



Wilderness.net Webmaster
This document is part of the Visitor
Use Management Toolbox on
<http://www.wilderness.net/toolboxes/>

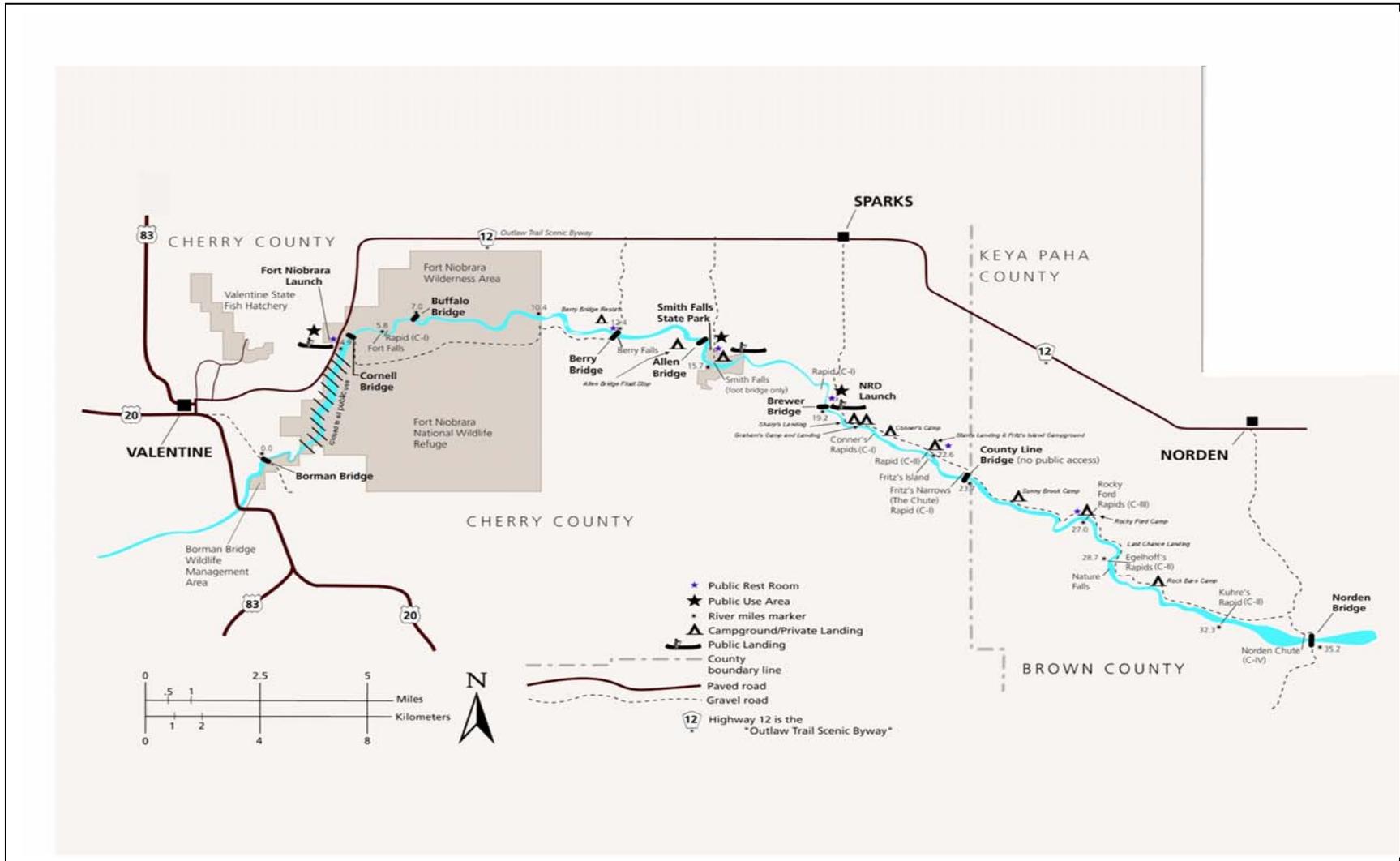
3.5. Public Use

General – An estimated 100,000 people visit the Fort Niobrara NWR each year to see, appreciate, and learn about wildlife and their habitats. Most of these visitors enjoy wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities that emphasize interpretation and education and include a visitor center; auto tour route; observation deck; nature trail; special programs such as Junior Ranger, bison roundup and auction; and exploring the Fort Niobrara Wilderness Area on foot, horseback, cross-country ski, or river floating. Fishing is allowed on the Minnechaduza Creek and along the Niobrara River downstream from Cornell Dam.

Wildlife-Dependent River Recreation

The 22-mile segment of Niobrara River from the Fort Niobrara NWR launch site downstream to Rocky Ford is the most frequently traveled by floaters (Figure 3). All floating is non-motorized and includes canoes, kayaks, and tubes. Trips ranging from one hour floats to multiple days are possible. Launching on the Refuge and floating to the first take-out point at Berry Bridge generally takes two to four hours to complete depending on vessel type and water level. Landing spots for hiking are provided at Fort Falls and the Niobrara Wilderness Area near Buffalo Bridge. The Refuge portion of the River is considered the most “scenic” and offers visitors a unique experience not available elsewhere. National Park Service data indicate that the most heavily used public launch is the Fort Niobrara NWR access. Most Refuge visitors float the River June through August. Mild weather and autumn foliage colors attract some visitors in September and October. Winter floats are possible for the experienced and properly equipped when the River is not iced-up, however few visitors take advantage of this opportunity.

