U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Wapato Lake

Land Protection Planning Study

Planning Update 1, October 2001

Greetings

This is the first in a series of Planning Updates you will be receiving from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding a study of the fish, wildlife and plant habitats in your community. Through these Updates, we share information with you and seek your involvement in our study. Your input is very important. It helps us gather information and identify issues affecting you, your community, and the natural resources of Wapato Lake. If you do not wish to receive the Updates please let us know through one of the points of contact listed on page 7.

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Wapato Lake. Photo USFWS

Land Protection Planning Study Kickoff

The Wapato Lake area is a special place. Residents enjoy the serene country landscape, and the tranquil water and surrounding plant life are welcoming to many species of fish and wildlife. The need to protect the fish, wildlife, and plant resources in and around Wapato Lake has been identified by a group of local landowners. Oregon ash habitat and scrub-shrub habitat–small trees and bushes less than 20 feet in height that grow in scrub-shrub wetlands–were historically present at Wapato Lake. Protecting and restoring these habitats is a high priority not only because of their former historical status but also because of their importance to biological diversity on a landscape scale. Biological diversity is indicated by the number of different species of plants and animals interacting in a given area. This Planning Update kicks off our study of a proposal to protect those resources through the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). The Service is proceeding with the study through our land protection planning process to determine if we can help accomplish protection and restoration of these resources and provide high quality wildlife-dependent public uses through the NWRS.

Notice of Open House

You are invited to help us identify issues, ask questions, and voice concerns about the Wapato Lake Land Protection Planning Study. See details on page 2.

Date/Time: Wednesday, November 7, 2001 at 7:00 pm
Location: Gaston High School Library
306 Park Street, Gaston, Oregon

Details:
Wapato Lake Land Protection Planning Study
Open House

To learn more about the planning process come to our Open House. You are invited to attend an Open House on November 7, 2001, to learn about the Service's Wapato Lake Land Protection Planning Study. This meeting will provide you with an opportunity to meet representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, learn about the National Wildlife Refuge System, and get involved in the planning process in its earliest stage. You can ask questions, get answers and comment on the issues and scope of the study in an informal setting. Service staff will be available to discuss the planning process, the land acquisition program, and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Your comments and questions will be considered during preparation of the planning documents.

What Area Is the Service Studying?

The Service has defined an area to study of approximately 6,400 acres located east of the town of Gaston and south of the town of Forest Grove. A map of the study area is on page 3. The study area is in the upper Tualatin River Watershed and encompasses the historic Wapato Lake bed, Tualatin River Floodplain, and some surrounding upland. It is primarily located in Washington County with the southern portion of the study area extending into Yamhill County. This area was identified because of its rich wildlife values and high potential for restoring rare native habitats.

What Fish and Wildlife Species and Habitats Are Found in the Study Area?

Photo © Ducks Unlimited Canada

The Wapato Lake study area includes patches of remnant rare native habitat such as scrub-shrub wetlands, Oregon ash riparian hardwood forests, and migratory bird habitat especially for wintering waterfowl. The Oregon ash forests flood in fall and winter providing foraging and roosting winter habitat for large numbers of tundra swan (800 recorded December 1987), mallard, pintail, canvasback, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup, and several varieties of Canada geese. Six subspecies of Canada geese found in western Oregon have been recorded at Wapato Lake, including western, dusky, lesser, Taverner's,

