

PUBLIC USE PLAN

BENTON LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
BLACK EAGLE, MONTANA

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
MOUNTAIN-PRAIRIE REGION

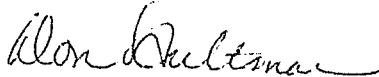
APRIL 4, 1990

REVIEW AND APPROVALS

PUBLIC USE PLAN

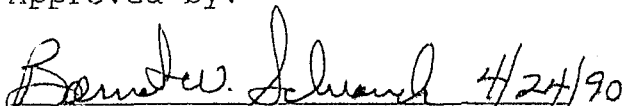
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Submitted by:



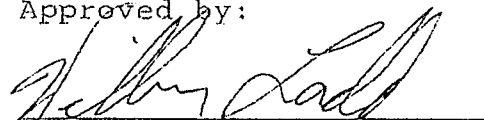
Don Hultman, Project Leader

Approved by:



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Approved by:



Jerry Ladd
Regional Office - R&W

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April, 1990

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Scope of Plan

This plan sets forth a course of action for non-consumptive public use at Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Consumptive uses, such as hunting or trapping, are best covered in separate plans due to their relative complexity. This plan will not deal with every conceivable type of non-consumptive use, but only those which are practical, wildlife oriented, in demand locally, and compatible with the refuge purpose.

B. Refuge Environment

Benton Lake is a 12,383 acre refuge located on the western edge of the northern Great Plains some 50 miles east of the Rocky Mountains and 12 miles north of Great Falls, the second largest city in Montana. Benton Lake proper is a 5,000 acre glacial lake bed which is the terminus of a 350 square mile watershed. Refuge terrain is gently rolling with shortgrass native prairie the predominant vegetation. Three mountain ranges are readily visible from the refuge: the Highwood Mountains to the east, the Big Belt Mountains to the south and the Rockies to the west.

The lake itself has been divided into eight marsh units to provide better water control for the enhancement of submergent and emergent vegetation and to limit botulism outbreaks. The marshes are generally a mosaic of open water and cattail, hardstem bulrush and alkali bulrush stands. Water management is generally by gravity flow, although an interunit pumping system allows for great flexibility, especially in the advent of a botulism outbreak. In dry years, supplemental water is pumped from Muddy Creek 30 miles to the west and arrives via Lake Creek through the northwest corner of the refuge.

Refuge wildlife is dominated by water birds including most major species of ducks, Canada geese, gulls, terns and various shorebirds. Mallard, gadwall and pintail are the major duck nesting species, with an average of 20,000 produced each year. The refuge is an important migration stop during spring and fall with up to 100,000 ducks, 4,500 tundra swans, 40,000 snow geese and 3,000 Canada geese present. Bald eagles are commonly seen in spring and fall.

Other refuge wildlife includes twenty different species of mammals such as jackrabbits, muskrat, mink, raccoon, weasel, coyote and a limited number of white-tailed deer, mule deer

and pronghorn. Only a handful of reptile and amphibian species are present, with only minnow-sized fish due to the shallowness of the marshes.

C. Public Use Objectives for Refuge

The following public use objectives for Benton Lake NWR are taken from the "Background and Operating Statement" for the refuge approved by the Denver Regional Office on 10/11/89.

"Goal IV - Interpretation and Recreation - Provide a range of opportunities for compatible wildlife and wildlands-oriented interpretation and recreation.

Objectives

1. Provide an effective environmental education program at 4,000 use days (visits).
2. Provide for other non-consumptive recreation, such as tour route use and birdwatching, at an annual level of 11,000 use days."

D. Current Level of Use

Current public use visits on Benton Lake NWR average about 5,000 per year. Of these visits, 70 percent are interpretive or wildlife observation visits, 20 percent environmental education and 10 percent hunting. These percentages equate to 3,500, 1,000 and 500 visits for the respective categories. All figures are well below refuge objectives.

