



Tulare Basin Land Protection Planning Study

Planning Update 1

June 2002



Greetings

This is the first in a series of Planning Updates you will be receiving from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding a study of the wildlife and plant habitats in your community.

Through these Updates, we share information with you and seek your involvement in our study. Your input is very important. It helps us gather information and identify issues affecting you, your community, and the natural resources of the Tulare Basin. If you do not wish to receive the Updates please let us know through one of the points of contact listed on page 4.



Private Wetland Photo USFWS

Land Protection Planning Study Kickoff

The Tulare Basin is an important place for migratory birds and local residents who enjoy the landscape. Protecting wetland dependant wildlife and restoring their habitat is a high priority for the Service and its partners involved in the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture. The Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture is a partnership program focusing on protecting and restoring important habitats for migratory birds in California's Central Valley. The Service is proceeding with this study to determine if we can help accomplish protection and restoration of these resources through the National Wildlife Refuge System using conservation easements or other land protection strategies.

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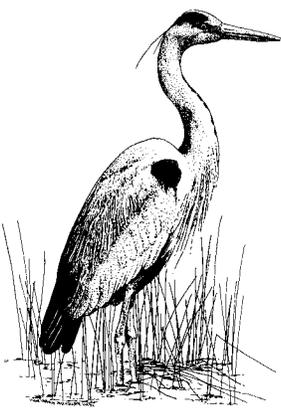
Notice of Open House

You are invited to help us identify issues, ask questions, and voice concerns about the Tulare Basin Land Protection Planning Study. The date, times, and locations follow. See details on page 2.

Date: Both meetings will be held on July 11, 2002

Times: 9:30 a.m. - Noon 6:30 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Locations: Public Library	Beale Branch Library
200 West Oak St	701 Truxtun Ave.
Visalia, CA	Bakersfield, CA



Great blue heron, Jean Harrison, USFWS

What Area Is the Service Studying?

The Service initially identified a broad study area within the Tulare Lake Basin. This area, located in Kern, Tulare and Kings counties, was identified because of its important wildlife values and high potential for conserving migratory bird habitats.

Several specific land protection actions were considered as components of the initial Service study proposal including, easement acquisitions to protect existing private wetlands; accept transfer from Bureau of Reclamation of approximately 8,000 acres of retired farmlands irrigated with CVP water; fee or easement acquisition of approximately 13,000 acres of to be developed into wetlands through the USDA Wetland Conservation Reserve Program; and fee or easement acquisition of 10,000 acres of Valley floor habitat linkages for the protection of Threatened and Endangered upland species.

After careful consideration, the Service has chosen to limit the current proposal to protecting existing wetlands and associated high quality uplands. The current proposal will investigate the acquisition of easements on up to 12,000 acres of private wetlands and associated uplands located within a limited focus area. Both the initial study area and the refined focus area can be found on a map on page 5.

The Tulare Basin wetlands have historically supported significant numbers of migratory waterfowl, including ducks, geese, sandhill cranes and shorebirds. Important habitats include seasonal wetlands, semi-permanent wetlands, alkali sinks, and associated uplands that are characterized by shallow open-water ponds featuring alkaline soils, annual plants (predominantly managed for swamp timothy), and in many cases, greasewood or iodine bush. Currently, 27 species of waterfowl winter within the study area and 13 species of ducks breed there. The Tulare

Basin has been particularly important in providing habitat for early migrant ducks, such as northern pintail and green-winged teal.

The shallow wetlands provide ideal foraging opportunities for shorebirds such as dowitchers, dunlin, yellowlegs, phalaropes and sandpipers, as well as wading birds such as white-faced ibis. Other common wading birds are great blue heron, common egret, cattle egret and black-crowned night heron.

The Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to:

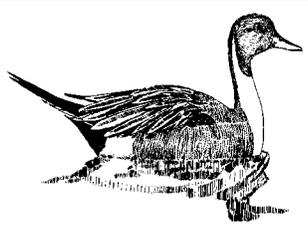
Administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Details: Tulare Basin Land Protection Planning Study Open House

To learn more about the planning process come to our Open House. You are invited to attend an Open House on July 11, 2002 to learn about the Service's Tulare Basin Land Protection Planning Study. You will have an opportunity to meet representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, learn about the National Wildlife Refuge System, and get involved in the planning process in its earliest stage. You can ask questions, get answers and comment on the issues and scope of the study in an informal setting. Service staff will be available to discuss the planning process, the conservation easement acquisition program, and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Your comments and questions will be considered during preparation of the planning documents.

Why Do These Habitats Need Protection?

