



Hello from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service!

The Nowitna Wild and Scenic River (WSR) represents one of Alaska's most unique rivers. It is as varied as it is beautiful. Over the course of 225 miles, the Nowitna WSR transforms from a narrow, swift, gravel-bottomed watercourse to a broad meandering floodplain river where it joins the mighty Yukon River. The Nowitna WSR flows through a mosaic of boreal habitats, some shaped by wildfire, and many created by the winding nature of the Nowitna WSR itself. The Nowitna WSR corridor provides remarkable habitat for an abundant diversity of both terrestrial and aquatic species as well as varied recreational opportunities. It has consistently delivered vital subsistence resources to people since prehistoric times. The topography in the region varies from wetland-dominated lowlands to low rolling hills and tundra-capped mountains, which intensifies the scenic beauty of the Nowitna WSR. Seasonal changes add to the tapestry of color, shifting from the stark white of winter to the varied greens of spring and summer. Wildflowers flourish along the Nowitna WSR's edge, adding splashes of vibrant color. In autumn, deciduous foliage takes on gold, orange, and deep red hues, with dark green spruce standing out in sharp contrast. Add to this the changing light of shifting clouds and dynamic weather, the result is a visual backdrop that is never the same from one moment to the next.

To help us steward this special river for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations, we are developing a comprehensive river management plan and environmental assessment. As part of this effort, we would like to know what makes the Nowitna WSR important to you. At the end of the newsletter, look for the many ways you can provide us with comments, suggestions, and feedback. We are looking forward to hearing from you.

Thank you!

Our Mission:

“Working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

Background

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was established in 1968 by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to protect certain river segments with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Currently, there are more than 220 rivers and streams covering more than 13,400 miles of protected waters included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System throughout the United States.

The passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980 added 25 rivers to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, one of which was the Nowitna WSR. The Nowitna WSR is classified as wild because it is free of impoundments and it is generally inaccessible, except by trail. The watersheds and shorelines are essentially primitive with unpolluted waters.

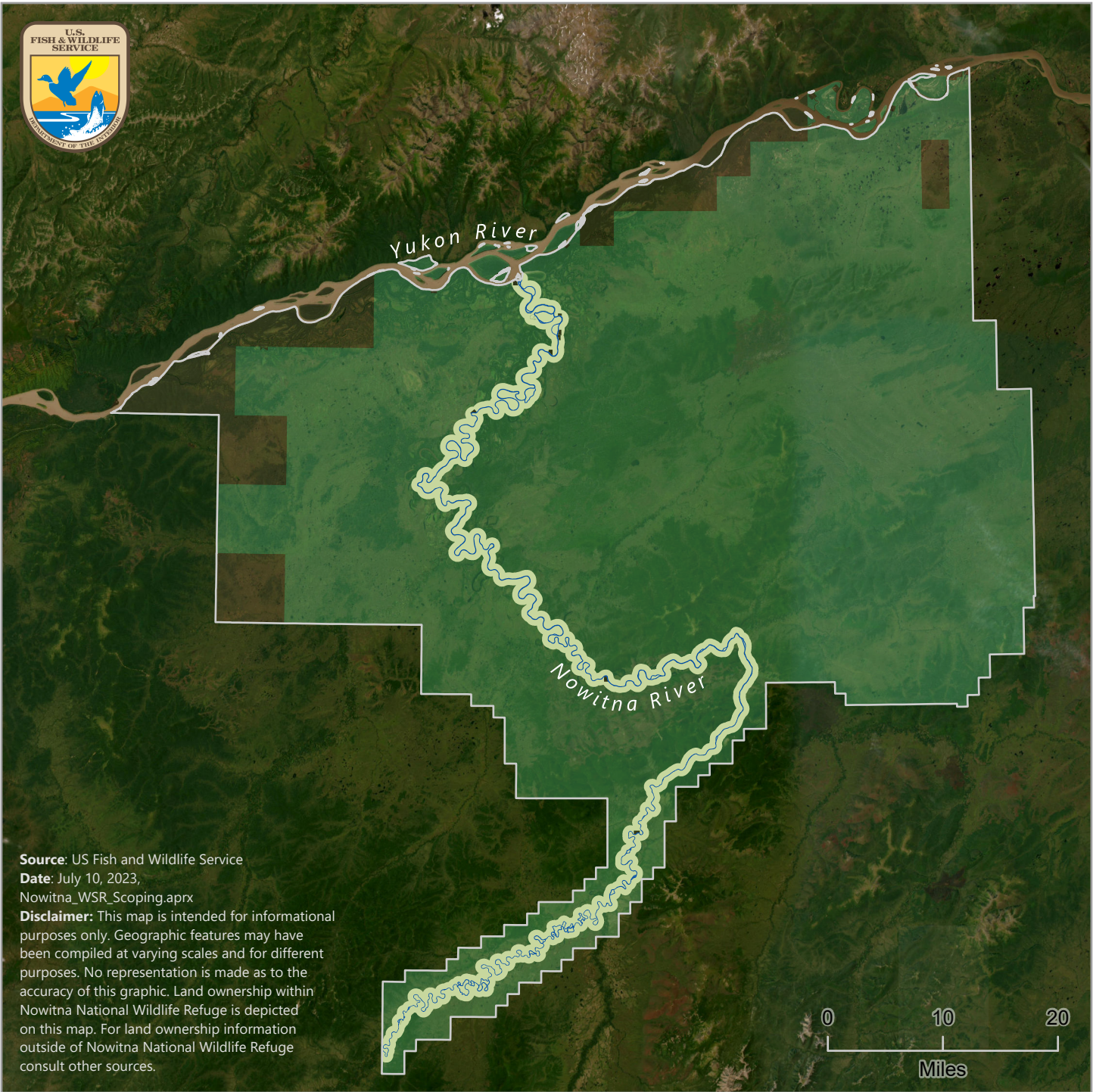
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) administers the Nowitna WSR which flows through the Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge. As required by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the USFWS is responsible for creating a comprehensive river management plan to provide for the protection of river values (the river's free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values [ORV]).



