

ROCKY FLATS STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL

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Monthly Status Report – July 2007 *Special Edition – Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge*

On July 12, 2007, the Department of Energy transferred jurisdiction over 3953 acres of the former Rocky Flats buffer zone to the Department of the Interior to be managed as the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge. This monthly status report focuses on the refuge system in general and The Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge system in particular.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The first national wildlife refuge was established in 1903. The refuge system, which has grown to more than 92 million acres, now includes 500 refuges (at least one in every state) and over 3000 waterfowl production areas. The Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge is one of three refuges in the Denver-metro area. The other two are The Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR (Commerce City) and Two Ponds NWR (Arvada).

The refuge system mission is:

To administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge Act of 2001

Determining the future use of Rocky Flats was a priority since the Future Site Use Working Group, a community forum in the mid-1990s, recommended that the Rocky Flats buffer zone be protected as open space. Questions about what to do with the Industrial Area, the former core production area, ranged from open space to reindustrialization. These questions were settled in December 2001 when, as part of the annual Defense Authorization bill, Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed the “The Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge Act of 2001” (Refuge Act).

The Refuge Act was championed by Senator Wayne Allard and Representative Mark Udall, and was broadly supported by community members surrounding the plant and the Colorado Congressional delegation. The Rocky Flats Coalition of Local Governments, the predecessor organization to the Rocky Flats Stewardship Council, was intimately involved in all aspects of the bill’s development and assisted greatly in securing additional Congressional support.

In the Refuge Act, Congress identified four purposes for The Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge:

1. Restore and preserve native ecosystems
2. Provide habitat for and populations management of native plants and migratory and resident wildlife
3. Conserve threatened and endangered species
4. Provide opportunities for compatible scientific research.

In addition, the Refuge Act provides wildlife-dependent uses and environmental education and interpretation are priority public uses of the Refuge.

USFWS Planning and Management Goals

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), a program office within the Department of the Interior, manages the Rocky Flats Refuge. In 2004 USFWS developed the following goals to guide refuge planning and management:

1. Wildlife and Habitat Management: Provide a riparian community representative of historic flora and fauna in a high valley of the southern Rocky Mountains to provide habitat for migratory birds, mammals, and river-dependent species.
2. Public Use, Education and Interpretation: Provide visitors and students high quality recreational, educational and interpretive opportunities and foster an understanding and appreciation of the Refuge's xeric tallgrass prairie, upland shrub and wetland habitats; native wildlife; the history of the site; and the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS).
3. Safety: Conduct operations and manage public access in accordance with the final Rocky Flats' cleanup decision documents to ensure the safety of the Refuge visitors, staff and neighbors.
4. Effective and Open Communication: Conduct communication outreach efforts to raise public awareness about the Refuge programs, management decisions and the mission of the USFWS and the NWRS among visitors, students and nearby residents.
5. Working with Others: Foster beneficial partnerships with individuals, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and others to promote resource conservation, compatible wildlife-related research, public use, site history and infrastructure.
6. Refuge Operations: Based on available funds, provide facilities and staff to fulfill the Refuge vision and purpose.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP)

The Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) outlines the management direction and strategies for refuge operations, habitat restoration and visitor services. It was approved in April 2005 and is effective for 15 years.

The CCP accomplishes the following:

1. Outlines a vision for the Refuge
2. Provides guidance for management decisions
3. Outlines goals, objectives and strategies to achieve the Refuge's visions and purpose

4. Provides other agencies and the public with an understanding of the management strategies to be implemented
5. Describes the desired future condition of the Refuge

In developing the CCP, USFWS considered four alternatives. Ultimately, USFWS chose an option that “balances wildlife and habitat management needs, compatible wildlife-dependent public uses and budgetary constraints.” USFWS has pledged to work closely with surrounding jurisdictions in implementing these actions.

Habitat Management: Habitat management will include prescribed fire, mowing and grazing to simulate and maintain native grassland communities. As part of the integrated pest management plan, these tools will be used along with herbicides, biological controls and other mechanical controls to reduce the density of noxious weeds. USFWS will remove and revegetate 28 miles of unused road and 13 miles of stream crossings. These efforts are aimed at improving habitat for a variety of wildlife species, including habitat that is important to the Preble’s meadow jumping mouse, a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

Wildlife Management: USFWS will work with the Colorado Division of Wildlife to manage deer and elk populations. Management options include public hunting, culling and other means. Hunting will be limited to two weekends per year and will be solely for youth and the disabled. Prairie dog populations will be allowed to expand to 750 acres in areas outside of identified Preble’s habitat and the xeric tallgrass community. USFWS will also evaluate the suitability of reintroducing native species, such as the sharp-tailed grouse.

Public Use: Public use programs will include environmental education programs for high-school and college students, as well as interpretative programs. Visitor use facilities will include 12.8 miles of multi-use trails, 3.8 miles of hiking-only trails, a visitor contact station, interpretative overlooks, viewing blinds, and parking facilities.

Refuge Compatibility

Lands within the refuge system are different from other public lands. Once a refuge is created the lands are closed until such time that they are opened. (Other federal lands, such as national forests and Bureau of Land Management lands, are open unless otherwise closed.) Under the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, uses of a given refuge are only allowed once the Refuge Manager has determined the use is a compatible use and consistent with public safety. “Compatible use” means a wildlife-dependent recreational use, or any other use that will not interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the refuge system or the refuge purposes.

Step Down Management Plans

The CCP describes the desired future conditions of the Refuge and provides long-range guidance and management direction. Additional, more detailed planning is done through step-down management plans. The USFWS anticipates developing step-down plans for

- Vegetation and Wildlife Management
- Integrated Pest Management
- Fire Management

- Visitor Services (includes interpretation, environmental education, hunting and research protocols)
- Health and Safety
- Historic preservation

These plans are in addition to the Site History/Safety Signs step-down plan USFWS approved earlier this year. That plan focused on entrance signs for the Refuge.

Trails Opening

The CCP anticipates the Refuge would be open for public use starting in 5 years. USFWS also planned to have the trail to the Lindsay Ranch open within the first year after the transfer. However, there are no funds available to staff the Refuge or place safety fencing around the Lindsey house to keep visitors out of an unsafe building. USFWS now says it will likely be several years before any of the trails are open to the public.

USFWS Priorities

In order to prevent habitat degradation, weed control and integrated pest management will be two of USFWS' top priorities. Due to the high precipitation earlier in the year, several noxious weeds, including dalmation toadflax and diffuse knapweed, have become problematic. Prescribed grazing will be important for reducing fuels loads, especially along the southern boundary of the Refuge. Grazing helps control wildfire potential, prepare the pasture area for restoration, and control of some noxious weed species.

In addition USFWS has identified the following funding priorities:

- Weed control
- Law enforcement
- Wildlife monitoring
- Maintaining migration corridors for wildlife
- Trail development

Department of Energy at Rocky Flats

The Refuge Act provides DOE shall transfer administrative jurisdiction over Rocky Flats to the Department of the Interior for management by USFWS. It further provides DOE shall retain jurisdiction over lands that require ongoing management to ensure the cleanup remedies remain protective of human health and the environment. Subsequent legislation addressed active mining claims. Accordingly, DOE retained jurisdiction of the vast majority of the former Industrial Area and the settling ponds (1309 acres), as well as jurisdiction over active mining claims (929 acres).

Importantly, should contamination be found on Refuge lands that requires remediation, the Refuge Act provides cleanup trumps Refuge management.

For more information about the Refuge please go to: <http://www.fws.gov/rockyflats/>