

Planning Update

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex: Alamosa, Baca, and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuges

Issue 3, August 2014



© Joe Zinn

Elk roam the wide open expanses of Baca National Wildlife Refuge.

Draft Plan Available for Review

After more than three years of work, we, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are excited to announce that the draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental impact statement (EIS) for the San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex (refuge com-

plex) is ready for your review and comment. The refuge complex is made up of three national wildlife refuges, Alamosa, Monte Vista, and Baca National Wildlife Refuges (refuge(s)).

Public involvement has been an important part of the planning process, and we are now turning to you to talk about the key issues related to this project. The draft CCP and EIS addresses the significant issues we have heard about during the planning process.

We invite you to engage in the public review of the draft plan. This planning update provides an overview of the contents of the plan. The full plan is available for downloading on our website at http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/ccp/co/alm_bac_mtv/alm_bac_mtv.html. We will hold public meetings September 29, 30, and October 1st 2014. Please refer to the schedule in the information bar found on this page.

The draft CCP and EIS analyzes four alternatives for managing habitat and wildlife, visitor services, and other important values and resources.

We appreciate your continued involvement in the CCP process and look

forward to talking with you about the issues and reading your comments.

The comment deadline is November 3, 2014. Information about how to provide your comments is found on the last page of this update.

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2014 Public Meetings

- **Alamosa, Colorado**
September 29, 6:30–8:30 p.m.
San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District
623 Fourth Street
719 / 589 2230
- **Monte Vista, Colorado**
September 30, 6:30–8:30 p.m.
Monte Vista COOP Community Room
1901 E. Highway 160
719 / 852 5181
- **Moffat, Colorado**
October 01, 6:30–8:30 p.m.
Moffat School
501 Garfield Avenue
719 / 256 4710



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Sandhill Crane

Purpose and Need for the Plan

The purpose of the draft CCP and EIS is to identify actions necessary to accomplish the purposes of the refuges, identify the role the refuge complex will play in support of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and provide long-term guidance for management of refuge programs and activities. The CCP is needed to help us achieve the following:

- communicate with the public and other partners about our

efforts to carry out the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and meet the purposes of the refuges;

- provide a clear statement of direction for management of the refuge complex;
- ensure that the refuges within the refuge complex continue to conserve fish, wildlife, and ecosystems in the face of ongoing drought, water shortages, and climate change;

Draft Vision

The San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex, set in a high expansive desert valley, is cradled between the snowcapped peaks of the San Juan and Sangre de Cristo Ranges. Mountain snowmelt feeds the Rio Grande, numerous streams, and a dynamic ground water system creating a diverse mix of playas, wet meadows, and willow and cottonwood riparian corridors that are in stark contrast with the surrounding arid landscape. As reflected by 12,000 years of human history in the valley, the refuge complex attracts many people. Visitors experience the ancient song of the sandhill crane, witness evening flights of thousands of waterfowl, and listen to bugling elk. Through ever changing conditions like climate change, the refuges support and foster a collaborative spirit between their neighbors and partners to conserve the valley's treasured resources.

- provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of our management actions on and around the refuge complex;
- ensure that our management actions are consistent with the mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997;
- ensure that management of the refuge complex considers other Federal, State, and local government plans;
- provide basis for development of budget requests for the operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs of the refuge complex

Significant Issues

The scoping process identified many qualities of the refuge complex along with a list of issues and recommendations. Based on this information, as well as guidance from other laws and policies that we follow, we identified seven significant issues to address in the draft CCP and EIS:

- habitat and wildlife management
- water resources
- landscape conservation and wilderness review
- visitor services
- partnerships and operations
- cultural resources and tribal coordination
- research, science, and protection of the physical environment

Vision

We developed a vision (below) which we shared with you during scoping. The vision portrays a picture of the refuge complex and describes the focus of refuge complex management for the next 15 years.

Cooperating Agencies

Early in the process, we granted cooperating agency status to the following agencies, and we have valued their input in the process:

- Bureau of Land Management
- Bureau of Reclamation
- U.S. Forest Service
- National Park Service

- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Colorado Water Resources Division

Goals

We developed six goals for the project. These broad goals direct work toward achieving the vision and purposes of the three refuges and outline approaches for managing the refuge complex.

Habitat and Wildlife Goal

Conserve, restore, and enhance the ecological diversity and function of the San Luis Valley ecosystem to support healthy populations of native fish and wildlife, with an emphasis on migratory birds.

Water Resources Goal

As climate patterns change, protect, acquire, and manage surface and ground water resources to maintain and support management objectives.

Visitor Services Goal

Provide safe, accessible, and quality wildlife-dependent recreation and perform outreach to visitors and local communities to nurture an appreciation and understanding of the unique natural and cultural resources of the refuge complex and San Luis Valley.

Partnerships and Refuge Complex Operations Goal

Secure and effectively use funding, staffing, and partnerships for the benefit of all resources in support of the refuge complex purposes and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Actively pursue and continue to foster partnerships with other agencies, organizations, the water commu-

nity, and private landowners to conserve, manage, and provide for the long-term sustainability of working landscapes within the San Luis Valley.

Cultural Resources Goal

Protect significant cultural resources within the refuge complex.

Research, Science, and Wilderness Review Goal

Use sound science, applied research, monitoring, and evaluation to advance the understanding of natural resource functions, changing climate conditions, and wilderness values in the management of the habitats within the San Luis Valley ecosystem.

