

August 5, 1994

MEMORANDUM

To: Refuge Supervisor Schranck

From: Project Leader, Medicine Lake NWR

Subject: Charles M. Russell NWR Administrative Inspection, July 25-29, 1994

I enjoyed the opportunity to participate in the Administrative Inspection of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. A review and field tour of the headquarters and substations gave me a good overview of the refuge operation. I have included some of my observations below.

Buildings/Facilities

The buildings and facilities were well taken care of and adequate to meet the basic needs of the refuge. However there is room for improvement. The first time I visited the headquarters I had a hard time finding it. Considering I am a Service employee and knew generally where it was, it still took me a while to locate it. I would think it would be much more difficult for the visiting public to find. Better signing is required to provide ease of location.

The headquarters building in Lewistown is old and outdated. Some of the current staff have adequate office space, while some seem crammed into small corners. The restroom facilities are very small and will never meet the requirements of handicap accessibility without major rehabilitation of the entire building. The visitor reception area has some nice displays but even this is limited to space. It would seem that the Service needs to design a new building to replace the current structure. It should include adequate office and storage space for the present and future staff, and a well designed visitor contact area with exhibits that reflect the colorful history of the area, and the current wildlife programs. The refuge is the largest, and most diverse in Region 6 and receives a lot of visitation during the year considering it is on a major travel route, Highway 200. It would seem we should strive to provide a good office setting for the staff to be able to function properly, and a quality visitor area to provide the public with good initial contact, descriptive displays, and a feeling of the professional wildlife work that is conducted at the station. When I compare the headquarters building with smaller stations in and outside our Region, the current CMR building comes up short.

The Lewistown shop facility is adequate and seems to function for the basic maintenance needs of the station. With only one maintenance worker it is surprising to me that all the stations needs can be addressed. Considering the substations told me they send vehicles/equipment in to Lewistown for repairs, I am surprised they are able to keep up with the mechanical problems that are a fact of life at all stations.

The shop equipment could use some upgrading which would be related to what is accomplished there (ie. vehicle/equipment overhauls, wood construction, etc.).

The Fort Peck substation had an adequate office with old but functional furnishings which could be upgraded depending on need and visitor use. Basically there was a limited visitor contact area and poor signing directing the public to the building. Perhaps this is purposeful due to limited staff available to deal with the public. However with the town of Fort Peck drawing recreationalists in to utilize the reservoir it would seem a good opportunity to get the Service message out to them.

The shop facility and equipment seemed fully functional for the stations needs.

I did not have the opportunity to review the Sand Creek Substation, but from past experience it seems to have the best facilities and is better staffed. This, I am told, is due to the higher public use at that portion of the refuge.

The Jordon Substation had the poorest facilities. This is because it has been a satellite of the Fort Peck Substation. Over the years it has evolved into a independent substation of its own. The office is cramped and not conducive to visitor contact, and I would assume they get very little visitation. The shop is very minimal and adequate for only minor repairs. I saw very few shop equipment and tools and was informed that most of that work is accomplished at the Lewistown office.

Most of the visitor information was provided by kiosks throughout the refuge. They are helpful and are probably the only method available to such a large refuge with limited staff. Some good information and directional signs are provided and I would think a good deal of money went into these in the recent past. Many of the signs are weathered and in need of repair or replacement, this is most obvious at the Sand Creek Substation. The direction numbered road signs similar to what the Forest Service/BLM use, are located throughout the refuge interior roads are very helpful when used in consort with the refuge map.

Considering the miles of interior roads the refuge has, they were in good condition. The maintenance of these must take considerable time and money.

Vehicles/Equipment

The vehicle fleet seemed to be in excellent shape. Most of what I saw were newer vehicles in good condition. What equipment I saw was in good shape and seemed adequate for most needs. I was only able to speak with Clayton Christianson, and did not specifically talk about the refuge equipment, so I am not aware of specific needs that may currently exist.

✓ Habitat

I was informed that this was a good precipitation year and the grasslands seemed to bare that out. Most of the upland vegetation I saw was in good condition. What most impressed me was the substantial acreage of native grasslands with an absence of exotic grasses, except near disturbed sites such as road edges. It is great that such a large area has been maintained in the native condition. Other grasslands had a big Spring response from yellow blossom sweet clover which dominated several areas. Its coverage blocked the view of many locations that are normally sparsely vegetated, and gave the impression of good cover in areas that usually have little.

