



San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Planning Update #1—Summer 2008



Green-winged teal are one of the most abundant dabbling ducks on the San Luis NWR Complex. Photo: Mike Peters

San Luis NWR Complex Overview

The San Luis National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex, which includes San Luis NWR, Merced NWR, San Joaquin River NWR, and Grasslands Wildlife Management Area, is located in the San Joaquin Valley of central California.

Located in a major wintering area along the Pacific Flyway, these Refuges were established primarily to provide critical habitat for wintering migratory birds and to protect endangered species. The Refuges contain a diverse mixture of habitats including seasonal and permanent wetlands, riparian corridors, native grassland complexes, and vernal pools, which attract millions of migratory birds and provide an important home for native mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and plants. The units of the San Luis NWR Complex that will be addressed in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan include the San Luis NWR, Merced NWR, and Grasslands Wildlife Management Area.

Greetings from the Refuge Manager

San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex (Complex) is about to embark on an important multi-year process to develop a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, Merced National Wildlife Refuge, and the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area. This plan will help to guide the management of the Refuges and Grasslands WMA for the next 15 years. Your ideas and comments will be an important part of the process, so I'd like to invite you to participate.

Before we begin the process, I'd like to provide background about the Refuge's history and current management. You'll also find some information about the National Wildlife Refuge System and how comprehensive conservation planning fits into the overall picture of refuge management. Planning will officially begin during the fall of 2008. You should receive our second "Planning Update" at that time, describing the

beginning of the planning process and information about attending our public scoping meetings.

We will frequently refer to background materials provided in this planning update (Planning Update #1) throughout the CCP process. Please try to read it before our first meeting; this will help all of us start on the same page, so to speak, when we begin our public scoping meetings.

I hope you'll feel free to contact me or Sandy Osborn, Refuge Planner, if you have any questions. See page 7 to learn about the CCP and page 8 for our phone

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Mayfly Karen Couch

“Wild beasts and birds are by right not the property merely of people who are alive today, but the property of unknown generations whose belongings we have no right to squander.”

—President Theodore Roosevelt

What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

The Service manages the 95 million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. The FWS also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 78 ecological services field stations.

The FWS enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat

such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.



Swainson's hawk
USFWS/Tom Kelley



What is the National Wildlife Refuge System?

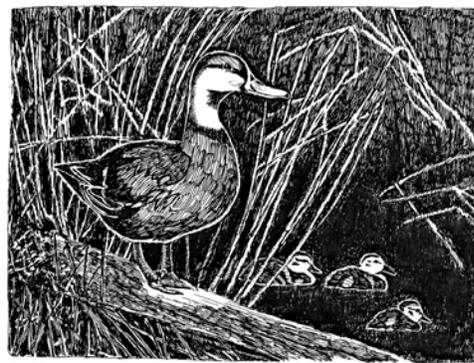
In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt protected an island with nesting pelicans, herons, ibis, and roseate spoonbills in Florida's Indian River from feather collectors decimating their colonies. He established Pelican Island as the nation's first bird sanctuary and went on to establish many other sanctuaries for wildlife during his tenure. This small network of sanctuaries continued to expand, later becoming the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Today, over 100 years later, San Luis NWR, Merced NWR, and Grasslands WMA are three of more than 545 National Wildlife Refuges encompassing nearly 95 million acres nationwide. The National Wildlife Refuge System (System) is the largest system of lands in the world dedicated primarily to the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants. The System is spread across 50 states, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Johnston Atoll, Midway Atoll, and several other

Pacific Islands. About 20.6 million acres in the Refuge System are managed as wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964.

In 1997 Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (Improvement Act), legislation which provides clear guidance for the management of the Refuge System. The act included a new statutory mission statement and directed FWS to manage the Refuge System as a national system of lands and waters devoted to conserving wildlife and maintaining biological integrity of ecosystems.

The Improvement Act requires the FWS to develop a comprehensive conservation plan for each refuge. It also stated that certain wildlife-dependent recreational uses are priority public uses on refuges and strengthened the compatibility determination process for assuring that these and other activities do not conflict with refuge management purposes and goals.



Mallard and chicks USFWS/Tom Kelley

What's in a name?