Figure 3. Area Map of Niobrara National Scenic River (courtesy of National Park Service)



History of River Use and Management - Recreational river use on the Refuge began in 1961 with several hundred “canoe trips” reported. A Refuge photograph in 1965 shows a small undeveloped launch area, and in 1966, a local Girl Scout troop purchased four canoes for rental (C. Pascoe, personal communication). In 1983, car counters and surveys of river recreation were used to estimate river use at approximately 9,000 people. During that same year, the first Special Use Permits were issued to seven outfitters and three new launch ramps were added to the launch area. Additional improvements including construction of improved restrooms, launch ramps, and a parking area were completed in 1991 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District. Beginning in 1993, outfitters were required to report number of vessels and people launched on the Refuge which was approximately 23,350 people for that year.

An Environmental Assessment of River Recreation on Fort Niobrara NWR was completed in 1994 in response to concerns over potential impacts of rapidly increasing river recreational use and settlement of the Compatibility Lawsuit (Civil No. C92-1641) of October 20, 1993 with the Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, Wilderness Society and others concerning secondary uses on refuges. The preferred alternative called for development of a river recreation management plan which would include maintenance of existing launch area (no expansion); monitoring and control of social encounters; limit visitor impact on vegetation and wildlife by controlling visitor numbers, behavior, period of use, and landing areas along the River; and retention of area naturalness. The number of Special Use Permits issued to outfitters was limited to the existing 11 (moratorium on new outfitters) and guidance was sought from resource specialists on appropriate management actions.

River Recreation Use Levels and Patterns – Long-term monitoring of river recreation on the Refuge was begun in 2000 to document use levels and patterns by year, month, day of week, and time of day. Data continues to be collected to better understand visitor use of the Niobrara River on the Refuge, and to be used with other information in evaluating potential impacts and guide future management of wildlife, plants, habitats and visitors.

Outfitter/Iron Ranger Data - Launch data provided by outfitters and iron ranger (fee collection station) envelopes are entered into an Excel spreadsheet and compiled and summarized by year, month (Figure 4), and day of week (Table 1). Summary statements of the data collected thus far are:

- River floating on the Refuge increased from approximately 23,350 people in 1993 to a high of 31,748 people in 1997 and has since declined to a level of approximately 13,993 people in 2003.
- Approximately 70% of total annual use takes place in July and August.
- Saturdays account for the greatest proportion of visitation, however, there has been a shift since 2000 between weekdays and Saturdays. Weekday use has increased and Saturday use has decreased on the Refuge.
- During the summer recreational float season of 2003, the mean number of people floating the River ranged from 44 people on Sundays in June to 416 people on Saturdays in August. The highest number of people recorded for any single day in the summer was 614 people on the first Saturday in August.

Figure 4. Number of People Launched Monthly by Outfitters, 1998-2003

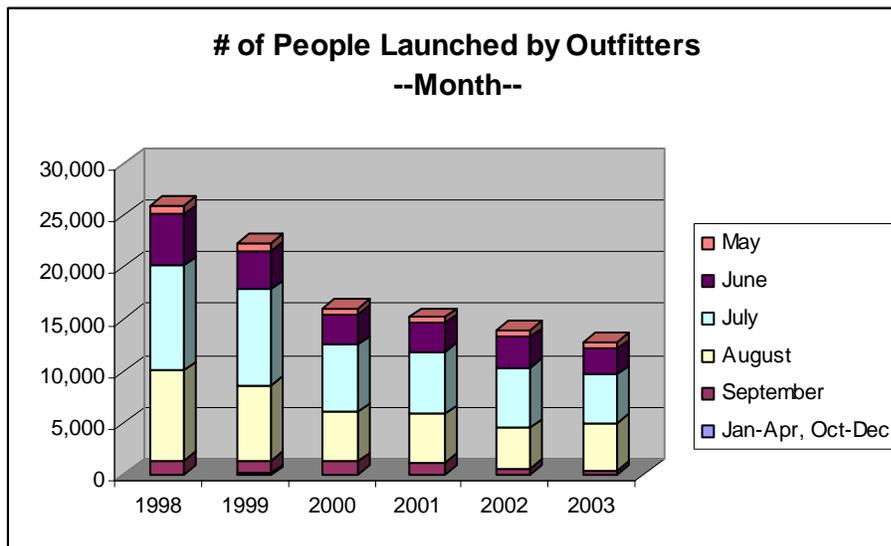


Table 1. Mean and High Number of People Launched in 2003 by Day of Week

	May		June		July		August		September	
	Mean	High	Mean	High	Mean	High	Mean	High	Mean	High
Sunday	20	64	44	92	155	196	133	146	2	4
Weekday	12	25	66	113	117	121	102	164	7	20
Saturday	73	137	288	541	409	486	416	614	69	127

