U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

September 2006

Cover Pictures: *Premier Blackwater NWR habitat,* USFWS Photo (in background)
Delmarva Fox Squirrel, USFWS Photo
Bald Eagle, USFWS Photo
Canada Geese, USFWS Photo

This goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service* is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 545 national wildlife refuges and thousands of waterfowl production areas. It also operates 65 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance Program which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.

Comprehensive Conservation Plans provide long term guidance for management decisions and set forth goals, objectives, and strategies needed to accomplish refuge purposes and identify the Service's best estimate of future needs. These plans detail program planning levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and, as such, are primarily for Service strategic planning and program prioritization purposes. The plans do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Approval
for Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex (including: Blackwater, Martin and Susquehanna National Wildlife Refuges)

Submitted by:

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August 1, 2006
Date

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Final Approval:

Acting

Marvin E. Moriarty
Regional Director, Region 5
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

8-7-06
Date

Finding of No Significant Impact
Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex (including Blackwater, Martin, and Susquehanna National Wildlife Refuges)
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) of May 2005 for Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex (including Blackwater, Martin, and Susquehanna NWRs) evaluated three management alternatives, carefully considering their impacts on the environment, their potential contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), and each refuge's purposes and goals. A brief summary of the three alternatives as presented in the draft CCP/EA follows.

Alternative A: "Current Management (No Action)." This was the No Action Alternative in the draft CCP/EA required by the Council of Environmental Quality's regulations on implementing the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Under this alternative, there would be no change from our current resource management programs on refuge lands. Chesapeake Marshlands NWR Complex would continue interpretive and environmental education programs already in place. Land acquisition would occur only within approved areas and extensions thereto as allowed by policy.

Alternative B: "Conservation Biology for Trust Species Diversity (Preferred Alternative)." This alternative was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Proposed Action in the draft CCP/EA. Land acquisition would expand to include an increase of 17,500 acres immediately surrounding the existing Blackwater NWR, and an additional 16,000 acres to be included as the Nanticoke Division of Blackwater NWR, for a total of 33,500 acres. Alternative B maintains biological diversity and environmental health, improves the resource inventory and monitoring program, and focuses on improving our ability to accommodate priority public uses. New hunting opportunities would be implemented for turkey and waterfowl.

Alternative C: "Maximum Public Use with No Habitat Management." Alternative C relies on monitoring natural processes and maximizes our management for compatible public uses on the complex. In this alternative, we narrow the emphasis and scope of our wildlife and resource management to those mandated by applicable Federal law.

The draft CCP/EA was distributed for public review from May 3 through July 15, 2005. After consideration of all public comments, I have determined that this EA was sufficient to support my findings.

After careful review of the proposed management actions, and based on the analysis provided in the EA and the comments received during the review period, I have selected Alternative B (the Service's Proposed Action in the draft CCP/EA) for implementation, with the following modifications:

Land Protection: We received a mixed response to the proposed boundary expansion. While there was a degree of support, a number of comments expressed concern about the scope of

the Land Protection Plan (LPP) and proposed boundary expansion. Some comments indicated a concern about the potential for condemnation of land by the Service.

I have revised the LPP to include protection measures other than fee-title acquisition for the Nanticoke Division of Blackwater NWR. The use of easements and management agreements, for example, is authorized for this division. Fee-title acquisition is authorized only for the boundary expansion contiguous to the existing Blackwater NWR.

Marshbird Habitat Improvement: We received comments that the CCP should recognize the distinctness and conservation value of the brackish marsh bird community and plan for its long term management.

I have added a new objective to Goal 1 to capture the significance of the brackish marsh bird community and future management strategies, including the need to adaptively manage fire in marsh ecosystems.

I have selected Alternative B for the final CCP, with the modifications noted above, because it helps fulfill the mission of the NWRS, best achieves each refuge's purpose, vision, and goals; maintains and, where appropriate, restores the ecological integrity of both refuges, addresses the significant issues identified during the planning process; and is consistent with principles of sound fish and wildlife management.

I find that the implementation of modified Alternative B will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment in accordance with Section 102 (2) (c) of NEPA. It adheres to all legal mandates and Service policies. As such, I have concluded that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required, and this Finding of No Significant Impact is appropriate and warranted.

Marvin E. Moriarty Acting
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Hadley, Massachusetts

8-7-06
Date

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