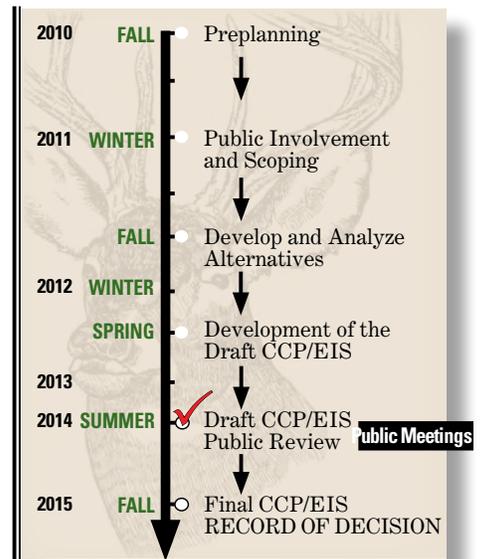
Alternatives and Environmental Consequences

The following pages outline the key actions and subsequent consequences of implementing four draft alternatives, which include a no-action alternative. Our planning policy requires that we identify a proposed action—the alternative that we believe best fulfills the refuge complex purposes

and the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

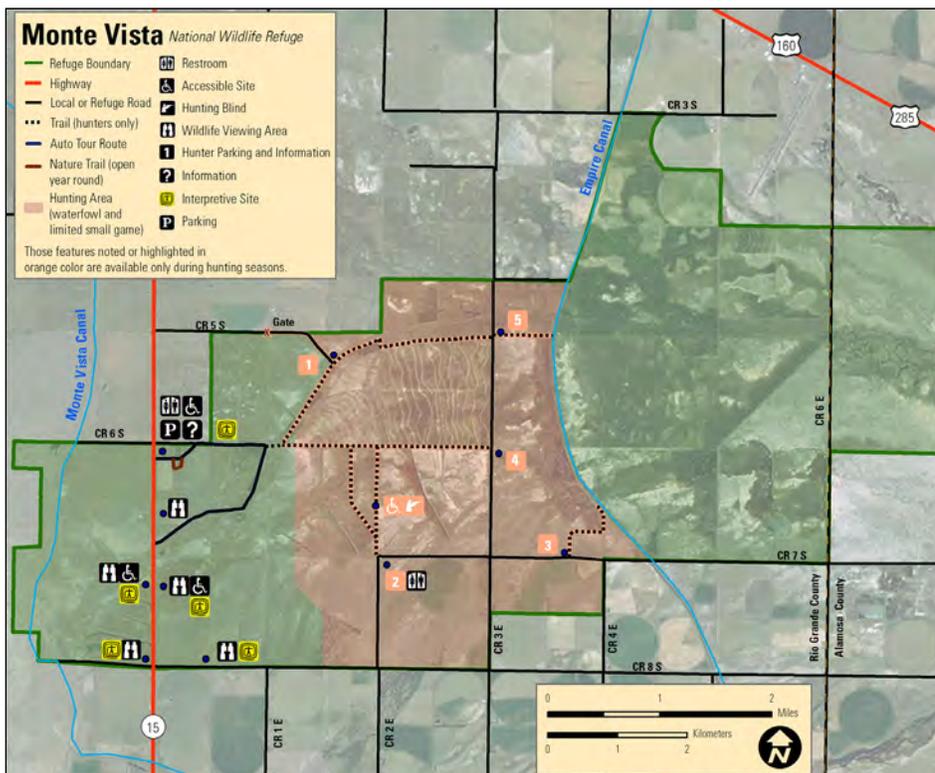
The primary environmental consequences are summarized for the physical environment, biological environment, special management areas, cultural resources, and social economic environment. Effects can be beneficial or negatives and are described as negligible (0-5 percent change), minor (detectable 5-24 percent change), moderate (25-50 percent change), and major (more than 50 percent change).

Project Timeline



Western Chorus Frog

Alternative A—No Action



Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge under alternative A.

Few changes would occur in managing existing wildlife populations and habitat. Wildlife-dependent public uses would continue at current levels.

projects that disturb the ground or affect buildings or structures over 50 years old.

Actions Common to All Alternatives

- We would continue to use our water rights within the refuge complex. Our use of ground water would continue, except as modified by changing State rules, regulations, and policies. As necessary, we will augment water supplies in accordance with State law.
- Waterfowl and small game hunting will continue to be allowed on the Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges.
- Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, we will conduct cultural resource reviews for

Summary of Actions for Alternative A

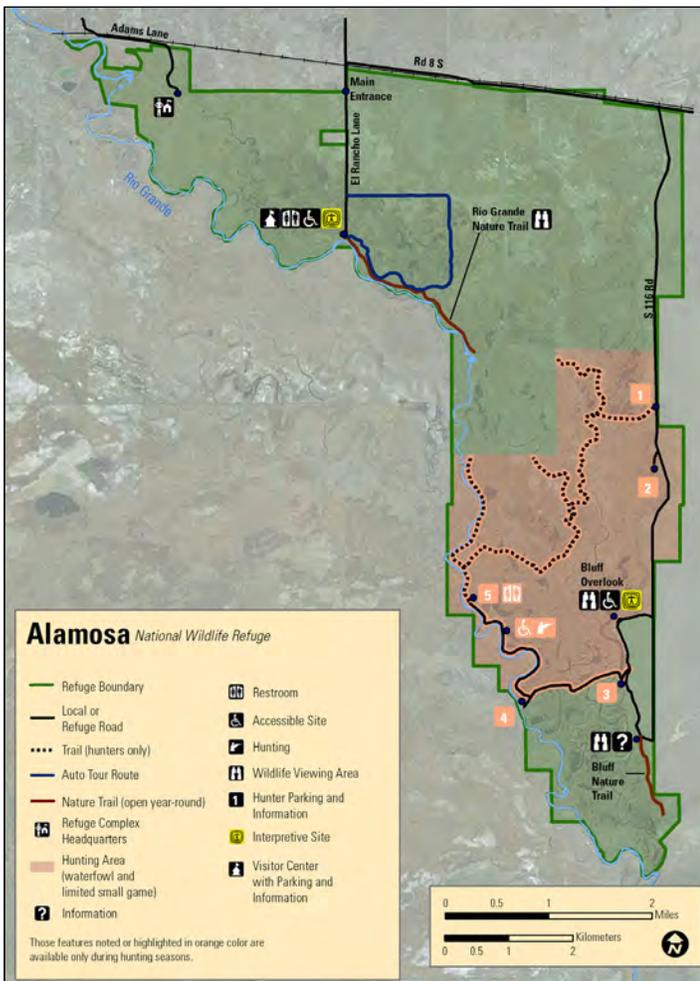
- On all three refuges, we would continue to manage wetland areas and wet meadows to provide habitat for a variety of waterbirds. Our riparian and upland habitats would be managed for migratory birds. We would continue to produce small grains on the Monte Vista Refuge (up to 270 acres, depending on water availability and crop rotation) to provide food for spring-migrating sandhill cranes.
- Few changes would be made in managing big game populations on the refuge complex and elk numbers would fluctuate

ate from 1,000 to 4,000 individuals on the Baca Refuge and smaller herds on the other two refuges.