Video Data - Direct counts of the number of persons and vessels launching on the Refuge by time of day are obtained by video tapes. Videotapes are made in four-hour blocks, selected randomly during moderate (May 24-June 30; August 21-September 6) and high (July 1-August 20) recreation use periods. Recordings are scheduled either in the morning (8:31-12:30) or afternoon (12:31- 16:30). Data are divided into consecutive one-minute intervals. The quality of video image is sufficient to enable vessels and persons to be detected, but not high enough resolution to be able to identify the faces of individual persons. Data are entered into an Excel spreadsheet and then compiled by various groupings (i.e. day of week; morning and afternoon). A total of 146 hours in 2001, 156 hours in 2002, and 91 hours in 2003 were surveyed. Mean values of the number of people floating past a fixed point per minute, by day of the week, for 2001-2003 are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean Number of People Floating Past a Fixed Point per Minute

	2003	2002	2001
Sundays	3.4	4.9	4.0
Weekdays	3.9	4.0	4.0
Saturdays	4.7	6.8	5.8

Other summary statements from the video data collected thus far are:

- The highest value of the mean number of people and vessels occurred on Saturdays in the morning for all three years. In 2001 and 2003, the lowest number occurred on weekdays in the afternoon, however in 2002, the lowest number occurred on Sundays in the afternoon.
- The numbers of observed vessels and people were significantly higher during all morning periods than corresponding afternoon periods on the same days. Peak periods of activity on Saturdays occurred between 9:30 and 10:30, and again but to a lesser extent between 11:00 and 11:30 and 12:00 to 12:30. Weekday activity followed the same pattern, but the level of activity was significantly lower than on Saturdays. Sunday activity showed two peaks, from approximately 9:30 to 10:00 and from 11:00 to 12:00.

Commercial Outfitting – Nine commercial outfitters from the local area provide canoes, kayaks, tubes (people, cooler), shuttle services, transportation, and/or food for approximately 91% of the people launching on the Refuge. Several of these outfitters also maintain landings (launch and take-out areas) and campgrounds down river, off the Refuge.

Safety - The Niobrara River is a relatively safe river to float and can be navigated by most novices. There are two segments of Class I rapids on the Refuge portion of the River. Off the Refuge, from Brewer Bridge to Rocky Ford, there are several more rapids (Class I and II) that can be easily negotiated. At Rocky Ford floaters are encouraged to portage the falls which are a Class III rapid. These rapids, like all water features, can change in character with differing water levels.

No fatalities have occurred on the Refuge, but several people have drowned further down-river. River recreation has resulted in search and rescue efforts as well as emergency medical incidents. Other safety considerations include injuries resulting from bison and elk contact, alcohol or drug related injuries, and conflicts between visitors. Safety concerns on the Refuge increased in proportion to the increase in river recreational use and popularity of the area in the late 1990s. Following implementation and active enforcement of the alcohol ban, visitor safety issues declined.

Facilities – The Fort Niobrara NWR launch area has restrooms with changing areas, an information kiosk, user fee/iron ranger station, graveled unloading area, six launch ramps, and parking for approximately 65 cars and several larger vehicles.

Administrative Costs & Funding – There are various costs associated with river recreation which are borne by the Refuge and/or partners. Some expenses are offset by monies collected from the user fees. Costs include, but are not limited to, law enforcement services; administration; interpretive and education services, panels, and literature; search and rescue; maintenance and/or construction of parking and launch facilities, trash collection and disposal; and maintenance of toilet facilities.

Neighboring Jurisdictions – The majority of river floaters previously began their trip at the Refuge launch area and traveled to take-out points and campgrounds downstream from Fort Niobrara NWR. Beginning in the late 1990s, however, a large proportion of launches shifted

down river (off-refuge) due to the Refuge encouraging outfitters to redistribute use to other parts of the River to reduce crowding and due to the implementation and enforcement of regulations (i.e. ban on alcohol, boom boxes, projectile shooting devices) on the Refuge. National Park Service data suggest an average of approximately 22,500 people per year launched off-refuge between 2001 and 2003. (Data were not collected by the NPS off-refuge prior to 2001; therefore, no numeric comparisons can be made.) Launch and take-out points down river from the Refuge are owned and/or managed by private landowners, outfitters, the Middle Niobrara Natural Resources District, the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, and The Nature Conservancy. Law enforcement off the Refuge is performed by the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, Cherry County Sheriff's Department, and the National Park Service. The National Park Service is in the process of developing management plans for the Niobrara National Scenic River of which Fort Niobrara NWR is a partner.

