



New Chapter Begins for Malheur National Wildlife Refuge's Conservation Planning

A groundbreaking collaborative conservation planning process gets underway

January 2025, by James Williams



Planning for the Future

The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge is embarking on a next phase of collaborative conservation planning and is inviting the community to help shape its future management. At the heart of this new phase is readdressing the existing [Comprehensive Conservation Plan](#), a strategic document that will continue to guide the refuge's management for the next 15 years. The CCP will serve multiple critical purposes: ensuring wildlife and habitat protection, promoting public engagement, and providing clear, transparent guidance for refuge management decisions.

Pictured: A short eared owl, photograph by Kay Steele.

Malheur's wetlands and diverse habitats are crucial for so many. For migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway, the refuge serves as a crucial breeding, nesting, and resting area for species like the greater sandhill crane, white-faced ibis, and bobolink. The refuge also encompasses significant cultural and historical landmarks, including the ancestral lands of the Burns Paiute Tribe and the former cattle empires of Peter French and the Hanley family, which later became key components of the refuge's landscape. Today, many area families hold deep connections to this land which, aside from being situated at the county's geographical and historical core, has significantly contributed to the county's agricultural economy.



Core Principles and Purpose

The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) represents more than just another bureaucratic planning process. At its core, the CCP embeds key principles: an ongoing collaborative approach built on partnerships, a commitment to science-based adaptive management, and a focus on wildlife, ecology and aquatic ecosystem health that benefits the entire landscape – from waterways to wetlands and upland habitats. This comprehensive approach ensures the long-term sustainability of both the refuge and the larger Harney Basin's wildlife, habitats, and human communities.

Building on Past Success

[The refuge's existing CCP](#), completed in 2012, marked a watershed moment in federal land management. The plan emerged from an unprecedented effort that brought together community members, conservation organizations, local government agencies, and refuge staff, becoming the most collaborative conservation planning process ever completed across the National Wildlife Refuge System.

A New Collaborative Approach

This new approach seeks to build on the success of the prior CCP by maintaining the same principles of transparency and collaboration. Because the current CCP brought together so many conservation groups, community members, as well as federal and local agencies, like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and refuge staff, it improved relationships between the refuge and various individuals and organizations all while addressing important issues like the health of the wetlands and wildlife habitat.

According to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Manager Jess Wenick, the idea this time around is similar: “To use the same open and collaborative approach that made the first CCP successful. This means involving the community and partners in discussions and planning decisions to ensure everyone has a voice in shaping the future of the refuge.”

Working Together for Conservation

The process will engage participants through the CCP Collaborative Group. “The CCP Collaborative Group includes a variety of participants and is open to all,” Wenick explains. “We will be discussing issues and exploring possible paths forward, including strategies and tools that may aid in reaching objectives that the group will help formulate.”

And the starting point? Wenick says it’s addressing invasive species like reed canary grass, smooth brome and hybrid cattail. “Those invasive species threats are what have us really concerned,” Wenick says. “Trying to get at the foundation of these problems – the core – it’s going to require a different general refuge management approach.”



Expert Support and Implementation

A newly formed “Biodiversity Brigade,” consisting of refuge staff and experts, will focus on three critical areas: the southern Blitzen Valley, Diamond Lane to Malheur Lake, and Malheur Lake itself. According to Wenick, they will “participate in the public discussions and explore how concepts might be translated to on-the-ground management.” Such management will likely address wildlife and aquatic benefits and impacts.

Pictured: A Greater Sandhill Crane and her chick in Refuge meadow habitat, photograph by Kay Steele.

But one of the primary goals for the initial meeting, Wenick says, is to ask the gathered group, “Why is [Malheur National Wildlife Refuge] important to you? Why is it worth your valuable time to sit here with us?”

Beyond Standard Environmental Review

While incorporating standard environmental review requirements, the CCP process goes further in its scope and specificity. Wenick explains, “NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act] is a broader federal law focused on environmental assessments for various projects, while a CCP is a specific management plan for Malheur National Wildlife Refuge that outlines long-term conservation strategies.”

Community Participation and Impact

Through public meetings, (the first scheduled for Wednesday, January 29, 9am-3pm at the Harney County Chamber of Commerce) local residents and all interested participants will offer valuable perspectives drawn from their knowledge and experience. Such diverse input helps ensure different concerns are taken into account during the planning process, building trust through open discussions and collaborative problem-solving. A dedicated coordinating committee will help guide the process.

Josey Wilson, High Desert Partnership's Harney Basin Ecological Coordinator, is excited to sit down with her neighbors and hear their ideas and, like Wenick, sees great benefit to doing so.

"They're out there in the field every single day – ranchers, farmers – and they know the ins and outs of what's going on in the refuge because they see it every day," Wilson notes. From waterways to plant communities to invasives, it's those who are on the ground who are often the most knowledgeable about the refuge. "And so it's very important to have their input as well as Tribal members with the long history and knowledge of the refuge, local residents and conservation groups so we can know how to manage this land for the good of everyone. The diverse perspectives and expertise from all our partners help us make better decisions for the refuge's future." Wilson says.

Getting Involved

The process begins with a public meeting on January 29, 2025 from 9am - 3pm at the Harney County Chamber of Commerce in Burns, with both in-person and virtual participation options. Anyone wanting to attend is welcome to participate for the full meeting or for whatever window of time works. Subsequent meetings will be held approximately every other month, with about nine gatherings planned over 18 months. High Desert Partnership's event calendar is a good source for meeting information, <https://highdesertpartnership.org/events-resources/event-calendar.html>.

Looking Forward

The refuge aims to have a completed draft of the CCP by 2027. To support public engagement throughout the process, the refuge will maintain a dedicated website section with regular updates, available before the January meeting. For those interested in participating in this historic process, contact Josey Wilson with the High Desert Partnership at josey@highdesertpartnership.org, with any questions, to be added to the participant list and receive updates about this planning process. You can also contact Jess Wenick, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Manager at jess_wenick@fws.gov.

Through this collaborative approach, the refuge seeks to ensure its management strategies reflect the diverse needs of both the wildlife and the community while addressing emerging challenges for the next generation. The success of the previous CCP demonstrates what's possible when community members come together to shape the future of this remarkable landscape.

"We want the community to know they're welcome," Wilson adds. "We're looking forward to collaborating and hearing their opinions. We're all in this together."

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan Collaborative.

