



San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge

Proposed Expansion

Planning Update #1 – May 2011



Riparian oak. Photo: USFWS

Greetings!

This is the first in a series of updates provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to share information on a proposal to expand the boundary of the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) in Stanislaus, San Joaquin, and Merced Counties, California. Expanding the boundary would allow the Service to acquire lands and develop conservation agreements with willing landowners.

This update provides a brief summary of the project; explains the planning process, documents, and how to provide comments; and includes a planning schedule. Through these updates, we plan to share information with you and seek your involvement in the planning process. Your input is very important. It helps us gather information and identify issues affecting you, your community, and the natural resources of the San Joaquin River. If you do not wish to receive these updates, please let us know through one of the points of contact listed on the last page.

The Refuge

The San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge is located west of Modesto, California within the historic floodplain of the confluences of the San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne Rivers. Refuge lands consist of oak-cottonwood-willow riparian forest, pastures, agricultural fields, and wetlands.

The Refuge was established in 1987 because of the importance of the area as habitat for the Aleutian Canada goose, once listed as endangered, but since delisted. Other listed species at the Refuge include the riparian brush rabbit and riparian wood rat.

The Refuge also protects the habitat of other native plants and animals, such as neotropical migratory birds, waterfowl, and colonial nesting birds.

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Lara peninsula. Photo: USFWS

What is the Fish and Wildlife Service?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 150-million acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses more than 553 refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat.

Why Expand the Refuge?

The San Joaquin River presents a unique conservation opportunity to restore a major migratory corridor through the center of California to benefit the birds of the Pacific Flyway, neotropical migratory birds, and other

wildlife. The proposed expansion would connect the Refuge with the Grasslands Ecological Area, a 160,000-acre mosaic of Central Valley floor habitats located in the historic floodplain of the San Joaquin River. This vast network of freshwater marshes (permanent and seasonal), alkali grassland and riparian thickets is the result of decades of collaborative conservation agreements between private duck clubs, CA State Parks (Great Valley Grasslands), CA Department of Fish and Game (Volta, Los Banos, and North Grasslands wildlife areas), and the Service (San Luis and Merced NWRs, Grasslands WMA). Maintaining connectivity between the remaining natural areas and minimizing further fragmentation is crucial to the long term viability of California's natural heritage.

The San Joaquin River basin once supported a highly diverse and species-rich ecosystem. The Valley floor was composed of a complex matrix of distinct riverine and wetland habitats in close proximity to one another. The complex system of channels, swales, ridges, flood basins, and sloughs were periodically inundated and supported a great diversity of permanent and seasonal wetlands, riparian scrub and forest, and aquatic habitat teeming with fish and wildlife. These seasonal and permanent

freshwater marsh and wetlands were, and continue to be, important habitat for migratory birds of the Pacific Flyway. Tens of millions of migratory waterfowl darkened the skies each winter. Nearly 50,000 acres of riparian forest rich with neotropical migratory birds and unique small mammal species flanked the streams and rivers in the basin. Historically, the San Joaquin River's Chinook salmon runs accounted for up to 40 percent (over 300,000) of the San Joaquin Valley's total Chinook salmon.

Historic impacts, such as gravel mining, construction of dams and diversions, and habitat clearing, dewatered the river and destroyed the surrounding wetlands that used to span a wide swath of the valley floor. Current threats, especially habitat modification and insufficient water supply, continue to degrade the river and can derail efforts to bring the river back to life. Less than 10 percent of historic riparian habitat exists and wetland habitats have shrunk to roughly five percent of their former extent. This loss of habitat has had substantial negative effects on migratory and resident wildlife populations.

Through the proposed expansion, the Service seeks to build on the success of previous restoration efforts and those of its many partners to conserve and restore fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats along San Joaquin River for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

What Area is the Service Studying?

The Service is studying two segments along the San Joaquin River. The northern portion of the study area includes a 15-mile reach of the San Joaquin River from the existing boundary of the San Joaquin River Refuge north to a point west of Manteca, where the River divides into three segments: Paradise Cut, Old River, and the San Joaquin River. This segment is located in San Joaquin County, California. The southern portion lies between the Refuge and the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, 26 miles to the south. This segment is located in Merced and Stanislaus Counties, California.



Aerial view of San Joaquin River NWR. Photo: Stephen Sheppard (River Partners)



San Joaquin River NWR. Photo: USFWS

The Land Protection Planning Process

The Service initiates the land protection planning process to study a habitat conservation proposal. Proposals must demonstrate that adding habitat or lands to the National Wildlife Refuge System is the best way to achieve protection. The process is then carried out as follows.

