Executive Summary

Morris Wetland Management District is part of a unique natural ecosystem and an equally unique legacy of human partnership.

The ecosystem is known as the tallgrass prairie ecosystem, and its combination of prairie grasslands and small wetlands made it among the most biologically diverse and intricate landscapes in the world. When European settlers arrived and discovered the land's tremendous productivity, the tallgrass prairie ecosystem became one of the most altered ecosystems on earth. The landscape changed rapidly, and little of the original prairie was saved. Today only fragments exist in small, isolated blocks.

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Partnerships have been inherent in efforts to preserve the remaining prairie. From the Duck Stamp Act of 1934 to the Wetland Loan Act of 1961 to the Small Wetland Acquisition Program of 1962, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and hunters, environmentalists, and communities have worked together to preserve land and wildlife. Funding for acquisition of Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA) comes in large part from funds generated through the Duck Stamp Act, making duck hunters a key partner in preserving critical habitat within the prairie pothole region. Waterfowl Production Areas are upland grasslands and wetlands purchased by the Service to provide nesting habitat for waterfowl. Wetland Management Districts (WMD) are the federal administrative units charged with acquiring, overseeing and managing WPAs and easements within a specified group of counties.

The Morris Wetland Management District, originally established in 1964 as the Benson Wetland Management District, includes the following Federal property: 246 WPAs totaling 51,208 acres in fee title ownership and 595 wetland easements encompassing 20,074 wetland acres, 27 habitat (grassland) easements covering 1,787 acres, 22 conservation easements covering 1,211 acres on property formerly controlled by the Farmers Home Administration, and two easement units of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge covering 110 acres. Both fee and easement areas are scattered throughout Big Stone, Chippewa, Lac Que Parle, Pope, Stevens, Swift, Traverse, and Yellow Medicine counties. The total surface area of the eight-county district is 3,334,580 acres. The total Fish and Wildlife Service property interest of 74,390 acres (excluding Big Stone NWR) represents 2.2 percent of the total area of the District.

Managing the District demands long range planning that reflects vision, science and people. This Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan describes how we intend to improve wildlife habitat, foster waterfowl production, and expand opportunities for compatible recreation, including hunting, wildlife observation, and environmental education.

The management direction identified in this Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan charts a course for the next 15 years. This course is summarized in three broad categories – Wildlife and Habitat, People, and Operations.

Comprehensive Conservation Planning

The Comprehensive Conservation Plan, or CCP, is a guide for management on the Morris WMD over the next 15 years. The document provides an outline for how we will accomplish our mission and make our vision become a reality. Several legislative mandates within the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 have guided the development of the Plan. These mandates include:

- The focus of management on the District is to benefit wildlife conservation.
- Wildlife-dependent recreation activities, (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation) are encouraged when they are compatible with wildlife conservation.

The CCP will benefit management of Morris WMD by:

- Providing a clear statement of direction for future management of the District.
- Giving District neighbors, visitors and the general public an understanding of the Service's management actions on and around the Districts.
- Ensuring that the District's management actions and programs are consistent with the mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Ensuring that District management is consistent with other federal, state, and local plans when practicable.
- Establishing that wildlife-dependent recreation uses (compatible uses including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, or environmental education and interpretation) are the priority public uses within the Refuge System.
- Providing a basis for the development of budget requests on operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

The Planning Process

The planning process for this Comprehensive Conservation Plan began October 1, 1997, when a Notice Of Intent to prepare a comprehensive management plan was published in the Federal Register (Vol 62: 51482). Because the six Districts face similar issues, Managers and planners decided to follow a shared CCP process that would result in separate documents for each District. This chapter describes the planning process that was employed.

Initially, members of the planning team identified a list of issues and concerns that were likely to be associated with the management of the District. These preliminary issues and concerns were based on the team members' knowledge of the area, contacts with citizens in the community, and ideas already expressed to the District staff. District staff and Service planners then began asking District neighbors, organizations, local government units, schools, and interested citizens to share their thoughts in a series of open house events.

Vision Statement for the Minnesota Wetland Management Districts

The Districts will emphasize waterfowl production and ensure the preservation of habitat for migratory birds, threatened and endangered native species, and resident wildlife. The Districts will provide opportunities for the public to hunt, fish, observe and photograph wildlife and increase public understanding and appreciation of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Ecosystem.

