Appendix J. Service Response to Public Comment

This appendix summarizes the comments that were received on the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (CCP/EA) for Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge. The Draft CCP/ EA was released for public review and comment from December 12, 2011 to January 23, 2012. The public was notified of the release of the Draft CCP and EA with a Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register* on December 12, 2011 (Volume 76, Number 238, pp. 77245-77247), as well as through local media outlets (local newspapers, radio station, and television). Additionally, public notices were posted on various community bulletin boards in Sealy, TX; Eagle Lake, TX; and Columbus, TX.

A CD-rom version of the document was sent to approximately 80 individuals, organizations, elected officials, and local, state, and federal agencies; and an electronic copy was made available on the Service's website. An open house was held during the comment period (January 14, 2012) at the Refuge headquarters building, providing the public with an opportunity to discuss the plan with Service staff. Despite being heavily advertised, few individuals attended this event and no comments were received. The Service received four comment letters. The National Park Service, Intermountain Region responded, but had no comments on the CCP. Summaries of the comments received in each letter and the Service's responses follow.

Comment 1: Ban all chemical control

Response 1: As stated in the Environmental Assessment (EA), Section 4.2 Effects Common to all Alternatives, chemical herbicides are one of the main methods the Service uses to control invasive plants on national wildlife refuges. Herbicides can efficiently and effectively suppress or kill unwanted plants, and the Service uses them in such a manner as to minimize adverse effects on non-target resources. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires extensive test data from herbicide producers to show that their projects can be used safely. EPA evaluates both exposure and toxicity to determine the risk associated with the use of a given herbicide. Additionally, all refuges must complete a Pesticide Use Proposal whenever a pesticide is used on a refuge. Therefore, chemical control will continue to be a tool utilized by Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR consistent with policy and mitigation efforts stated in the EA.

Comment 2: Ban all prescribed fire

Response 2: Habitat Management Objective 1, Rationale, states: "Historically, fire was an important factor in maintaining the open character of grasslands occupied by APC." Research supports the use of fire to maintain prairie habitat conditions. Therefore, prescribed fire will continue to be used to manage habitat on the Refuge.

Comment 3: Stop growing animals with food plots, it is clear you are growing them to kill them

Response 3: Food plots are provided as additional nutrition for APC during the winter months. The benefits of food plots are defined in Wildlife Management Objective 2, Rationale and in the Environmental Assessment under Impacts on Threatened and Endangered Species and Special Status Species. Additionally, hunting is not permitted on Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR. Therefore, the Refuge will continue to manage food plots for the benefits of APC.

Comment 4: I like the idea of the patch burn system that was implemented on the Refuge 8-9 years ago. Also, I like the idea of the potential fence-removal projects outlined and like the idea of going to bigger pastures and removing as many fences as needed.

Response 4: Thank you for your comment. The Refuge will continue to evaluate all habitat management practices, including a properly managed grazing program, to determine the best management practices to meet Attwater's prairie-chicken life requisites.

Comment 5: Continue to stay on top of the Macartney rose and deep-rooted sedge control.

Response 5: Thank you for your comment. Habitat Management Objective 4 states, "Over the life of the CCP, reduce Macartney rose, deep-rooted sedge, Chinese tallow, and other invading species by 50 percent on the Refuge." The Refuge will use integrated pest management practices to continue to control invasive species and will monitor and map such species.

Comment 6: While Defenders of Wildlife is not able to submit detailed comment on the draft CCP, they would like the Refuge to refer to criteria developed in the Defenders of Wildlife fact sheet "Climate Change and National Wildlife Refuge Planning" to ensure that climate change is comprehensively considered and addressed.

