

I. BACKGROUND

Introduction

This Environmental Assessment for the proposed Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge has been prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act. It discusses the purpose and need for a comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge, which is located in southeastern Martin County, 1.5 miles south of the town of Hobe Sound, Florida. It also analyzes the impacts that could be expected from each of the management proposals outlined in the plan. This analysis assists the Fish and Wildlife Service in determining if it will need to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) or a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) for the plan.

Purpose of and Need for the Action

As directed by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, comprehensive conservation plans are to be developed for all national wildlife refuges by 2012. The plan for Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge will identify the role of the refuge in supporting the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and provide guidance in refuge management and public use activities. The plan articulates the Service's management direction (goals, objectives, and strategies) for the next 15 years.

The plan is needed to:

- Articulate a vision statement framing the future management of the refuge;
- Provide refuge neighbors, visitors, the public, and government officials with an understanding of the Service's management actions within and around the refuge;
- Ensure that the refuge's management actions are consistent with the mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System;
- Provide long-term guidance and continuity for refuge management; and
- Provide a basis for development of annual budget requests for operational, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

The environmental assessment for the plan is needed in order to determine and evaluate a range of reasonable management alternatives for the refuge. Each alternative was generated with the potential to be fully developed into a final comprehensive conservation plan. The environmental assessment also predicts and evaluates the biological, physical, and socioeconomical effects of implementing each alternative. From this range of alternatives, the Fish and Wildlife Service's proposed management action is then identified, following public review and comment.

In accordance with the guidelines of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Service identified a number of issues, concerns, and needs through discussions with the public, agency managers, and professionals. From the issues and concerns, the

Service's planning team identified four alternatives, evaluated the effects of implementing each, and tentatively selected Alternative 2, Ecosystem Emphasis, as the preferred alternative. In the opinion of the Service and the planning team, Alternative 2 is the best approach to guide the refuge's management direction.

Decisions to be Made

Based on the environmental effects analysis of the proposed action, referred to as the "preferred alternative" or Alternative 2, Ecosystem Emphasis, along with public comments concerning the significance of these effects, the Fish and Wildlife Service must decide whether or not the proposed action would have a significant impact on the environment. If the proposed action is not significant, then a finding of no significant impact will be issued, followed by the preparation of a final comprehensive conservation plan. If the proposed action is significant, then an environmental impact statement will be prepared.

Issues and Concerns

For a description of the issues and concerns, refer to Chapter II, Planning Issues and Opportunities, in the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge.

Following the guidelines of the National Environmental Policy Act, issues and concerns were identified by holding a public scoping meeting and by obtaining written comments from the public. The planning team identified a range of reasonable alternatives, evaluated the consequences of each, and chose the preferred alternative which, in the opinion of the Service and the team, is the best approach to guide the refuge's direction. This planning effort and the refuge team's ongoing dialogue with various federal, state, and county agencies; interest groups; and individuals provided important elements in the synthesis of the proposed goals, objectives, and strategies found in the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge. Implementation of the plan will necessitate further coordination and cooperation with these entities.