Reasons for the low visitation for a refuge so close to a large population center vary. For one thing, Montana offers a wide array of recreational opportunities which "compete" with what the refuge has to offer. Secondly, there is a perception among the public that they are not welcome on the refuge due to the restrictions on use, signing or lack thereof, and insensitive contacts by management in past years.

II. PROPOSED CHANGES

For the sake of comparison and clarity, the proposed changes in public use on the refuge are presented with current opportunities in chart form in the appendix.

It is important to note that these changes do not only represent an effort to reach the public use objectives for the refuge, but overall objectives for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Refuges' mission includes maintaining wildlife "to meet society's needs for areas where the widest possible spectrum of benefits

associated with wildlife is enhanced and made available". One of the goals to fulfill that mission is to "...provide refuge visitors with high-quality, safe, wholesome, and enjoyable recreational experiences oriented toward wildlife, to the extent these activities are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established". (Refuge Manual)

III. COMPATIBILITY WITH REFUGE PURPOSE

Under The Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, recreation on refuges must be compatible with the purpose of the refuge and funds must be available to properly manage recreational activities before they are allowed. The Refuge Manual defines a compatible use as one that will not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which the refuge was established. In the case of Benton Lake, the purpose is to serve "...as a refuge and breeding ground for birds".

The proposed changes were reviewed in the light of possible conflicts with the refuge purpose. This review is found in chart form in the appendix. The proposed uses were found to be compatible with the purpose of the refuge.

Also, funding for implementing the changes (signing, leaflets, road maintenance, etc.) is available in the current fiscal year. Maintenance of the program in future years will be minimal and easily accomplished within refuge operations and maintenance programs.

IV. ACTIONS NEEDED FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A. Leaflet

Done

A "Public Use" leaflet is proposed to better orient visitors to the refuge and help ensure they understand what interpretive and recreational activities are available. Just as important, the leaflet will detail prohibited activities to minimize wildlife disturbance, protect refuge resources and facilities, and provide for visitor safety. The leaflet will be attractive, functional and low cost. A layout of the leaflet is found in the appendix.

B. Signing

Done

New signs will be needed to identify the alternate tour route, parking areas and the dike open to hiking. Sign style, mounting, placement and maintenance will be in accordance with the FWS sign manual and station sign plan. Total cost for new signage is approximately \$500.

C. Road Maintenance

The alternate tour route will need to be graded and repaired more often than in the past. However, since the route is one-way, no major road bed changes are needed.

D. Permit System

done

A simple, half-page "Public Use Permit" will be developed (see appendix) to handle access to closed areas by visitors for photography, hiking, etc. The permit system will protect sensitive areas or sensitive species while still accommodating visitors. Time and space scheduling through the permit will also maintain activity quality. For example, it may be fine if one photographer is permitted to take pictures of the Franklin's gull colony, but a major disturbance if five per week wanted to. The permit system will allow refuge staff to control these types of special visits to avoid conflicts with wildlife and other refuge users.

V. EVALUATION OF PROGRAM

Public use on the refuge will be continually monitored to determine any adverse affects on wildlife, and especially migratory birds. For example, each year a sample of refuge dikes and uplands is searched to determine nest densities and success. If dikes or uplands open to hiking show a marked decline in nest densities or success, the activity will be modified by location or season of use.

