



San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge

Land Protection Planning Study

Planning Update #2 – October 2011

Greetings!

This is the second in a series of updates provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to share information on the proposal to expand the boundary of the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge).

The purpose of this second *Planning Update* is to summarize key issues and concerns identified through the public scoping process, and to encourage your continued input, as the plan develops.

Public Scoping Provided Important Insight

We would like to thank everyone who participated in the scoping process for the *Proposed Expansion* of the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR or Refuge). Approximately 25 people attended the two scoping meetings in Los Banos and Modesto. We received 16 letters providing comments, and also received ten emails, most of which were requests to be added to the mailing list.

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.

It is estimated that 95 percent of the San Joaquin Valley’s riparian woodlands were lost during the last century due to changing land uses. However, the Service is in the process of restoring this critical habitat on the San Joaquin River Refuge. The Refuge includes one of California’s largest riparian forest restoration projects: over one-half million native trees such as willows, cottonwoods and oaks have been planted across 1,700 acres of river floodplain creating the largest block of contiguous riparian woodland in the Central Valley.

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Bullock's oriole.
Photo: Gary Kramer; USFWS

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Riparian brush rabbit. Photo: Brian Hansen, USFWS

This important riparian woodland habitat is host to many rare animals. Swainson's hawks nest in the canopy of tall cottonwood trees. Herons and cormorants form communal nesting colonies within the tops of the large oaks. Endangered riparian brush rabbits have been re-introduced to this restored habitat from captive-reared populations. These woodlands also support a diversity of breeding songbirds, including grosbeaks, orioles, flycatchers, warblers, as well as least Bell's vireos – a threatened species which last nested in the San Joaquin Valley over 50 years ago.

Summary of Public Scoping Comments

What if any, lands should be included in the proposed expansion?

Several comments suggested reducing the footprint of the project on the northern segment, while others suggested increasing the footprint on both the northern and southern segments.

How would the proposed expansion affect farmland?

There was concern that the proposed expansion would take prime farmland and other farmland of economic importance out of production. There was also some concern over increased wildlife use adjacent to farmland, and the potential for contamination of food crops. Some wondered if their participation would affect their neighbor's ability to farm without increased regulations.

What type of access would be allowed, and how would it be controlled?

Several comments indicated interest for additional access for recreation, including hunting and fishing, and other refuge priority uses. Others indicated that increased Refuge law enforcement presence would be needed along with physical controls (gates, fencing) to keep areas safe.

How would the proposed expansion affect flood control activities?

A couple of comments mentioned flood control concerns regarding riparian vegetation, and wondered if there would be increased or decreased flooding if riparian habitat is restored.

How would the proposed expansion affect the regional economy?

Several comments mentioned the potential effects on the regional economy to remove lands from agricultural production. Other comments addressed the loss in property tax revenue if lands are acquired in fee title by the Service. Several stated concern that the federal government should not spend money to acquire lands that would reduce the tax base of special districts and counties. Others have mentioned that ecosystem services provided by a functioning river and riparian system are more cost effective than artificial replacements. Naturally provided services such as nutrient cycling, soil stabilization, water filtration, carbon sequestration, pollination and pest control all are provided by a proper functioning riparian system. Others have



River otters. Photo: Jim Leopold, USFWS



Swainson's Hawk. Photo: Dick Daniels

suggested that increased recreation on the river would bring tourism dollars to local businesses.

What are the proposed project goals, and can they be accomplished with existing programs?

One commenter mentioned that the Service needs to provide measurable metrics to determine success of the proposal. Two others mentioned that the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) or similar existing programs would be sufficient to provide habitat values.

Would this proposal increase water use, affect water quality, or riparian rights?

A couple of comments questioned the source and amount of water needed for the proposed project; also the possibility of water pollution due to the project. Some wondered if they would lose their riparian water rights if they had sold an easement or fee title to the Service.

How would the Service manage the proposed expansion area?

Several comments praised the past restoration work by the Refuge, and anticipate increased human visitation and

wildlife use of the area. One commenter mentioned that the Service should point out the extent private owners retain control over their lands, and what uses are permissible on easements.

How would the proposed expansion address climate change?

Several comments suggested that consideration of climate change and its possible effects be central to the development of this proposal. A couple of comments suggested that this proposed

action would be important in making the river more resilient to climate change.

How would the proposed expansion affect fish and wildlife?

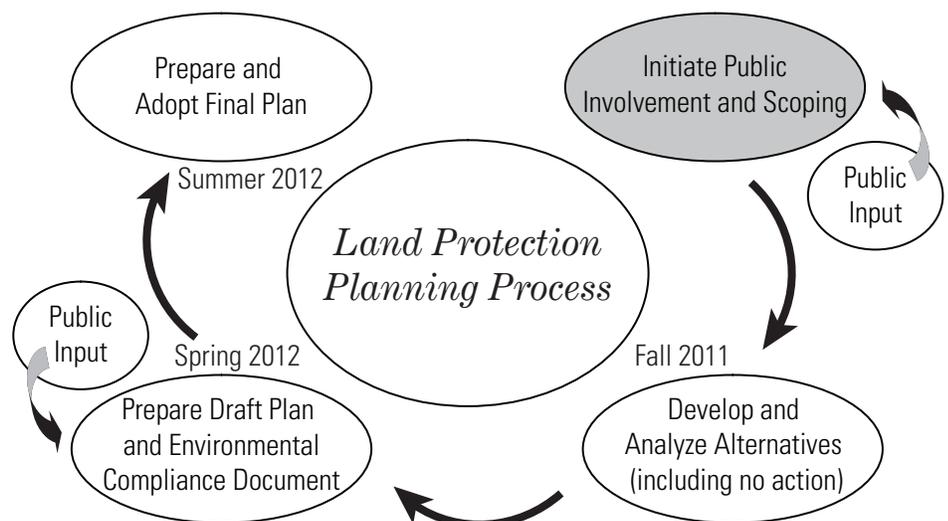
Two comments mentioned that the proposed expansion is needed to bring some of the diversity back to the San Joaquin Valley, particularly for migratory birds. One comment said it would bring back the ecological integrity of the San Joaquin Valley. A few said this proposal complements and enhances the congressionally mandated San Joaquin River Restoration Program, being conducted upstream.

How would mosquito control be addressed?

A mosquito control district suggested they would support the proposed project if the Service: performs comprehensive mosquito surveillance and control activities on refuge lands; and adopts mosquito control best management practices (BMPs) for wetlands issued by the California State Department of Public Health and the Central Valley Joint Venture's Mosquito Working Group.

The Land Protection Planning Process

The graphic below shows the Planning Process. Scoping has been completed, and the next steps involve developing and analyzing alternatives for the proposed expansion. A draft plan should be ready for review and comment by Spring 2012.



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 below.

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
 Phone: (916) 414-6502
 Fax: (916) 414-6497

Other Contacts

For Information on the National Wildlife Refuge System, contact:

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.)

San Joaquin River Proposed Expansion Website:
<http://www.fws.gov/cno/refuges/sanjoaquin/SJRNWR-expansion.cfm>



Black-crowned night heron.
 Photo: Lee Karney, USFWS

Planning Schedule	Target Date
Draft planning documents available for public review and comment/public meetings.	Spring, 2012
Final decision on proposed expansion.	Late Summer, 2012