Open houses were conducted at each District as well as the Regional Office at Ft. Snelling, Minnesota.

People were invited to send in written comments describing their support or concerns about the Districts. Fifty-one written comments were received.

A survey of public use was conducted and focus group meetings were conducted to develop the issues, goals, and objectives for the Plan. These meetings included the District Managers and invited participants from the University of Minnesota, The Nature Conservancy, and the U.S. Geological Survey, Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center. Concurrent with the focus group meetings, planning staff met with individual District staff members numerous times to review issues and discuss District management.

A wide range of issues, concerns and opportunities were expressed during the planning process. Numerous discussions among District and planning staff, focus groups and resource specialists brought to light several recurring themes. Issues fall into broad categories of wildlife, habitat and people. Dealing with these issues is at the core of the development of goals and objectives for the management of the Wetland Management Districts in Minnesota.

Management Alternatives

An environmental assessment (EA) encompassing all six of the Minnesota Wetland Management Districts was prepared as part of the planning process. Three management alternatives were evaluated in the EA, including: maintaining management of current wetland management district acres but not acquiring more land; increasing land holdings to meet the goal acres and maintain current management practices; and improving WMDs for waterfowl and other trust species. The Service has selected the third alternative, improving the Districts for waterfowl and other trust species, as the preferred alternative. Each alternative is briefly described in the following paragraphs.

Alternatives Development

Project Leaders on WMDs within the major waterfowl breeding habitats of the United States have been charged with the responsibility to identify tracts of land that meet the goals of the Small Wetland Acquisition Program (SWAP) for

inclusion in the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). Of all the responsibilities Project Leaders carry, identifying lands to include in the NWRS has the longest lasting implications and is by far the most important. The land, once acquired, needs to be managed intensively with a variety of tools available to the managers. The intensity of management is limited by the number of staff available and the scattered distribution of the land holdings across a wide landscape in 28 counties of western Minnesota. The following alternatives identify three approaches meeting the goals and responsibilities of land ownership and management.

The main goal of the SWAP has been, and still is, to purchase a complex of wetlands and uplands that provide habitat in which waterfowl can successfully reproduce. The basic concept has been to purchase, in fee title, key brood marshes that include adequate nesting cover on adjacent uplands while protecting under easement surrounding temporary and seasonal wetland basins as breeding pair habitat. Once this is accomplished the land must be managed through seeding with native grasses and forbs, burning, and spraying or otherwise controlling exotic and/or invasive species. Additionally, abandoned human infrastructure (wells, barns, etc.) must be removed. The areas are signed and sometimes fenced to provide safe public access.

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The SWAP began in 1958 and accelerated rapidly in the early 1960s with passage of the Wetlands Loan Act. The original 1960s delineations were prepared for each fee title parcel based on their suitability to provide brood rearing habitat for waterfowl. These delineations designated wetlands as priority A, B, and C for fee title purchase. These tracts had few upland acres and only existing wetlands with no drainage facilities were considered for fee or easement purchase. In some locations, these original delineations have been reevaluated and revised. In Minnesota, a 1974 exercise produced maps showing proposed boundaries of each fee title delineation, as well as wetlands within a 2-mile radius that were eligible for easement purchase. A 1984 effort produced maps of "significant wetland areas" for fee title purchase. Although dated, these efforts were biologically sound and provide valuable information in deciding which properties to purchase today.

Over the years our understanding of breeding waterfowl biology has increased and the landscape of the Upper Midwest has changed dramatically. The SWAP itself has evolved to include purchase of drained wetlands, increased upland acreage, and grassland easements along with new counties that include lands within intensely agricultural and urbanized landscapes.

Three possible alternatives to acquisition and management were considered as we thought about the future of the programs for the wetland management districts. The three alternatives were (1) manage what lands we currently own; (2) acquire additional lands and manage them as we currently manage the lands that we own; and (3) acquire additional lands and expand management beyond the present level of intensity.

In the following sections we summarize what we would do under each alternative. More detail is provided in Chapter 2 of the EA (Appendix N of this document). The third alternative is our preferred alternative, which is developed in more detail as the Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Alternative 1 – Maintain Management on Current Acres With No Additional Land Acquisition

Under this alternative we would manage fee title land already in the system and would not increase the holdings to the agreed goal acres for each county within the District. We would restore native grasslands using local ecotypes of mixed native grasses and forbs and improve wetlands by increasing water control and improving watersheds. We would regularly evaluate our approach to waterfowl production. We would maintain the recruitment rate of waterfowl and the current level of inspection of our lands and easements. We would continue to conduct the 4-square-mile monitoring program and the monitoring of nesting structures under this alternative. We would continue routine surveys such as the scent post survey and bird counts and non-routine surveys when requested, such as the deformed frog survey. We would continue to avoid any actions that would harm endangered or threatened species, and we would note the presence of any species that is federally listed as endangered or threatened.