3.6. Socio-Economics

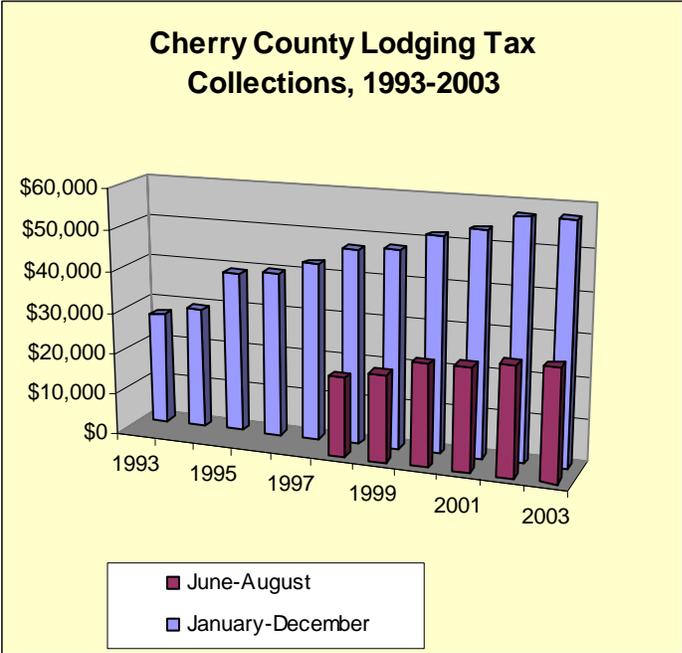
The Refuge is located in Cherry County approximately three miles east of the city of Valentine, the County seat and largest city in the County with a population of approximately 2,842 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2003). Cherry County is the largest County in Nebraska with a total area of approximately 6,013 square miles and one of the least populated counties with approximately 6,167 people recorded in 2002. Rural population in the County is very sparse due to large ranch sizes. Predominate land-use in the County is native prairie grazing and haying with less than 10 percent of the acreage cropped or irrigated (Miller 1990).

Family-owned ranching is the primary source of income in the County, although income generated from tourism has increased in recent years as reflected in Lodging Tax Revenues (Figure 5). Monthly lodging tax revenues are the greatest during the summer float season months of June, July, and August and show an increasing to stable trend 1998 – 2003. People originating from outside the area who floated on the Niobrara River through the Refuge in 2003 spent an estimated 1.4 million dollars in the Valentine area (Refuge and Nebraska Department of Tourism data). These expenditures include lodging, food, gas, and rental equipment.

According to Nebraska QuickFacts (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2003), for the year 1999, the median household income for Cherry County was \$29,268 and the per capita income was \$15,943. The percentage of households, for the same year, with annual income levels below the poverty level of \$17,029 was 9.6 percent. The number of families with income below the poverty level was 166 and the number of persons was 744. According to the same source, Cherry County minority population (excluding women) accounted for 5.8 percent of the total population.

Access to the Refuge is by Nebraska Highway 12 and a County maintained gravel road and bridge. Major highways traversing the County are U.S. Highway 83 (north/south) and US Highway 20 (east/west). The nearest airport with scheduled passenger service is in North Platte, Nebraska located 136 miles south of Valentine, Nebraska.

Figure 5. Annual and Summer Lodging Tax Revenues for Cherry County



- Data provided by Nebraska Department of Economic Development.

Chapter 4. MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

The mission and purposes of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the purposes for which Fort Niobrara NWR was established, and the existence of a designated Wilderness Area and a Scenic River within Refuge boundaries are the basis for river recreation management goals and objectives established in this plan. Management strategies to meet these broad goals and objectives were developed and revised based upon the best available scientific information and public input received during the planning and review process of the Draft Fort Niobrara NWR River Recreation Management Plan and Environmental Assessment.

This plan is not intended to be static, but rather dynamic and flexible to the extent possible. As new and better information becomes available to evaluate and guide management, changes may be made. The underlying purpose, however, will remain the same and that is in order for wildlife-dependent river recreation to occur on the Refuge, it must (1) be compatible with legislated purposes of Fort Niobrara NWR and the NWRS, (2) not interfere with the protection of wildlife, plants and habitats of the Refuge, and (3) promote public understanding of and appreciation for the natural resources and legislated purposes of the Refuge. Furthermore, commercial outfitting will be administered in accordance with Service policy and guidance.

4.1. Refuge Purposes / Responsibilities

River Stretch Open to Recreational Use

- Wildlife-dependent river floating on the Refuge will be allowed downstream from Cornell Dam only.
- The four mile stretch of Niobrara River on the Refuge above the Cornell Dam will remain closed to public use, allowing that area to be a sanctuary for wildlife.

Annual and Daily River Recreational Use Levels

- Approximately 20,300 people will be allowed to float the Niobrara River through the Refuge each year to learn about and appreciate river wildlife, plants, and their habitats.
- Opportunities for this wildlife-dependent public use will exist year-round. When annual use levels rise to a point that concern exists over launch opportunities not being available throughout the year, launch passes will be allocated by month based on historic patterns and input of outfitters. (A sample distribution is found in Appendix B.)
- During peak visitor use months of July and August, wildlife-dependent river recreational use will be encouraged on Saturdays up to a maximum daily level of approximately 980 people. River floating Sunday through Friday will emphasize the needs of wildlife and visitors wanting opportunity for a wilderness float experience. The maximum number of people that could float through the Refuge Sunday through Friday during these peak visitor use months will be maintained at lower levels and rarely reach an upper daily level of 490 people.
- When the number of people launched by commercial outfitters reaches 400 people on a Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday, or 800 people on a Saturday, the maximum number of people an outfitter may launch daily will be allotted. (Refer to Section 4.3 and Appendix B.)

