

Summary of Major Topics Discussed at Open House/Public Meeting Wapack National Wildlife Refuge - Comprehensive Conservation Planning February 7, 2007

1. Expansion of the Refuge

- It was suggested by several members of the public that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) should consider expansion of the refuge in order to create better linkages with other conservation land areas.
- The Monadnock Conservancy wants help from USFWS to protect Temple to Crotched corridor. A representative from the Monadnock Conservancy spoke of the importance of the Quabbin to Cardigan greenway initiative. Wapack Refuge lies within a “focus area” between Crotched Mountain and Temple Mountain. There are several partners, towns, and individuals interested in creating a corridor in the area.
- Several adjacent landowners are very interested in conservation of the area.
- Interest was expressed in the USFWS looking to acquire lower land habitat. This would provide more habitat for wildlife, mammals in particular. Moose are evident on adjacent land that is being surveyed as possible conservation easements.
- Could the USFWS possibly acquire land through conservation easements? Might consider this as another option rather than full fee title acquisition.
- If there is a seemingly logical property for the refuge to acquire, how would local conservation organizations approach the USFWS to make a compelling case for the refuge to acquire that land?
- **USFWS response:** We are very glad that people are interested in land conservation, but it might not be possible given our current budget. Yes, we could acquire land through conservation easements, but we would still need permission from willing sellers. The USFWS pays a lot of attention to partnerships. Partnerships, which convey our mission, would strengthen our proposal. We will also pay attention to proposals that have a very strong wildlife intent.

2. Dog walking on the Refuge

- There was concern about the possible restrictions on dog walking on the Refuge. What if someone is walking a dog on the Wapack Trail, but can't take their dog on the refuge? Will there be signage indicating that dogs can't go on the refuge? If the Service has a policy to prohibit all dogs from the refuge this could be a problem when people walk into the refuge from southern areas (i.e. Miller State Park) and are not aware of the change in restrictions.
- **USFWS Response:** Wapack is an unstaffed refuge. It is hard to get out there to monitor if dogs are indeed being walked on a leash. We have refuges throughout the region where dog walking (on a leash) is allowed and other refuges where it is prohibited. Before we can make a decision, we have to look at the effect of dog walking on wildlife, safety, etc. Dog walking will be resolved through this planning effort. Dog walking will either be prohibited altogether or we will enforce the dog-on-leash regulation.

3. Need to conduct biological surveys on the Refuge

- There was concern over the lack of biological surveys currently conducted on the refuge. There needs to be some baseline data. It will also be great if the USFWS could make this kind of information available for the public.
- A recommendation was made to speak with someone from Keene State College, who's citizen survey group might be able to help with conducting surveys.
- The local Trout Unlimited group may also be able to help with refuge surveys.
- **USFWS response:** Wapack is an unstaffed refuge, so we don't have the staff to conduct the surveys and our current tight budget makes it tough to contract out the surveys. We could look to and greatly appreciate any help from partners and volunteers to conduct these surveys. We will be publishing a list of species on the refuge as well as specific species of concern in an appendix in the CCP.

4. Coordinating with Casalis State Forest to encourage duck nesting

- A question was raised as to if we currently coordinate with the Casalis State Forest to encourage duck nesting.
- **USFWS Response:** We don't have any significant wet areas on the refuge so waterfowl are not/will not be a focus for this refuge.

5. Ability to stay within the deed restrictions

- Concern with what a new alternative to refuge management would mean for compliance with the deed restrictions (restrictions include no hunting, fishing, trapping, motor vehicles, tree cutting)
- **USFWS response to issue:** The majority of the changes will result from dealing with the issues that we have identified for the refuge. We would want to deal with dog walking, lack of signage/presence of USFWS, erosion/widening of trails, trespassing by hunters, etc. We would not veer from the restrictions laid out in the deed. There wouldn't be any major changes in habitat/species management since we don't have the funds/staff to do so.

6. Concerns with continuing to comply with deed restrictions

- Clearings need to be established to allow for better birding and better views at the top of the mountain. The land at one time was much more open. The views have disappeared on the top of mountains because of the growth of trees – nature has taken over. It was recommended that selective cutting along the Wapack trail be allowed (it is currently not allowed under the deed restrictions). Is there any leeway to cutting trees to keep views not just for hikers but for birders? Northern hardwood forests offer a particular habitat for wildlife and the forest would benefit if different niches were provided for other wildlife.
- **USFWS response:** Tree cutting is prohibited under the deed, we would have to look to the descendant of the donor for permission.
- **Response from descendant of donor:** The refuge was established for the natural world, for wildlife. It was not established for birders or hikers to have views. Cutting trees in order to create views is not acceptable. There is a different focus with this deed. It is focused on nature and wildlife.

