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**Authority:** This notice is published under the authority of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, Public Law 105-57.

Dated: September 14, 2010.

**Mark J. Musaus,**

*Acting Regional Director.*

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## DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

### Fish and Wildlife Service

[FWS-R2-R-2010-N208; 20131-1265-2CCP-S3]

#### **Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Aransas, Calhoun, and Refugio Counties, TX; Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Finding of No Significant Impact for Environmental Assessment**

**AGENCY:** Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

**ACTION:** Notice of availability.

**SUMMARY:** We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), announce the availability of our final comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and finding of no significant impact (FONSI) for the environmental assessment (EA) for the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex (NWRC). In this final CCP, we describe how we will manage this refuge for the next 15 years.

**ADDRESSES:** You may view or obtain copies of the final CCP and FONSI/EA by any of the following methods. You may request a hard copy or CD-ROM.

*Agency Web Site:* Download a copy of the document(s) at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/Plan/index.html>.

*E-mail:* [roxanne\\_turley@fws.gov](mailto:roxanne_turley@fws.gov).

Include "Aransas final CCP" in the subject line of the message.

*Mail:* Roxanne Turley, Natural Resource Planner, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Division of Planning, P.O. Box 1306, Albuquerque, NM 87103-1306.

*In-Person Viewing or Pickup:* Call 505-248-6636 to make an appointment during regular business hours at 500 Gold Avenue SW., Albuquerque, NM 87102.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Dan Alonso, Refuge Manager, Aransas NWRC, P.O. Box 100, Austwell, TX 77050; by phone, 361-286-3559; or by e-mail, [dan\\_alonso@fws.gov](mailto:dan_alonso@fws.gov).

#### **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**

##### **Introduction**

With this notice, we finalize the CCP process for the Aransas NWRC. We started this process through a notice in the **Federal Register** August 30, 2002 (67 FR 55862).

Aransas NWRC is located in Aransas, Calhoun, and Refugio Counties, Texas, and encompasses 115,931 acres of coastal prairie, oak woodland and savannah, barrier island, and salt and freshwater marshes. Management efforts focus on protecting, enhancing, and restoring Refuge habitats and water management for the benefit of important fish and wildlife resources. The Refuge is world renowned for hosting the largest wild flock of endangered whooping cranes each winter. Other native species on the Refuge include the American alligator, javelina, roseate spoonbill, armadillo, and wildflowers.

Aransas NWRC was established "as a refuge and breeding grounds for birds", by Executive Order No. 7784 on December 31, 1937. The authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 712d) establishes that each refuge in the system is "for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or any other management purpose, for migratory birds." The Refuge Recreation Act (16 U.S.C. 460-1) states that each refuge in the system is "suitable for incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, the protection of natural resources, and the conservation of endangered or threatened species." Additionally, Aransas NWRC contains critical habitat for the whooping crane (43 FR 20938, May 15, 1978).

We announce our decision and the availability of the FONSI for the final CCP for the Aransas NWRC in accordance with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (40 CFR 1506.6(b)) requirements. We completed a thorough analysis of impacts on the human environment, which we included in the EA that accompanied the draft CCP.

The CCP will guide us in managing and administering the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex for the next 15 years. Alternative B, with modifications as described in Appendix J (Response to Public Comments), is selected as the management direction for the Final Plan.

##### **Background**

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee) (Refuge Administration Act), as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, requires us to develop a CCP for each national wildlife refuge. The purpose for developing a CCP is to provide refuge managers with a 15-year plan for achieving refuge purposes and contributing toward the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, consistent with sound principles of fish and wildlife management, conservation, legal mandates, and our policies. In addition to outlining broad management direction on conserving wildlife and their habitats, CCPs identify wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities available to the public, including opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. We will review and update the CCP at least every 15 years in accordance with the Refuge Administration Act.

##### **CCP Alternatives, Including Selected Alternative**

Our draft CCP and our EA (75 FR 6872) addressed several issues. To address these, we developed and evaluated the following alternatives.