Many people confuse State and Federal fish and wildlife agencies because their names are similar. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is a Federal agency within the U.S. Department of Interior. The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is a department within the California Resources Agency.

Our names are similar and so are our missions: Both agencies are dedicated to the conservation of wildlife for the benefit of present and future generations. Our jurisdictions are different. The FWS is the lead agency responsible for Federal Endangered Species Act-listed plant and animal species and migratory birds, whether they are located on Federal, State, or private lands. The DFG has primary responsibility for resident fish and wildlife on State and private lands, and oversees California Endangered Species Act-listed plant and animal species and stream alteration issues throughout California.

San Luis NWR Complex is managed by the FWS, which coordinates with DFG on a variety of management issues.

San Luis & Merced NWR and Grasslands WMA

San Luis NWR consists of 26,878 acres, and was established in 1967. It hosts large concentrations of waterfowl and shorebirds, raptors and songbirds, and is home to a herd of endemic tule elk. The Merced NWR consists of 10,262 acres and supports the largest concentrations of wintering Ross' geese and lesser sandhill cranes along the Pacific Flyway. The Grasslands WMA was established in 1979. It contains more than 190 privately-owned parcels totaling approximately 90,000 acres. Most of the Grasslands WMA easement lands are privately-owned waterfowl hunting clubs.

San Luis NWRC Project Locations and Watershed

The San Luis NWR, Merced NWR, and Grasslands WMA are located in Merced County in California's San Joaquin Valley. The units are within the watersheds of the San Joaquin and Merced Rivers and their associated tributaries.

History of San Luis NWR, Merced NWR, and Grasslands WMA

The **San Luis NWR** was established in 1967 under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. The first parcel of the Refuge was purchased with Federal Duck Stamp funds to provide a sanctuary for migratory waterfowl. Since then, additional lands have been acquired. Today, the San Luis NWR includes six contiguous units: San Luis, Kesterson, West Bear Creek, East Bear Creek, Freitas, and Blue Goose.

The **Merced NWR** was established in 1951 under the authority of the Lea Act and Migratory Bird Conservation Act. Under the Lea Act, a founding purpose of the Refuge was to attract waterfowl away from adjacent agricultural land where major crop depredation was occurring. In the last few decades, changes in local agricultural practices and Refuge management activities have reduced these wildlife/crop issues. The Refuge consists of the Merced, Lonetree, Arena Plains, and Snowbird units.

The **Grasslands WMA** was established in 1979 under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, Endangered Species Act, and Emergency Wetlands

Resources Act. The Grasslands WMA includes approximately 190 properties under FWS conservation easements.

Overview of Habitats and Resources

The San Luis NWR is a major wintering ground and migratory stopover point for large concentrations of waterfowl, shorebirds, and other waterbirds. Large flocks of northern shoveler, mallard, gadwall, wigeon, green-winged teal, cinnamon teal, northern pintail, and snow, Ross', and white-fronted geese swarm over the mosaic of seasonal and permanent wetlands that comprise a quarter of the Refuge. Waterfowl generally remain until early April before beginning their journey north to breeding areas. However, some mallard, gadwall, and cinnamon teal stay and breed on the



Large wading birds, such as great egrets, are commonly found on the Complex year round. Photo: Jerry Baldwin

Refuge. Tens of thousands of shorebirds, including sandpipers and plovers, can be found from autumn through spring. Large flocks of dunlin, long-billed dowitchers, least sandpipers, and western sandpipers can be found feeding in shallow seasonal wetlands, whereas flocks of long-billed curlews are found using both wetlands and grasslands.

The San Luis NWR has played a key role in the recovery of the tule elk, a non-migratory elk subspecies found only in California. Prior to the mid-1800s, an estimated 500,000 tule elk lived in California. Due to over-hunting and loss of



A flock of northern pintails and northern shovelers takes flight. Photo: Mike Peters

Great Blue Heron
USFWS/Tom Kelley



natural habitat, they were nearly driven to extinction by the turn of the twentieth century—by some accounts, the population was down to 10–20 individuals. In 1974 a herd of 18 animals was established in a large enclosure at the San Luis NWR and has since thrived.