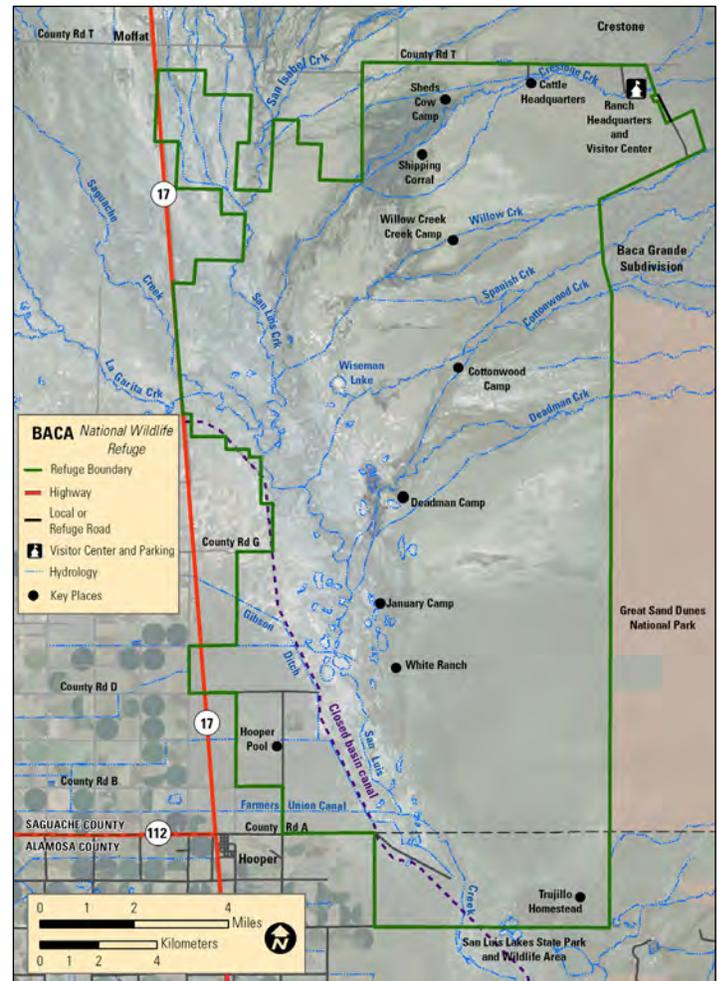
- We would phase out the existing arrangement with The Nature Conservancy for season-long bison use on those parts of the Medano Ranch that are within the Baca Refuge boundary, and we would not use bison as a management tool in the future.
- We would provide wildlife observation, interpretation, and photographic opportunities on Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges at current levels. We would not open Baca Refuge to public uses outside of occasional staff-led tours.
- We would not recommend additional protection for any areas having wilderness characteristics or values.

Environmental Consequences Common to All Alternatives

- The refuge complex would continue to provide a variety of habitat and vegetation in the San Luis Valley which benefits habitat and wildlife.
- All alternatives would result in negligible short-term impacts on air quality as a result of any increased dust emissions from refuge operations. There would be negligible changes to visual resources, soundscapes, water quality, and the socio-economic environment of the San Luis Valley.



Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge under alternative A.



Baca National Wildlife Refuge under alternative A.

- In the short-term (first few years), there would be negligible impacts for waterfowl hunting opportunities on Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges. Long-term impacts would vary by alternative.

largely entrenched and denuded streambanks.

Effects to Biological Environment

- Elk numbers would continue to fluctuate greatly with limited options for population distribution. Elk would continue to negatively impact riparian habitats on the refuge complex.
- Little to no water would be applied to playa habitat areas, thus there would be a negligible benefit for migratory birds except for wet years.
- Ongoing small grain production on Monte Vista Refuge would have minor long-term benefits to sandhill grains.

Effects to Visitor Services

- Most stream corridors would remain heavily browsed with

there could be minor to moderate long-term impacts on hunters due to continued reduction in available water to support waterfowl hunting.

- There would be a negligible effect due to limited opportunities and staff.

Effects on Special Management Areas

- There would be no further protections for these lands outside of our refuge management policies and practices.

Effects on Cultural Resources

- There would be negligible effects on cultural resources.

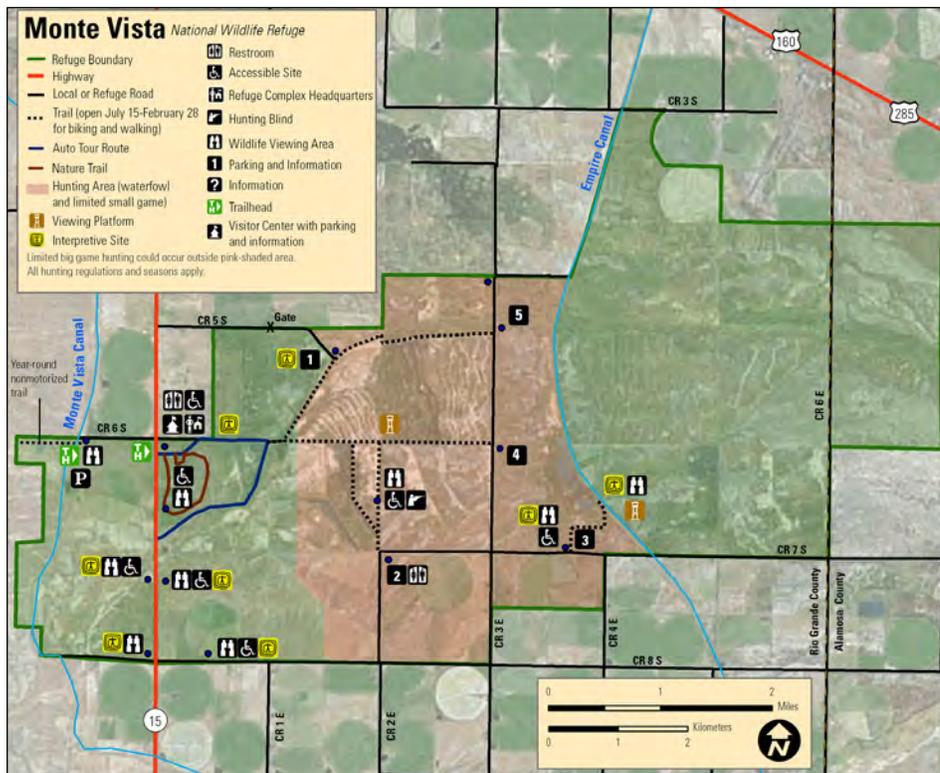
Effects on Socioeconomics

- There would be negligible effects. Total impact is 13 jobs with \$367,600 in labor income and \$566,500 in value added.

