

Lake McConaughy/Lake Ogallala Master Plan Executive Summary

Introduction

Lake McConaughy and Lake Ogallala State Recreation Areas are two of Nebraska's most popular state recreation areas. With over 100 miles of shoreline and 40,000 acres of land and water, they provide tremendous recreational value to the state, region, and local communities. Located in western Nebraska and a short distance from Interstate 80 near Ogallala, the lakes are easily accessible within four hours of the Denver and Lincoln/Omaha metropolitan areas. Lake McConaughy lies on the southern edge of the Nebraska Sandhills, leading to beautiful white sand beaches along the shores which provide exceptional experiences for visitors.

The lakes offer many different types of recreational activities including, but not limited to, a multitude of boating opportunities, a variety of fishing (both cold and warm water), day use activities and various camping options. These lakes create a haven for natural resources and are a significant draw for wildlife in the region. Two threatened and endangered species nest at the lakes, the Interior Least Tern and Piping Plover, providing unique opportunities and challenges for managing recreational use of the areas. With the presence of terns and plovers nesting on beaches, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), CNPPID and NGPC all have roles in ensuring those species are conserved.

Both lakes are owned by Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District (CNPPID). Recreation on the lakes is managed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) through a lease with CNPPID. CNPPID must adhere to specific requirements through the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and NGPC must also comply with requirements under the lease. CNPPID owns the lakes and their interest is to ensure that the areas are being managed in accordance with their regulations as well as that the recreational needs of the public are being met. This partnership for management has been on-going for the past 70 years. The lakes are primarily managed by NGPC as State Recreation Areas as a part of Nebraska's state park system.

The lakes and State Recreation Areas generate a great deal of interest from a diverse public. Local communities count on these lakes as a primary recreational resource for residents and as an asset for economic development and growth. Hundreds of thousands of visitors come to the lakes, bringing their families to provide experiences that they feel is time well spent. This plan is being developed to conserve the valued natural resources of the lakes and provide high quality recreational experiences well into the future.

Planning Process

In October of 2015, the NGPC's Board of Commissioners directed staff to complete a master plan for the lakes by October of 2016. Staff was tasked to create a local advisory group, made up of local entities and individuals that had a vested interest in the operation and maintenance of the areas. This advisory group met several times to create goals, tactics and development proposals for guiding the operation and advancement of the lakes into the future. Public comment was sought through meetings to assist in the development of the plan, and meetings were held with CNPPID and USFWS. Additional input was taken through phone calls, emails and other meetings regarding the development and implementation portion of the plan. The master plan was vetted internally among key NGPC staff, along with CNPPID and USFWS, prior to being submitted to the Board of Commissioners for approval in October 2016.

Management Challenges

The master plan provides background information on existing operations and management of the areas and the challenges NGPC faces when managing the lakes. Several issues were identified in managing recreation at the lakes, with four major categories that cut across multiple issues: water fluctuations, staffing, size of the area, and enforcement and regulations. There are other issues that are more specific, including partnerships, soil and shoreline conservation, fishery concerns, and interactions between humans, canines and the threatened and endangered species.

Water Fluctuations

Lake McConaughy is subject to significant water fluctuations on a yearly basis due to inflows and CNPPID water management for irrigation and power production. This provides challenges for maintaining fish species, as carrying capacity of sport fish in the reservoir at normal full pool (or near full pool) cannot be supported with large declines in the amount of water in the reservoir. At lower water levels, the risk for fish die-offs increases due to physical stress from poorer water quality conditions and associated algal blooms. Fluctuations of water levels provide difficulties in providing adequate boat ramps and docks for visitors to the lake. At this time, there are nine ramps available at normal full pool, but when water levels decline the number of ramps available drops. The changing water levels creates maintenance issues regarding the ramps, shoreline erosion and changes in plant composition on the landscape.