Specified Times of Day for Wildlife and/or Recreational Use

- Early morning and late afternoon/evening hours will emphasize the needs of wildlife and will be free of or have minimal disturbance by humans.
- Refuge visitors will be encouraged to launch from 9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. resulting in the last wave of vessels exiting the Refuge by 3:30 p.m. River floating during daylight hours before and after this specified time period will still be allowed, however, at very low levels. The actual number of people allowed to launch outside of this specified recreational period could be established in the future as more data becomes available.

Minimize Impact to Wildlife, Plants, and Habitats

- River floaters will be encouraged to stay in their watercraft so as not to trample banks, destroy habitat, or further disturb birds and other wildlife; discouraged from leaving food or trash; and encouraged to enjoy the natural sights and sounds of the River by talking quietly.
- Landings at Fort Falls and the Buffalo Bridge will be available for river floaters to stop to view the Falls and to hike into the Wilderness Area.
- All commercial outfitters will be required to help with the Spring and/or Fall river clean-ups.
- Litter bags, with “Leave No Trace” education text printed on the outside will be made available to private floaters and provided to commercial outfitters for clientele to “pack out” their trash. Outfitters will encourage their clients to use beverage cans instead of bottles, to use and secure sturdy containers (not Styrofoam) for personal items, and to follow the Code of Ethics developed by the Niobrara Council.

Monitoring and Research

- Long-term monitoring of wildlife, plants, habitats, recreational use levels and patterns, and visitor experiences will be accomplished to evaluate, guide and/or modify future management on the Refuge.
- The Service will cooperate and work with downstream partners to conduct monitoring and research that evaluates recreational impacts on wildlife, plants and habitats off-Refuge.

4.2. Visitor Experience

Allocation of Annual Use Between Private Floaters and Outfitters

- Ten percent of total annual river recreational use (approximately 2,030 people) will be reserved for non-outfitted river floaters and the remaining 18,270 people launches will be made available to commercial outfitters.
- The allocation of river recreational use between private and outfitted visitors will be adjusted in the future if the number of non-outfitted (private) floaters increases. Commercial outfitters will not have preference over non-outfitted river floaters.

Spectrum of Opportunities (Wilderness Solitude to Recreational)

- A spectrum of visitor experience opportunities (recreational to wilderness solitude) will be made available by implementing management strategies that meet wilderness and recreational visitor experience standards (Section 1.5) including, but not limited to,

establishment of upper limits on the number of people that may launch daily (Section 4.1) and staggering of launches by outfitters.

- Refuge data will be provided to outfitters to help them identify days and times requiring increased effort in distributing launches to stay within visitor experience standards. If outfitters are unable to successfully address visitor experience concerns, the Service will implement specific management actions (i.e. assign launch ramps and times).

Vessel Type and Group Size

- Vessels that may be launched from the Refuge are canoes, kayaks, or float tubes capable of carrying no more than 4 people each.
- No more than five float tubes carrying a maximum of 8 people may be tied together. Visitors are discouraged from tying any kayaks or canoes together.
- Refuge staff will work with commercial outfitters to develop special criteria (vessel type and group size) that would allow for interpretive, guided float trips.

Interpretation and Environmental Education

- Refuge staff will work with partners to develop and conduct environmental education/interpretation programs (i.e. ranger/biologist talks, guided float trips, teacher workshops, integrated school curriculum) and other media (i.e. self-guided river nature trail leaflet).
- Existing interpretive and information panels at the Refuge launch area will be improved.
- Refuge staff will work with commercial outfitters and other partners to develop an information packet about Refuge wildlife, plants, habitats, wilderness and scenic river values, and safety. The packet will be distributed to all visitor groups (outfitter and private).
- Commercial outfitters will be required to provide a standard safety orientation for their clients.
- In collaboration with the National Park Service and/or other partners, funds will be sought to construct and staff a shared Environmental Education Center. Its location will be respectful of Scenic River boundaries and placed where it best informs and educates visitors. The new Center, identified in the Fort Niobrara CCP (1999), will be designed to accommodate a shared facility building that combines staff, scientific, interpretive, and financial resources of each partner resulting in improved environmental education and interpretation of the wildlife, plant, cultural, and paleontological resources of the Refuge and Niobrara National Scenic River.

4.3. Commercial Outfitting

River Outfitting Opportunity, Requirements and Selection

- There will be no limit on the number of commercial river outfitters that have the opportunity to provide services to Refuge visitors.
- The opportunity to provide outfitting services to river floaters on the Refuge will be announced to the public one year in advance of the permit cycle. The announcement (Appendix C) will describe the commercial visitor services required and selection/evaluation criteria for business proposals.
- In order to conduct outfitting services on the Refuge, each business must meet qualifications that include a current business/operating plan; demonstrated experience in

outfitting/business; statement of business ownership; public liability insurance in the amount of \$1,000,000; any applicable insurance required by the State of Nebraska (i.e. vehicle, workman's compensation); possess applicable licenses required by the State (i.e. motor vehicle, commercial driver, business/tax); ability to provide quality equipment and service to Refuge visitors; and willingness to conduct environmental education and stewardship activities.

- Business proposals/operating plans along with a nonrefundable application fee of \$ 50.00 will be due in April of the year prior to the permit cycle. Business proposals will be evaluated by Refuge staff. Outfitters will be notified in June whether they will be awarded a Special Use Permit for the upcoming permit period.