The Missouri River shoreline habitat on the western end of the refuge was beautiful. The area has been allowed to revert to natural ecological processes which has resulted in good stands of woody vegetation at various stages of succession. One gets the feeling that this is what the Lewis and Clark expedition would have viewed. However, most riverine, coulee and draw habitat was in very poor condition. Over grazing in these areas by cattle have reduced or eliminated typical vegetative cover leaving most open to water erosion and a loss of wildlife habitat. A few areas where exclosures have been constructed in recent years shows a fairly quick response and re-vegetation of the area in the absence of cattle. As I saw time and time again, the areas where water is available, the cattle congregate and denude the vegetation. These are not only the riverine areas, but wetlands and water impoundments as well. In a year, such as we are experiencing this year, that had good Spring moisture, the uplands look good. But this is not the true picture. The grasslands in past years have been grazed hard, removing most standing vegetation. With a good water year more vegetation is produced and the cattle do not need to move as much into the uplands, because the riverine habitat provides good forage. The problem is that area gets over grazed.

Wildlife

- ✓ The refuge is a very complex system with a wide array of wildlife which I had the opportunity in a four day period to see only a small part. The nesting of T & E species such as piping plover and least tern was interesting. The importance of islands and graveled beaches on Fort Peck Reservoir to these species is well documented and it seems good coordination with COE is helping to maintain as much habitat as possible. It was mentioned that livestock were using beaches that piping plovers had nested on. It is imperative to protect these nesting locations from livestock prior to the nesting season. If the birds do not choose a beach area, then livestock could utilize it. If plovers do nest on the beach then the livestock should be kept out of the area until the young reach flight stage and disperse, usually by August.
- ✓ The re-introduction effort for the black-footed ferret is commendable and requires a lot of time and money from the station. Although money has filtered down to from outside grants, they don't seem to be getting their fair share. With everything the station is doing for T & E species it would seem appropriate that they also receive endangered species funding from the Service. This has not taken place, with Ecological Services utilizing most of the funds. This seems to always be the case when a refuge is involved in endangered species management. With our new ecosystem management and all players working together I hope it is time to redistribute those dollars to refuges where this work is being accomplished, and not be required to fund most of the program from refuge O & M.

The abundance of grassland passerines and neotropical species in wooded areas is probably substantial. However with so much time spent monitoring livestock little information on these species exists for the refuge.

Big game populations seem healthy, I observed several mule deer, white-tailed deer, and antelope. Although I did not view elk I was told a good population exists.

Personnel

The staff I talked with seemed highly professional and dedicated to the job. It was obvious that there are not enough people to handle everything that goes on at the refuge and people are spread thin. Adding to the fact that they are six FTE's below their approved full staff, it makes the problems worse.

- ✓ Much of the management staff is delegated to a overseer position. A majority of their time is spent checking cattle to make sure they are in the right allotment, that over stocking is not taking place, maintaining and erecting fences to keep livestock confined on hundreds of thousands of acres, much of it with limited accessibility. Consequently I found several staff members frustrated with their jobs and their inability to make substantial change for the betterment of wildlife.

- ✓ On a refuge where livestock grazing is a dominant activity and working with permittees is a daily occurrence, it is not surprising that the professional staff begins to communicate in cattlemen terms. In my discussions with most staff members I heard terms such as rangeland, allotments, forage assessments and more. The more the staff veils their daily communication in cattlemen terms, the more it becomes ingrained in the refuge. A concerted effort to use biological terms when communicating between themselves and other professionals will align them more closely to the biological component of the refuge, rather than the livestock. Biological terms such as upland, habitat units, and grassland determinations could be used to replace the aforementioned terms and provide the same meaning. Certainly the cattleman terms should be used when communicating with permittees so they are all talking on the same plane. But if the staff wants to begin getting away from the cattle refuge and move more to the biological refuge, then this is a place to start.

Administration

The big problem on the refuge is cattle. This is not new to anyone, yet it is a continuing problem that has gotten a little better over the years, but is far from being under control. Due to unprecedented political intervention, a EIS that was written in the mid 1980s, and a court decision rendered in 1990, the refuge is handcuffed by what they can do to manage the refuge for wildlife. Although the decisions allowed a grazing reduction of 33%, it did not provide the necessary freedom for the refuge managers to adequately manage the refuge for wildlife. Currently nearly all the refuge is being grazed.