Environmental Consequences of Alternative A

Effects on the Physical Environment

Alternative B—Wildlife Populations, Strategic Habitat Restoration, and Enhanced Public Uses (Draft Proposed Action)



Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge under alternative B.

We would emphasize maintaining or restoring the composition, structure, and function of natural and modified habitats on the refuge complex. Wildlife species needs and ecological site characteristics would be considered in strategies that preserve and restore biological productivity, integrity and diversity. We would apply strategic habitat conservation in deciding how to manage for native fish, wildlife, and plants, with emphasis on migratory birds, waterfowl, and declining or listed species. Compatible, wildlife-dependent uses would be enhanced and expanded to all refuges. We would facilitate the protection, restoration, and conservation of key water resources through partnerships, public education, and stewardship.

Summary of Actions

- We would manage wetland areas to achieve a variety of
- We would grow limited amounts of small grains on

wetland types and conditions to support a diversity of migratory birds and other wildlife, with a specific focus on focal species that represent our larger conservation goals. We would restore historical water flow patterns in specific areas through more effective water management practices and riparian habitat along 21 miles of stream corridor on Baca Refuge and in areas along the Rio Grande through Alamosa Refuge.

- We would use public hunting to complement the State's elk management. We would open portions of Baca Refuge to public hunting (big and small game) and parts of Alamosa and Monte Vista Refuges to a limited public dispersal hunt.

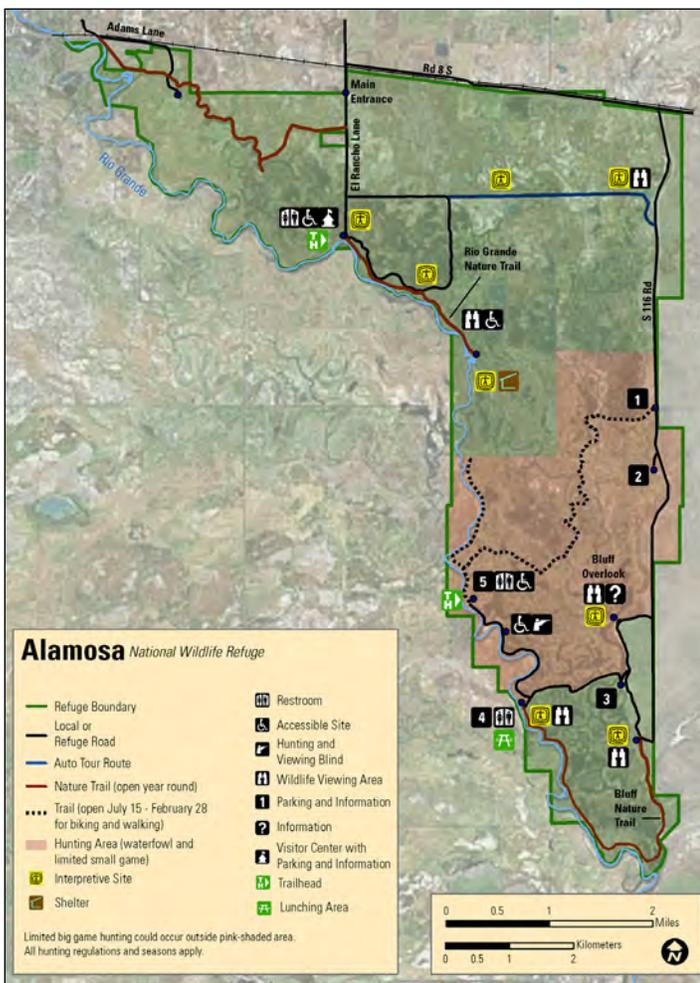
Monte Vista Refuge (about 190 acres) to provide necessary food for sandhill cranes migrating through the San Luis Valley in spring and fall.

- We would research the feasibility and suitability of introducing semi-free-ranging bison year-round to maintain and enhance certain habitats.
- Public access would be enhanced on Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges and established on Baca Refuge. This would include building a visitor center and headquarters at Monte Vista Refuge, opening trails within the hunt boundary for biking and walking from July 15 to February 28, improving the auto tour route on Alamosa Refuge, extending nature trails, establishing an auto tour route on Baca Refuge and providing other trail access, and increasing interpretation and environmental education.
- We would recommend protecting wilderness values on the eastern edge of Baca Refuge (about 13,800 acres) to be managed as a wilderness study area and considered for future wilderness designation.