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We would maintain the public access to WPAs that currently exists. We would complete and document development plans for every WPA on the District as time and staffing permit. The development plans would be recorded in a geographic information system (GIS) and document boundaries, habitat, facilities and history of management.

Each District would continue with the current level of staffing. We would identify and replace facilities and equipment that do not meet Service standards. We would expect that the maintenance backlog would be reduced, but not eliminated, over the life of the CCP.

Alternative 2 – Increase Land Holdings to Goal Acres and Maintain Current Management Practices (No Action)

Under this alternative we would continue acquiring land up to the negotiated goal acres within each county in the District (See Table A). We would expand the size of WPAs in areas of prime waterfowl use through easements and working with partners.

We would restore native grasslands using local ecotypes of mixed native grasses and forbs and improve wetlands by increasing water control and improving watersheds. We would regularly evaluate our approach to waterfowl production. We would maintain the recruitment rate of waterfowl and the current level of inspection of our lands and easements. We would continue to conduct the 4-square-mile monitoring program and the monitoring of nesting structures under this alternative. We would continue routine surveys such as the scent post survey and bird counts and non-routine surveys when requested, such as the deformed frog survey. We would continue to avoid any actions that would harm

Table A: Fee Title Acres Approved and Goal Acres Per District in Accordance with the Land Exchange Board

Wetland Management Districts	Fee Title Acres Approved for Purchase by the Land Exchange Board	Goal Acres	Remainder
Detroit Lakes	41,615	89,280	47,665
Fergus Falls	43,417	74,675	31,258
Litchfield	33,213	76,220	46,007
Big Stone	2,343	0	0
Morris	51,208	74,830	23,622
Windom	12,669	24,476	11,807

endangered or threatened species. We would note the presence of any species that is federally listed as endangered or threatened.

We would continue current public access on existing areas and add access to new acquisitions over several years. We would complete and document development plans for every WPA on the District as time and staffing permit. The development plans would be recorded in a GIS and document boundaries, habitat, facilities, and history of management.

Each District would continue with the current level of staffing. We would identify and replace facilities and equipment that do not meet Service standards. We would expect that the maintenance backlog would be reduced, but not eliminated, over the life of the CCP.

Photo by Bernie Angus

Alternative 3 – Increase Land Holdings to Goal Acres and Expand Management for Waterfowl, Other Trust Species and the Public. (Preferred Alternative)

Under this alternative we would continue acquiring land up to the negotiated goal acres for each county within the District (See Table A). We would expand the size of WPAs in areas of prime waterfowl use through easements and working with partners. We would focus whenever possible on prime habitat as outlined in the Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (HAPET) "thunderstorm" maps. These maps reveal high density waterfowl populations and, because the results are color coded, look somewhat like weather maps.

We would follow the Strategic Growth of the SWAP Guidelines for Fee and Easement Purchase (See Appendix K). These Guidelines specify that:

1) The program will focus on providing the mission components for the WMD landscape: wetland complexes, surrounding grasslands and a predator component that approaches a naturally occurring complement (i.e., coyotes vs. red fox).

2) The program will focus on established delineation criteria (size, location, ratio of upland to wetlands, soil composition, etc.) for all fee title, habitat and wetland easements (Appendix K).

3) The program will prioritize acquisition based on thunderstorm maps, land cover (grassland acres), landscape characteristics, and data on predator populations. Prioritization will be given to tracts that benefit waterfowl, but other wildlife benefits will be considered in the priorities such as native prairie, endangered or threatened species and colonial nesting birds. Additional considerations may include expanding and protecting large tracts of grassland as Grassland Bird Core Conservation Areas as proposed by Fitzgerald et al. (1998).

We would restore native grasslands using local ecotypes of mixed native grasses and forbs and improve wetlands by increasing water control and improving watersheds. We would, where practicable, follow HAPET recommendations for nesting platforms and predator management (electric fencing, predator control, islands, etc.). Cooperating landowners within the District's watershed would be offered incentives and/or compensated through cost-sharing agreements for applying conservation and environmental farming practices on their lands and for creating, maintaining, or enhancing habitat for wildlife.