Special Use Permit

- A Special Use Permit (SUP) will be issued for a three year period.
- The annual fee for the SUP will be a minimum of \$200 (Fee based upon the cost to administer the program and conduct annual evaluations). Payment for the permit will be due 30 days after the launch pass bid process. If an outfitter is not successful in purchasing launch passes in the bid process, payment of the annual fee for that year will not be required.
- The Special Use Permit cannot be sold or subleased. If an outfitting business changes ownership during the three year SUP period, the Refuge Manager will consider transferring the permit to the new owner under a temporary one year SUP. In order for this to be a possibility, the new owner must agree to continue implementing the original business proposal/plan submitted by the prior owner and abide by all terms and conditions of the SUP.
- Should a commercial outfitter have his SUP revoked by the Service before the end of the three year period, the Refuge Manager will determine if the permit should be filled by a new outfitter.
- Applicable terms and conditions of the SUP include various management actions and strategies described in this Plan (Appendix D). Commercial outfitters will be informed of any changes to the SUP conditions prior to the annual renewal and bid process in January.

Annual Evaluation

- Each commercial outfitter will be subject to annual review and evaluation of three categories – Special Use Permit and operating plan compliance, resource protection/stewardship, and safety and visitor services. First and second time non-compliances associated with each of the three categories will have an assigned point value. An annual performance rating of acceptable or unacceptable will be assigned to each outfitter based on accumulated points (Appendix D).

Bid Process and Payment for Launch Passes

- In January, Refuge commercial outfitters will submit sealed bids for the number of people launch passes they wish to purchase for that calendar year. The minimum bid will be the fee charged the private user or what is established by the Service for one person to launch on the Refuge.

- Daily launch passes will be available in bundles of 100. Each outfitter may submit two bids on a minimum of 500 launch passes up to a combined maximum of 2,500 people launch passes. For example, an outfitter could submit a bid of \$ 2.00 each for 800 launch passes and a bid of \$ 1.50 each for 1700 launch passes.
- Sealed bids will be opened during a public meeting. Launch passes will be allocated by high bid until none remain. If more than one bid is received for the same dollar amount, outfitters submitting same bids will be asked to submit a new bid during the meeting with the amount of the “tie bid” being the new minimum bid. Once the tie is broken, allocation of launch passes will continue in the manner already described.
- If any people launch passes remain after the bidding process is complete, outfitters who did not purchase their maximum allotment of 2,500 may purchase additional launch passes on July 15 at that year’s high bid. If the demand for additional launch passes is greater than the number available, launch passes will be distributed equally and/or until an outfitter reaches the maximum level.
- If launch passes still remain after the second round of allocation, outfitters who have purchased their maximum allocation for that year may purchase additional launch passes at that year’s high bid. If the demand for additional launch passes during the final round of allocation exceeds the supply, launch passes will be distributed equally.
- Outfitters will pay for launch passes in four equal installments due by the 15th of June, July, August, and September. If additional launch passes are purchased on July 15th, the additional money owed must be paid with the August 15th and September 15th installments.
- Launch passes cannot be sold or transferred to another outfitter.

Allocation of Launches (monthly, daily)

- When the number of people launched on the Refuge by commercial outfitters reaches 400 people on a Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday, or 800 people on a Saturday, the maximum number of people an outfitter may launch daily will be allotted. The allocation will be based on the number of launch passes an outfitter purchased of the total number purchased by all outfitters during that year’s bid process (Appendix B).
- When annual use levels rise to a point at which concern exists over launch opportunities not being available throughout the year, the maximum number of people a commercial outfitter may launch monthly will be allotted. The allocation will be based on the number of launch passes an outfitter purchased of the total number purchased by all outfitters during that year’s bid process (Appendix B).

Other Requirements

- Outfitters will be required to shuttle their customers to the Refuge launch area in buses or vans on Saturdays and Sundays from Memorial Day through Labor Day.
- All vessels launched by a commercial outfitter must be permanently marked with their company name or a Refuge approved abbreviation.
- Each outfitter must submit monthly reports reflecting the number of people and vessels launched on the Refuge by each day of the week May through September; and all days combined October - December and January - April.

- Commercial outfitters may float the river without using a launch pass to obtain current information on river conditions to better educate their clients; however, trip information (date, number of people and vessel) must be reported to the Refuge.
- Commercial outfitters may be required to provide the Refuge with a copy of trip logs for a specified date that would include the names and addresses of clientele, number of people and vessels launched on the Refuge, etc. to enable follow-up checks of service quality and visitor satisfaction, or to verify monthly use reports.

4.4. User Fee

- A user fee of a minimum of \$1.00 per person per day launching on the Refuge will be collected through an iron ranger for private (non-outfitted) visitors.
- Commercial outfitters will pay the per person launch fee as described in Section 4.3 “Commercial Outfitting” above.

4.5. Facilities / Access

- Existing launch area facilities/access will be maintained.
- In collaboration with partners, the Service will consider developing a visitor contact site for environmental education programs on the west end of the launch area.
- River floaters not using a commercial outfitter will have access to all launch ramps.
- Commercial outfitters will annually develop and submit a plan to the Service that assigns launch ramps and times between outfitters with special consideration given to the 9:30a.m. -12:30 p.m. recreational period. If outfitters are unable to develop and implement an acceptable launch plan, the Service will assign launch ramps and times (i.e. lottery draw).

