# 2.0 The Planning Process

The process used to develop this CCP is consistent with the planning requirements specified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, as amended; the Service's planning policy (602 FWS); National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) direction (42 U.S.C. 4321-4347); and the Council on Environmental Quality's Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA. Service policy, the Refuge Improvement Act, and NEPA provide specific guidance for the planning process, such as seeking public involvement in the preparation of the EA. The development and analysis of "reasonable" management alternatives within the EA include a "No Action" alternative that reflects current conditions and management strategies on the Refuge. Figure 2-1 shows the steps in the CCP planning process in a linear cycle. The following sections provide additional detail on individual steps in the planning process.

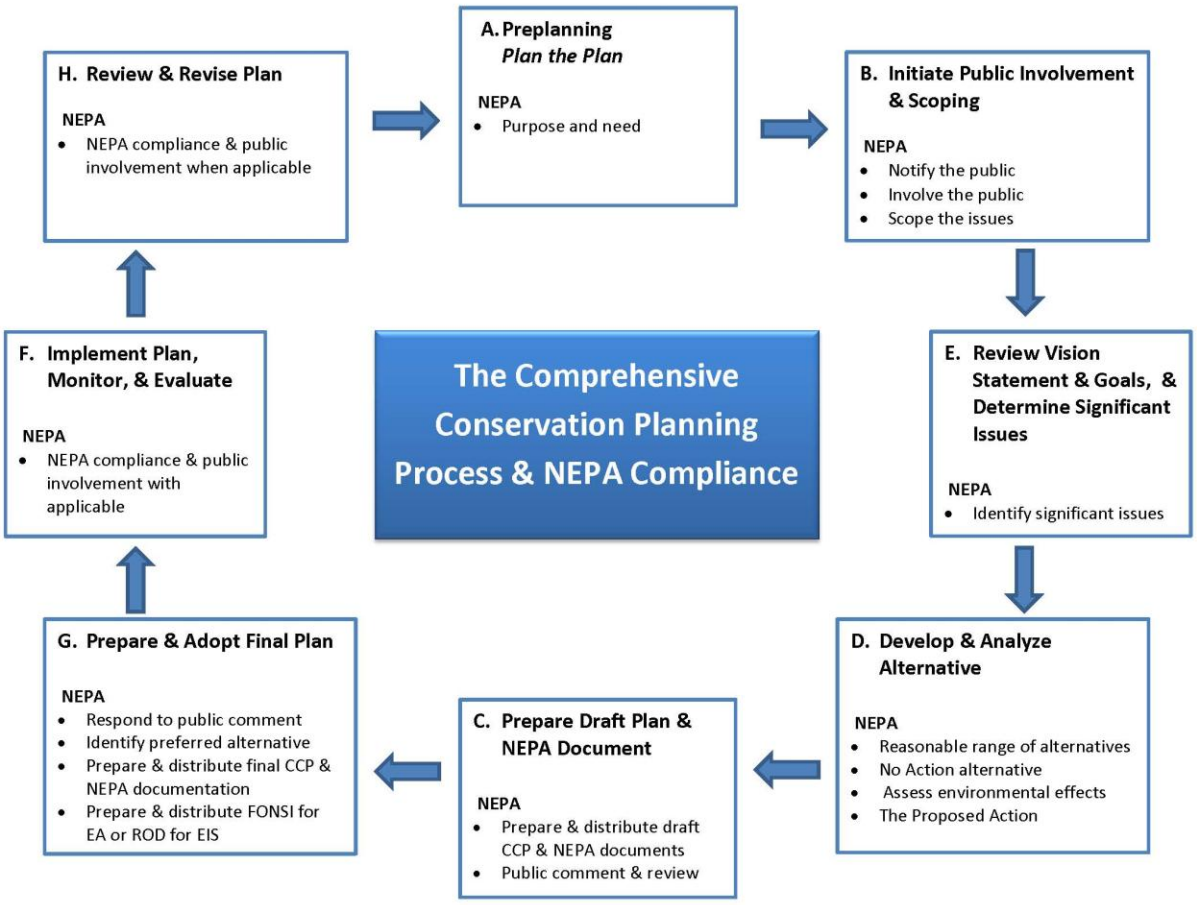


Figure 2-1. The Planning Process

## 2.1 Preplanning

Prior to formally initiating the development of this CCP, the following tasks were completed to support planning activities:

- Established an interdisciplinary planning team
- Identified Refuge purpose, history, and establishing authority
- Identified all relevant laws, regulations, and policies that would have to be considered during the development of the CCP
- Identified purpose and need for the CCP to ensure all issues were adequately addressed
- Identified planning area and resource data needs

## 2.2 Initiate Public Involvement and Scoping

The formal planning process begins with the scoping period, which involves a thorough assessment of issues, concerns, opinions, thoughts, ideas, concepts, and visions for the Refuge.