Extensive upland habitats are also found on the San Luis NWR. Many of these habitats are characterized by saline or alkaline conditions which are accentuated by the low rainfall and arid conditions that characterize the San Joaquin Valley. These habitats support a rich botanical community of native bunchgrasses, native and exotic annual grasses, forbs, and native shrubs. Trees, such as the valley oak, cottonwood, and willow grow along riparian corridors.

The Merced NWR plays host to the largest wintering populations of lesser sandhill cranes and Ross' geese along the Pacific Flyway. Each autumn over 20,000 cranes and 60,000 arctic-nesting geese terminate their annual migrations

from Alaska and Canada to make the Refuge home for six months. Here they mingle with thousands of other visiting waterfowl, waterbirds, and shorebirds making the Refuge a true winter phenomenon. The Refuge also provides important breeding habitat for Swainson's hawks, tri-colored blackbirds, and burrowing owls. Tri-colored blackbirds—a colonial-nesting songbird—breed in colonies of over 25,000 pairs in robust herbaceous vegetation.

Vernal pools are a seasonal wetland habitat found on Merced NWR and San Luis NWR. These special pools form when natural shallow depressions underlaid with clay soils fill with winter rainwater. The pools come to life as they fill: fairy and tadpole shrimp emerge from cysts embedded in the soils the year before. The endangered tiger salamander, along with other amphibians, lay eggs and rear tadpoles. The vast number of aquatic invertebrates found in these pools provides a food source for wintering and migrating birds as they prepare for the long flight north to their breeding grounds. As spring arrives and the water in the vernal pools evaporates, wildflowers—such as goldfields,

purple owl's clover, and butter-and-egg—germinate in colorful patterns of thick rings or halos around the pool basins. Once the vernal pools have dried out, Dowingia and Colusa grass, a rare California species, appears in the parched basins.

In addition to managing natural habitats, the Merced NWR contains approximately 300 acres of cultivated corn and winter wheat crops and over 500 acres of irrigated pasture for wildlife. Not only do these managed agricultural areas provide important sources of carbohydrates to the tens of thousands of arctic-nesting geese and sandhill cranes that make Merced County their winter home, they also help ensure that the birds will have adequate nutrient stores to make the long migration north to their breeding grounds.

The Grasslands WMA consists primarily of seasonal wetlands along with lesser amounts of livestock pasture and agricultural lands. Management of the wetlands within the Grasslands WMA is very similar to the management practices used on the San Luis NWR and Merced NWR, with various flooding/drainage and mechanical manipulation regimes. The habitats found in the Grasslands WMA harbor several unique and sensitive animals, such as giant garter snakes, tri-colored blackbirds, burrowing owls, bald eagles, and Swainson's hawks.

(continued page 6)