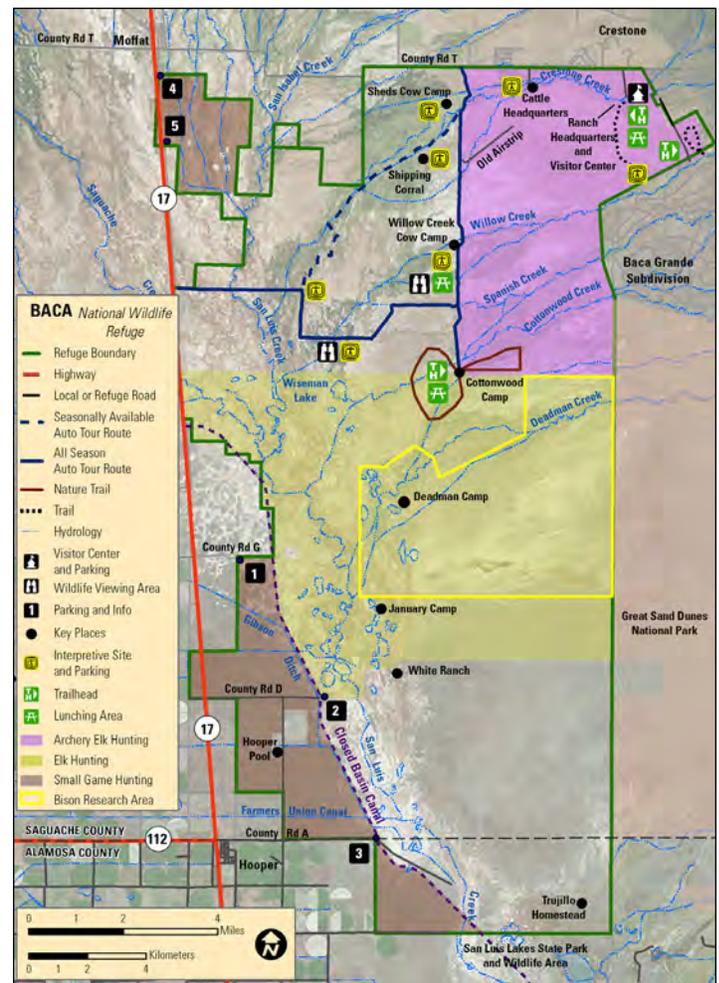
Environmental Consequences

Effects to the Physical Environment

- Negligible impacts to air quality from habitat restoration, refuge operations, and more visitor use.
- Negligible to moderate, short-term, local soil disturbance on new trails or roads.



Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge under alternative B.



Baca National Wildlife Refuge under alternative B.

- Minor benefits for water resources from establishing water quality monitoring, increasing infrastructure efficiency, and restoring natural water flow patterns, and conducting surveys.

Effects to the Biological Environment

- Minor long-term benefits for birds, native fish, and other wildlife from habitat enhancement.
- Minor to moderate long-term benefits for playa habitat from water delivery and playa enhancement efforts.
- Minor long-term impacts on upland habitats from more visitor use and facilities.
- Minor benefits for bison conservation as a research area would enable us to better understand the benefits and drawbacks of bison.

- Negligible effects to sandhill cranes due to slight reduction of amount of grains provided.
- Minor long-term benefits for elk from population and disease management efforts.
- Moderate long-term benefits for wetlands and riparian streams due to habitat improvement and restoration.

Effects on Visitor Services

- Same as alternative A for waterfowl hunting; minor to moderate long-term benefits for small game and big game hunting on all three refuges.
- Minor to moderate benefits for visitor services with funding for an outdoor recreation planner, a new visitor center at Monte Vista Refuge, and opening Baca Refuge to public use. Greater emphasis on outreach would result in mod-

erate benefits to public communications about resources.

- Moderate to major long-term benefits from expanded trail and road access.

Effects on Special Management Areas

- There would be minor to long-term benefits for protecting wilderness values and characteristics.

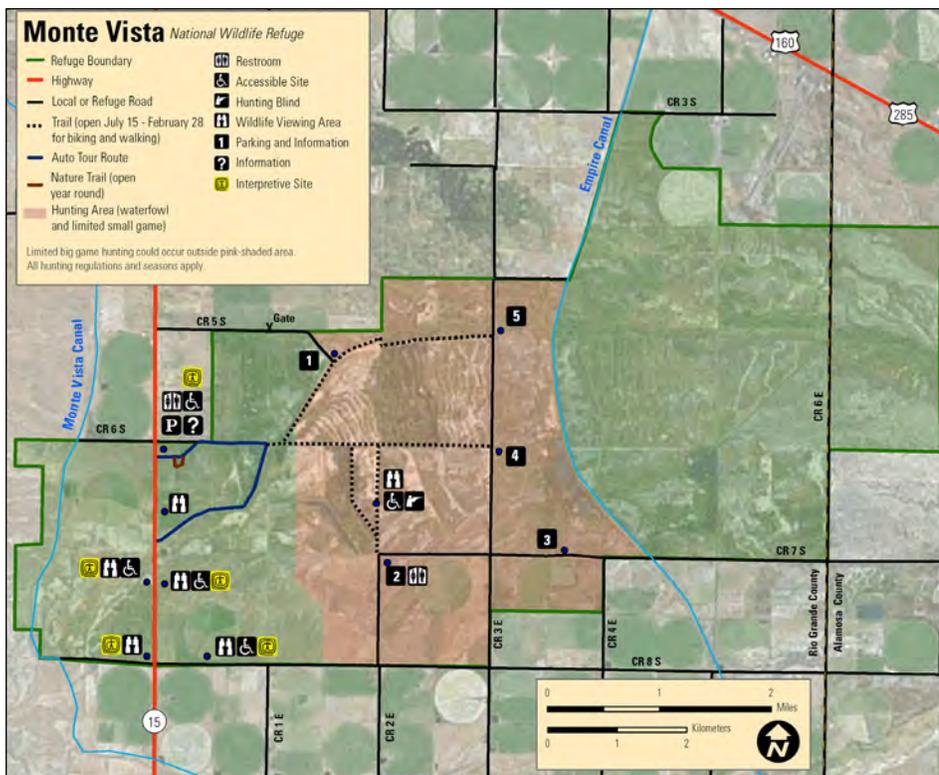
Effects on Cultural Resources

- Negligible to minor benefits from increased planning, resource protection, and law enforcement.

Effects on Socioeconomics

- There would be negligible benefits with 2 more jobs and an additional \$116,300 in labor income and \$212,800 in value added over alternative A.

Alternative C—Habitat Restoration and Ecological Processes



Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge under alternative C.

We would take all feasible actions to restore or mimic, where needed, the native vegetation community based on ecological site characteristics and processes (hydrologic conditions and other natural disturbances such as grazing and fire), and other abiotic factors. We would continue to provide compatible wildlife-dependent public uses, but adapt them in response to changes in area management. Partnership efforts would be broadened and geared toward restoring native vegetation communities and mimicking natural hydrologic conditions.

Summary of Actions

- We would restore vegetative communities in the refuge complex to mimic the ecological conditions that existed before Euro-American settlement of the area. We would restore the function of both

the riparian areas and playas on the Baca Refuge and identify potential habitat conditions for the three refuges.

- We would end production of small grains for migrating sandhill cranes on the Monte Vista Refuge.
- We would use hunting to manage elk populations or their distribution and improve the long-term health of riparian habitat. Similar to alternative B, our priority would be to improve habitat for all native species, but particularly threatened and endangered species and other species of concern.
- We would periodically (not every year) use bison on the Baca Refuge to mimic the ecological benefit they may have once provided.

