



Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake and Pierce National Wildlife Refuges

Planning Update #4 *January 2006*

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Greetings

This is the fourth and final planning update from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to keep you informed about the planning process for the three National Wildlife Refuges in the Columbia River Gorge. We are pleased to announce the release of the Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, or CCP, for the Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuges (Gorge Refuges).

The Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Since the last planning update announcing the public comment and review period for the Draft CCP/EA, the planning team for the Gorge Refuges responded to public comment and revised the CCP. The Final CCP, signed in August 2005, will guide management of the Gorge Refuges for the next 15 years to improve habitat conditions, protect native plants and animals, reduce invasive species, increase Refuge research and monitoring, and develop compatible public uses. The Final CCP can be obtained by contacting the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex at (360) 887-4106. The Final CCP/EA is also available for viewing and downloading online at: <http://pacific.fws.gov/planning>.

Summary of Public Involvement and Outreach

The CCP Planning Team is grateful for the interest and support that the Gorge Refuges and its CCP received during the public comment and review period. The Draft CCP/EA was released for a 30-day public comment period on August 20, 2004. The draft CCP and/or planning updates were distributed to organizations, agencies, elected officials, Tribal governments, and approximately 350 members of the public. During the public comment period, the planning team discussed the CCP at public meetings held by the Columbia River Gorge Commission and Skamania County Commissioners. Members of the planning team also met with staff from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the City of Washougal, the City of North Bonneville, and the Port of Camas Washougal. The planning team also met with Congressional staff to discuss the release of the Draft CCP/EA. Based on public comments received on the Draft CCP/EA, the Final CCP was developed from Alternative B with additions from Alternatives A and C. Comment letters and Service responses to comments are presented in Appendix O of the Final CCP. Thanks to all who contributed comments to improve the CCP.



Common Snipe (Photo by Jennifer Brown)

New to the CCP: Waterfowl Hunting Issue

Based on responses received during the public review period for the Draft CCP/EA, the Service reevaluated the potential for opening Steigerwald Lake Refuge to waterfowl hunting. The reevaluation resulted in adding the following objective to the Final CCP: The Service will work with partners to secure additional wetland habitat, and if secured, design a waterfowl hunt program that is compatible with the Refuge's purposes. The Service made the following determinations during the reevaluation: (1) To avoid hunting-related safety incidents, a buffer of approximately 300 yards between blinds and private interests and other public uses, would be necessary; (2) Because of the limited waterfowl sanctuary area available, and the safety buffer requirement of 300 yards necessary to safely implement a hunting program, adequate wetland habitat is not currently available to provide sufficient sanctuary while conducting a safe waterfowl hunting program; (3) Hunting without providing adequate sanctuary area would not achieve Refuge goals and would detract from fulfillment of the Refuge's mitigation purposes; and (4) In order to design a waterfowl hunting program, more wetland habitat needs to be secured, through acquisition or agreement, to provide for both a compatible hunt program and adequate sanctuary.

Summary of Comments and Responses on the CCP

Comments Received

Response

Public Use

The Service should re-evaluate the potential for opening a limited access hunting program on current refuge lands at Franz Lake and Steigerwald Lake Refuges.

Opportunities to open the Refuges to waterfowl hunting were reevaluated in the Final CCP (see discussion above). A new objective has been added to the Final CCP to design a waterfowl hunting program that is compatible and consistent with the establishing legislation and goals of Steigerwald Lake Refuge should additional wetland acreage be secured.

Reconsider the decision to allow jogging, dog walking, and bicycling at Steigerwald Lake.

No change. Compatibility Determinations for these uses are provided in Appendix K.

In addition to allowing equestrian use at Steigerwald Lake Refuge, the plan should consider developing horseback riding opportunities at Pierce and Franz Lake Refuges.

No change. Horseback riding is a compatible use at Steigerwald Lake Refuge. Public access and facilities to support equestrian use are currently absent from Pierce and Franz Lake Refuges.

The plan should allow public access to Pierce Refuge in order to provide a recreation trail linking the City of North Bonneville with Beacon Rock State Park.

The Service supports the public trail system in the Management Plan for the National Scenic Area which would connect the City of North Bonneville to the State Park and other public lands without impacting the Refuges.

Western Pond Turtle

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) does not agree with the stipulation that the Western Pond Turtle Working Group concur with potential western pond turtle releases at Steigerwald Lake Refuge. Also, WDFW requests that turtle releases include adults, as well as 'head-started' juveniles, and that a final decision to allow a release should not be contingent upon completion of a study to determine the feasibility of restoring floodplain wetland functions to Steigerwald Lake, as described in Appendix H.