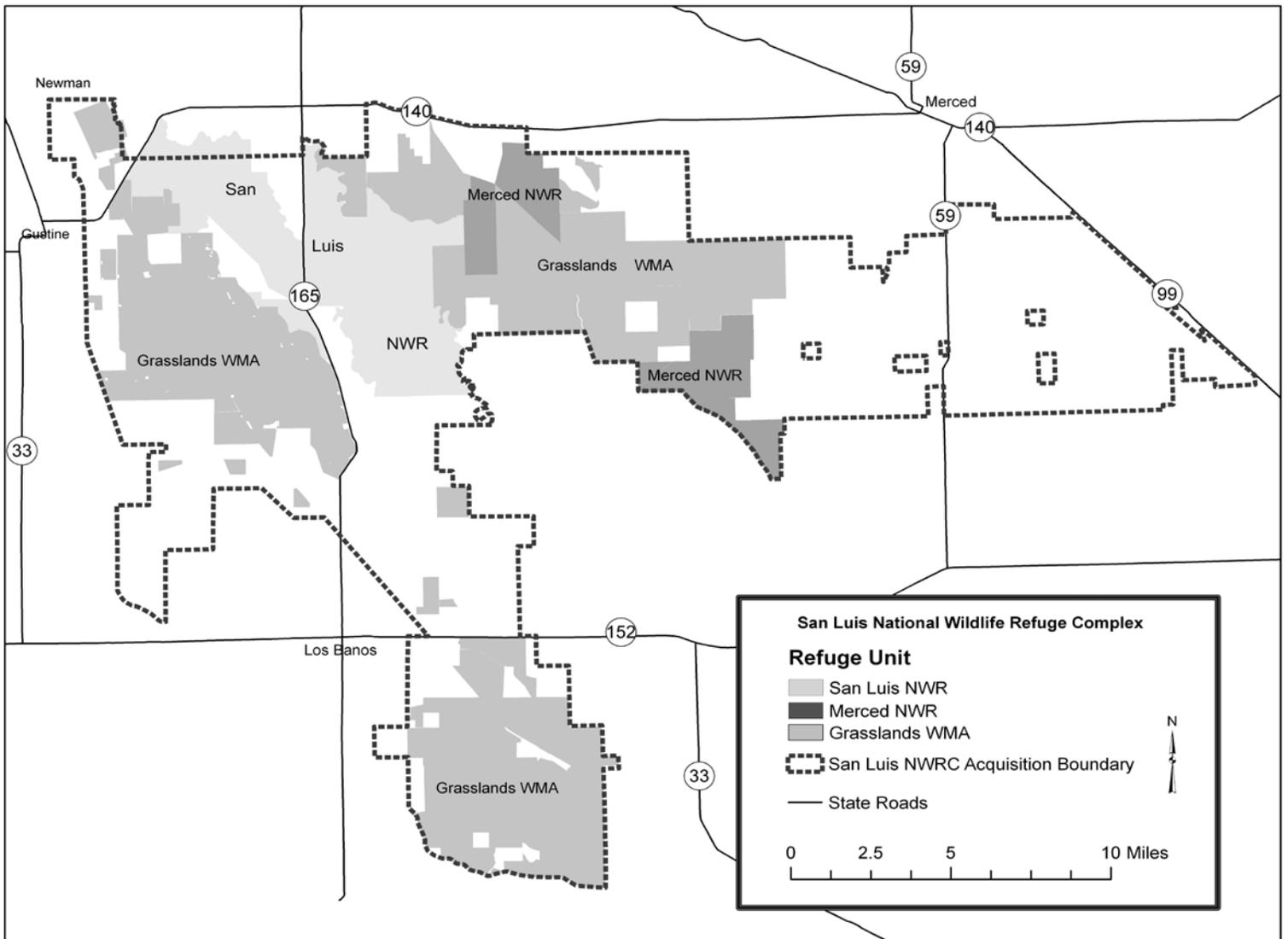


American white pelicans, with incredible 9-ft wingspans, are present on the Complex throughout the year. Photo: Lee Eastman



Tri-colored blackbirds breed in colonies of over 25,000 pairs. Photo: Dave Menke

Map of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex



The Complex offers many opportunities for wildlife observation and other wildlife-dependent recreation activities. Photo: USFWS

Visitor Services at San Luis NWR and Merced NWR

There are exciting things to see and do throughout the year, with peak wildlife viewing generally occurring during the winter. Wildlife observation, fishing, hunting, photography, interpretation, and environmental education are all popular at San Luis NWR and Merced NWR.

Because they are privately owned, lands within the Grasslands WMA are not open to the general public and most of the lands are managed as private waterfowl hunting areas.

Automobile tour routes at the San Luis NWR and Merced NWR enable visitors to experience diverse assortments of wildlife. The San Luis NWR has a 5-mile tule elk auto tour that takes visitors around an enclosed herd of tule elk. Interpretive panels

along the way tell the successful story of the elk's recovery from near extinction. A 12-mile waterfowl auto tour at the San Luis NWR provides viewers the opportunity to see the vast numbers of ducks and geese that make the Refuge their winter home. The 2 ¼-mile auto tour at the West Bear Creek unit of the San Luis NWR provides a view of waterfowl, shorebirds, and riparian songbirds. On the Merced NWR auto tour route, visitors can view thousands of sandhill cranes and Ross' geese. Most of these auto tour routes have associated nature trails and observation decks with permanently mounted viewing scopes.

At the San Luis NWR and Merced NWR, fieldtrips are routinely conducted for schools from throughout California. By exploring the Refuges, classes of all grade levels integrate the natural world into their classroom lessons. Many interpretive components, such as interpretive panels and information kiosks, help visitors understand key wildlife issues, interesting facts, and natural resource management strategies.