Purpose of the CRMP

The purpose of the Comprehensive River Management Plan is to:

- establish river corridor boundaries;
- describe the Nowitna WSR's "ORVs" which are the river-related or river dependent and unique, rare, or exemplary characteristics that make a river eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system;
- identify any threats to and opportunities for stewarding the Nowitna WSR's values, including water quality concerns;
- recommend instream flow requirements;
- define goals, objectives, and strategies for protecting and enhancing the Nowitna WSR's ORVs, free-flowing condition, and water quality;
- address user capacity by establishing the kinds and amounts of visitor use appropriate in the river corridor;
- identify potential development of lands and facilities consistent with the wild classification;
- develop a monitoring strategy to better understand baseline conditions and impacts to the values of the Nowitna WSR; and
- establish collaborative roles between the USFWS, the State of Alaska, Tribes, local communities, and members of the public for stewarding the Nowitna WSR and the greater watershed.








Source: US Fish and Wildlife Service

Date: July 10, 2023,
Nowitna_WSR_Scoping.aprx

Disclaimer: This map is intended for informational purposes only. Geographic features may have been compiled at varying scales and for different purposes. No representation is made as to the accuracy of this graphic. Land ownership within Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge is depicted on this map. For land ownership information outside of Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge consult other sources.

Nowitna Wild and Scenic River

-  Nowitna Wild and Scenic River
-  Proposed corridor
-  Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge

-  U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
-  Private



Key Components of the Plan

Outstandingly Remarkable Values—The Foundation for Wild and Scenic River Planning

The Comprehensive River Management Plan will define the ORVs, so that these values can be protected and enhanced in accordance with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Additionally, protecting the free-flowing condition and water quality of the Nowitna WSR are key components of the planning effort because they are integral to maintaining these ORVs. The USFWS, in consultation with subject matter experts from the the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the University of Alaska Museum of the North, Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, has developed a draft set of ORV statements for the Comprehensive River Management Plan. These draft statements are included as part of this newsletter for your review.

Boundary Delineation

The Comprehensive River Management Plan will establish Nowitna WSR corridor boundaries to protect the free-flowing condition, water quality, and ORVs for which the river segments were designated. The boundary cannot exceed an average of 640 acres per mile measured from the ordinary high watermark on both sides of the Nowitna WSR. The boundaries can be wider or narrower in places to protect ORVs as long as the average of 640 acres per mile is not exceeded. (The area of any islands located within the designated corridor does not count against the acreage limitation.) Pending the completion of the Comprehensive River Management Plan, an interim boundary of one-half mile on each side of the Nowitna WSR will be established.



Goals, Objectives, and Strategies for Protecting River Values

The Comprehensive River Management Plan will describe goals, objectives, and strategies for protecting and enhancing the Nowitna WSR's free-flowing condition, water quality, and ORVs. These goals, objectives, and strategies will include desired conditions for natural and cultural resources, visitor experiences, subsistence uses, and access to be achieved and maintained in the future.