4.6. Regulations / Requirements

- Various regulations will be enforced throughout the Refuge, however, those that specifically pertain to river recreation include: open during daylight hours only; no more than five float tubes carrying a maximum of 8 people may be tied together; alcoholic beverages, firearms, fireworks, high volume radios, devices capable of shooting or directing a projectile or liquid at another person or wildlife, and collecting plants, animals, rocks or historical artifacts are prohibited.
- If data suggests that Refuge visitors and/or commercial outfitters are not complying with management actions that are “encouraged” or “discouraged” in this plan, the Service will make these actions a requirement.

4.7. Partnerships

- Refuge staff will strive to improve communication and increase partnerships with federal, state, county and local governments, and private entities and organizations that foster stewardship of the natural and cultural resources of the Niobrara River including Fort Niobrara NWR.
- At a minimum, the Service will meet with partners annually to discuss river management issues and concerns, develop and coordinate work projects, and nurture better relationships.

Organizations

- Aldo Leopold Wilde, Missoula, MT
- Audubon Society, Lincoln, NE
- Central Mountains and Plains Section of TWS, Berryman Institute, Logan, UT
- Friends of the Niobrara, Malcolm, NE
- National Wildlife Refuge Association, Colorado Springs, CO
- National Wildlife Refuge Association, Washington DC
- Nebraska Audubon Society, Denton, NE
- Nebraska Chapter Wildlife Society, Kearney, NE
- Nebraska Wildlife Federation, Lincoln, NE
- Niobrara Council, Valentine, NE
- River Management Society, Missoula, MT
- Sandhills Task Force, Wood Lake, NE
- The Nature Conservancy, Valentine and Johnstown, NE
- The Wilderness Society, Bozeman, MT
- The Wilderness Society, Washington, DC
- Wilderness Watch, Missoula, MT

Newspapers and Radio Stations

- Ainsworth Star Journal, Ainsworth, NE
- Associated Press, Omaha, NE
- Grand Island Independent, Grand Island, NE
- Lincoln Journal Star, Lincoln, NE
- KBRB Radio, Ainsworth, NE
- KVSH Radio, Valentine, NE
- Midland News, Valentine, NE
- North Platte Telegraph, North Platte, NE
- Omaha World Herald, Omaha, NE
- Rock County Leader, Bassett, NE
- Springview Herald, Springview, NE
- The Chadron Record, Chadron, NE
- The Kearney Daily Hub, Kearney, NE
- Norfolk Daily News, Norfolk, NE
- The Outdoorsmen, Hartington, NE
- United Press International, Omaha, NE
- Todd County Tribune, Mission, SD
- Winner Advocate, Winner, SD
- Scottsbluff Star Herald, Scottsbluff, NE
- Gordon Journal, Gordon, NE
- KBRX Radio, O'Neill, NE
- KINI Radio, St. Francis, SD
- Hall County Independent, O'Neill, NE

*The USFWS Regional Office of Denver, CO, in addition to the above media outlets, released a general press release to 214 additional media sources.

Individuals

- Jason Appelt, Ainsworth, NE
- Warren Arganbright, Valentine, NE
- Brad Arrowsmith, Bassett, NE
- Roy & Steve Breuklander, Sparks, NE
- Buffalo Bruce, Chadron, NE
- Fred Egelhoff, Valentine, NE
- Monte Frauen, Valentine, NE
- Twyla Gallino, Valentine, NE
- Doug & Twyla Graham, Valentine, NE
- Gene Gregg, Valentine, NE
- Ed Heinert, Sparks, NE
- Betty Hermsmeyer, Johnstown, NE
- Kalli Kieborz, Valentine, NE
- Kerry Krueger, Valentine, NE
- Lance Kuck, Bassett, NE
- Jim Luchsinger, Valentine, NE
- Len McDaniel, Valentine, NE
- Randy & Mary Mercure, Valentine, NE
- Richard Mercure, Valentine, NE
- Dana Miller, Valentine, NE
- Nola Moosman, Valentine, NE
- Tylr Naprstek, Valentine, NE
- Herb Pabst, Valentine, NE
- John Ravenscroft, Nenzel, NE
- Nancy Reinhardt, Sparks, NE
- Tim Ryschon, Valentine, NE
- Dave Sands, Lincoln, NE
- Pete Sawle, Springview, NE
- Jim Schoenberg, Bassett, NE
- Carl Simmons, Valentine, NE
- Lee Simmons, Valentine, NE
- Dwite Sharp, Sparks, NE
- Wayne Sharp, Sparks, NE
- David Stoeger, Valentine, NE
- Al Stokes, Honey Creek, IA
- Rick VanderWey, Valentine, NE
- Duane Gudgel, Valentine, NE
- Klane & Getha Leonard, Springview, NE

- Patricia Neujahr, Valentine, NE
- Dallas Dodson, Valentine, NE
- Steven Isom, Valentine, NE
- Sandy Benson, Bassett, NE
- Dr. John Davis, Bennington, VT
- Betty Hall, Bassett, NE

Appendix G. Compatibility Determination

Use: Implement the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge River Recreation Management Plan. Wildlife-dependent recreational floating will be permitted on a portion of the Niobrara River that flows through the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

Refuge Name: Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

Executive Order 1461 on January 11, 1912
Executive Order 1642, on November 14, 1912
Executive Order 3256, on March 31, 1920
Executive Order 7301, on February 21, 1936

Purposes for which the Refuge was established:

Executive Order 1461: "... preserve and breeding ground for native birds."