Response 6: The Refuge reviewed the Defenders of Wildlife fact sheet and using best available data, integrated climate change throughout the CCP. For more information, please refer to the following sections of the CCP:

- Section 1.3.3.1 Climate Change
- Section 3.3.1.4 Estimated Conditions due to Climate Change
- Section 3.3.2.9 Concerns Regarding Wildlife Populations
- Chapter 4, Habitat Management Objective 6
- Chapter 4, Visitor Services Objective 2

Comment 7: Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) still maintains concerns regarding the proposed habitat management plans in regard to the waterfowl impoundments referenced in Chapter 4 and would like to reiterate the concerns over proposed loss of waterfowl habitat.

Response 7: On July 1, 2011, the draft CCP was sent to TPWD because the internal review period allows state partners an opportunity to engage in development of the Refuge's plan before it is distributed to the general public for review and comment. On August 15, 2011, TPWD provided comments on the draft document. The Refuge responded with a written letter on October 6, 2011. At that time in response to this concern, the Refuge stated,

> "We understand and are sympathetic with waterfowl objectives by various organizations for the Texas Gulf Coast. However, the original purpose for establishment of this refuge is *"... to conserve (A) fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species....or (B) plants ..." 16 U.S.C. §1534 (Endangered Species Act of 1973).*, specifically Attwater's prairie-chicken. These artificial impoundments were constructed at a time when Attwater's populations were more abundant. From a national perspective, The State of the Birds United States of America 2009 states that "Dramatic declines in grassland and aridland birds signal alarming neglect and degradation of these habitats…..Grassland birds are among the fastest and most consistently declining birds in North America." With regard to wetland species, this same document states: "The upward trend for wetland birds in the U.S. is a testament to the amazing resilience of bird populations where the health of their habitat is sustained or restored."
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> Aside from loss of habitat for the critically endangered Attwater's prairie-chicken, by concentrating wintering waterfowl in close proximity to some of the last remaining habitat used by Attwater's, these impoundments expose this critically endangered species to periodic disease outbreaks such as avian cholera which have plagued waterfowl populations on the Texas Coast, and in this area specifically, in the relatively recent past (beginning in 1988 through early 2000's). These cholera episodes killed thousands of wintering waterfowl in areas on and around the refuge. Analysis of blood samples collected from Attwater's prairie-chickens at the refuge indicated that 25% (2/8) and 20% (1/5) tested positive for exposure to *Pasteurella multocida*, the causative agent for avian cholera, in 1987 and 1993, respectively (Peterson et al. 1998, Serologic and parasitologic survey of the endangered Attwater's prairie chicken, Journal of Wildlife Diseases 34:137–144). Peterson (2004, Parasites and infectious diseases of prairie grouse: should managers be concerned?, Wildlife Society Bulletin 32:35–55) stated: "Infectious agents such as ….*Pasteurella multocida*…. that cause high mortality across a broad range of galliform hosts have the potential to extirpate small, isolated PG [prairie grouse] populations." Task 1.3.11 of the Attwater's Prairie Chicken Recovery Plan (2010) lists "Managing waterfowl, especially geese, to minimize competition and potential for disease transmission" as a priority 1 task (i.e., necessary to prevent extinction or prevent irreversible population declines in the foreseeable future).
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> The two man-made impoundments are not the only available wetland habitat on the refuge. Ephemeral wetlands (approximately 1,000 acres) are scattered throughout the refuge and are a natural component of the prairie ecosystem. As supported in the paragraph above, providing scattered wetlands reduces waterfowl concentrations, presumably lowering the potential for disease outbreak. Even though water control structures for these impoundments will be removed, there are existing historic ephemeral wetlands within the watershed that will continue to provide wetland habitat. The presence

> of wetland habitat at these locations will not be completely eliminated. The refuge plans to restore historic hydrology has much as possible. Areas on the refuge that were farmed before establishment of the refuge are currently being restored. In this process, the refuge will restore natural hydrology which includes ephemeral wetlands to the extent practicable."

Although, the Refuge remains understanding and is sympathetic to the concerns of TPWD, the Refuge will continue plans to remove the artificial impoundments and restore the area to native prairie to aid in the recovery of the endangered Attwater's prairie-chicken.