Staffing

Providing staffing levels to match visitation demand is a challenge for managing the lakes. The majority of visitation at the lakes is highly seasonal which results in a need for seasonal employees. The population has declined in the surrounding communities, which makes it difficult to maintain a robust pool of potential employees. There continues to be a high demand across multiple industries (agriculture, retail, food services, etc.) in the region competing for a limited pool of seasonal employees, making it a challenge to retain enough help to maintain and operate the areas. There is high demand for conservation officers during the summer season, especially on the three holiday weekends of the summer. The visitation volume of the lakes in the summer results in calls for service on a 24/7 basis and require a great deal of attention when citations are issued. With increased visitation, conservation officers are brought in from other areas of the state.

Size of the Area

The sheer size of the lakes requires a tremendous effort to provide adequate services to visitors and ensure regulation compliance. Considerable travel time is required to move around to the various accesses, campgrounds, and beach areas on the lake. As a result, staff are often spread out over various parts of the area, which makes employee supervision, communication and oversight challenging. The same challenge applies to responding to public safety concerns and providing emergency response services. With the size of Lake McConaughy, having adequate boat ramps and services to is also a public safety issue, as fast-developing thunderstorms in the spring and summer can lead to rapidly deteriorating conditions requiring boaters to get off the lake rapidly. There also have been multiple access points created by users that are not authorized, which can create additional challenges for both the agency and visitors not familiar with the area. The amount of entrances and exits, along with the created access points by users, create a challenge for both law enforcement and park personnel to effectively manage and respond to our visitors. Balancing the needs of different user groups is also challenging due to the size and use patterns of the lake areas.

Enforcement and Regulations

We have identified the issue of the non-designated areas for camping as a large challenge for managing park visitors. The “camp anywhere” concept does not allow adequate enforcement of regulations due to the sheer size of the area. When the water levels decline there is additional beach area along the lakes available for camping, which provides additional oversight responsibilities to ensure the safety of visitors and provide maintenance at all the additional beach areas. Other regulatory issues include management of concessionaires, control of traffic, and compliance with other state regulations (water, sanitation, electrical, permitting...etc.). Language barriers between visitors and those that manage the areas can pose challenges for communication in regards to compliance with regulations and daily interactions.

Other Issues

The native soils, primarily sandy soils, create challenges for maintaining landscaping, maintenance of roads and boat ramps and are difficult to provide good foundations for building new developments. Having partnerships to provide visitors good recreational experiences takes time and to cultivate meaningful relationships between concessionaires, local communities, county boards, and tourism entities is extremely important to the NGPC. Concerns about the fisheries include poor catch rates of white bass, maintaining a trout fishery at Lake Ogallala, low dissolved oxygen levels, and physical stress on fish species. Another major concern for NGPC, CNPPID and USFWS is the interaction of humans, canines and the piping plovers and interior least terns that nest and raise young at the lake. There is a need to ensure the conservation of these species and to minimize negative impacts to the birds by recreational activities.

Goals

In order to establish an effective plan, there needs to be a set of goals that address the management issues and challenges. Within each goal, several strategies and tactics were developed to achieve the goals. Goals were derived by the Advisory Committee, staff of NGPC, CNPPID and USFWS, and from public input. The plan identifies ten major goals:

1. Provide memorable experiences for the users through a diverse set of recreational opportunities.
2. Increase visitation during the shoulder seasons.
3. Explore partnerships to positively affect surrounding areas economies.
4. Manage and expand recreational opportunities to avoid user conflicts and protect the natural resources.
5. Protect and effectively manage the natural resources of the lakes, with a focus on the threatened and endangered species on the lakes.
6. Ensure public safety in a fair and effective manner.
7. Manage the area in accordance with the agreement between the NGPC and CNPPID.
8. Offer quality cultural and natural resources education and interpretation.
9. Provide effective and efficient operation of the area.
10. Increase revenue generation.

Development

The development portion of the plan is a culmination of the other sections of the master plan. It is here where the regional analysis, inventory of existing facilities, analysis of operating conditions, the goals, strategies and tactics, and all the public input come together to outline the future development of the lakes. By examining all of this information, it was clear that NGPC needs to make changes in how we manage recreation on these SRA's. Operating successful park areas requires several key elements: programming, staffing, partnerships and enhancements. It is important to have the right balance of programming which includes events, activities and services offered at the park areas. It is crucial to have the right level of staffing to maintain the areas in good condition and provide the activities and events planned. Partnerships with local entities are paramount to success of not only the park areas but the local communities surrounding the parks. Without strong connections between the lakes and local communities, opportunities are lost to create a vibrant community that is enhanced by the lake areas. Finally, the enhancements and changes at the lakes will provide the link for providing excellent programming, assist in how the staff can manage the lakes, and create viable partnerships into the future.