User Capacity

According to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, comprehensive management plans must address user capacities. User capacity includes the kinds and amounts of recreation use that a river area can sustain without adverse impacts on the ORVs, water quality, free-flowing character of the river area, quality of recreation experience, and public health and safety. Therefore, the Comprehensive River Management Plan will identify the activities and associated visitor use levels that are appropriate while continuing to protect and enhance the values for which the rivers were included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Evaluation of Water Resource Projects

Section 7 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act directs federal agencies to evaluate federally assisted water resources projects to ensure the existing conditions of designated river values (free-flowing conditions, water quality, and ORVs) are not diminished. The Comprehensive River Management Plan will formalize the evaluation procedures for this purpose.

Instream Flows

Federal reserved water rights are established to protect and enhance the free-flowing condition and the ORVs that allowed these wild and scenic rivers to be designated. The Comprehensive River Management Plan will describe which river values are dependent on instream flows.

Monitoring Strategy

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires that the Nowitna WSR's ORVs will be protected and enhanced. Therefore, it is important to understand the baseline conditions of the Nowitna WSR and continue to monitor the status of its water quality, free-flowing condition, and ORVs to see if they are indeed being protected and enhanced. Accordingly, the Comprehensive River Management Plan will include a program of monitoring and ongoing study.

Outstandingly Remarkable Values

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act defines ORVs as the characteristics that make a river worthy of special protection. The criteria for identifying and defining these values were developed by the Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council. The criteria includes 1) the values must be river-related and 2) they must be rare, unique, or exemplary in a regional or national context. The USFWS identified the following ORVs for the Nowitna WSR ecology, fish, subsistence, and cultural. These ORVs are described in more detail below.

Ecology ORV

The combination of abiotic and biotic features of the Nowitna WSR, including the hydrology, geology, and biodiversity, create a truly unique example of boreal riparian ecology. Over 225 river miles, the Nowitna WSR completes a transition from a narrow, swift, gravel-bottom river in its upper reaches to a relatively broad, slowly meandering river typified by cut-banks, sandbars, sloughs, and oxbow lakes in the lower floodplain area. Spring flooding enriches the oxbow lakes and sloughs with nutrients and carbonates from the limestone bedrock in the Nowitna WSR's headwaters. The distinct water chemistry, flood regime, and meandering nature of the Nowitna WSR generate diverse and highly productive riparian habitats within which a broad, interconnected array of northern wildlife species exists. The wildlife species includes moose, black bear, grizzly bear, wolf, wolverine, red fox, lynx, marten, porcupine, hare, river otter, muskrat, mink, weasel, squirrel, wood frog, waterfowl, raptors, songbirds, and other

birds. The grassy margins of the Nowitna WSR, surrounding lakes, and waterways provide some of the best breeding habitat in Interior Alaska for trumpeter swans, white-fronted geese, canvasback ducks, cranes, and many other migratory waterfowl. A mixture of mature forest and early successional plant communities provide excellent moose habitat. Refuge moose populations are highest along the Nowitna WSR corridor, which in turn sustains increased populations of predators. Beaver are numerous in the Nowitna WSR and adjacent oxbow lakes. Taken as a whole, the diverse and abundant assemblage of boreal wildlife species is a defining characteristic of the Nowitna WSR.

Extensive stands of larch, a species of conservation concern in Alaska, occur in areas along the upper and middle portions of the Nowitna WSR because of the unique water chemistry. Additionally, the Nowitna WSR corridor contains an uncommon old-growth white spruce forest community, including some of the oldest white spruce found in Alaska with many mature white spruce that are between 200 and 350 years old. It is nourished by the Nowitna WSR's productive floodwaters and protected from wildfire by surrounding wetlands. As well as nourished by nutrients carried in upstream Nowitna WSR floodwaters. In addition, it is protected from wildfire by surrounding wetlands. Spruce trees along the designated Nowitna WSR corridor grow to an impressive size. These old-growth forests provide nesting areas for raptors and some of the best marten habitat found in Alaska. You will not find another river in Alaska with the unique ecology and resulting species diversity of the Nowitna WSR.