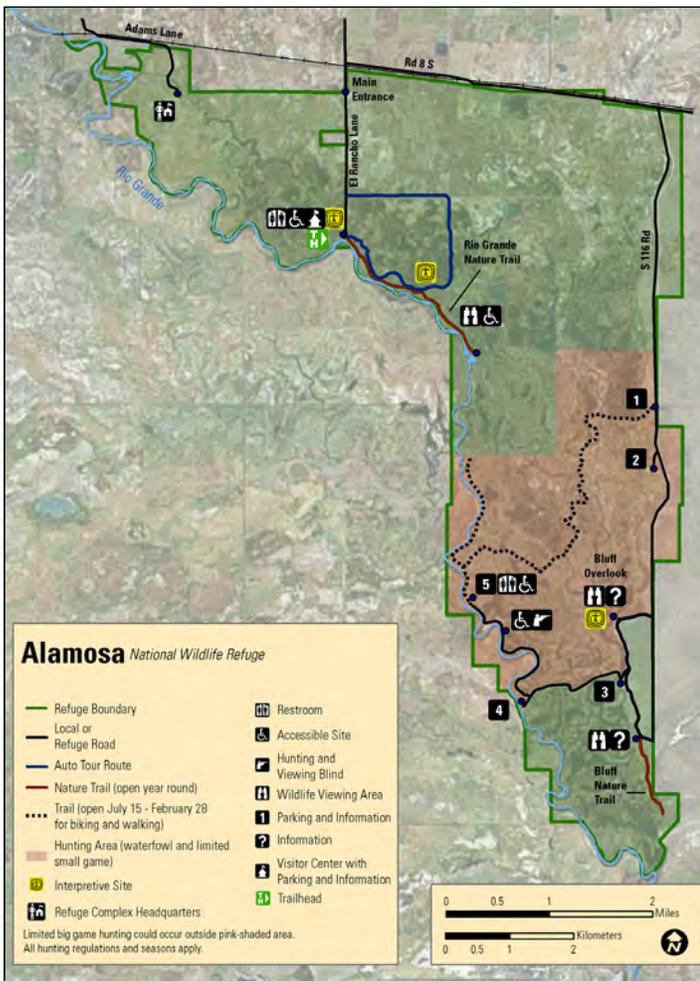
- We would manage water to restore hydrologic conditions, with less focus on habitat management for specific species or for providing wildlife viewing. We would evaluate supplementing existing water supplies while considering restoring historical hydrology, especially on Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges. In some years, water may not be available to meet life cycle needs for some waterfowl. Water infrastructure would be removed or modified as needed and quality monitoring would also be increased.
- We would open the Baca Refuge for big game and small game hunting. On the Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges, we would rely on public hunting or agency dispersal methods for elk management.

- Except for limited hunting access to achieve management objectives, there would be no other trails, facilities, or programs on Baca Refuge.
- Similar to alternative B, we would recommend protection of the wilderness values and characteristics found along the eastern boundary of Baca Refuge (about 13,800 acres).

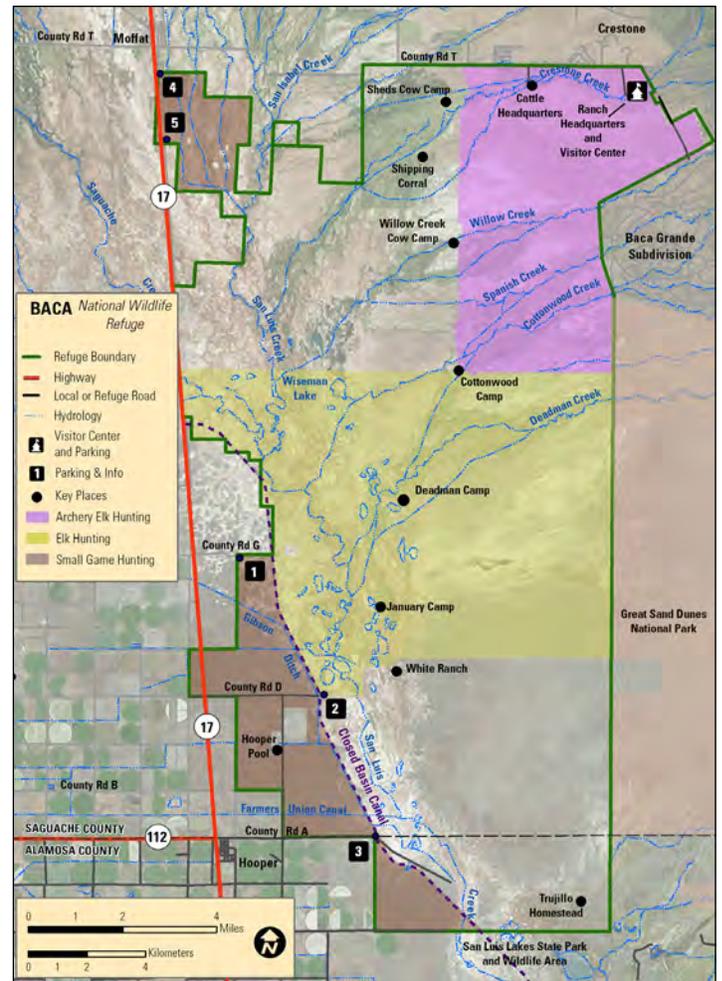
Environmental Consequences

Effects to the Physical Environment

- There would be minor to major short-term localized impacts but long-term benefits from restoration efforts.
- Increased emissions for short periods of time due to habitat



Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge under alternative C.



Baca National Wildlife Refuge under alternative C.

restoration activities, refuge operations, and increased visitor use resulting in negligible impacts to air quality.

- There would be negligible to moderate local soil disturbance on new trails or roads.
- Minor benefits for water resources from water quality monitoring, increasing the efficiency of our infrastructure, and restoring natural water flow patterns, and conducting surveys.

Effects to the Biological Environment

- Moderate long-term benefits for riparian streams from habitat improvement and restoration.
- Minor long-term impacts from removed created wetlands.
- Moderate to major long-term benefits for playa habitat

from water delivery and playa enhancement efforts.

- Negligible impacts on upland habitats from increased visitor use and facilities.
- Moderate to major impacts on sandhill cranes due to elimination of grain production.
- Minor long-term benefits for elk from population and disease management.
- Negligible benefits for bison as focal species.
- Moderate benefits for native fish from more extensive habitat enhancement efforts.