Zoning of the Areas

The development portion of the plan outlines the improvements that can be made in programming, staffing, partnerships and the physical changes of the landscape. It also created zones at the lake areas, similar to what communities do when planning for future development. There are maps and zoning definitions included within the body of the plan that depict the changes proposed. It was determined to

properly manage the lake for future use, a zoning approach would be a good way to manage the changes on the landscape that need to occur over time.

Beach Zoning

The beach zoning was identified to create areas specific to protect threatened and endangered species, areas that are day use only, areas that are walk in use only, areas that are managed vehicle access only and areas that are open to all existing uses. There are two different types of managed vehicle access in the plan, including those areas that provide camping opportunities with licensed vehicles and those beach areas in front of CNPPID cabin areas that provide limited vehicle access for those within the cabin areas. The beach areas in front of cabin areas will require an additional beach management plan that will be created with NGPC, CNPPID and those within the non-managed NGPC area. Beach zoning is the most visible change proposed for the future. Currently the beach is largely open to all visitors and licensed vehicle travel, which contributes to many of the management challenges.

Campground Zoning

With additional management of recreational activities on the beaches, including some reduction in camping, additional campgrounds will be needed. An equestrian campground, which will cater to a new recreational group, was identified along with trails around the campground for visitors who want to camp with their horses and ride through designated areas. Two additional campgrounds were also identified to provide additional campsites to assist in the displacement of visitors on the beach. Included in campground development is off-leash, gated and fenced, dog parks to provide guests the opportunities to let their dogs run and still remain in compliance with leash law regulations.

Access

Controlling access is another primary concern. NGPC will take actions to manage access to parts of the lakes by fencing, barrier placement, road closures, gates and gate houses. Gate houses will be used as a tool to effectively and efficiently collect fees. When fencing is put into place, walk through areas in certain locations to provide pedestrian access will be provided. Other improvements for access will include other road improvements and parking areas; since the activities and locations of activities on the beach will change, certain roads will need upgrades.

Amenities

Additional amenities are also slated for future development, including boat ramp improvements, new boat ramps, fishing improvements, and hike/bike, mountain bike, and water trails. Expansion of the Water Center, a group facility at Lake Ogallala and a new maintenance shop are planned.

Infrastructure

For development to be complete and meet visitor needs, additional upgrades to infrastructure will be required. This includes new parking, restrooms and showerhouses that will be placed in high traffic areas and where new development will occur. Electrical, water and sewer upgrades will be a necessity for this plan to be successful.

Implementation

Implementation of this plan will take time and significant financial commitments. Developments have been separated into five phases. Each phase reflects a four year time period. Phase I begins in 2017 and ends in 2020; Phase II is 2021-2024; Phase III is 2025-2028; Phase IV is 2029-2032; and Phase V is 2033-2037. The phasing timeline may change depending on the resources available and time required for implementing developments. This plan is meant to be a living, adaptive document. The actions undertaken will be evaluated and adjusted given new information, opportunities and effectiveness of the applied changes to meeting the goals in the plan. Changing the behaviors of visitors and management of the lakes will require NGPC to be flexible with solutions and adapt to lessons learned. Full evaluation of successes and failures will occur and the plan will be modified accordingly. Changes to the master plan will require thorough evaluation and additional public input.

An annual implementation plan will be developed to ensure that adaptive management strategies are used. The master plan provides the overarching picture of what development and management of the lakes should look like for the next 20 years. The intent of the plan is to fulfill the goals outlined and address the management challenges identified. If the master plan is fully implemented, specific zoning will occur on 48% of the beach, leaving the remaining 52% of the beach open to use as it exists today.

This plan is an ambitious endeavor for the betterment of two of the most visited and beloved park areas in the state. Lake McConaughy and Lake Ogallala State Recreation Areas are treasured for both their natural resources and the tremendous recreational opportunities they provide, and we must to continue to balance them both.