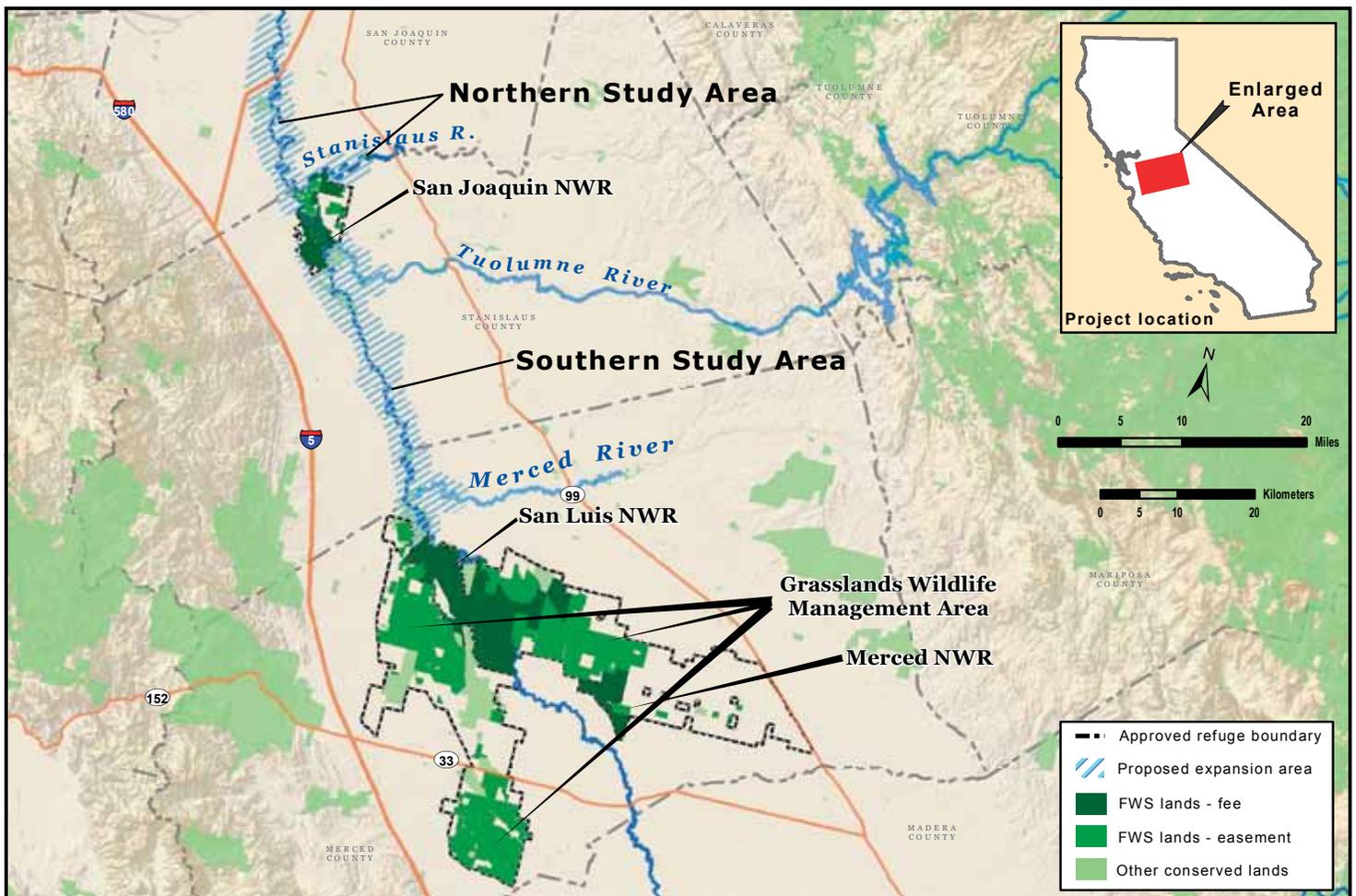
- The planning process integrates three components: study and planning, public involvement, and environmental compliance.
- The documentation that evolves from the process includes an environmental compliance document, and a land protection plan.
- These documents are provided to the public for review and comment to ensure the interested public is informed about Service proposals.
- Based on the alternatives presented, Service decision makers choose an appropriate course of action.

- If part or all of the lands are approved for addition, an expanded refuge boundary is established and the planning process is complete.

A refuge project boundary defines an area where the Service may acquire lands (fee title acquisition) or interest in land (easements). The project boundary does not convey any regulatory requirements or make any land use changes, it merely allows the Service to pursue acquisition opportunities. It is Service policy to acquire land only from land-owners who are willing sellers. Acquisitions are subject to funding availability.

Public Involvement

You can provide input by letting us know your ideas and concerns for this proposal. Your participation at various stages of the planning process is an integral part of the refuge's growth. If you would like to be added to or deleted from our mailing list for this project, please let us know. Contact information is on the next page.



Proposed Expansion Study Area

Who to Contact

If you have questions and concerns, or would like more information, please feel free to call or write us at the following addresses and phone numbers:

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Region 8, Refuge Planning
Richard Smith**
2800 Cottage Way, W-1832
Sacramento, CA 95825
Fax: (916) 414-6497

**Kim Forrest, Project Leader
San Luis National Wildlife
Refuge Complex**
P.O. Box 2176
Los Banos, California 93635
Phone: (209) 826-3508

Use our e-mail and website

E-mail: fw8plancomments@fws.gov
(Please use "San Joaquin River" as the subject.)

Refuge Planning Website:
<http://www.fws.gov/cno/refuges/>

Planning Schedule	Target Date
Study initiation, issue identification, information gathering, begin scoping	April, 2011
Public meetings	June 1 and 2, 2011
Your issues and comments should be received by this date. Review of public comments begins	July 15, 2011
Draft planning documents available for public review and comment	Winter 2011/Spring, 2012
Final decision on expansion	Summer, 2012



Public meetings will be held:

Wednesday, June 1st, 6-8 pm in Los Banos, at the Miller and Lux building, 830 6th Street, Los Banos.

Thursday, June 2nd, 6-8 pm, at the River Partners office, (upstairs) at 1301 L Street, Suite 4: Modesto.

Waterfowl. Photo: Gary Zahm, USFWS

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