The CCP includes an objective to evaluate the feasibility of establishing a western pond turtle population at Steigerwald Lake Refuge. Concurrence from the Western Pond Turtle Working Group is not required. Both adults and juvenile turtles will be considered for release. A decision to allow the WDFW to release pond turtles is no longer contingent upon the Steigerwald Lake Refuge floodplain wetlands feasibility study.

Comments Received	Response
<i>Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area</i>	
The Scenic Area boundary shown on the map of Steigerwald Lake Refuge is incorrect.	The map has been updated to show the current Scenic Area boundary.
Visual standards for portions of Franz Lake and Pierce Refuges under the Scenic Area Management Plan are higher than described in the Draft CCP/EA.	The higher “not visually evident” standard has been added to the Final CCP.
The CCP should clearly state that the Forest Service will review specific project proposals for consistency with the Scenic Area Management Plan.	This clarification has been made in the Final CCP. Where specific projects are subject to provisions of the Scenic Area Act, the Service will request a consistency review by the Forest Service.
<i>Mosquito Management</i>	
Application of mosquito larvicide may harm endangered salmonids and the Endangered Species Act would require an incidental take permit.	The Refuge does not currently and will not allow larvicide application in areas likely to support listed, proposed, or candidate fish.
Due to the potential for West Nile Virus to infect birds, mosquito control should be a high priority for the Service.	The moderate potential for floodwater mosquitoes to transmit West Nile Virus to refuge species of concern is explained in the Final CCP. A contingency plan will be developed to respond to the virus.
<i>Habitat/Wildlife Management</i>	
Steigerwald Lake Refuge should be managed first to prevent flooding to adjacent industrial properties and secondly as a wildlife refuge.	No change. The CCP contains water management guidelines that represent a compromise between maintaining the flood detention capacity of Steigerwald Lake and achieving the mitigation purposes for the Refuge.
The Gorge Refuges are of minor importance to Canada geese and the species is not a conservation concern for the lower Columbia River ecosystem.	No change. Canada geese are a Conservation Target for the Refuges. In the final CCP, nonnative grasslands managed for Canada geese will be reduced but not eliminated through native habitat restoration.
References to cooperative management of State Threatened Columbia yellowcress need to be modified due to TNC’s recent funding shortfalls. However, the CCP should emphasize the critical importance of the population at Pierce Refuge and the need for monitoring.	The Final CCP is revised to reflect the Service’s intent to encourage cooperative work with other agencies and organizations to monitor Columbia yellowcress at Pierce Refuge. Specific plans for treating competing invasive plants will be developed in the Integrated Pest Management Plan.
NOAA Fisheries supports opening access to the additional 0.9 miles of stream habitat at Pierce Refuge indentified in Alternative C.	Although Alternative C was not selected in the Final CCP, a strategy was added to evaluate the feasibility of removing or modifying the water control structure at Domestic Springs. The existing barrier in South Slough will not be removed, however, due to the potential negative impacts to species of concern.
The Draft CCP/EA incorrectly identifies Franz Lake Refuge as supporting habitat for the northern spotted owl.	The Final CCP states that the second growth coniferous forest at Franz Lake Refuge is not suitable for nesting but may support dispersing northern spotted owls.

Planning Schedule

Planning Update #1	September 2000
Open House-Issue Scoping Meetings	September 20 & 21, 2000
Planning Update #2	May 2001
Planning Update #3	September 2004
Public Review of Draft CCP	August 20, 2004
Distribution of the Final CCP	January 2006
Planning Update #4	January 2006

What's Next?

The Final CCP was approved by the Regional Director on August 26, 2005. With approval of the Final CCP, the planning process is finished, and the Refuges can begin implementing the CCP. Projects intended to restore habitat, protect native plants and animals, combat invasive species, improve research and monitoring, and develop compatible public uses will be initiated on a priority basis contingent upon available resources, as described in the Final CCP. The CCP will be revised every 15 years, or earlier, if monitoring and evaluation determine that adjustments are needed to achieve the Refuges' purposes, visions, goals, or objectives.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions or want to be added to our mailing list, please contact:

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or visit the Ridgefield NWR Complex website:
<http://ridgefieldrefuges.fws.gov>

or the Pacific Region Planning website:
<http://pacific.fws.gov/planning>



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