- Concern was expressed over the health of the mount. The trees on North Pack Monadnock are growing very old. There has not been a fire for many years and consequently there has been nothing to open up the area. Natural burns are not occurring, so we don't get understory clearing and shrubby growth. Would like the descendant of the donor to consider managing for bobcat by allowing former pastures to return. The area is not large enough for a controlled burn, but could allow cutting in former field areas. By allowing for selective cutting the refuge could provide food for moose, snowshoe hares and bobcat.

7. Concerns with possible restrictions on entire Wapack trail corridor

- If the entire Wapack trail corridor is protected via conservation easements, would this limit the amount of tree cutting that would be allowed? This would impact views throughout the entire Wapack trail area. Don't want the same restrictions on the refuge to apply to the rest of the trail.
- *USFWS response:* Just because the land might be under conservation easement, does not mean that it will have the same restrictions as the refuge. Only the refuge is restricted by a deed, but other areas under easement will not have a deed restricting particular activities. It is the choice of the landowner to decide what activities are allowed on the easement.
- *Response from Friends of Wapack Trail:* The Friends group is aware of the need for views throughout the trail. The friends group requests from current owners to remove trees to improve views. Don't need to get permission for minor cutting.

8. Access to and maintenance of Wapack Trail (3 miles of trail run through refuge)

- It is important for people that are using the trail to have idea of where they can go and what they are allowed to do through out the entirety of the Wapack trail. There needs to better signage throughout the trail. There also needs to be better access on Old Mountain Road. Should establish a parking lot at the northern terminus of the trail.
- A recommendation was made that we don't put any flashy signs throughout the Wapack trail. Would want to keep the trail natural looking. Any new signs should conform to the natural environment.
- People are seeing problems with erosion on the trail. The Friends of Wapack Trail does not advocate constructing bridges to deal with flooding/eroding of trails. They could possibly re-route the trail or add stepping-stones. They would prefer to use stepping-stones, not bridges. They would like feedback on using structures over streams and would like to know if any money is available to pay for materials for stream crossings. They would only build simple structures. They might only need a bog bridge – plank might work. They would have to consult with the descendant of the donor before they construct anything on the trail.

9. Law Enforcement concerns

- A report was made of vandalism at the trailhead (southern terminus) parking lot. Are there possibly any grants available to increase law enforcement in the area? The public would like to see more law enforcement presence out there.
- *USFWS response:* There are no grants available from the USFWS for additional law enforcement. The Refuge Manager usually looks to state and local police officers to

- patrol the refuge. It is possible that the local police department could obtain a grant. We are going to have a law enforcement officer from the NH Fish and Game Department on our core planning team, so we will be discussing these sorts of issues.
- How will everything (deed restrictions, public use activities) be enforced on the refuge? How do you really protect the wildlife in light of budget cuts and short staff? Hunters have been observed trespassing on the refuge. There needs to be increased law enforcement presence especially during the hunting season.
 - **USFWS response:** Refuge need to have boundaries posted – first order of business for visitor orientation. Need to stress outreach and education through providing information online, signage, brochures, etc. We are relying on the honesty of refuge visitors to go along with posted regulations since we don't have someone out there to enforce them. CCP's create a vision for the next 15 years. Budgets and staff are very constrained right now but we are hopeful that times will change at some point throughout the 15-year time frame. For that reason we could put a strategy in the plan that states the need for additional law enforcement.
 - There are lots of partners/volunteers willing to help with outreach and education. You could get a volunteer from a neighboring organization to go up and monitor trails or look for trash etc. and it won't cost anything e.g. Harris Center or Nature Conservancy. You could also get adjacent landowners to be the "eyes and ears" and monitor activities. The Friends of Wapack Trail and the Nature Conservancy are two possible groups that could help with monitoring. The Open Space Committee of Greenfield is also very active. There are a lot resources available - Harris Center, Monadnock Conservancy, Piscataquog Watershed Association, Chairs of local conservation commissions