The scoping period began with a Notice of Intent to prepare a CCP and EA, which was published in the *Federal Register* on November 5, 2008 (Volume 73, Number 215, pp. 65872-65873).

When the Notice of Intent was published, the team distributed a Planning Update requesting public feedback and informing community members of upcoming public scoping meetings. The planning team solicited public comments on Refuge issues to aid in CCP development through four open house meetings held in 2009 (Table 2-1). The first meeting was held in January at the Old Plantation Restaurant in Medicine Park, Oklahoma. Another meeting was held that month in Saddle Mountain, Oklahoma, at the Saddle Mountain Community Center. The third meeting was held on February 3, 2009, in Cache, Oklahoma, at the Cache Senior Center. The fourth and final meeting was held at the Cameron University Science Complex in Lawton on February 10, 2009.

Table 2-1. Location, Attendance, and Dates of Public Meetings

| Community | Attendance | Meeting Date |
|---|---|---|
| Medicine Park, OK | 25 | January 22, 2009 |
| Saddle Mountain, OK | 12 | January 29, 2009 |
| Cache, OK | 30 | February 3, 2009 |
| Lawton, OK | 33 | February 10, 2009 |

The Planning Team held an ecoregion-wide coordination meeting at the Refuge Environmental Education Center on December 2, 2009, to gain a better understanding of the issues within the Central Mixed-Grass Prairie ecoregion, where the Refuge is located, and to determine the Refuge's role in addressing issues impacting fish, wildlife, and their habitats within the larger landscape. Seventeen participants attended this meeting. Agencies and organizations attending the ecoregion coordination meeting are listed in Table 2-2.

Table 2-2. Agencies and Organizations attending the Central Mixed-Grass Prairie Ecoregion Meeting

| Agencies | Organizations |
|---|---|
| Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation | Playa Lakes Joint Venture |
| U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Wichita Mountains, Washita, and Salt Plains national wildlife refuges) | The Nature Conservancy |
| Commissioners of the Land Office | The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation |
| National Park Service | |

The Refuge also met with the State (ODWC) in February 2010 and sent a letter to potentially affected tribes to solicit feedback on concerns on the Refuge. The Refuge met with one tribe, the Delaware Nation, as a result. The feedback received at the conclusion of the public involvement period identified numerous concerns for a variety of stakeholders. Table 2-3 lists these concerns and specifies which stakeholder group voiced them. These concerns were organized by five broad issue categories and one administrative category: Ecoregion, Habitat, Wildlife, Public Use, Facilities, and Administrative Areas.

Table 2-3. Concerns by Stakeholder Group

| Issue | General Public | ODWC | Ecoregion | Tribal | USFWS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ecoregion** | | | | | |
| Air Quality | | | X | | |
| Climate Change | | | X | | X |
| Fragmentation/Land Protection | X | | X | X | X |
| Riparian Areas | | | X | | X |
| Water Quality | | | X | | |
| **Habitat Management/Quality** | | | | | |
| Fire Ecology and Management | X | | X | | |
| Invasive/Non-Native Flora | X | X | X | X | X |
| Permitted Grazing | | | | | X |
| Restoration | X | | X | | |
| Special Use Area | X | X | | | |
| Spring Modification | | | X | | |
| Water Conservation | | | X | | X |
| Water Resources | X | X | | | X |
| Water Rights | | | | | X |
| **Wildlife** | | | | | |
| Native Fauna | X | X | X | X | X |
| Non-Native Fauna | X | X | | | X |
| **Public Use** | | | | | |
| Bicycling | X | | | | X |
| Boating | | | | | X |
| Camping | X | | | | X |
| Developed Camping Expansion | X | | | | |
| Environmental Education | X | X | X | X | |