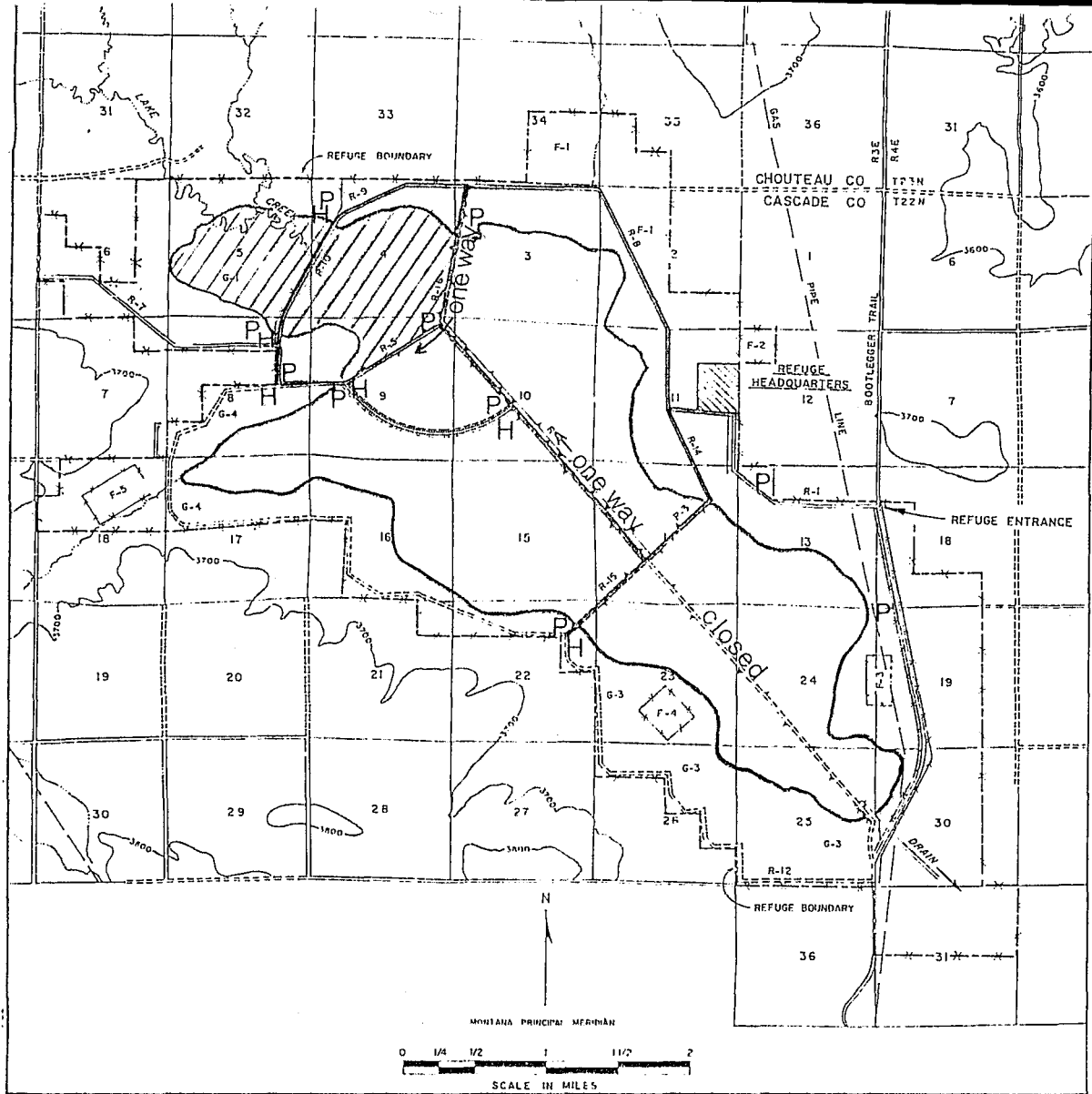
A traffic counter will continue to be used to measure overall use of the refuge. It is not anticipated that the number of visits, even with higher refuge visibility, will reach a point that markedly detracts from activity quality or measureably affects the purpose for which the refuge was established.