Effects on Visitor Services

- Same as alternative A; moderate long-term impacts on waterfowl hunting due to limited water availability across the wetlands.

- Minor benefits for hunters for small game and big game across the refuge complex.
- Minor long-term benefits from opening trails on Alamosa and Monte Vista Refuges, but major impacts on Monte Vista as viewing areas could be limited.

Effects on Special Management Areas

- There would be minor to long-term benefits for protecting wilderness values and characteristics.

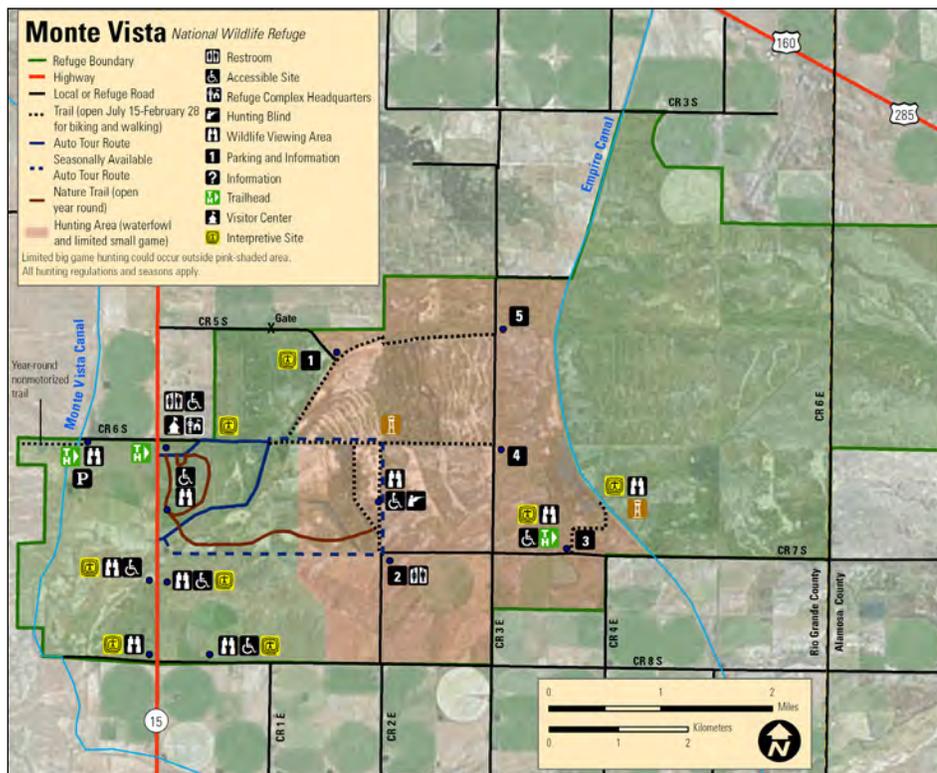
Effects on Cultural Resources

- Same as alternative B.

Effects on Socioeconomics

- There would be negligible effect or benefits with \$35,700 more in labor income and \$65,300 more in value added as compared to alternative A.

Alternative D—Maximize Public Use Opportunities



Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge under alternative D.

We would manage wildlife and habitats on the refuge complex consistent with our mission and purposes of the refuges while emphasizing quality visitor experiences and compatible wildlife-dependent public uses. Partnerships that complement our efforts to accommodate and provide for the priority public uses would be strengthened.

Summary of Actions

- Similar to alternative A, we would manage wetlands to maximize waterbird production at the Monte Vista and Alamosa Refuges. We would also irrigate areas that are closer to public access to enhance wildlife viewing.
- Our water management would be similar to alternative B, except that more effort would be given to making sure there is water in specific areas to enhance wildlife viewing.
- As with alternative B, we would offer opportunities for elk hunting and viewing.
- We would introduce and manage a small bison herd on a confined area of the Baca Refuge. Wildlife viewing and interpretation opportunities would be emphasized and incorporated into this program.
- We would permit walk-in fishing access along the Rio Grande at the Alamosa Refuge south of parking area 5 in addition to developing a safe access point at the Chicago Dam.
- Expand and increase opportunities for wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and environmental education on all three

refuges more extensively than under alternative B. Provide additional access, seasonal auto tour routes, and youth programming.

