refuge's purpose or the refuge system's mission.

Under the law, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and environmental interpretation are identified as priority public uses. Also known as the “big six public uses,” they are automatically considered appropriate, meaning they will not be restricted unless they are found to be incompatible.

For other, non-priority uses to continue at the refuge, they must be determined through the CCP process to be both appropriate and compatible.

Irrigation not affected

Some have questioned what, if any, implications the plan could have for irrigation, for which Lake Lowell was originally created.

Refuge officials said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not have jurisdiction over irrigation, and it will not be affected by the plan.

What should comments include?

Officials have asked the public to provide suggestions for how to make nonpriority uses appropriate and compatible with the refuge.

Some mistakenly believe the public input process is a vote, and submit comments such as “I vote to keep the lake open,” Assistant Refuge Manager Kendra Niemec said.

The most helpful comments contain constructive recommendations and offer solutions, she said.

Although officials will accept public comments in any format, e-mail is preferred, Niemec said. Refuge staff must type printed, handwritten and other comments so they can be entered into an electronic database.

Conservation Plan timeline

- The initial public comment period closes Friday.
- Refuge officials will invite interested parties to participate in public work sessions to brainstorm alternatives for potential inclusion in the plan later this month.
- Officials expect draft alternatives will be published and open for public comment in spring 2011.
- Public input on the proposed alternatives will then be considered as officials work to create a draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan, expected to be completed by spring 2012.
- A third round of public comment will be taken on the draft plan before a final plan is released and implemented in fall 2012.



Refuge created 100 years ago

James H. Lowell, then president of the Payette-Boise Water Users Association and future namesake of Lake Lowell, spearheaded the effort to establish the Deer Flat Reservoir in 1905.

The undertaking required the removal of more than 4 million cubic yards of gravel, dirt and rock, using steam shovels, trains and horse teams. Because no natural rivers flowed into the basin, water was drawn from the Boise River, requiring the extension of 40 miles of canal. Construction was completed in 1908, and water first

flowed into the lake from the New York Canal in early 1909.

Soon after, President Theodore Roosevelt issued his Feb. 25, 1909, executive order to create a national bird refuge at Deer Flat Reservoir, now Lake Lowell. Deer Flat was one of 17 federal reclamation projects

— created under the U.S. Reclamation Service, now the Bureau of Reclamation, to irrigate western lands — included in the order.

The Snake River Islands Unit, which consists of more than 100 islands over 113 miles of river in Idaho and Oregon, was added to the Deer Flat refuge in 1963.

While the conservation plan will apply to the Snake River islands included in the refuge, it will not affect Types of wildlife

Officials estimate the refuge is used by more than 200 native bird species, including geese, swans, pelicans, songbirds, ducks, shorebirds, eagles, falcons, hawks, and owls. Thirty species of mammals also use these diverse habitats, including mule deer, coyote, red fox, gophers, marmot, badger, rabbits, and beaver.