- Appendix A - Current and Planned Public Use
- Appendix B - Public Use Map
- Appendix C - Relative Impact of Planned Public Use
- Appendix D - Leaflet Layout
- Appendix E - Public Use Permit


APPENDIX A


CURRENT PROGRAMPLANNED PROGRAM


<u>ACTIVITY</u>	<u>AREA</u>	<u>PERIOD OF USE</u>	<u>AREA</u>	<u>PERIOD OF USE</u>	<u>COMMENTS</u>
A. HIKING	Not Permitted		All Uplands & IVb Dike	Year Around except IVb dike July 15-Sept. 30	Access limited during winter. Roads not plowed.
B. AUTO TOURING	Prairie Marsh Guided Tour	March 1-Nov. 30	Prairie Marsh Drive	Year Around	Access limited during winter. Roads not plowed.
			Lower Marsh Road	July 15 - Sept. 30	No RV's/trailers due to road turns. Lower Marsh Road closed during fall migration to limit disturbance to birds staging in Unit III.
C. PHOTOGRAPHY	Tour Route, other by special permit	March 1-Nov. 30	All above	Year Around	In marshes by permit only to limit disturbance to colonial nesting birds.
D. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION	Various areas based on group needs, consul- tation w/refuge	Year around		No Change	
E. CANOEING	Not Permitted		Units I & II	July 15 - Sept. 30	Special Use Permit only. Limited season and use to avoid disturbance to over-water nesters. Users will be mostly photographers.
F. CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING	Not Permitted		Entire Refuge	Winter	Access limited. Roads not plowed. Very few wildlife species present. Use will be sporadic due to varying snow conditions by month and year.
G. PHOTO, OBSERVATION BLINDS	Not Available		Selected Areas	Year around	Special Use Permit only. Semi-permanent blinds may be set up at sharp-tailed grouse lek, use strictly scheduled. Local Audubon Club interested in establishing permanent blind on a marsh unit in the future.





P Parking Areas


 Canoeing July 15 - Sept. 30
(by special permit only)

 Prairie Marsh Wildlife Drive

 Photography - all of above
except permit only in marshes

 Lower Marsh Road

 X-country skiing - all of above

H  Hiking Areas

GENERAL REGULATIONS

Parking, permitted only at sites designated by P signs. Park so as not to block roads, trails or gates.

Refuge open during daylight hours only.

Keep your refuge beautiful, no fires, littering or camping permitted.

Vehicles restricted to designated areas - no off-road driving.

All plants and wildlife are protected. Pets must be kept under control to protect nesting birds and other wildlife.

Public restrooms available on back side of refuge office.

Questions? Remember that activities not specifically listed are prohibited without special permission. Refuge office open Monday - Friday, 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM. Phone: (406) 727-7400.

APPENDIX C

RELATIVE IMPACT OF PLANNED PUBLIC USE ON
REFUGE RESOURCES, ESPECIALLY MIGRATORY BIRDS
BENTON LAKE NWR · MONTANA

<u>PROPOSED USE WITH PLANNED TIME/SPACE RESTRAINTS-</u>	<u>ENDANGERED SPECIES</u>	<u>WATERFOWL</u>	<u>SHOREBIRDS</u>	<u>OTHER BIRDS</u>	<u>MAMMALS</u>	<u>CULTURAL RESOURCES</u>	<u>VEGETATION</u>
HIKING	○	◐	◐	◐	◐	◐	◐
AUTO TOURING	○	◐	◐	◐	◐	○	○
PHOTOGRAPHY	○	◐	◐	◐	◐	○	◐
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION	○	○	○	◐	○	○	◐
CANOEING	○	◐	◐	◐	○	○	○
X-COUNTRY SKIING	○	○	○	◐	◐	○	◐
PHOTO, OBSERVATION BLINDS	○	◐	◐	◐	○	○	◐