Protection of remaining habitat and restoration of altered habitats is needed because of the basin's former historical status and range of importance for promoting biological diversity on a landscape scale in the San Joaquin Valley. Tulare, Goose, Buena Vista and Kern Lakes, created by annual runoff from numerous Sierra Nevada rivers and creeks, were a natural haven for wildlife. Prior to settlement and diversion of water for agriculture, Tulare Lake was the largest lake west of the Mississippi. The lake shore wetlands and later flood irrigated farm fields have supported a significant portion of the Pacific Flyway waterfowl populations.



Pintail, Larry Eiffert, USFWS

By the 1880s, inflow to Tulare Lake was reduced to the point that the permanence of the lake was altered. Except for wet years, nearly all of the water that previously sustained the natural lake was diverted for human use. Currently, water diversions use 100% of the historic inflow in all but the very wettest years. Wetland habitats have been greatly diminished and riparian forest wetlands with considerable natural biological diversity have essentially vanished from the San Joaquin Valley floor.

Changes in agricultural irrigation practices, the increasing cost of pumping water for remnant wetlands, and competing land uses, have all resulted in decreases in available habitats. Researchers believe that existing wetlands may be inadequate to support current populations, because most pintails leave the area early in the season. Radiotelemetry and aerial survey data indicate that pintails and other waterfowl wintering and breeding in Tulare Basin serve as an important source of birds for other northern California habitats. Premature exodus of birds from the southern San Joaquin Valley may explain why pintail populations in the Grasslands Ecological Area (northern San Joaquin Valley) during mid and late winter have declined during the last 20 years.



Mallard hen and chicks © Ducks Unlimited Canada

Protecting and restoring additional wetlands in the southern San Joaquin Valley, may reduce the threat of habitat degradation in the northern San Joaquin Valley, and conversely if waterfowl populations in the southern San Joaquin Valley continue to decline, private wetland managers may reduce their effort and funding.

Landowners are keenly interested in increasing waterfowl habitat diversity by managing for more semi-permanent wetlands to benefit local breeding by mallard, gadwall, cinnamon teal, American avocets and black-necked stilt. This is only possible if the cost of available water supplies can be kept reasonable. Finding new water supply allocations or assisting private landowners with facilities necessary for redistributing existing water sources will be necessary to conserve existing wetlands and increasing wetland habitat diversity. Through the land protection planning process the Service will examine a number of protection options, including habitat protection by means of conservation easements as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

What is the National Wildlife Refuge System?

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest and most diverse collection of public lands set aside specifically for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants. More than 530 refuges have been established from the Arctic Ocean to the South Pacific, from Maine to the Caribbean. This system of lands encompasses more than 93 million acres of land and water and at least one national wildlife refuge can be found in every state.

What is the Land Protection Planning Process?

The Service initiates the land protection planning process to study habitat protection proposals. 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—detailed study and planning, extensive public involvement, and environmental compliance.
- The documentation that evolves from the process includes an environmental compliance document, a land protection plan and a conceptual management plan.
- These draft documents are provided to the public for review and comment to ensure the interested public is informed about Service proposals. Comments are considered in final documents.
- Based on the refuge boundary alternatives presented in the final documents Service decision-makers choose an appropriate course of action. The alternatives can range from no action to including all or part of the study area lands within a refuge boundary.
- If part or all of the lands are approved for inclusion, a refuge boundary is established and the planning process is complete.

A refuge boundary defines an area where the Service can acquire land or interest in land. It is Service policy to acquire land only from landowners who are willing sellers. Acquisitions are subject to funding availability.

How Do I Contact the Service or Provide Comments?

Your participation is encouraged throughout the process. We would like to meet with you, listen to your ideas, and learn about your issues. The information gathering or scoping phase of this project begins with this kickoff. It is a good time for you to get involved early in the process.

