



Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR)

CMR Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

Background

Every 15 years the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is required to undergo a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that defines the long-term management of the refuge. The initial draft documents were released September 7, 2010 and the FWS is inviting public comments on the draft for 90 days. They have identified four management alternatives and have identified alternative D "managing for ecological processes" as their preferred draft alternative. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) strongly believes this is the best option for maintaining quality hunting and wildlife viewing experiences, as well as for improving wildlife habitat.



Brief Summary of Proposed Management Plan (Alternative D)

- Through the use of prescribed fire, grazing and hunting, the FWS plans to restore natural processes on the refuge, benefitting diverse plant and animal species.
- Prescriptive grazing, the concept of using grazing as a tool to benefit wildlife habitat, would be utilized to maintain and improve habitat conditions. The manipulation of livestock grazing on the refuge would allow the FWS to employ active management of key grass and shrub species.
- The FWS would actively cooperate with Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks (FWP) in providing big game management recommendations. The NWF would recommend population objectives, including managing for a diverse age structure of game on the refuge.
- The FWS would evaluate roads and execute permanent or seasonal closures on 23 miles of road, as needed, to improve the ecological health of the refuge.
- Wilderness would be expanded by 18,559 acres in six proposed wilderness units (Antelope Creek, Crooked Creek, Alkali Creek, Wagon Coulee, West Hell Creek, and Sheep Creek Units) and eliminated in three areas (East Beauchamp Creek, West Beauchamp Creek, and East Hell Creek Units) for a reduction of 26,744. This would result in a total loss of 8,185 acres. NWF is not supportive of a loss in proposed wilderness acreage on the CMR.

Bison Restoration on the CMR

Through the work of NWF, FWS and others, over the last 20 years, livestock grazing has been phased out on over 250,000 acres and this land could now be available for bison restoration without livestock conflict. The amount of ungrazed land will continue to grow in future years as other livestock permits are phased out.

According to the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, the FWS has an obligation to restore, when appropriate, native species to refuges. We believe FWS has the ability and jurisdiction to be proactive with bison restoration on the CMR. The CMR's CCP makes it plain that in order for the refuge to restore biological diversity and function as a natural ecosystem, bison need to function as the primary large herbivore on the landscape. NWF believes that bison restoration is not beyond the scope of analysis for the CCP, and that the plan should contain specific language directing the eventual return of bison to the refuge. NWF believes that the FWS should not be a passive observer in bison restoration, but a willing, and active, participant and a full partner with the State of Montana in conservation efforts.

How Will This Plan Affect You?

"The breaks" have changed little since Lewis and Clark first explored the area more than 200 years ago. During the Fall, sportsmen spend a combined 100,000 days pursuing game on the refuge. This does not include the thousands of bird watchers, boaters, elk viewers and hikers. We must ensure that this unique landscape is preserved for future generations to enjoy.

Get Involved!

For more information or to view an electronic version of the document, visit www.nwf.org/cmri or contact Kit Fischer, National Wildlife Federation, 240 N. Higgins, Missoula, MT 59802, fischerk@nwf.org, office 406-541-6731; cell 406-241-3121.