Executive Order 1642: set aside additional lands as the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve for the preservation of bison and elk herds representative of those that once roamed the Great Plains.

Executive Orders 3256 and 7301: various purposes including roost sites for sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chickens, migratory bird food sites, and pronghorn antelope management.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

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.

Description of Proposed Use: The Niobrara River, including that portion on the Refuge, is part of the Wild and Scenic River System. The Niobrara River downstream of the launch area to the Refuge boundary is part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The River Recreation Management Plan will allow up to 20,300 people to float a portion of the Niobrara River on the Refuge each year. River floating on the Refuge, approximately 5 miles, will be allowed downstream from Cornell Dam only. The four mile stretch of river on the Refuge above Cornell Dam will remain closed to public use, allowing that area to be a sanctuary for wildlife. Specific management strategies will be implemented to ensure opportunities for Refuge floaters to experience a quality, wildlife-dependent visit. Float trips are by non-motorized vessels including canoes, kayaks and tubes. Trips range in duration from 2 to 4 hours depending on vessel type and water level. Existing launch area facilities/access on the Refuge will be maintained.

Availability of Resources: Sufficient resources are available to administer river recreational use at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge.

Anticipated Impacts of Use:

- River recreational use, as planned, is not likely to adversely affect any threatened or endangered species. The primary use period for bald eagles on the Refuge is October through April which is when very little river recreational use takes place. Whooping cranes, least terns, and piping plovers will not be impacted, as the area they inhabit on the Refuge is above Cornell Dam and is closed to all public use as a sanctuary to wildlife.
- Visitor use results in disturbance to wildlife on the Refuge. Researchers on the Refuge found no clear effects of recreational disturbance to songbirds breeding on Fort Niobrara NWR; however, there was negative behavioral effect on waterbirds. Birds roosting or feeding in the River are the most susceptible to disturbance and include herons, ducks, and shorebirds. Only small numbers of these birds use that part of the River frequented by canoers and tubers. The portion of the River above Cornell Dam is used more by these groups of birds and is closed to all public use as a sanctuary to wildlife.
- Disturbance to soil and vegetation is, at present, minor. River recreational use, as planned, will continue to address and minimize this effect. Most visitors do not get out of their canoe or off of their tube except on sandbars. Two developed sites, Fort Falls Nature Trail and the Niobrara Wilderness Access, are only lightly used and disturbance is on or adjacent to the foot path.
- Specific management strategies, as identified in the River Recreation Management Plan, will be implemented to ensure opportunities for Refuge floaters to experience a quality, wildlife-dependent visit and opportunities for wilderness solitude.

Public Review and Comment: Notifications of the public scoping meeting, research summaries, and planning document availability were distributed through media press releases. A letter with a series of questions was sent to outfitters to gain perspective of the outfitting business, as it relates to the Refuge and development of the River Recreation Management Plan. An Open House was held to which the public and partners were invited to share their thoughts, ideas and concerns. In addition to comments received during the Open House, twenty-one pieces of correspondence were received during the public scoping period. The draft plan was made available to the public for a 60-day comment period. An Open House was hosted by the Refuge staff approximately 30 days into the comment period for the public and partners to discuss the draft document. Comments received during the public review period were considered and changes were made to the final document as a result. A copy of the Fort Niobrara NWR River Recreation Management Plan will be provided to all interested parties.

Appendix H. List of Preparers

This document is a compilation of efforts by several Service people. The core planning team consisted of Bernie Petersen (Deputy Refuge Manager) and Kathy McPeak (Refuge Biologist) who were responsible for gathering and preparing information.

Royce Huber (Project Leader, Fort Niobrara/Valentine/Seier NWRC), Dave Wiseman (CO, KS, NE Refuge Supervisor), Ron Shupe (Acting Regional Chief), Melvie Uhland (Education and Visitor Services Specialist), Sheri Fetherman (Chief, Education and Visitor Services), Linda Kelly (Chief, Comprehensive Conservation Planning), and Michael Spratt (Chief, Refuge Planning) provided guidance and assisted with review and editing.

Connie Young-Dubovsky (NEPA Coordinator), Cindy Souders (Recreation Fee, Wilderness, Scenic River Issue Specialist), and Tom Graff (Attorney, DOI Solicitor's Office) provided technical expertise. Sean Fields (GIS Specialist) and Mark Ely (Chief, GIS) prepared the various maps. Jim Renne (ITM Specialist) managed the planning document web page. Matt Kales (External Affairs Office) prepared press releases and dispensed information to the media.

Mark Lindvall (Refuge Manager), Mel Nenneman (Refuge Biologist), and Chuck Melvin (Park Ranger) provided information and/or reviewed portions of the document.

Marge McPeak (Refuge Administrative Assistant) compiled the document and completed all desktop publishing aspects of the document.