	A: No-action alternative	B: Optimal habitat management and public use (proposed action) alternative	C: Maximal habitat management and public-use alternative
Issue 1: Habitat Management Activities.	Biological program and habitat management would continue under existing plans, with the emphasis remaining primarily on migratory birds, waterfowl, and Federally listed species; the status quo would prevail without the benefit of holistic, long-term, and comprehensive guidance.	Ecosystem-level management actions to better protect and preserve the natural diversity of unique habitats and sensitive wildlife, through a holistic, partnered, and publically involved approach, would be implemented; current and future long-term benefits for migratory and resident birds, wildlife and their habitats, and the recovery of threatened and endangered species would be provided.	Intensive management to achieve a predetermined amount of woodlands, wetlands, croplands, grasslands, shrublands, and water impoundments to benefit the highest variety of plants and wildlife would be implemented.
Issue 2: Improvements to Public Use Opportunities.	Current public use under existing plans would continue; any expansions would occur opportunistically.	An optimal, quality experience for the public. Priority wildlife-dependent uses would be emphasized, and other existing public uses would be allowed where appropriate.	All priority public uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education and interpretation) would be expanded above current levels. Visitor facilities and interpretive and environmental education programs would be improved or developed.
Issue 3: Refuge Land and Boundary Protection.	Currently, there is no active land acquisition or land protection plan. However, any future acquisitions would be based on an approved land protection plan, developed as a step-down plan of the CCP. Any additional lands added to the Refuge would be purchased from willing sellers as opportunities and funding arise.	Same as Alternative A; however, additional land protection to address whooping crane flock expansion in the vicinity of the Refuge would be considered. The emphasis would remain on protecting whooping cranes and available acres of existing wetland or restorable wetland habitat and adjacent uplands in portions of Aransas, Calhoun, and Refugio Counties.	Same as Alternative A.

**Comments**

We solicited comments on the draft CCP and the EA for the Aransas NWRC from February 12, 2010, to April 13, 2010 (75 FR 7862). Subsequently, the Draft Plan/EA was made available for public review starting on February 12, 2010, at the Refuge, online, and at the Regional Office in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Two open house meetings were held in communities near the Refuge in March 2010. In all, approximately 30 individuals attended the open house meetings and a total of 73 comments were submitted in writing or phoned in to the Refuge/Regional Office. Additionally, one State agency, two Federal agencies, and four nongovernmental organizations responded prior to the end of the 60-day public comment period.

Based on the comments received, the Draft Plan/EA was changed to include

an improved assessment of effects to air and water resources, inclusion of wildlife observed at the refuge, added strategies for wildlife-dependent recreation, and updates or added supplemental information throughout the document.

**Selected Alternative**

After considering the comments we received, we have selected Alternative B for implementation. This alternative describes how habitat objectives will be accomplished through a combination of management activities to encourage ecological integrity, promote restoration of coastal prairie habitats, control invasive plant species, and provide long-term benefits for migratory and resident birds and the recovery of threatened and endangered species. This alternative was selected because it best meets refuge purposes and goals of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Complex. This action will not adversely impact threatened or endangered species or their habitat. Opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation activities, such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation, will be enhanced. Future management actions will have a neutral or positive impact on the local economy, and the recommendations in the Plan will ensure that Refuge management is consistent with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

**Public Availability of Documents**

In addition to the methods in ADDRESSES, you can view or obtain documents at the following locations:

- Our Web site: [http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/STRC/laguna/Index\\_Laguna.html](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/STRC/laguna/Index_Laguna.html).
- At the following libraries:

Library	Address	Phone number
Victoria Public Library .....	302 N Main St., Victoria, TX 77901 .....	361-572-2701
Parkdale Branch Library .....	1230 Carmel Pkwy., Corpus Christi, TX 78411 .....	361-853-9961
Calhoun County Public Library .....	200 West Mahan St., Port Lavaca, TX 77979 .....	361-552-7323
Aransas County Public Library .....	701 E Mimosa St., Rockport, TX 78382 .....	361-790-0153

Dated: January 19, 2011.

**Joy Nicholopoulos.**

*Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Region 2.*

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**DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

**Bureau of Land Management**

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L91310000.EJ0000.LXSIGEOT0000 241A;  
MO#4500018986; NVN 087795; 11-08807;  
TAS:14X5575]

**Notice of Availability of the Draft  
Environmental Impact Statement for  
the Salt Wells Energy Projects,  
Churchill County, NV**

**AGENCY:** Bureau of Land Management,  
Interior.

**ACTION:** Notice of Availability.

**SUMMARY:** In accordance with of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Salt Wells Energy Projects and by this notice is announcing the opening of the comment period.

**DATES:** To ensure comments will be considered, the BLM must receive written comments on the Salt Wells Energy Projects Draft EIS within 60 days following the date the Environmental Protection Agency publishes its Notice of Availability in the **Federal Register**. The BLM will announce future meetings or hearings and any other public involvement activities at least 15 days in advance through public notices, media releases, and/or mailings.

**ADDRESSES:** You may submit comments related to the Salt Wells Energy Projects by any of the following methods:

- *Web site:* [http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/carson\\_city\\_field.html](http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/carson_city_field.html).
- *E-mail:* [saltwells\\_eis@blm.gov](mailto:saltwells_eis@blm.gov).
- *Fax:* 775-885-6147.
- *Mail or other delivery service:* BLM Carson City District, Stillwater Field Office, Attn: Salt Wells Energy Projects, 5665 Morgan Mill Road, Carson City, Nevada 89701.