We would regularly evaluate our approach to waterfowl production and improve waterfowl monitoring. We would strive to increase the recruitment rate of waterfowl and increase inspection of our lands and easements. We would work to prohibit the introduction of wildlife species that are not native to the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Ecosystem.

We would employ a scientifically defensible means to monitor and evaluate habitats and populations under this alternative. We would increasingly use GIS in our monitoring. We would inventory the hydrological systems within the District, invertebrate communities, and monitor contaminant levels in water flowing to and from District wetlands. We would increase our surveys and monitoring of threatened and endangered species, invertebrates, and unique communities under this alternative. We would seek opportunities to enhance and reintroduce native species in the District.

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Under this alternative we would expand and improve opportunities for public use through construction of additional parking lots and interpretive kiosks on existing and acquired lands.

We would complete and document development plans for every WPA on the District within three years under this alternative. The development plans would be recorded in a GIS and document boundaries, habitat, facilities, and history of management.

Staff would be added to the Districts under this alternative. Implementation of the CCP would rely on partnerships formed with landowners in the watershed, volunteers and interested citizens, farm and conservation organizations, and with appropriate government agencies. We would identify and replace facilities and equipment that do not meet Service standards. Our goal would be to meet the standards by 2010.

Management of the Districts would be more consistent among the Minnesota Districts and with the Districts in Iowa, Wisconsin and the Dakotas.

Planning Issues and Management Direction

A wide range of issues, concerns and opportunities were expressed during the planning process. Numerous discussions among District and planning staff, focus groups and resource specialists brought to light several recurring themes. Issues fall into broad categories of wildlife, habitat and people. In the following paragraphs, we list the issues that were identified in this planning process and our objectives for addressing that issue.

Wildlife and Habitat

Can we improve waterfowl productivity?
We will work to increase waterfowl production through effective monitoring of populations, evaluating current management actions and increasing recruitment. We will strive to increase recruitment through cropland conversion to grassland and artificial structures where appropriate, and protecting existing National Wildlife Refuge System lands as well as other waterfowl habitats in cooperation with District partners.

Strategic Acquisition: Can we buy the highest priority land in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible?

We will ensure strategic land acquisition by evaluating current acquisition guidelines, identifying priority acquisition areas, and evaluating acreage goals while securing rapid responses to sellers through close coordination with the acquisition office.

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Managing Uplands: Can we improve prairie restoration by planting the right seeds and using the right management tools?

We will seek to reestablish and manage native plant communities by seeding a diverse mixture of local grasses and forbs each year as determined through the WPA development plans. We will actively manage to maintain quality grassland habitats using fire, grazing and/or haying, and haying as viable management tools.

Managing and Restoring Wetlands: How do we manage wetlands to maintain or increase productivity?

We will strive to restore and manage wetlands primarily within identified priority areas, increasing the amount and quality of water level management, monitoring hydrological systems, and encouraging and cooperating in research of these systems.

Can we improve biological inventories and monitoring on WPAs?

We will improve biological inventories and monitoring through planning, training, expanded species data gathering, research, and use of GIS.

Can we stem the loss of migratory birds in the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Ecosystem?

We will try to stem the loss of all migratory birds by expanding restoration of upland wetland and riparian habitats on private lands.

Can we manage District land to preserve, restore and enhance threatened and endangered species, rare and declining species, and address regional priority species?

We will preserve, restore and enhance threatened and endangered species and rare and declining species through the collection of baseline population and habitat data, tailored management activities, enforcement of regulations, and cooperation with partners.

Under what circumstances should we reintroduce rare native species to District land?

We will seek to reintroduce rare native species where feasible by identifying, evaluating and prioritizing opportunities. All reintroduction programs will be conducted in close cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

How do we mitigate negative external influences such as contaminants on WPAs and reduce its impact on long-term health and productivity of District land?

We will work to mitigate negative external influences on Service lands by identifying, monitoring and developing action plans to address threats such as pesticide use, contaminants, soil erosion, and poor water quality.

How do we balance management for Federal trust species with the needs of resident species?

We will balance management of Federal trust species with the needs of resident species by communicating with state wildlife agencies and local conservation organizations to provide compatible food and cover sources where there are documented needs.

