

Appendix J



Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge
Edward Henry/ USFWS photo

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Finding of No Significant Impact
Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In November 2005, we published the draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (draft CCP/EA) for the Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). That draft evaluates three alternatives for managing the refuge over the next 15 years, and carefully considers their impacts on the environment and their potential contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and refuge purposes and goals. Its appendixes provide additional information supporting the assessment. It also identifies a 3,486-acre Shawangunk Grasslands Focus Area that includes the refuge and contiguous, ecologically important areas. None of the alternatives proposes that we acquire additional land at this time. A brief overview of each alternative follows.

Alternative A: The Council of Environmental Quality regulations on implementing the National Environmental Policy Act require this “No Action” alternative. It would not change our resource management programs on refuge lands. We would continue to maintain 400 acres of the 566-acre refuge as open fields and grasslands, primarily by mowing, to benefit breeding, migrating and wintering grassland-dependent birds. Asphalt and concrete runways and taxiways covering 30 acres of the refuge would remain intact. We would not manage the remaining 136 acres on the refuge classified as upland hardwood woodland, with some shrub land transitioning to woodland. Staff from the Wallkill River refuge headquarters in Sussex, New Jersey, would continue to administer the Shawangunk Grasslands refuge. It will offer wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation. Bird watching remains the most popular among those activities. Selecting this alternative would maintain the status quo in refuge management over the next 15 years. Thus, it provides a baseline for comparing or contrasting the two “action” alternatives.

Alternative B: The draft CCP/EA identifies this alternative as the Service-preferred alternative. We would enhance our present grasslands management on 400 acres, by increasing our program and using a wider diversity of tools and techniques, such as grazing, haying, prescribed burning, and applying herbicides to promote native vegetation and discourage invasive plants. We would restore the 30 acres of asphalt and concrete runways and taxiways to native grassland, except where we could incorporate some into a planned interpretive trail. We would also restore the natural hydrology of the refuge to the extent it does not impede our grasslands management. Alternative B includes opening a small pond for fishing, and opening the refuge in the fall for an archery hunt for white-tailed deer.

Alternative C: Under this alternative, we would allow all 400 acres of current managed grasslands and open fields to revert to shrub land, and eventually to woodland, to benefit shrub- and forest-dependent birds of conservation concern for the region. Re-establishing the natural hydrology of the area would become a high priority, which would eliminate the small pond and the opportunity for fishing on the refuge. As in alternative B, we would restore the 30 acres of runways and taxiways, create an interpretive trail, and open the refuge in the fall for an archery hunt for white-tailed deer.

We distributed the draft CCP/EA for a 57-day period of public review and comment, from December 5, 2005 to January 31, 2006. We received 590 responses. Appendix I in the final CCP includes a summary of those comments and our responses to them.

After reviewing the proposed management actions, considering all public comments and our responses to them, I have determined that the analysis in the EA is sufficient to support my findings, described below.

I am selecting draft CCP/EA Alternative B (the Service-preferred alternative) as the final CCP for implementation, with these clarifications.

- 1) We will design the archery hunt for white-tailed deer in the fall with the utmost consideration for the safety of other visitors and refuge neighbors. As one example, we will post highly visible signs at the refuge entrance and at strategic locations along the refuge perimeter well before the hunt begins.
- 2) We will closely monitor the new activity of fishing at the small refuge pond. If trash becomes a problem, the site becomes degraded or wildlife threatened, the refuge manager will exercise his authority to close the refuge for this activity.
- 3) We recognize that some people are concerned about some of our grassland enhancement and maintenance tools or techniques, particularly prescribed burning, applying herbicides, and allowing grazing. We will be judicious in their use. In any year, the extent to which we use them will be at the discretion of the refuge manager, after careful consideration and consultation with our regional contaminants coordinator and fire management officer.
- 4) We will redesign our project to restore the 30 acres of asphalt and concrete runways and taxiways to grasslands. Instead of mechanically digging up all 30 acres and hauling the debris offsite, we will design a lower impact, less intensive, and less expensive project that still meets our objective of enhancing the area for grassland birds. We will explore further all means of recycling or using the debris in a constructive way onsite or in areas nearby.

I have selected Alternative B, with the clarifications noted above, for several reasons. It helps fulfill the mission of the NWRS; best achieves the refuge purpose, vision, and goals; maintains and, where appropriate, restores the ecological integrity of the refuge; addresses the major issues identified during the planning process; and is consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management.

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



Acting

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Hadley, Massachusetts

6-14-06
Date