| Issue | General Public | ODWC | Ecoregion | Tribal | USFWS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fishing | X | X | | | |
| Hiking | X | | | | X |
| Horseback Riding | X | | | | |
| Hunting | X | X | | | |
| Interpretation | X | | | | |
| Military Overflights | X | | | | |
| Night Access | X | | | | |
| Picnicking | X | | | | X |
| Photography | X | | | | |
| Rock Sports | X | | | | X |
| Special Use Activities | | | | | X |
| Swimming | X | | | | |
| Wilderness Management | X | | | | X |
| Wildlife Observation | X | X | | | |
| **Facilities** | | | | | |
| Administrative Facilities | | | | | X |
| Public Use Facilities | X | | | | X |
| **Cultural Resources** | | | | | |
| Archaeological Resources | X | | | | X |
| Historic Sites | X | | | | |
| **Administrative Areas** | | | | | |
| Holy City | X | | | | X |
| Job Corps Site | X | | | | X |

In addition to the scoping meetings, the Refuge also held an open house at the Refuge Visitor Center on January 25, 2011. The purpose of this open house was to introduce the new Refuge Manager and to give the public an opportunity to discuss various Refuge projects and programs, including the planning process. Approximately 20 individuals attended.

## 2.3 Determine Issues

To determine the planning issues being addressed in the CCP, the planning team reviewed the concerns identified by the public, along with management concerns identified by Refuge staff and those submitted by the State of Oklahoma and other Federal agencies.

Refuge planning policy defines an issue as any unsettled matter that requires a management decision: an initiative, opportunity, resource management problem, threat to Refuge resources, conflict in uses, public concern, or presence of an undesirable resource condition (602 FW 1.6I). Public responses obtained through newsletters and public open house meetings—in addition to management concerns identified by Refuge staff and State and Federal natural resource agencies—were used to identify issues addressed in the CCP and EA.

Public responses identified a broad range of concerns, which were grouped and categorized by how they would be addressed in the CCP. This process helped the planning team identify issues (Table 2-4).

Table 2-4. Addressing Issues Raised During Scoping[1]

| Concern | Description | Category |
|---|---|---|
| Developed Camping Expansion<br>Horseback Riding<br>Night Access<br>Restoration<br>Swimming | The concern is addressed by existing laws, regulations, or policies. | Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis |
| Military Overflights | The concern is outside the scope of this Plan. | Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis |
| Fire Ecology and Management<br>Invasive/Non-Native Flora<br>Spring Modification<br>Water Conservation<br>Water Rights | The concern is addressed in the same manner regardless of the alternative selected. | Management Direction Common to all Alternatives (Alternative A) |
| Air Quality<br>Boating<br>Camping<br>Climate Change<br>Environmental Education<br>Fragmentation and Land Protection<br>Hunting<br>Interpretation<br>Permitted Grazing<br>Picnicking<br>Riparian Areas<br>Water Quality<br>Water Resources | The concern is addressed in the same manner regardless of the action alternative selected. | No Action Alternative and Proposed Action (Alternatives A and B) |
| Bicycling<br>Cultural Resources<br>Facilities<br>Fishing<br>Hiking<br>Holy City<br>Job Corps Site<br>Native Fauna<br>Non-Native Fauna<br>Photography<br>Rock Sports<br>Special Uses<br>Special Use Area<br>Wildlife Observation | The concern is significant. The EA proposes a variety of ways to address it. | No Action Alternative, Proposed Action, and additional alternative (Alternatives A, B, and C) |

[1] The Wilderness Management Issue will be divided and described, along with the activities that take place within the Charons Garden Wilderness Area: camping, environmental education, hiking, interpretation, photography, rock sports, and wildlife observation.

## 2.4 Planning Issues

### 2.4.1 Ecoregion

Ecoregion-wide issues were generated from a landscape-level meeting held on the Refuge with Federal, State, and local agency and non-profit organization land managers in December 2009. The intent of this meeting was to outline concerns regarding management for habitat, wildlife, and/or public uses throughout the ecoregion and to share ideas and advice on how these concerns might be resolved. Not surprisingly, most concerns were shared by all. These included climate change and its potential for alterations to habitat components and wildlife migrations, and habitat fragmentation from the development of sprawling communities or other land use developments. The participants discussed their concerns about the health and productivity of riparian areas that has resulted from increased development adjacent to rivers and river corridors. Air and water quality and the management of water resources were also identified as issues of concern. Most land managers indicated that they deal more with the adverse effects resulting from surrounding land developments rather than effects from any habitat or wildlife management actions generated within the land manager's jurisdictions. Other relevant issues included invasive species, recreation, and wind energy. Many concerns expressed by the participants were directly related to the Refuge's own management issues. As a result, the Refuge selected the most pressing Refuge-related issues to address in this Environmental Assessment, as follows: climate change, air quality, fragmentation and land protection, riparian areas, and water quality.

