U.S. Department of the Interior
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
California/Nevada Operations Office
Sacramento, California

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
Proposed Tulare Basin Wildlife Management Area
Kern National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Kern & Tulare Counties, California

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the *Environmental Assessment for the Proposed Tulare Basin Wildlife Management Area.* The Environmental Assessment describes the Service's proposal, the affected environment, and evaluates three alternatives (including a no action alternative) to determine the effects associated with establishing the Tulare Basin Management Area (WMA). The Land Protection Plan and Conceptual Management Plan describe and provide information on land acquisition priorities and management programs for potential implementation within the proposed WMA area.

The Service proposes to establish the WMA to conserve, protect, and restore seasonal wetlands, native grasslands, and wildlife compatible croplands through the purchase of perpetual conservation easements. It is the intent of the Service to maintain currently existing land use that support resident and migratory wildlife.

The Service analyzed three alternatives, including the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1), in the Environmental Assessment. Alternative 1 does not support the conservation and recovery goals of the Service, its numerous partners, and conservation organizations. Long-term protection of the area's wildlife habitat would not be likely without some type of incentive to the landowner. Fragmentation of the existing natural habitat is likely to continue without landowner incentives. Two major forces are at work in removing suitable wildlife compatible habitats from within the project area they are: (1) increases in operation and maintenance costs for managed wetland habitats, especially water; and (2) increasingly intensive land uses, such as conversion from grass to row crops, orchards, vineyards, poultry farms, sewage disposal sites, and construction of new dairies. It is anticipated that continuing loses of private wetland habitat from active management, including seasonal flooding, would result in a continuing decrease in the carrying capacity for Pacific Flyway waterfowl populations in the Tulare Basin. For these reasons, the Service has not selected Alternative 1 for implementation.

Under Alternative 2, the Service would seek habitat protection through conservation easements on approximately 20,000 acres within a 57,000-acre project area (for specific parcels included see the Land Protection Plan, Appendix A, Table 1). This alternative would attempt to arrest further declines in the available habitat base. Securing perpetual conservation easements on approximately 20,000 acres of wetland habitat and associated uplands would prevent additional effects to the migratory bird populations that depend on these scarce resources. All of the existing private wetlands within the study area could be protected within this alternative.

With the protection of these natural wetlands and associated upland habitats, the Service would be contributing to protection and recovery of migratory waterfowl populations, shorebirds, and neotropical migratory birds of North America's Pacific Flyway, and federally listed threatened and endangered species by attempting to meet minimum habitat requirements to support stable populations. Although Alternative 2 could largely achieve the Service's waterfowl habitat goals for the Tulare Basin, the Service has not selected Alternative 2 for implementation because it does not allow the same level for acquisition and management flexibility as Alternative 3.

Alternative 3 includes lands identified in Alternative 2 for protection using perpetual conservation easements with the addition of an area, not to exceed 2,000 acres, of potential fee acquisition or optional conservation easements. All 22,000 acres would be protected via conservation easements if willing landowners choose to participate. The lands potentially considered for fee acquisition would exhibit high quality or unique habitat values or key habitat locations that would connect similar areas of high quality habitat near the proposed WMA. Securing perpetual protection on approximately 22,000 acres (including 2,000 acres potential fee acquisition) of wetland habitat and associated uplands would make measurable contributions toward the waterfowl habitat goals and partially offset past habitat losses. Implementing this alternative would stabilize declining migratory bird populations locally, and with implementation of the restoration components, could result in modest increases in migratory bird populations wintering in the Tulare Basin. A stable base of wintering waterfowl habitat in the area would reduce the dangers of disease outbreaks associated with large concentrations of birds on minimally adequate habitat or wetlands impaired by water quality contamination.

Lands within the project area could be protected through perpetual conservation easements at the maximum level considered and would assist in achievement of recovery goals for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and federally listed threatened and endangered wildlife species which occur within the study area. As with Alternative 2, lands would not become part of the WMA or National Wildlife Refuge System upon establishment of the new WMA project boundary, but rather at such time that the Service purchased an interest in the property on a willing seller basis.

The Service has selected Alternative 3 for implementation because Alternative 3 would allow the Service the most flexibility to achieve the waterfowl habitat conservation goals associated with the Tulare Basin.

As described in detail in the Environmental Assessment, the Service is attempting to preserve this region in its current state. The Service believes it is important to create a program that compensates the community and those landowners who manage their lands for the benefit of wildlife resources and the public, so this heritage can be perpetually protected for future generations. Because the Service is attempting to preserve the area essentially as it exists, the social and economic effects are relatively minor. For the same reasons, the environmental effects are mainly neutral or beneficial in preserving the existing habitat values.

Based upon my review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, I have determined that the action of creating the 22,000-acre Tulare Basin Wildlife Management Area is not a major Federal action that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended. Accordingly, the Service is not required to prepare an environmental impact statement.

Manager, California/Nevada Operations Office

11/01/2007
Date

References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. September 2005. *Tulare Basin Wildlife Management Area Proposed Expansion, Final Environmental Assessment, Land Protection Plan and Conceptual Management Plan.*