Outstandingly Remarkable Values

Fish ORV

Nineteen fish species have been documented in the Nowitna WSR corridor, surrounding wetlands, and tributaries. Various fish species use the Nowitna WSR, which is slightly different above and below the Little Mud River. Above the Little Mud River, the headwaters and tributaries (Susulatna, Sulukna, and Titna Rivers) of the Nowitna WSR Watershed harbor critical spawning and rearing habitat for both anadromous and freshwater fish species. The upper section of the Nowitna WSR also provides suitable habitat for Arctic grayling and resident Dolly Varden. Below the Little Mud River, the lower section of the Nowitna WSR supports summer foraging and overwintering habitat for multiple spawning populations of fish, like sheefish. The shallow floodplain lakes, marshes, and oxbows are uniquely important habitats providing slack water for foraging on smaller prey fish and providing spring spawning lakes for Northern pike.

The Nowitna WSR specifically provides exceptionally high-quality forging habitat, and it is a continentally important migration corridor for populations of Chinook, coho, chum salmon, and resident Dolly Varden, as well as sheefish and other species of whitefish. Sheefish are among the region's most targeted subsistence and sport fishing species. The sheefish that migrate up the Nowitna WSR to the Sulukna River are one of only six known spawning populations of sheefish in Alaska's Yukon drainage. Also, the Nowitna WSR contains five other species of whitefish including broad whitefish, humpback whitefish, round whitefish, least cisco, and, occasionally, Bering cisco. The excellent water quality and natural seasonal patterns of dynamic flow regimes contribute to the diversity of fish species found here. The Nowitna WSR and its unique nature provide valuable river habitat and a vital connection for multiple fish species to upstream spawning habitats.

Cultural ORV

Though the Nowitna WSR is constantly changing, the human relationship to the Nowitna WSR and its resources has remained remarkably constant over thousands of years. This is especially true for local Athabascans whose connection to the Nowitna WSR goes back countless generations. The Nowitna watershed has long been an important location for travel and trade across Alaska due to its unique proximity to tributaries of the Tanana, Kuskokwim, and Innoko Rivers. Nowikakat, an early settlement, and highly important trade center situated at the mouth of the Nowitna River, is recorded on the Alaska Heritage Resources Survey. This community and others along the Nowitna WSR were described by the earliest European explorers of the region, beginning in the 1840s. Trapping activities, which were the foundation of trade in earliest times, continue along the Nowitna WSR today, and they are just one part of the ongoing cultural significance of the Nowitna WSR.

Generations of Koyukon Athabascans, primarily from the communities of Kokrines, Tanana, and Ruby, once lived in the Nowitna WSR drainage seasonally and year-round. Families traveled the Nowitna WSR in all seasons. They survived by hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering other necessities from the land and waters. Descendants of these families continue to spend time along the Nowitna WSR, nourished by and connected to the land and river as their ancestors had experienced. Koyukon Athabaskan culture is built around a respectful relationship with the natural environment and its resources, and it honors the wisdom and tradition of elders. A strong cultural connection also exists for some Alaskans from other parts of the State of Alaska, who through their visits over many years, have come to cherish the Nowitna WSR and their connection to its environment.

Although little archaeological work has been completed in the Nowitna WSR corridor, the meandering nature of the Nowitna WSR and other topographic features of the corridor makes it very conducive for locating archaeological sites. Paleontological remains from prehistoric animals, including mammoth, can be found within the Nowitna WSR corridor and along the Yukon River mainstem nearby. The presence of these prehistoric animals and relatively close proximity of a high valued obsidian source near the Nowitna WSR, approximately 140 miles north of the Yukon River, could signal that it was a hunting or scavenging ground and a corridor to lithic raw material for some of the first inhabitants in the area. Therefore, it is highly probable that the Nowitna WSR drainage contains numerous archaeological sites that have yet to be discovered.



Outstandingly Remarkable Values

Subsistence ORV

Due to the diversity and abundance of fish wildlife, plants, and timber resources residing in the Nowitna WSR corridor, the Nowitna WSR has played a long and important role in providing subsistence resources for the surrounding rural communities. Subsistence means “the customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools, or transportation; for the making and selling of handicraft articles out of nonedible byproducts of fish and wildlife resources taken for personal or family consumption; for barter, or sharing for personal or family consumption; and for customary trade” (Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Section 803). The Nowitna WSR, due to its long history of subsistence uses, and the continued reliance of local communities on subsistence resources is exemplary for Interior Alaska. The Nowitna WSR’s location and abundant natural resources have drawn people to its banks probably since their arrival to the region in the late Pleistocene. Throughout the area, there continues to be an ongoing and substantial dependence by a high percentage of households on subsistence resources such as fish, game, waterfowl, berries, and timber. Residents seek out the rich wildlife and plant resources that are concentrated in the Nowitna WSR and its riparian corridor. The presence of these resources is directly tied to the unique productivity of Nowitna WSR waters and the river meander action that produces a mosaic of wildlife habitats. The Nowitna WSR is also a travel corridor that provides human access to these subsistence resources. The array and abundance of subsistence resources, along with the primitive setting of the Nowitna WSR, make it an incredible river for subsistence use.