The San Luis NWR and Merced NWR have longstanding waterfowl hunting

programs. Various units of each Refuge offer diverse opportunities for waterfowl hunting, such as free-roam, hunting from blinds, and hunting by boat. Waterfowl hunting during the legal season generally takes place on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with several exceptions. The Freitas Unit of San Luis NWR is open daily during the waterfowl hunting season, and the Merced NWR



San Luis NWR is home to a herd of endemic tule elk—a subspecies of elk almost lost to extinction in the early-1900s. Photo: Lee Eastman

is open on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The waterfowl hunting programs at San Luis NWR and Merced NWR are cooperatively managed with the California Department of Fish and Game.

Designated areas of the San Luis NWR are open to fishing during daylight hours. The most common species caught are channel catfish, bullhead catfish, striped bass, and black bass. All anglers must have a current fishing license with proper stamps. Fishing is accomplished from the bank of Salt Slough and from an ADA-accessible fishing pier.

Recent and Ongoing Resource Management Activities

Activities on the San Luis NWR have focused on wetland management including maintenance, enhancement, and restoration activities. The Refuge contains approximately 100 seasonal wetland basins; the majority are managed as moist soil units requiring periodic disking, mowing, and/or prescribed burning. Recent wetland restoration activities at the Kesterson and West Bear Creek units of the Refuge and a major wetland restoration project on the East Bear Creek should be completed within the

year. These wetland units provide habitat for hundreds of thousands of waterbirds. Although known for its wetland habitats, the San Luis NWR has significant grassland habitat which is managed for a diversity of migratory birds and resident wildlife through prescribed burning, seeding, grazing, mowing, and other techniques. Major wildlife management activities have included a re-introduction of black-tailed deer and management of a tule elk herd.

The resource management program at the Merced NWR, like the San Luis NWR, comprises many varied wetland management techniques associated with providing/creating high quality habitat for waterfowl and other waterbirds. Management of irrigated pasture and croplands is conducted to attract and hold Ross',

snow, and white-fronted geese on the Refuge, as well as lesser sandhill cranes, from autumn through spring. Thousands upon thousands of geese and cranes winter at Merced NWR. Other Refuge activities focus on the management and protection of vernal pool habitats and their dependent wildlife/plant communities, as well as grassland management for migratory birds and resident wildlife. A major effort to restore vernal pool and wetland habitats will continue over the next few years on one of the Refuge's units. Restoring native grasslands is a continuing process at all of the units. Wildlife management activities include the protection and management of waterbird and tri-colored blackbird nesting colonies.

Management activities at the Grassland WMA primarily focus on ensuring easement (which protect habitat and benefit wildlife) compliance on these private lands—most of which are managed as wetland habitat for waterfowl. Additional activities include acquiring new easement lands within the approved acquisition boundary to preclude landscape fragmentation of wetland/native grassland habitats, as well as habitat enhancement or restoration projects to benefit migratory birds on easement lands.

What is a CCP?

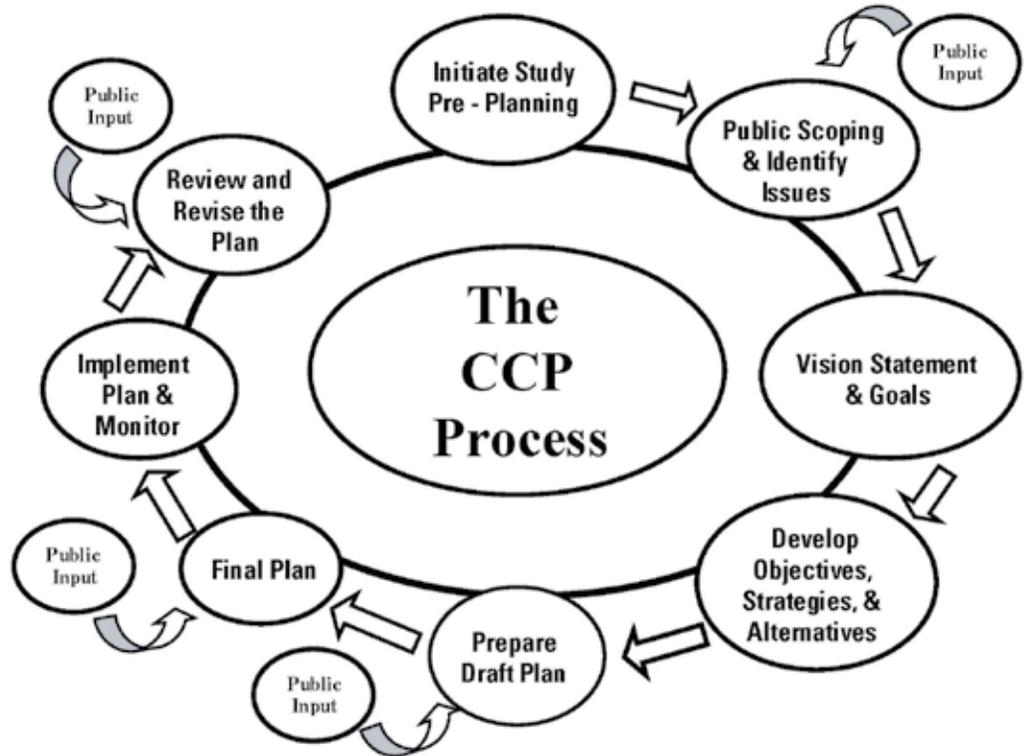
When Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, it incorporated an underlying philosophy that “wildlife comes first” on refuges.

