

Chincoteague

National Wildlife Refuge

Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement Release

Final Plan is Now Available

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has completed a final comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental impact statement (EIS) for Chincoteague and Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuges (NWR). The 15-year management plan will guide refuge practices to achieve our wildlife conservation mission and to support public use on the refuge. The plan will be released for a 30-day review through October 11, 2015.

The review period offers individuals and organizations that commented on the draft CCP/EIS the opportunity to review our responses to comments. It also allows Federal and State agencies with jurisdiction or expertise to review the plan. After the review ends, we will evaluate and incorporate any new substantive information and complete the process to approve the final CCP.

Where to Get a Copy of Final CCP/EIS

You can download an electronic copy of the final CCP/EIS from our website at: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Chincoteague/what_we_do/conservation.html

You may also request a CD-ROM copy from our planning staff (see reverse side).



Yucca (filamentosa)

Public Comments on the Draft Plan

In May 2014, we released the draft CCP/EIS and outlined three alternatives for managing the refuge. Alternative B was identified as the “preferred alternative.” We initially released the draft CCP/EIS for 60 days of public review and comment from May 15 to July 14, 2014. In response to public requests, we extended that period another 30 days. We held two public open house meetings in Chincoteague, and additional meetings in Melfa, Virginia and Pocomoke City, Maryland. As part of this public involvement process we also held a public hearing on June 26 at the Chincoteague Center with 28 people formally raising a variety of issues and concerns. We evaluated all letters and emails sent to us during that period, along with comments recorded at our public hearing.

A total of 236 emails and 94 letters were received, including official comments from the Town of Chincoteague, the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce, The Nature Conservancy, the National Park Service (NPS), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), various departments from the Commonwealth of Virginia, and other local interest groups. In addition to the individual comments, a petition with about 600 signatures was submitted, supporting an alternative (“Alternative A Plus”), which called for building up and maintaining the current recreational beach as long as possible, then transitioning to relocation only after extensive studies and designs have been completed and approved. A second petition with 112 signatures was submitted in support of the preferred alternative (Alternative B).



Boy fishing

A majority of comments received were related to the recreational beach. Specific comments were directed at beach access, beach nourishment, timing and funding, along with general questions about the proposed relocated beach. Many comments received were opposed to the proposed beach relocation or requested the beach be maintained at its current location. In addition, comments were received regarding maintaining the overall visitor experience, beach access, more or improved biking and hiking opportunities, and concerns over mosquitoes. Commenters also requested further studies of designs, economics, flood protection, and associated costs.



USFWS

Dowitcher

Changes made in the Final CCP/EIS

After reviewing public comments, we modified our preferred alternative in several ways and have put it forth as the final CCP/EIS for the two refuges. Specifically,

- The assigned area - an area managed by the National Park Service through an agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service - will consist of the relocated one-mile recreational beach, associated parking areas, a new visitor contact station, and will extend to include an additional mile south to the terminate of the Swan Cove Bike Trail. This additional mile will allow certain uses, such as fishing, walking and watching wildlife, and doubles the length of the assigned area.
- Rather than close the Beach Road causeway across Toms Cove to all public access once alternative routes are created, we will continue to allow oversand vehicles and hikers access to Beach Road south to Fishing Point from September 16 to March 14 each year. The road will stay open to vehicles year-round to the vicinity of the South Pony Corral.

- The National Park Service will continue to offer environmental education programs at Toms Cove Hook area. If the building becomes unserviceable over time, it will not be rebuilt.
- We revised our bike-to-beach access. Instead of eliminating the Swan Cove Bike Trail and pursuing an alternative route north, we will keep current access open and include the beach terminus within the new assigned area.
- Rather than close it to public access, we will continue to keep Service Road open to hikers year-round to the refuge's boundary with the national seashore.
- A section of the Affected Environment (chapter 3) on cultural resources was inadvertently left out of the draft CCP/EIS. This section, coordinated with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, is included in the final CCP/EIS.
- We added a "significant concern" to Section 1.9. "Public safety and community resilience to storm damage and flooding" is a concern that arose primarily during the public

comment period with release of the draft CCP/EIS.

- Since release of the draft CCP/EIS, the status of two species of concern has changed. Red knot, a shorebird species, was proposed to be listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) during the planning process, and was finally listed as threatened in December 2014. The Delmarva fox squirrel was proposed for delisting from the endangered species list in September 2014, but that action has not been finalized yet.

Next Steps

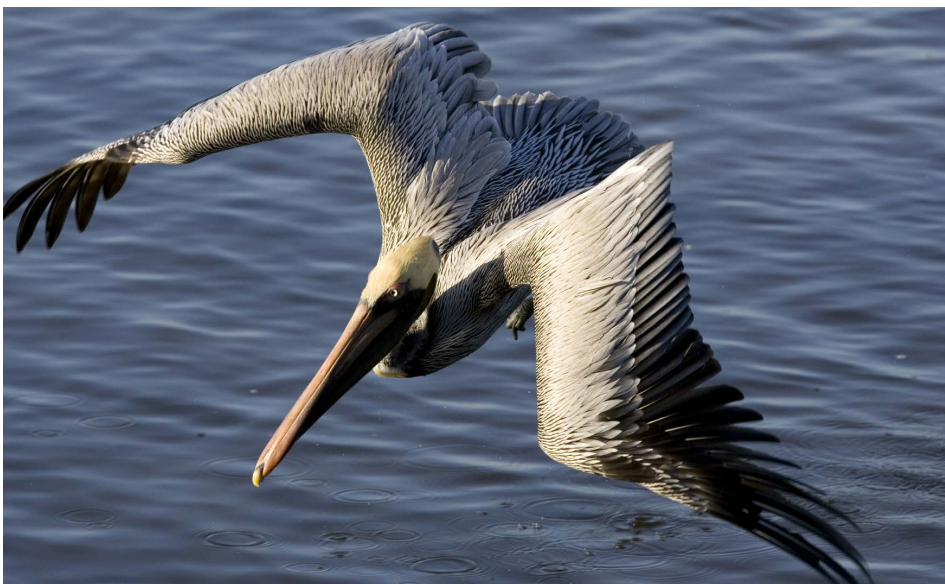
At the close of the 30-day review, the USFWS's Northeast Regional Director will determine if the final CCP/EIS is adequate to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. She will then select an alternative to implement as the final CCP and document this decision in a Record of Decision (ROD). We will announce the ROD's availability in the Federal Register. Effective with the signing and release of the ROD, we can begin to implement the CCP. If the preferred alternative is selected, then one of our first proposed actions will be to begin an additional National Environmental Policy Act review process on relocating the recreational beach. Additionally, we will work with the National Park Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, other Federal and State agencies, and the community on a design for the recreational beach and adjacent parking areas.

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For more information on the refuge and planning process, visit:
http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Chincoteague/what_we_do/conservation.html

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Brown pelican