I certainly do not know all of the politics, behind door deals, and decisions that have transpired over the years concerning cattle grazing on the refuge, so I look at the situation as a naive outsider. But, if I view this refuge, as I would any other in the National Wildlife Refuge System, the following observations are made.

The refuge establishing authority basically says: The refuge is established primarily for a maximum population of 400,000 sharp-tailed grouse and 1,500 antelope. Secondary is a balanced population of non-predatory species that does not interfere with the primary species. Whatever forage that is left, after the two categories of wildlife have utilized it, is available to livestock grazing.

My observations led me to believe that the livestock permittees have too much control of the refuge and dictate much of its management (if it can be called that). Nearly all the refuge is broken down into "allotments" where the permittee is allowed to graze at a specific AUM rate. Most of the allotments are large and have few restrictions on them that are enforced, with the exception of the AUM number and dates of grazing. Allowing hundreds of cattle into a large area results in the animals consuming their vegetation of choice, at the best sites. These are often the riverine areas which get over grazed. The permittee gets no incentive to be a good operator and little fear of losing grazing rights, so many of the allotments are over grazed which reduces wildlife values. Until just recently the permittees were

allowed to sell their allotments to someone else, pocketing the profit. Or sublease to another livestock operator at a price higher than the refuge can charge, again making a profit off of the refuge. I was told of an instance where a "new" permittee would walk in the office and attempt to instruct the refuge staff on how he was going to graze the allotment he just purchased! Somewhere we lost control, if we ever had control.

The whole issue of grazing on CMR needs to be re-addressed if the refuge is to be properly managed under its establishing authority. Under the various laws that govern the National Wildlife Refuge System is the basic premise that the refuge must be managed for its primary purposes, then other activities may be allowed as long as they do not interfere with that primary purpose. Presently that is not the case at CMR. Cattle grazing seems to dictate how other management will be applied. It is not up to the refuge staff to prove livestock grazing is having a detrimental effect, but the secondary user must show his activity has no negative affect on the primary purpose.

✓ The Service is being asked to show that there is money available to conduct various activities on refuges, if not, the activity should be terminated. From what I saw a substantial amount of CMRs budget is spent specifically on livestock grazing. When most of the staff time is concerned with trespass grazing, determining cattle numbers, developing habitat management plans for each allotment, all these activities are driven by the grazing activity. If a substantial portion of the refuge budget must be used to regulate cattle grazing, it is hard to justify its continuation when basic wildlife monitoring cannot be accomplished because of limited funds!

It is true that livestock grazing is specifically addressed in the establishing authority, and some form of grazing will probably always be allowed. But any grazing should show positive wildlife benefits from the activity, or the refuge staff must demonstrate that all available wildlife habitat is currently being used to provide a balanced non-predatory population and excess forage is available for livestock consumption. It does not indicate that grazing is the driving force behind all other management as things operate now.

The decisions, agreements, and alterations made by previous administrations are not set in stone and should no longer be the driving force behind CMR wildlife management. The recent settlement of the lawsuit between the Audubon Society and other litigants with the Service mandated us to address each refuge activity and determine if it is compatible with the primary refuge purpose. Albeit short time frames do not allow a lot of time to address the issue as it should be addressed. However, I feel it would be improper to indicate that CMR is functioning under a compatible activity with the current grazing program. Certainly anyone who objectively reviewed the basis for refuge management of CMR would question whether the refuge is being properly managed in regards to livestock grazing. The opportunity exists to make changes now! The refuge staff has not

gone out and asked for a review of how they have to operate under the EIS and other decisions. They are being told by our leadership to review all activities, following specific guidelines, to determine if they are managing the refuge properly. It seems wholly improper to have a refuge like Monte Vista NWR closely scrutinized for their grazing practices, which the manager is attempting to use as a management tool, and have CMR ignored in this process, when by all accounts of its own staff, the livestock grazing is having detrimental effects on the habitat and the wildlife that use it.

Touring the refuge for four days only gave me a cursory view of this vast refuge treasure. My comments consequently are limited to the little I was able to see. Any in depth review of refuge operations would take weeks, and we never seem to have that time to spare. I was very impressed with the refuge and came away with a better understanding of the "baggage" the staff has to carry in order to operate. I respect the hard work they have done to make small gains toward getting control of the refuge. I hope something more substantial can be done to assist them, but I realize it will be difficult and perhaps impossible. I appreciate the opportunity of being involved in the inspection and the courtesy given by the staff.