#### 2.4.1.1 Representative Comments

"Burning causes air quality concerns. People in urban areas are frequently unwilling to deal with the fire and smoke associated with prescribed burning. Prescribed fire council is active in smoke management."

**"**Knowledge about the impacts of many land management practices on populations of many of the species of greatest conservation need in this habitat is incomplete. Currently, there is not enough information to share, which hinders coordination and collaboration, and the privately owned landscapes make collecting data difficult."

"Baseline knowledge about flora/fauna and both the historic and current distribution and condition of this habitat type is incomplete."

"Current land practices sometimes make conditions in this habitat ideal for invading species or introduced species."

"The natural fire regime has been disrupted or eliminated (sometimes resulting in increased density of woodland stands relative to their historic conditions)."

"One concern is groundwater withdrawals and reduction of spring and stream flow. How does the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge affect water downstream?"

### 2.4.2 Habitat

Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge received numerous comments from all stakeholder groups on habitat management and quality in regards to fire ecology, habitat fragmentation (discussed under the Ecoregion issue heading), invasive flora, and habitat restoration. Comments on the future of the Refuge's Special Use Area mostly reflected the public's desire to continue the

closure of this area to the general public to maintain habitat conditions and the health of wildlife. Members of the general public and ecoregion stakeholders expressed concern over habitat restoration, as well as the change in Refuge's natural fire regime and the corresponding habitat response. The public, ecoregion stakeholders, tribes, and the Service each raised the issue of habitat fragmentation and land protection, some showing interest in future Refuge expansion. All parties commented to express concern over the increased spread of invasive and non-native flora throughout the natural habitat of Wichita Mountains. Other habitat issues include lake management, riparian areas, spring modification, water conservation, and water rights.

#### 2.4.2.1 Representative Comments

"Controlled burns should be used to burn off combustibles and regenerate grasses. Not just to eliminate red cedars. Like it or not, they are a natural succession."

"The natural fire regime has been disrupted or eliminated (sometimes resulting in increased density of woodland stands relative to their historic conditions)."

"[My vision of the Refuge is…] to preserve the Refuge as close as possible to the way it was before European settlers came to the United States."

"Invasive species management is the key to having and saving this area for the future. Weeds, animals, etc., that don't belong in Wichita Mountains should be tightly controlled."

"The invasion of cedar trees significantly increases fire danger and threatens the indigenous habitat."

"The Refuge is for the security of habitat and wildlife, not necessarily the pleasure of people. Maintain the integrity of the history and natural habitat, including natural change."

### 2.4.3 Wildlife

All stakeholders expressed concern over native fauna at Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. Members of the public commented on numerous concerns, including maintaining bison populations, conditions of native fish populations, managing prairie dog populations, and protecting insects and invertebrates. Ecoregion concerns centered on data needs and increased understanding for species of greatest conservation need. Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation expressed their support of placing a priority on native wildlife. Other wildlife issues discussed amongst all stakeholders included concern over non-native fauna, such as feral hogs and longhorn cattle. Members of the public also recommended that the Refuge consider reintroduction of many species, including pronghorn antelope, mustangs, and wolves.

#### 2.4.3.1 Representative Comments

"Delaware Nation has a strong cultural tie to buffalo and would like to see the Refuge key in on buffalo in relation to tribal interests and outreach."

"Wild hog proliferation remains a serious problem, endangering the public and environment. Please continue, if not increase, your eradication efforts."

"Remove the longhorn herd. The longhorn herd is not appropriate on the Refuge."

"Longhorns are significant, and the pure bred herd should be kept in the Refuge. If it wasn't for the Refuge personnel's vision, this animal would now possibly be as extinct as the Merriam elk."

"Why not introduce back to the Refuge the wild horse or mustang? The horse was critical to Indian life on the plains. The romance and symbolism of the horse in American history could be captured with this move. People would like to see the horse along with the other species here on the Refuge."