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How do we reduce crop loss caused by Canada geese foraging on private land adjacent to WPAs?

We will work to reduce crop loss caused by Canada Geese foraging on private lands adjacent to Waterfowl Production Areas by developing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources which defines agency responsibilities to provide alternate feeding areas and long-term solutions.

Invasive species, both exotic and native, are negatively impacting the natural ecological balance of grasslands and wetlands on WPAs.

We will seek to control the negative impacts of invasive species by taking aggressive control measures against exotic plants, documenting and eradicating inva-

sive plant populations, and increasing long-term resolution of these problems through biological controls.

What is the Long Range Goal of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Private Lands) on Wetland Management Districts?

We will identify the long-range goals of the District's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (private lands) by developing priority action items that could include identification of partners in key project areas, and developing a brochure for the public to better define the Partners program and its benefits.

People

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There are conflicting views concerning the costs and benefits of federally owned land in a community. Who benefits? Who pays?

We will identify the benefits and costs of Federally owned land to a community by investigating the economic value of wetlands and federal land ownership as well as revenue sharing in relation to local taxes. We will seek to determine the social values of wildlife and natural habitats to people.

How do we provide adequate facilities and programs for the public to fully enjoy wildlife-related recreation in a way that is compatible with our mission?

We will provide adequate facilities and programs for public enjoyment of compatible wildlife-dependent recreation by enhancing public use experiences with accessible facilities that meet National Visitor Service Standards as well as providing current maps and District information. We will increase environmental education opportunities through additional "hands-on" exhibits, specific on-site interpretative opportunities, and building volunteer programs.

Operations

Districts need sufficient staff in critical areas to fully meet resource challenges and opportunities.

We will meet staffing needs for resource challenges and opportunities by hiring additional administrative, biological, technical, and maintenance personnel.

Districts need office, maintenance, and equipment storage facilities to carry out their mission.

We will provide adequate maintenance and storage facilities by selecting and developing a secure maintenance and equipment storage area within the boundaries of the Wetland District.

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Vehicles and other necessary equipment need to be replaced on a regular basis according to Service standards.

We will schedule vehicle and equipment replacements to achieve industry standards when normal life expectancy is reached and acquire all necessary equipment to achieve Wetland Management District Goals.

Funding is needed to develop and manage newly acquired WPA land and facilities.

We will develop newly acquired Waterfowl Production Areas by identifying these needs, securing funding, and carrying out projects immediately after lands are purchased. We will identify the costs of new lands to the District's annual operation and maintenance budget.

We will maintain existing waterfowl production areas at Service standards including delineated boundaries, nature trails, parking lots, access trails, water control structures and fences by maintaining a current inventory of maintenance needs on the Maintenance Management System database, and updating these costs and priorities annually.

Individual WPA development plans and record keeping need to be updated.

We will ensure that Waterfowl Production Area Development Plans are current by performing complete resource inventories and utilizing the most current GIS technology and complete unit planning to meet trust responsibilities.

The Districts need to be consistent in their application of policy and resource protection efforts.

We will seek consistency in policy and practices on all Service Wetland Management Districts by attending coordination meetings and following Service policy when implementing programs.

Essential Staffing, Mission-Critical Projects and Major Maintenance Needs

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The Service relies on two systems to track the needs of the Wetland Management Districts and other units of the National Wildlife Refuge System. These systems are the Refuge Operating Needs System and the Maintenance Management System. Each station has scores of projects in each system, representing a need which is often beyond the realities of funding. However, each station has identified its most critical needs which form a realistic assessment of funding needed to meet many of the goals, objectives, and strategies identified in the CCP. These needs also form the basis for the President's budget request to Congress. These critical needs are listed below in the categories of essential

staff, mission-critical projects, and major maintenance projects. A complete listing of projects in the Operating Needs System is found in Appendix G of this document and it represents the long-term needs of the Morris Wetland Management District to operate at optimum levels.

Essential Staffing Needs
Wildlife Biologist
Visitor Services Specialist

Mission-Critical Projects
Prairie Chicken Reintroductions
Native Prairie Restoration
Water Level Management
Visitor Services

Major Maintenance Projects
Replace Storage Building at Benson Site
Replace Roof on Maintenance Building
Replace Boundary Fences
Replace Tractor
12 Additional Projects

Total Funding Needs: $1,435,000