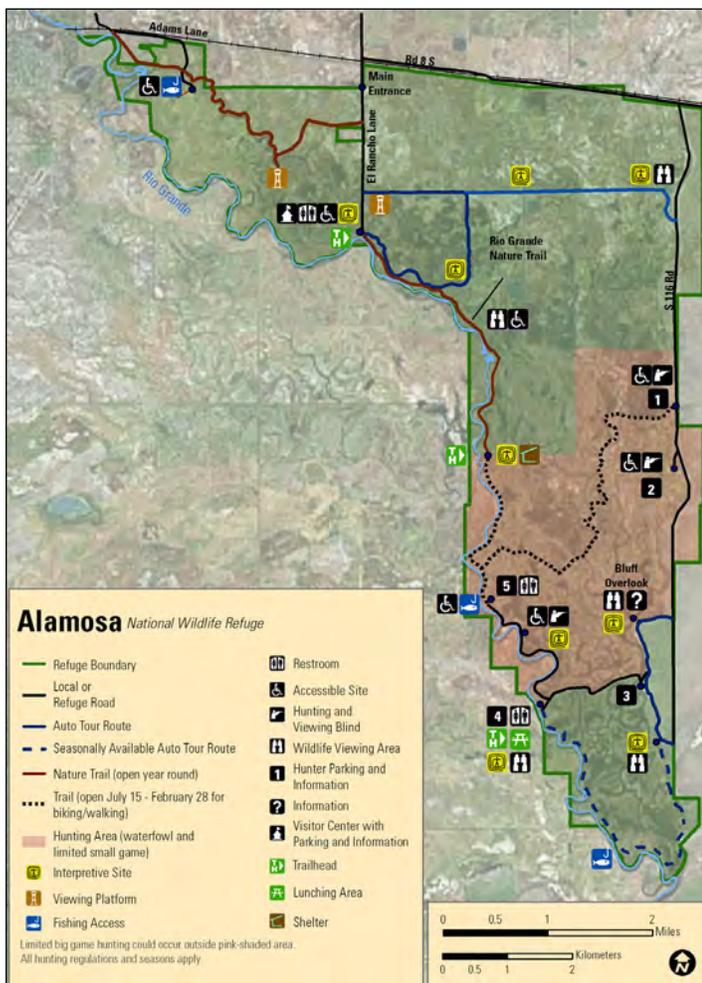
Environmental Consequences

Effects to the Physical Environment

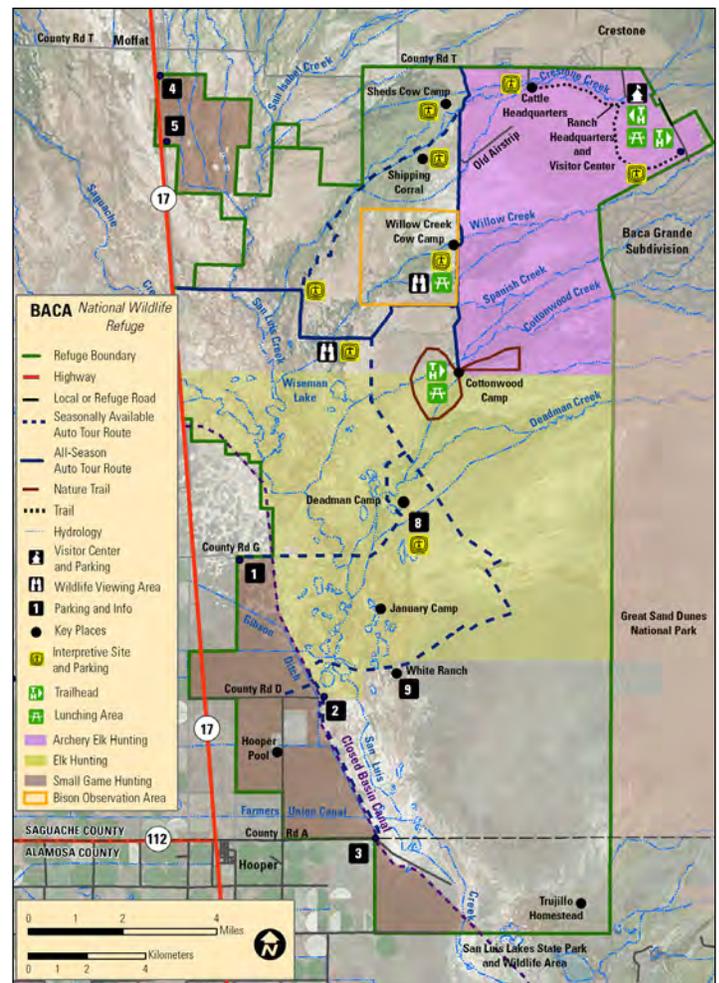
- Similar to alternative B, negligible to moderate localized



Cottonwood Creek on Baca National Wildlife Refuge.



Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge under alternative D.



Baca National Wildlife Refuge under alternative D.

soil disturbance along new trails or roads.

Effects to the Biological Environment

- Minor long-term benefits to wetlands from habitat management efforts and minor to moderate, long-term localized impacts to wetland habitat from increased visitor use and facilities.
- Similar to alternatives B and C for minor benefits from riparian habitat restoration.
- Minor to moderate impacts on southwestern willow fly-catcher due to allowing fishing access. With mitigation measures put in place, impacts would be lessened.
- Moderate long-term benefits for sandhill cranes from expanded small grain production.

- Minor long-term benefits for bison conservation from maintaining a small demonstration herd.
- Minor long-term benefits for elk population and management.
- Moderate localized impacts for birds from increased public access.

Effects on Visitor Services

- Same as alternative A for waterfowl hunting; negligible impacts short-term, but in the long-term, waterfowl hunting could be impacted.
- Moderate benefits for small and big game hunting opportunities.
- Moderate to major benefits for wildlife observation, interpretation, environmental edu-

cation, and outreach due to more opportunities.

- Negligible to minor benefits from walk-in access for fishing on Alamosa Refuge.

Effects on Special Management Areas

- Same as alternatives B and C; there would be minor to long-term benefits for protecting wilderness values and characteristics.

Effects on Cultural Resources

- Same as alternatives B and C.

Effects on Socioeconomics

- There would be negligible to minor benefits with 5 more jobs, \$184,300 more in labor income, and \$323,200 in value added as compared to alternative A.

How to Provide Comments

We encourage your feedback on the contents of the draft CCP and EIS. There are several ways to provide comments—by written letter, email, or at a public meeting. Each meeting will include a brief overview of the draft plan followed by an opportunity to offer comments. We ask that those who wish to speak sign up when they arrive, and everyone will be given a few minutes to comment. We will also be available to answer questions.

Written comments should be sent to the addresses listed under Contact Information. The deadline for submission is October 30, 2014.

When reviewing the draft plan, keep in mind that comments should be specific and address the plan's adequacy, the impact statement, or the merits of the alternatives. In the final CCP and EIS, we will respond to all substantive comments that:

- provide additional information relevant to the analysis;

- question, with reasonable basis, the accuracy of information in the plan;
- question, with reasonable basis, the adequacy of the environmental analysis;
- offer reasonable alternatives other than those in the plan;
- cause changes or revisions to the CCP.

Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made available to the public at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold such information, we cannot guarantee that we can do so.

Next Steps

Following the public comment period, we may change the alternatives, the impact analysis, or other features as a result of comments. We will then select a preferred alternative

and publish a final CCP and EIS. Our final decision will be documented in a record of decision that is published in the Federal Register no sooner than 30 days after publishing the final plan. We will carry out the plan immediately as funds become available.

Contact Information

Send written comments to:

San Luis Valley NWR Complex
Comprehensive Conservation Plan
Attn: Laurie Shannon, Planning
Team Leader
P.O. Box 25486
Denver, CO 80225-0486
Tel 303 / 236 4317; 303 /236 4792

Send email comments to:

SLVrefugesplanning@fws.gov

Download the document or get on the mailing list at:

http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/ccp/co/alm_bac_mtv/alm_bac_mtv.html



August 2014

**San Luis Valley NWR Complex CCP
Division of Refuge Planning
P.O. Box 25486
Denver, CO 80225-0486**

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED