

Draft Environmental Assessment

Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge New Bunkhouse

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Prepared by Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge

U.S. Department of Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
Region 6 (Mountain Prairie Region)
Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge
Brigham City, Utah

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

National Wildlife Refuges are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the purposes of an individual refuge, federal laws and executive orders, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) policy and international treaties. Relevant guidance includes, but is not limited to, the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 United States Code [U.S.C.] 668dd et seq.), the Refuge Recreation act of 1962 and selected portions of the Code of Federal Regulations and the Service manual.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, as outlined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd), 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.”

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 directs the Secretary of the Department of the Interior to ensure that refuges are fulfilling the intended mission of the refuge system and the purposes of individual refuges (16 U.S.C. 668dd(5)(a)(3)(A-M)).

Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge (Refuge) was established in 1928 by a Presidential Proclamation and Public Law 304 of the 70th Congress, and the legislative purpose for the refuge is as follows:

1. As "a suitable refuge and feeding, and breeding grounds for migratory wild fowl." (Bear River Migratory Bird Act, April 23, 1928, P.L. 70-304)
2. "For the establishment and maintenance of migratory waterfowl refuges." (Utah Code Annotated 23-21-6(1))

1.2 Proposed Action

The Service is proposing to design and build a new bunkhouse for seasonal and temporary employees.

This proposed action is an initial proposal and may evolve during the development of alternatives, the impact analysis and public involvement. This Environmental Assessment (EA) may determine that there are other, better or less impactful ways to address the purpose and need and the proposed action and alternatives may change during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process as the agency refines its

proposal and gathers feedback from the public, federally recognized Tribes and Tribal entities and other agencies or organizations. Therefore, the final action may be different from the originally identified preferred alternative and will be finalized at the conclusion of the public comment period after the incorporation of substantive comments. A decision to implement a proposed action will not be made until the environmental review process is complete.

1.3 Purpose and Need for Action

The Refuge has limited staffing to complete various management goals and objectives. To offset shortages in staffing, the Refuge offers housing opportunities for residential volunteers and interns. The Refuge partners with youth organizations to provide career development opportunities at the Refuge, while at the same time providing much needed assistance to the Refuge. These organizations include the Hispanic Access Foundation and Americorps - American Conservation Experience. A requirement of youth organizations is to offer housing as the interns receive a stipend that is often not enough to rent a place on their own.

Currently, there is a three-bedroom, 1,800-square-foot double-wide mobile home, on the Refuge that serves as the Refuge's bunkhouse. This mobile home came with the property when purchased. The mobile home sits on 2.5 acres of land, most of which is wetlands, that contains a small garage and a concrete pad for residential volunteers with their own recreational vehicle. A 2021 Comprehensive Condition Assessment (USFWS 2021) states that the mobile home does not contain adequate safety provisions, such as fire sprinklers, proper emergency egress, and multiple other safety issues. There are also deficiencies related to accessibility standards in accordance with the American with Disability Act (ADA) issues. Furthermore, the report states that the "asset has reached its life expectancy" and replacement is recommended.

The purpose of the proposed action is to provide safe place housing for interns, volunteers, seasonal employees, and others supporting the Refuge. Due to the condition of the existing Refuge bunkhouse and the high cost of housing, a new temporary housing solution is needed to meet the mission of the Service and the Refuge. Funding for this project will come from the Great American Outdoor Act, which passed in 2020. This Act aims to provide major investments in federal infrastructure to address deferred maintenance needs on public lands.

Chapter 2: Involvement, Coordination and Consultation

2.1 Public Involvement

This draft EA is available for public review and comment for 15 days. Members of the public have been notified of the availability of the draft documents via Facebook, a news release and posted on the Refuge website. The draft document will be made available at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge Visitor Center at 2155 Forest Street, Brigham City, Utah, via email bearriver@fws.gov and can be downloaded from the Refuge website at <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/bear-river-migratory-bird>. Contact the Refuge for access to the document in an alternative format. Comments may be submitted in writing via the email address provided above or by mail. Any comments, concerns, suggestions or other feedback will be incorporated into the final EA if a substantive response is required.

Before including your address, phone number, email address or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

2.2 Coordination

The Northwest Band of the Shoshone have been consulted via letters, email and in-person conversations on all planning efforts for the Refuge, including the Habitat Management Plan and Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Coordination with the Brigham City Council has also occurred, and this draft EA will be shared with them for comment.

Chapter 3: Alternatives

3.1 Alternatives

Alternative A - No New Bunkhouse- No Action Alternative

In this alternative, the Refuge would not build a new bunkhouse. The existing bunkhouse, or mobile home, would continue to be used by interns, volunteers, seasonal employees and visiting Service staff. Currently, the existing bunkhouse is not accessible per ADA guidelines, has no safe egress from the house in the event of a fire, has no fire sprinklers, and multiple other safety issues identified in a Comprehensive Condition Assessment. There are ongoing deferred maintenance needs and efforts to mitigate these needs, and safety issues would be addressed as funding and capacity allows.

Alternative B - Construct New Bunkhouse/New Location Preferred Alternative

This alternative involves demolition of the existing bunkhouse and building a new bunkhouse in a new location to accommodate interns, volunteers, seasonal employees and visiting Service staff to address the high cost of housing challenge along the Wasatch Front in Northern Utah. This preferred option entails constructing a new bunkhouse adjacent to existing Refuge infrastructure.

The new bunkhouse would be approximately 2,100 square feet and contain four bedrooms, two bathrooms, kitchen, dining room, living room, and a mud room accessible from a backdoor entrance, and a front entrance. Utilities would be added by utilizing an existing power pole that serves the neighboring Refuge infrastructure or equipment barn. Access to the bunkhouse would be via the same road as the Refuge barn that is next door; however, a gravel driveway would need to be constructed leading off the road to the house itself. Essential safety and ADA accessibility features, such as an entry ramp and accessible bathroom, would also be incorporated into the design. Current residents would continue residing in the existing bunkhouse until the new one is ready. Upon completion, these residents would transition to the new bunkhouse, leading to the demolition of the existing bunkhouse.

Alternatives Considered But Dismissed From Further Analysis

Construct New Bunkhouse/Existing Bunkhouse Location

The option of building a new bunkhouse at the site of the current bunkhouse was considered; however, the Service decided against pursuing this alternative further. The existing bunkhouse currently houses 2-3 individuals and relocating them during construction would pose significant challenges. Unfortunately, due to the limited availability and high cost of rentals in the local community, finding alternative housing arrangements for them is not feasible. Such a situation would impose hardship on the interns and the Refuge, as local renting is not viable.

Chapter 4: Affected Environment and Environmental

Consequences

The impact analysis evaluates a variety of criteria, as defined below, to describe the context and intensity of impacts on affected resources. Cumulative effects: effects on the environment resulting from the incremental effects of the action when added to other past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions regardless of what agency (e.g., federal or non-federal) or person undertakes the action (40 CFR 1508.1(g))

- Direct effects: caused by the action and occur at the same time and place (40 CFR 1508.1(g))

- Indirect effects: incidentally caused by the action and are often later in time or farther in distance but are still reasonably foreseeable (40 CFR 1508.1(g))
- Short-term effects: occurring in or relating to a relatively short period of time (40 CFR 1501.3)
- Long-term effects: occurring in or relating to a relatively long period of time (40 CFR 1501.3).

The following resources were not considered for further analysis as any impact to these resources will be negligible or unlikely to occur, or the affected environment does not contain the resource:

- Candidate, threatened, endangered, or special status species (none of these species exist in the proposed project area) - There are no listed species within the Refuge.
- Climate change
- Special land status designation - There is no special land status designation for the project area.
- Wetland/floodplains - The project area is uplands and contains no wetlands. Best management practices will be in place to ensure the project does not impact any wetlands in the area outside of the project footprint.
- Visitor Use - The project area has been and will continue to be closed to visitors.
- Aesthetic/viewsheds - The project area is a fallow upland with neighbors on both side and a road. There will be minor blocking of the view of the upland from the road but extremely unlikely to occur as people travel 45+ mph past this area in a vehicle.
- Socioeconomics/Local economy - Construction will provide a small temporary boost to the local economy. The bunkhouse provides temporary housing for no more than four people; thus, impacts to the economy is negligible.
- Geology/Soils, Air quality, Water Resources - There are no water resources that will be impacted. Geology/soils are consistent with fallow land with poor soils that do not support growth of any native vegetation. Air quality in the project area is based on the overall quality of the Great Salt Lake area and the inversions that are experienced in the summertime. The proposed project will not impact the air quality either positively or negatively.
- Cultural Resource/Archaeological Resources - There are no cultural or archaeological resource on the project area.
- Land Use - Due to existing housing and other infrastructure in the area, land use would remain the same.

4.1 General Description of Affected Environmental Applicable to All Affected Resources

The Refuge is located in Northern Utah as part of the Bear River Watershed and the Great Salt Lake Ecosystem. Consisting of almost 80,000 acres, the Refuge is made up of managed wetlands and uplands. Additionally, the Refuge has various infrastructure consisting of a Visitor Center, equipment storage barns, garages, and a double-wide mobile home that serves as the current and existing bunkhouse. The proposed location is considered upland habitat and is located on the Refuge. It is approximately one acre in size and is immediately adjacent to an existing Refuge barn and equipment storage to the west, and a private home to the east. See Figure 1.

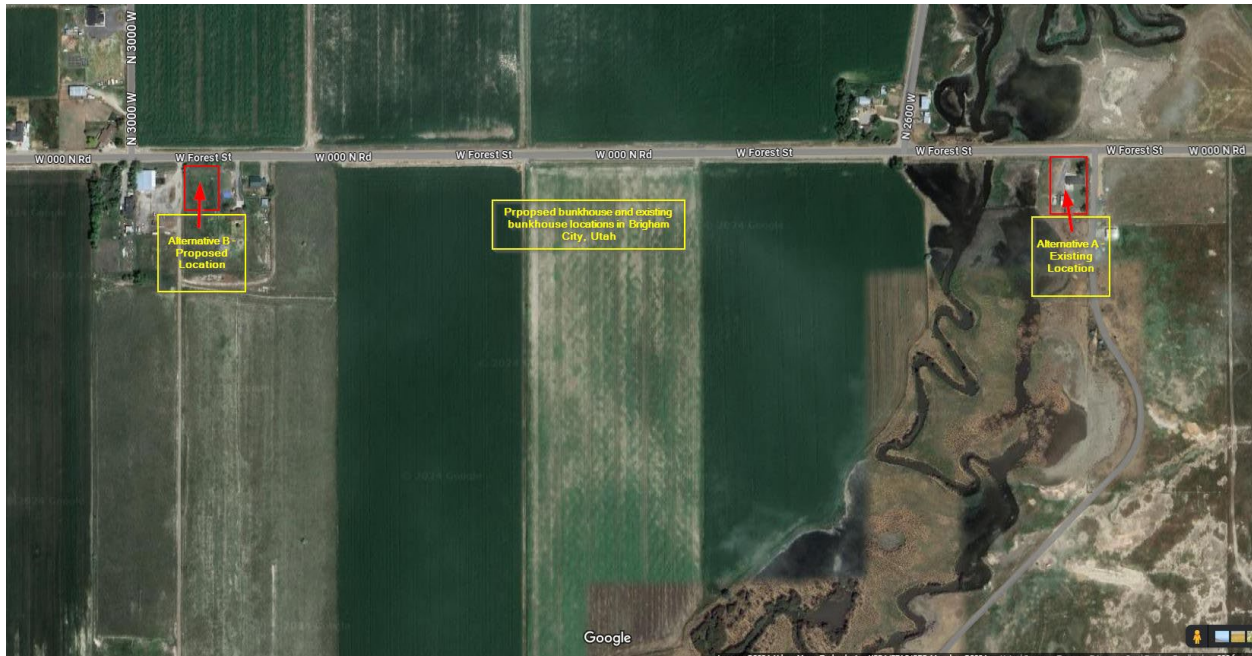


Figure 1 showing both Alternative A and B locations.

4.2 Natural Resources

Habitat and Vegetation: Affected Environment

This new location (Alternative B) for the bunkhouse is highly trafficked and disturbed from prior construction of nearby infrastructure. Existing vegetation is non-native upland habitat in an area that historically was comprised of terrestrial grasses and meadow species. However, the topography of this area has since been altered and converted to irrigated agricultural use over the years. In recent years, the area has not been irrigated or managed, and the vegetation has degraded resulting in an area that is extremely disturbed and consists of non-native upland grasses with little or no wildlife value (Figure 1). Non-native and invasive vegetation on site include crested wheatgrass, poison hemlock, and common teasel.

Habitat and Vegetation: Environmental Consequences

- *Alternative A* - There would be no change in habitat or vegetation at either location.
- *Alternative B* - Building the bunkhouse in a new location would have direct effects due to ground disturbance from construction machinery and ultimately a concrete foundation supporting the 2,108-square-foot building. These impacts would directly impact non-native vegetation that is not utilized by wildlife.

Fish and Wildlife Species: Affected Environment

Both locations (existing and new) do not provide any significant habitat for wildlife. There are a few non-native trees, such as Chinese Elm and Russian Olive, that may provide shelter or nesting habitat for small songbirds. The non-native grasses on the proposed new location may also provide shelter and nesting habitat for ground-nesting birds, but none have been observed.

Fish and Wildlife Species: Environmental Consequences

- *Alternative A* - There would be no change or impacts to fish and wildlife species.
- *Alternative B* - There may be short-term, minor effects to small birds, insects, and herptiles that utilize the non-native vegetation for shelter, food, or other needs from direct effects of construction disturbance. Direct but minor effects may occur as there would be the loss of 2,108 square feet of ground as a result of a foundation.

Noise: Affected Environment

Alternatives A and B are in an area with residences on both sides of the parcel and adjacent to a busy city street that has frequent traffic and experiences common residential noise.

Noise: Environmental Consequences

- *Alternative A* - There would be no changes or impacts to the existing soundscape.
- *Alternative B* - There may be temporary short-term impacts directly from the sound of heavy equipment during the construction of the house, along with sound from people working in the area. There would be no long-term impacts as this location is next to a building used for equipment storage and already has employees utilizing the space.

4.3 Refuge Resources

Management and Operations: Affected Environment

The provision of short-term housing accommodations to interns, volunteers, and visiting Service staff is pivotal for fulfilling Refuge purposes and management objectives. These individuals play a crucial role in conducting fieldwork, delivering visitor services, and supporting essential functions. Given the scarcity and expense of rentals in the local area, the bunkhouse is indispensable. Its absence would adversely affect management operations.

Management and Operations: Environmental Consequences

- *Alternative A* - There would be no change and operations of the existing bunkhouse would remain. However, there are only three bedrooms and existing safety concerns that would need to be addressed.
- *Alternative B* - Constructing a 4-bedroom bunkhouse would enhance capacity, enabling the refuge to accommodate more individuals, thereby improving refuge management.

4.4 Cultural Resources

Based on a site visit by Regional Archaeological staff in July of 2023, the proposed site has been heavily disturbed and there was no observation of any evidence or indication of any potential impacts to cultural resources. The Service will convey this observation and work with the State Historic Preservation Office as required by the National Historic Preservation Act.

4.5 Cumulative Impacts

Alternative A and Alternative B would not have any incremental impacts to the above affected natural and refuge resources when added to other past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions, because there are no known environmental trends, or planned or foreseeable actions impacting the already disturbed site which the bunkhouse is currently on or being re-built on.

4.6 Summary of Analysis

Impacts on all resources would be short-term and limited primarily during the time of construction. After construction, long-term impacts would be minimal or negligible from people using the bunkhouse as there is already an existing Refuge building with equipment and use in place currently. There are no significant impacts under either alternative.

Chapter 5: List of Preparers and Sources

5.1 List of Preparers

- Erin Holmes, Project Leader, Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge
- Ella Wagener, Supervisory Natural Resource Planner, Mountain-Prairie Region

References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2021). Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge Comprehensive Condition Assessment. Internal Report.