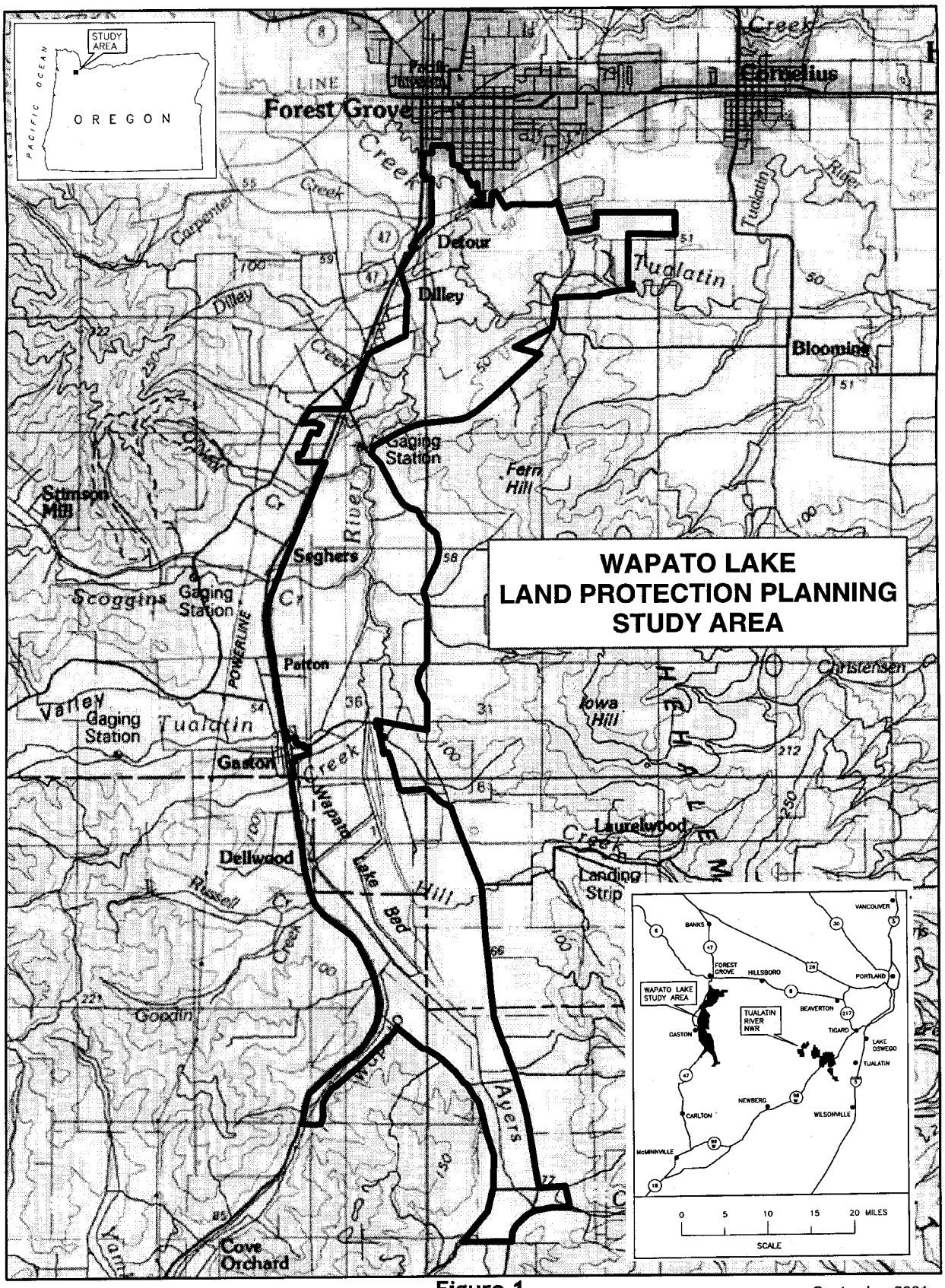

Figure 1

September 2001

cackling, and Aleutian. A Chagulak Island Aleutian Canada goose was sighted in March 1989, indicating this population may migrate through the area upon leaving their wintering grounds in California's San Joaquin Valley. In addition, an Aleutian Canada goose captured on Buldir Island in Alaska was sighted at Wapato Lake in January 1989. White-fronted geese have also been documented using the historic Wapato Lake Basin.

Numerous species of shorebirds and other marsh birds use the basin for foraging and resting during spring and fall migration. Riparian areas and wet deciduous swales of mixed hardwood species, as well as mixed deciduous/coniferous forest, provide breeding habitat for neotropical bird species. Raptors and other bird of prey species observed in the area include red-tailed hawk, northern harrier, American kestrel, long-eared owl, and turkey vulture. Mammal signs indicate black-tailed deer, coyote, skunk, and numerous species of small rodents use the area.

The main stem and upper tributaries of the Tualatin River historically provided important spawning, passage, and rearing habitat for anadromous fish. Fish species federally listed as threatened that may be found in the watershed include both upper Willamette River steelhead and Chinook salmon. Restoring meandering river channels and riparian habitat along streambanks and the Tualatin River, as well as restoring floodplain wetlands, will improve habitat quality and enhance fish migration in the Tualatin River system.

Other wildlife species, either federally listed or species of management concern known or likely to frequent the study area, include peregrine falcon, American bald eagle (threatened), Aleutian Canada goose, dusky Canada goose, tundra swan, northern red-legged frog, and the western pond turtle. Restoration efforts would enhance population recovery efforts for all of these species.

Protection and restoration of the habitats mentioned above would contribute greatly to the efforts across the Tualatin River Basin to improve watershed health and function.

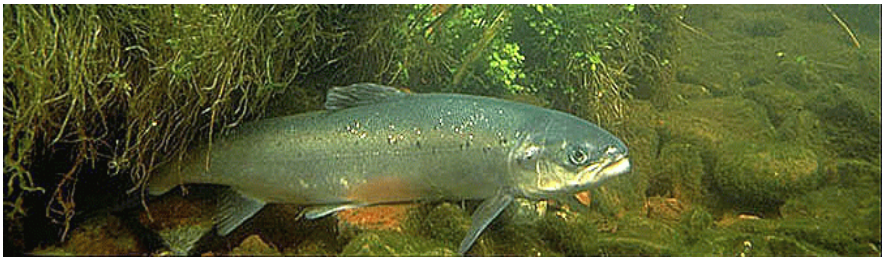

Photo USFWS

Why Do These Habitats Need Protection?

