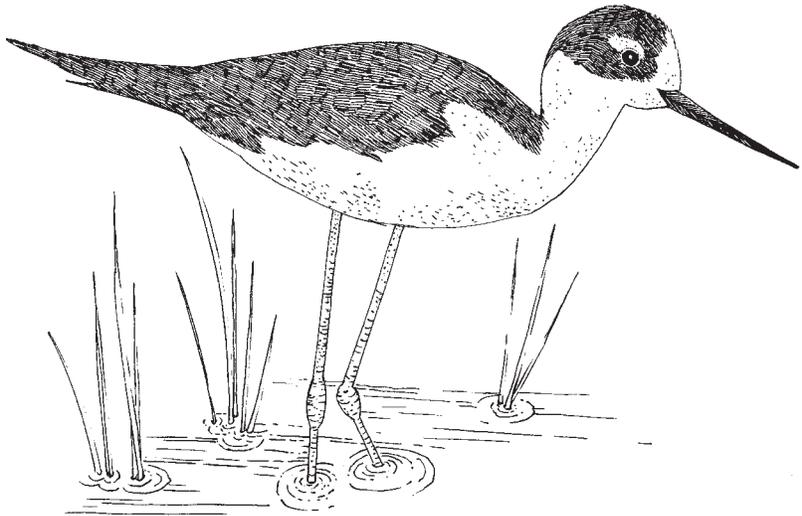


chapter 1



INTRODUCTION, PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR PLAN

Chapter 1. Introduction, Purpose of and Need for Plan

1.1 BACKGROUND

The Baca National Wildlife Refuge is located in Saguache and Alamosa counties in the San Luis Valley of south-central Colorado (figure 1). Congress authorized acquisition of land within the boundary of the refuge with passage of Public Law 106-530, also known as the “Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act of 2000.” In addition to the refuge, the Act authorized the federal acquisition of lands adjacent to the Great Sand Dunes National Monument for the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve (hereafter “Park”). This legislation focused on protecting the region’s hydrology, which the entire sand dunes ecosystem depends upon, and at protecting the region’s exceptional ecological, cultural, and wildlife resources.

With an approved acquisition boundary of approximately 92,500 acres, the refuge joins two existing national wildlife refuges (Alamosa and Monte Vista) in the San Luis Valley managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (figure 1). Although the authority has been granted to acquire land within this boundary, this does not guarantee that all of this area will ever be acquired by the Service. The refuge abuts lands owned or controlled by other conservation entities including The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the National Park Service (NPS), the USDA Forest Service (USFS), and the Colorado State Land Board (SLB). This complex of lands, totaling more than 500,000 acres, contains one of the largest and most diverse assemblages of wetland habitats remaining in Colorado. In addition to the tremendous biological and ecological resources in this part of the San Luis Valley, there are significant cultural resources.

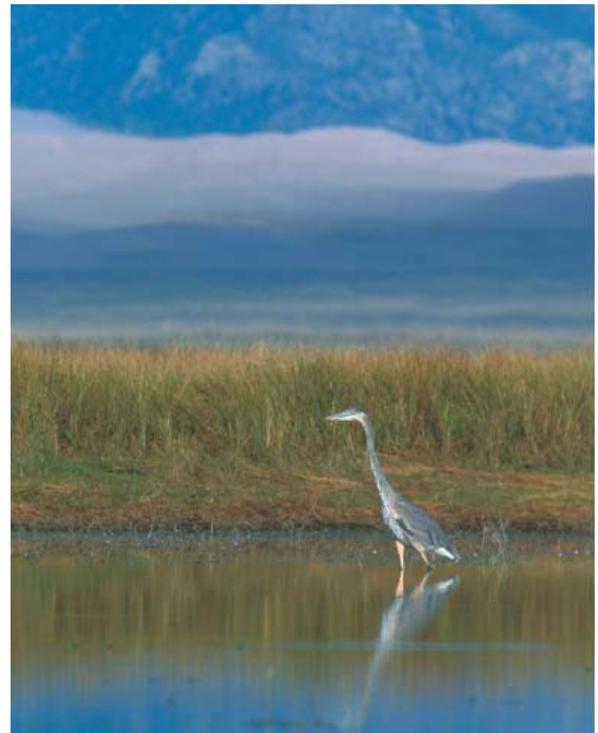
The San Luis Valley, a high mountain desert averaging only 7 inches of precipitation annually, is surrounded by towering 14,000 foot peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the east and the San Juan Mountains to the west. In contrast to the valley floor, higher elevations of the mountains receive more than 30 inches of precipitation annually, mostly as winter snow. Nearly everything and everyone in the valley depends upon these mountain snow packs. The refuge contains a diversity of habitat types including desert shrublands, grasslands, wet meadows, playa wetlands, and riparian areas, and is home to a multitude of wildlife and plant species, some of which only occur in the San Luis Valley.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