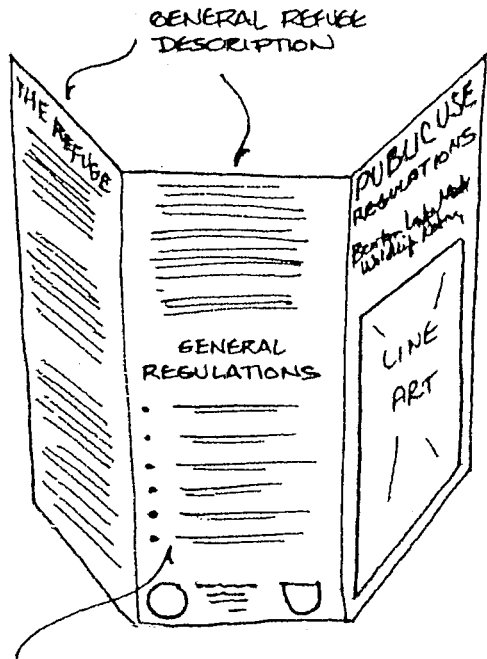
Degree of Impact

- None ○ No measurable impact
- Low ◐ Some disturbance, temporary displacement of individuals to adjacent habitat
- Medium ◑ Disturbance that displaces individuals for longer periods of time to more remote areas of refuge
- High ◒ Disturbance that displaces large numbers of certain species to remote areas of refuge and may cause individual mortality
- Intolerable ◓ Disturbance that measurably affects reproduction and use of refuge by the species as a whole. Incompatible with purpose for which refuge was established

NOTE:

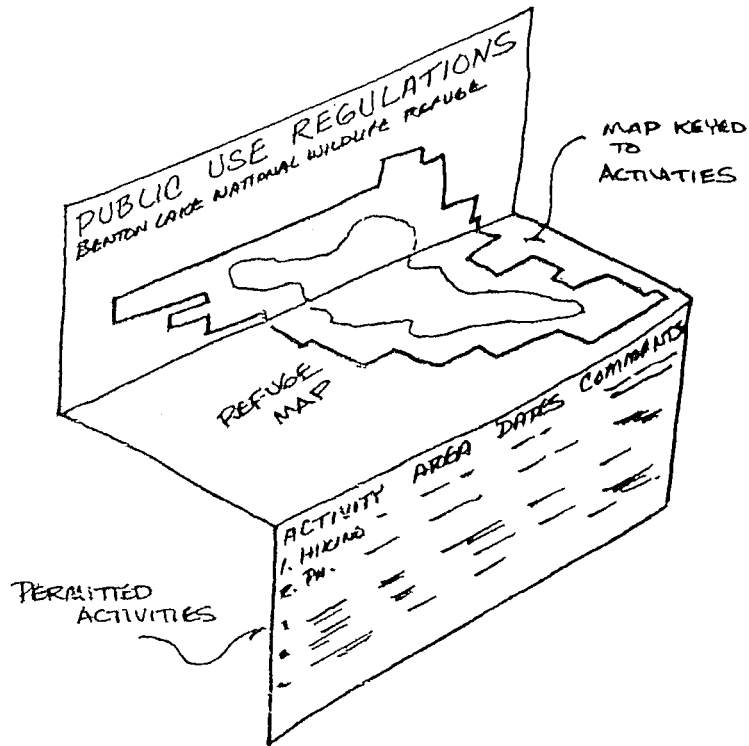
This review was based on refuge data for wildlife reproduction, specific areas used, observation of wildlife/visitor interaction over the years, and managers' experience here and on other refuges.

LEAFLET



GENERIC REFUGE REGS (CFR)

OUTSIDE PANELS



INSIDE PANELS

GENERAL INFORMATION

Print on light colored bond paper, one color ink, 8 1/2" x 11" standard paper, two fold.

This will be supplement to general, auto tour and hunting leaflets currently available.

Will be available at refuge kiosk, office and Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks office in Great Falls.

APPENDIX E

PUBLIC USE PERMIT

BENTON LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Name(s) _____

Address _____

is hereby permitted to enter _____
(area)

for the purpose of _____

During the period _____

Special Conditions _____

A copy of this permit will be displayed on the vehicle dash at all times. Permittee agrees to follow special conditions and all other applicable refuge regulations.

Permittee Signature	Date	Refuge Official	Date
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Note: Permits will be prenumbered and an issuance log maintained per 5 RM 17.11 (Refuge Manual)