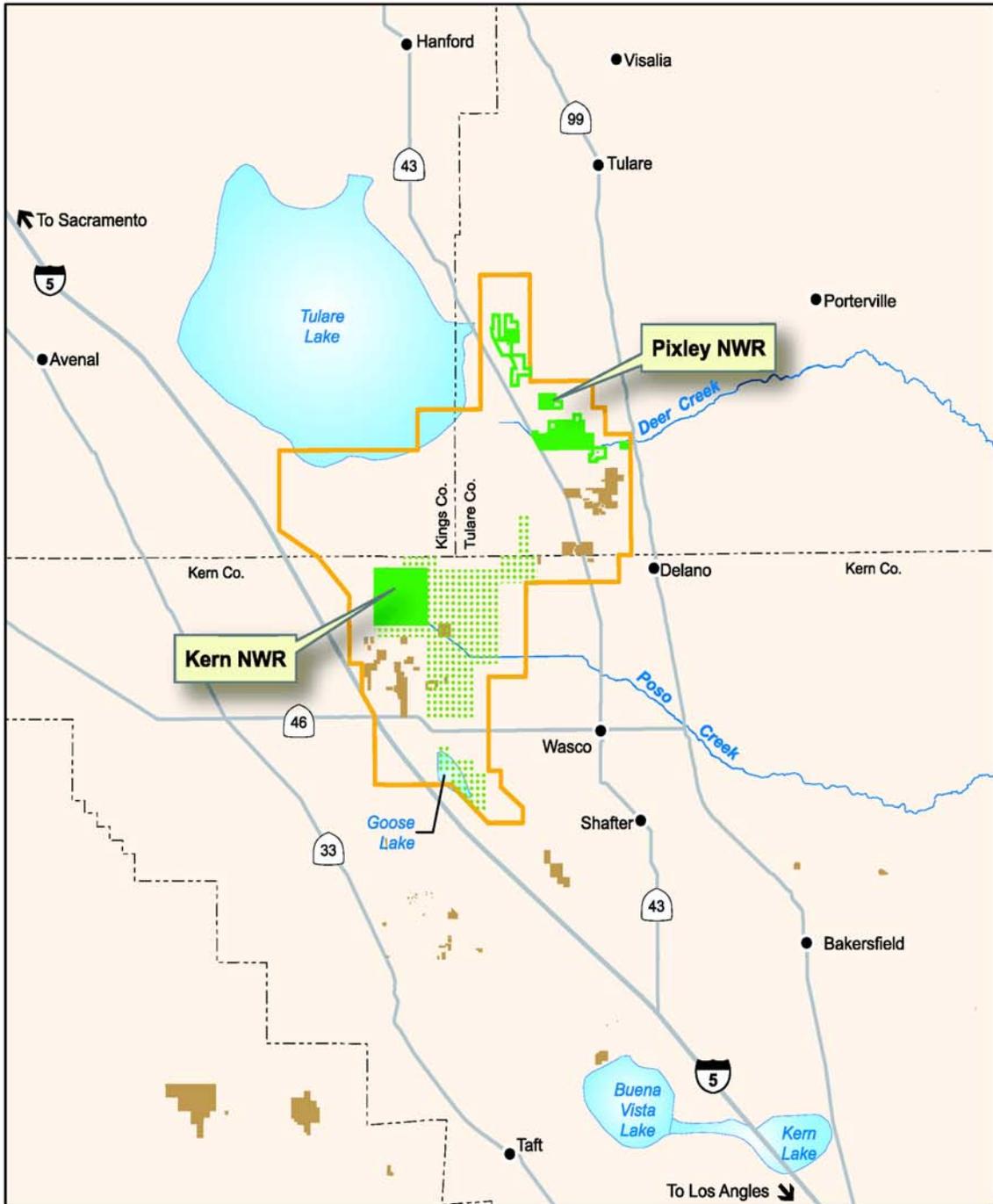
We would love to hear your ideas and discuss them at the Open House scheduled for July 11th. If you cannot attend, but still wish to share your ideas, concerns, and questions, please send them by August 30, 2002, for consideration during the development of the planning documents. Please send your written comments to Scott Frazer . . .



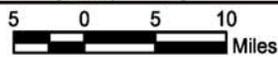
. . . via mail: Scott Frazer, Refuge Operations Specialist
Kern National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 670
Delano, CA 93216

continued on page 6

Tulare Basin Focus Area



CA/NV Refuge Planning Office - April 2002



- Approved Refuge Boundaries
- Tulare Basin Study Area
- FWS Lands
- Fish and Game Lands
- Focus Area
- Historic Lakes

continued from page 4

or to

Richard Smith, Natural Resource Specialist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
CA/NV Refuge Planning office
2800 Cottage Way, Suite W-1916
Sacramento, CA 95825

**For Information on the
National Wildlife Refuge
System Contact:**

Dave Hardt, Project Leader
Kern NWR
P.O. Box 670
Delano, CA 93216
Phone: (661) 725-2767
Fax: (661) 725-6041



... via fax: (661) 725-6041



... or via e-mail: FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov
(Please refer to "Tulare Lake" in the subject line.)

Richard can also provide information on the planning process.
Call him at (916) 414-6502, if you have any questions.

Tulare Basin Land Protection Planning Study Schedule

Planning Step

Target Date

Study Kickoff, Issue Identification, Information Gathering, Begin Scoping	July 11, 2002
Reviewing Public Comments Begins, send your Issues and Comments by this date.	August 30, 2002
Planning Documents Available for Public Review and Comment	December 2002
Public Comments on Planning Documents Due	February 2003
Issue Notice of Decision	April 2003

Dates are tentative and may change as the study progresses.



U.S. Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
Attn: NWRS/RPL
911 NE 11th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97232-4181

Address correction requested