The act provides the FWS with guidance for managing refuges to ensure the long-term conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Two important principles of the Improvement Act are to maintain biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the refuge and facilitate compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

Every refuge must have a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) completed by 2012. The CCP will outline refuge goals, objectives, and management strategies. It is a flexible, “living” document that will be updated every 15 years.

The CCP:

- Ensures that management of the refuge reflects the purposes of the refuge and the mission, policies, and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System;
- Provides the public with an understanding of the reasons for management actions on the refuge;
- Provides a vision statement for the refuge;
- Ensures the compatibility of current and future uses of the refuge with its purposes;
- Provides long-term continuity in refuge management; and



- Provides budget justification for operation and maintenance and facility development requests.

The CCP will provide broad management direction and guidance for the refuge, contingent upon future funding and resources. The accompanying environmental document, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, will describe the alternatives considered and their environmental effects. You will have

an opportunity to review and comment on the draft CCP and environmental document.

During September 2008 we will hold our first public scoping meetings to help identify issues and gather information. The key planning steps are listed above and will be listed in future updates so you can track our progress through the planning process.

The CCP will outline refuge goals, objectives, and management strategies. It is a flexible, “living” document that will be updated every 15 years.

Compatibility of refuge uses

Prior to allowing various public uses on the refuge, Federal law requires that the FWS first determine that these specific uses are compatible.

A compatible use is a proposed or existing use of a National Wildlife Refuge that, based on sound professional judgment of the Refuge Manager, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the refuge.

Compatibility determinations are used to help evaluate such uses and will be integrated as part of the CCP

planning process. Many compatibility determinations were completed for San Luis NWR, Merced NWR, and Grasslands WMA between 1994 and 2005. Compatibility determinations were made for uses including: environmental education and interpretation, outdoor recreation, research, wildlife observation, photography, grazing and haying, farming, right-of-way, waterfowl and upland game hunting, and recreational fishing.

It is possible that compatibility determinations for other proposed uses will be completed in the course of the CCP planning process.

Please feel free to contact us!

We are available to provide additional information about the Refuge history, goals, and accomplishments to date, and to answer any questions about the planning process. Feel free to call, write, e-mail, or come to see us.

If you did not receive this newsletter through the mail and would like to be on our mailing list, please contact us. You can also find information at our website <http://pacific.fws.gov/planning/>

If you would like to be removed from the list or are receiving multiple copies of these notices, please let us know.



USFWS/Tom Kelley

Muskrat

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Public Meeting Schedule

Public scoping meetings are scheduled for Wednesday, September 24, 2008, in Los Banos. We will send out another Planning Update before the meetings, but please check our website for updates prior to that time:

<http://www.fws.gov/cno/refuges/planning/ccp.cfm>



Photo: USFWS

The Merced NWR consists of 10,262 acres and supports the largest concentrations of wintering Ross' geese and lesser sandhill cranes—often as many as 60,000 geese and 20,000 cranes—along the Pacific Flyway.



Photo: USFWS/Richard Albers