"I also believe that issues related to non-native species (invasive, introduced, or even managed) need to be viewed as a negative aspect of the Refuge and not a feature to be promoted for tourist entertainment."

### 2.4.4 Public Use

Members of the public provided numerous comments on issues relating to wildlife-dependent and supportive recreation uses. Many of the public's wildlife-dependent recreation comments focused on wildlife observation and photography opportunities and the need to improve interpretation and environmental education programs. Comments related to supportive recreation (i.e., those that are not considered wildlife-dependent according to the 1997 Refuge Improvement Act) issues centered on the need for a greater number of bicycle trails, camping opportunities, hiking trails, and picnicking facilities. Some public comments recognized the necessity of achieving a balance among the roles of protection of natural resources and public uses and acknowledged the necessity of limiting some recreational activities. However, most comments indicated a desire for maintaining current public use activities. In order to better manage public uses, some are willing to accept an increase in the number and scope of rules, restrictions, and/or education initiatives, such as Leave No Trace, while others advocated for only minimal changes or restrictions. Members of the public also requested that some activities that are currently prohibited or restricted, such as horseback riding and swimming, be allowed on the Refuge. Rock climbing, which occurs in both the Public Use Area and in the Charons Garden Wilderness, is a major concern for many stakeholders. The size of a visitor group was also considered by members of the public and the planning team as an issue relating to many public use opportunities. Overall, public comments reflected care and concern over this unique area of Oklahoma, providing not only unique wildlife viewing and educational activities, but also extraordinary recreational opportunities.

#### *Wildlife-Dependent Recreation*

Generally, comments related to hunting and fishing and wildlife observation and photography activities expressed the public's desire to maintain these activities as they now exist, with no significant change in the current level of use or in the scope of regulations and restrictions on use. Most public comments on interpretation and environmental education focused on the need to increase and/or improve signs, programs, workshops, and handouts.

#### *Supportive Recreation*

General comments on bicycling, boating, camping, hiking, picnicking, rock sports, and scuba diving reflected a wide range of interests from minimizing the level or availability of these activities to maintaining them as they are to expanding on current use levels. Some suggested opening new areas, while others suggested that the current level of public use might be causing problems with erosion, litter, law enforcement, and habitat and wildlife disturbance. Some suggested limits on group sizes, developing a program for trail maintenance projects, expanding Leave No Trace education efforts, or other mitigations for public use activities. A few comments requested that horseback riding and swimming be allowed on the Refuge and military flyovers from nearby Fort Sill Military Base be restricted. Concerns were also expressed about special

uses, including scuba diving instruction, tours, tournaments, commercial photography, and filming, need to be more effectively managed.

#### 2.4.4.1 Representative Comments

"I ask that the CCP planning and compatibility review process not restrict or eliminate longstanding secondary uses of the Refuge but ensure that this treasure remain as it is for Oklahoma."

"I hope these traditional Refuge activities are continued to be made available, as they increase the sense of ownership people feel for the resources and lead to more responsible usage that translates to other areas all over the country."

"Wildlife and habitat conservation first; then, compatible secondary uses such as hunting, camping, hiking, rock climbing, wildlife observation, and photography. None of the secondary uses should imperil the primary use."

"Refuge management should consider reasonable policies and regulations to better manage large groups of recreational users, which have the greatest potential to cause significant impacts to Refuge resources, the wildlife, and the wildland experiences of other Refuge visitors."

"Ultimately, allowing continued access for secondary uses will raise awareness and inspire people to become actively involved in preserving such a valuable place."

"There should be no new 'bolting' of routes within the Refuge. It is Leave No Trace policy to discourage bolting… Chalk should be discouraged in all climbing sites."

### 2.4.5 Facilities

The planning team received comments on public use facilities, administrative facilities, and Refuge access issues. In regard to public use facilities, members of the general public commented on issues such as creating more user-friendly visitor facilities, utilizing green infrastructure, increasing availability of trash cans and recycling stations, and increasing the use of interpretative signs. The planning team determined that the needs for administrative facilities include maintenance of signs, roads, and buildings, and accessibility updates. Refuge access concerns were raised by the public who would like to see public access expanded. Comments were also received on archaeological and historic resources. These comments emphasized a need for increased monitoring and improved preservation or protection efforts.

#### 2.4.5.1 Representative Comments

"[The primary issue that needs to be addressed in the CCP is…] continued or expanded public access, including more non-vehicular access to northern areas."