Wapato Lake was created from yearly flood waters of the Tualatin River. Historically, the river crested its banks during seasonal flooding periods filling the Wapato Basin. The basin held water as flooding receded. The soils in the Wapato Lake Basin contain an organic peat substrate that once supported a scrub-shrub wetland plant community hosting a variety of species. Upper marsh areas were comprised of dense stands of seasonally flooded herbaceous plants dominated by wapato (*Sagittaria latifolia).* Oregon ash riparian hardwood forests historically occupied flood plains adjacent to streams and the Tualatin River. This habitat has been identified as among the rarest plant communities. Protection is needed because of its former historical status and range of importance for promoting biological diversity on a landscape scale in the Willamette Valley.

In the mid 1930's, the Wapato Lake Improvement District was formed and the area was drained for agricultural crops, with water from the Tualatin River used for irrigation. Currently, most of the study area has been ditched, diked, and drained with tiles to convert and maintain land use as agricultural. Crops include winter wheat, onions, corn, grass, and strawberries. Small orchards are present on drier slopes. Remnant communities of seasonal emergent wetland, forested wetland, and riparian forest can also be found with considerable biological diversity in native fauna and flora species. Existing habitat presently consists of farmed wetland, small marsh areas and ponds, riparian areas along ditches, and intermittent streams supporting growth of Oregon ash, Oregon white oak, willow, wet deciduous woodland swales, and small stands of mixed deciduous/coniferous forest. Through the land protection planning process the Service will determine whether these lands could be protected under the National Wildlife Refuge System.

What is the National Wildlife Refuge System?

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest and most diverse collection of public lands set aside specifically for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants. More than 530 refuges have been established from the Arctic Ocean to the South Pacific, from Maine to the Caribbean. This system of lands encompasses more than 93 million acres of land and water and at least one national wildlife refuge can be found in every state.

Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System

The mission of the System 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.

What is the Land Protection Planning Process?

The Service initiates the land protection planning process to study habitat protection proposals. Proposals must demonstrate that adding habitat or lands to the National Wildlife Refuge System is the best way to achieve protection. The process is then carried out as follows.

- The planning process integrates three components–detailed study and planning, extensive public involvement, and environmental compliance.
- The documentation that evolves from the process includes an environmental compliance document, a land protection plan and a conceptual management plan.
- These draft documents are provided to the public for review and comment to ensure the interested public is informed about Service proposals. Comments are considered in final documents.
- Based on the refuge boundary alternatives presented in the final documents Service decision-makers choose an appropriate course of action. The alternatives can range from no action to including all or part of the study area lands within a refuge boundary.
- If part or all of the lands are approved for inclusion, a refuge boundary is established and the planning process is complete.

Wapato Lake
Land Protection Planning Study Schedule

Planning Step	Target Date
Study Kickoff, Issue Identification, Information Gathering, Begin Scoping	October 2001
Public Open House at the Gaston High School Library	November 7, 2001
Review of Public Comments Begins. Your Issues and Comments Should be Sent by This Date	November 30, 2001
Planning Documents Available for Public Review and Comment	April 2002
Public Comments on Planning Documents Due	May 2002
Issue Notice of Decision	June 2002

Dates are tentative and can change as the study progresses.

A refuge boundary defines an area where the Service can acquire land or interest in land. It is Service policy to acquire land only from landowners who are willing sellers. Acquisitions are subject to funding availability.

Your participation is encouraged throughout the process. We would like to meet with you, listen to your ideas, and learn about your issues. The information gathering or scoping phase of this project begins with this kickoff. It is a good time for you to get involved early in the process.

How Do I Contact the Service or Provide Comments?

We would love to hear your ideas and discuss them at the Open House scheduled for November 7. If you cannot attend, but still wish to share your ideas, concerns, and questions, please send them by November 30, 2001, for consideration during the development of the planning documents. Please send your written comments to Dave Bassler, Natural Resource Specialist . . .

. . . via mail: Dave Bassler, Natural Resource Specialist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Division of Refuge Planning
911 NE 11th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97232-4181

. . . via fax: (503) 231-6161

. . . or via e-mail: FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov
(Please refer to "Wapato Lake" in the subject line.)

Dave can also provide information on the planning process. Call him at (503) 231-6840, if you have any questions.

For Information on the National Wildlife Refuge System Contact:

Ralph Webber
Project Leader
Tualatin River
National Wildlife Refuge
16507 SW Roy Rogers Rd
Sherwood, Oregon 97140

Phone: (503) 590-5811
Fax: (503) 590-6702

U.S. Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
Attn: NWRS/RPL
911 NE 11th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97232-4181

Address correction requested