Copies of the Salt Wells Energy Projects Draft EIS are available in the BLM Carson City District, Stillwater Field Office at the above address.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:**

Colleen Sievers, (775) 885-6000, or e-mail: [saltwells\\_eis@blm.gov](mailto:saltwells_eis@blm.gov).

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The BLM Stillwater Field Office received separate proposed geothermal utilization plans and applications for facilities

construction permits from Vulcan Power Company (Vulcan) and Ormat Technologies, Inc. (Ormat), and an electric transmission right-of-way (ROW) application from Sierra Pacific Power Company (SPPC), for proposed geothermal energy projects covering a combined area of approximately 24,152 acres in the Salt Wells area about 15 miles east of Fallon, Nevada. Vulcan proposes the development of as many as four geothermal power plants and associated facilities. Ormat proposes the development of one geothermal power plant and associated facilities. SPPC proposes 22 miles of above-ground electrical transmission lines, electrical substations, and switching stations. Due to similar timing, geographic area, and type of action, the BLM is analyzing the proposals in one EIS. The BLM will issue a separate Record of Decision for each proposed project.

The proposed facilities would be sited on a combination of private property and public land; the public land is managed by the BLM and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation).

The Vulcan project proposal is to construct as many as four 30- to 60-megawatt (MW) binary or dual-flash geothermal power plants and associated facilities at five possible locations for a total net output of 120 MW. Each site includes production and injection wells, pipelines, a substation, interconnection lines to the proposed substation, and access roads. The Vulcan project could require an estimated 46 geothermal production and injection wells. Twenty of these wells have been analyzed in two previous environmental assessments (EA): Salt Wells Geothermal Drilling EA for Ten Drilling Wells, EA-NV-030-07-05 (February 6, 2007), and Salt Wells Geothermal Exploratory Drilling Program EA for Ten Wells, DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2009-0006-EA (April 24, 2009).

The Ormat project proposal includes the construction and operation of a 40-MW binary combination wet- and air-cooled geothermal power plant, a substation, a switching station, and an associated transmission line between the power plant and switching station. These facilities would be developed on an 80-acre private parcel. While Ormat has not yet determined the total number of production and injection wells needed, up to 13 well pads would be constructed in addition to the 12 well pads previously analyzed in the Carson Lake Geothermal Exploration Project EA-NV-030-07-006 and DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2010-0012—Determination of NEPA Adequacy, and authorized by the BLM on July 25, 2008, and July 22, 2010, respectively up to five wells might

be drilled from each pad location. Associated pipelines and roads would also be permitted and constructed.

The SPPC proposal includes construction of a new substation, 22 miles of single circuit 230-kilovolt (kV) transmission line, two 230-kV switching stations, and two 60-kV electric lines.

The BLM's purpose for this EIS is to direct and control the use of public lands for the orderly development of commercial-scale geothermal power generation facilities, associated infrastructure, and a transmission line in a manner that will protect natural resources and prevent unnecessary or undue degradation to the public lands following the NEPA regulations [40 CFR 2801.2]. In accordance with 43 CFR part 2800 and 43 CFR part 3200, the BLM needs to process the applications to construct, operate, and maintain the proposed Salt Wells Energy Projects. Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) authorizes the Secretary of the Interior (through the BLM) to grant ROWs over, upon, under, or through public lands for the purposes of generating and transmitting electric energy. These projects are consistent with the BLM Carson City District Office Consolidated Resource Management Plan (2001).

In addition to the proposed actions, the BLM is analyzing the following action alternatives. For the Vulcan project, an alternative switching station and interconnection 230-kV transmission line is proposed should SPPC elect not to build its project. For the Ormat project, the BLM developed an alternative to relocate specific well sites and a portion of a pipeline to maintain consistency with lease stipulations and land use plan decisions to protect riparian vegetation and surface waters within canals. For the SPPC project, two alternative routes for the proposed 230-kV transmission line and an alternative examining the construction of an additional fiber optic line to connect communications from Highway 50 are being considered to minimize impacts to the nearby Fallon Naval Air Station (NAS) airspace. As required under NEPA, the Draft EIS analyzes a no-action alternative for each of the proposed projects.

The BLM took into consideration the provisions of the Energy Policy Act of 2005, and Secretarial Orders 3283, *Enhancing Renewable Energy Development on the Public Lands*, and 3285A1, *Renewable Energy Development by the Department of the Interior*, in responding to the applications.

The Draft EIS analyzes site-specific impacts of the proposed projects on