Threats and Opportunities

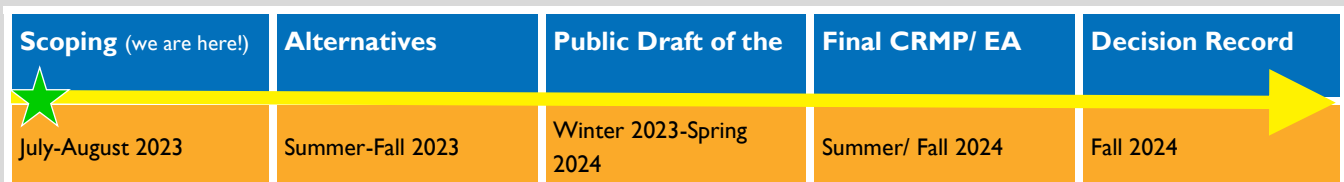
The Comprehensive River Management Plan will identify potential threats to the Nowitna WSR as well as opportunities to conserve or protect the Nowitna WSR. This process helps ensure the protection of the natural resources for current and future generations. The USFWS will work with the State of Alaska, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Tribes, local communities, and others to identify and manage threats and opportunities.

One of the biggest threats to the Nowitna WSR is climate change. Warmer average annual temperatures can lead to changes in vegetation distribution, wildlife habitat, melting of permafrost, and a myriad of other threats. Permafrost melting is a particularly alarming threat as it can lead to changes involving river geomorphology, water quality, and groundwater resources. Other potential threats to the Nowitna WSR include mining in the watershed, invasive species, and forest fires.

The Comprehensive River Management Plan represents a great opportunity to help protect and conserve the natural resources surrounding the Nowitna WSR. It allows the USFWS to implement management practices for subsistence, recreation, and in-stream flows.

Scoping Questions

1. What makes the Nowitna WSR special to you and why?
2. When you visit the Nowitna WSR or its tributaries, what activities and experiences are most important to you?
3. Do the ORV statements accurately describe the river-related values of the Nowitna WSR and its tributaries? Is there any missing information to consider?
4. What opportunities exist for protecting and enhancing the Nowitna WSR and its ORVs?
5. What issues exist related to protecting and enhancing the Nowitna WSR and its ORVs?
6. When you visit the Nowitna WSR or its tributaries, have you experienced any conflicts with other types of visitor activities? If so, what was the conflict and circumstance?
7. Imagine you are visiting the Nowitna WSR area 20 years from now. What river conditions, experiences, visitor services, and facilities would you like to see? Would there be any changes from the present?
8. Please share any additional comments or suggestions.



Thank You for Reading!

Part of the development of the Comprehensive River Management Plan/Environmental Assessment includes public involvement to ensure all voices are heard during the planning process. The USFWS is soliciting public input during the public scoping period from July 11, 2023 through August 10, 2023 for the development of the Comprehensive River Management Plan/Environmental Assessment. At this early stage of the project, the USFWS is collecting preliminary information and identifying issues that should be analyzed in the Comprehensive River Management Plan/Environmental Assessment.

The USFWS published radio and newspaper ads, along with this newsletter, to provide background information. You can provide input and information electronically, verbally, or in writing using the methods below.

Email: Nowitna_CRMP@fws.gov

Website: <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/nowitna>

Mail: **Attention: Nowitna WSR CRMP/EA**
P.O. Box 287
Galena, AK 99741

Hand Deliver (M-F, 8:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. AKST):

Attention: Nowitna WSR CRMP/EA
101 Front Street
Galena, AK 99741-0287

Voicemail: **(907) 656-1231**

Fax: **(907) 656-1708**

Attention: Nowitna WSR CRMP/EA

The USFWS is requesting your input by **August 10, 2023**. However, comments received after this date may still be considered.

The USFWS encourages you to participate in this planning effort and to share your thoughts about what makes the Nowitna WSR special to you.