"[The primary issue that needs to be addressed in the CCP is…] access for visitors that are disabled or in wheelchairs to picnic areas. Designate parking and some sidewalks with shorter distances. Add wheelchair ramps."

"Public Use Areas should remain free to enjoy by the general public. Special Use Areas should have limited access, as in tours and educational uses for study."

"I encourage the agency to employ 'green infrastructure' designs to harvest rainwater and to manage erosion from paved and developed areas and contain pollution wherever possible."

"Keep the Visitor Center up-to-date and make sure displays are updated, repaired, etc., and expand public contact and educational programs… Make sure the public area provides high quality experience so there is less demand for Special Use Area usage."

"It would also be nice to have more detailed signs at trail junctions to make it more user-friendly. There are numerous locations when you are hiking that you aren't really sure of your location and how far you have to get."

### 2.4.6 Administrative Areas

Members of the public and the planning team expressed concerns over the Holy City, including leaving the site as is in its current location and function, removing the statue associated with the site, and whether the site should exist on a national wildlife refuge. Some expressed an interest in having hand outs or signs interpreting Holy City. The few comments received on the Treasure Lake Job Corps site suggested a partnership with the Refuge to assist in Refuge projects and complete removal of the site from the Refuge.

#### 2.4.6.1 Representative Comments

"Because of historical and cultural significance of the Holy city in this area, there should always be a way to leave it where it is located."

"…The holy city should not be on refuge property…"

"Redevelop a quality partnership with the Job Corps to teach environmental ethics and use their skills to the benefit of the resource."

"Move Job Corps to more appropriate location."

## 2.5 Develop and Analyze Alternatives

The practice of developing management alternatives as a part of the planning process is derived from the NEPA, which requires Federal agencies to consider the impacts of proposed actions and to develop a reasonable range of alternatives to those actions. Alternatives are "different sets of objectives and strategies or means of achieving refuge purposes and goals, helping to fulfill the Refuge System mission, and resolving issues" (602 FW 1 of the Service Manual). The planning team developed a range of alternatives that respond to the planning issues and eliminated alternatives that did not meet Refuge purposes or that were outside the Service's ability to implement. The environmental effects of the alternatives were analyzed, and the results are presented in the environmental assessment (Appendix A). These alternatives meet the Refuge's purposes and goals and comply with the Service and Refuge System mission.

## 2.6 Prepare Draft Plan and EA

The CCP and EA were prepared concurrently and an analysis of the potential impacts of implementing each alternative was developed. The CCP and EA were submitted for internal review, then forwarded to Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) for review, and finally followed by a 30-day public review and comment period. The public was notified of the release through local media outlets and a Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register* on August 9, 2012 (Volume 77, Issue 154, pp. 47657-47660).

## 2.7 Prepare and Adopt Final Plan

During the 30-day public comment period (August 9, 2012 through September 10, 2012) the Refuge held two public meetings – one at the Lawton Public Library on August 13, 2012 and the other at the Refuge Visitor Center on August 14, 2012. Approximately 50 people attended these meetings. Eighty-six individual comments were received by mail, email, phone call, and comment form. Comments received on the Draft CCP and EA were responded to (see Appendix I) and some resulted in modifications to the CCP. The Final CCP replaces current management direction after the decision document is signed (see Appendix A).

## 2.8 Implement Plan, Monitor, and Evaluate

The Final CCP provides management direction for the Refuge over the next 15 years. It will guide the development of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas and will be the basis for the annual budgeting process for Refuge operations and maintenance (see Chapter 5). Most importantly, it describes the general approach to managing habitat, wildlife, and public use on the Refuge that will direct day-to-day decision making and actions.

A critical component of management is monitoring and measuring resources and social conditions to make sure that progress is being made toward meeting goals. Monitoring also detects new problems, issues, or opportunities that should be addressed. The Refuge is using an adaptive management approach, which means that information gained from monitoring is used to evaluate and, as needed, to modify Refuge objectives.

## 2.9 Review and Revise Plan

Agency policy directs that the CCP be reviewed annually to assess the need for changes. The CCP will be revised when significant new information becomes available, ecological conditions change, or the need to do so is identified during the annual review. If major changes are proposed, public meetings may be held, or new environmental assessments and environmental impact statements may be necessary. Consultation with appropriate State agencies will occur at least every 15 years.

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