The Service is formulating this conceptual management plan (CMP) during the acquisition planning process

to provide local landowners, neighboring governmental agencies, and the interested public with a general understanding of the anticipated management approaches for the refuge over the next 3 to 5 years. The purpose of this CMP is to provide a broad overview of the Service’s proposed management approach to wildlife and their relative habitats, public uses, facilities, interagency coordination, and other operational needs. This CMP is not intended to provide substantive detail regarding issues such as where new facilities (if any) would be developed or how approved visitor services would be implemented. Answers to these types of questions and many others will be addressed with significant input from the public and others, as required by Service policy and the National Environmental Policy Act, during the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) planning process.

The CCP planning process, which is scheduled to start in 2008, will provide a thorough, in-depth analysis of all facets of current and future refuge management activities. Management actions described in this CMP only apply to those lands under the jurisdiction of the Service.



Great blue heron

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1.3 NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE MISSION, GOALS, AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a national network of lands set aside specifically for wildlife and their respective habitats. This priority-use mandate for wildlife is unique when compared to the mandates of other federal land management agencies such as the USFS and Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which have multiple-use mandates. Since the first national wildlife refuge was established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 (3-acre Pelican Island in Florida), the Refuge System has grown to 545 refuges encompassing over 95 million acres of land. The Refuge System is national in scope in that every state hosts at least one national wildlife refuge.

With the passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Refuge Improvement Act), the mission of the Refuge System was, for the first time, clearly defined and articulated. The Refuge Improvement Act can be regarded as the organic act for the Refuge System. The mission of the Refuge System originating from the Refuge Improvement Act 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.”

(National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.)

Not surprisingly, the Refuge System mission is quite similar to the overall mission of the Service:

“Working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

Specific goals of the Refuge System include:

- To perpetuate migratory bird, interjurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations
 - To conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife and plants
 - To conserve and restore as appropriate representative ecosystems of the United States, including the ecological processes characteristic of those ecosystems
 - To foster understanding and instill appreciation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their conservation, by providing the public with safe, high-quality, and compatible wildlife-dependent public use. Such use includes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation.
- In addition to the goals outlined above, four guiding principles for the management and general public use of the Refuge System have been established:
- **Habitat** - Fish and wildlife will not prosper without high quality habitat, and without fish and wildlife, traditional uses of refuges cannot be sustained. The Refuge System will continue to conserve and enhance the quality and diversity of fish and wildlife habitat within refuges.
 - **Public Use** - The Refuge System provides important opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation.
 - **Partnerships** - America’s sportsmen and women were the first partners who insisted on protecting valuable wildlife habitat within wildlife refuges. Conservation partnerships with other federal agencies, state agencies, tribes, organizations, industry, and the general public can make significant contributions to the growth and management of the Refuge System.
 - **Public Involvement** - The public should be given a full and open opportunity to participate in decisions regarding acquisition and management of our national wildlife refuges.
- To fulfill the Service’s statutory duty to achieve refuge purpose(s) and further the System mission
 - To conserve, restore where appropriate, and enhance all species of fish, wildlife and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered

1.4 HISTORY OF REFUGE ESTABLISHMENT

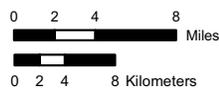
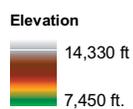
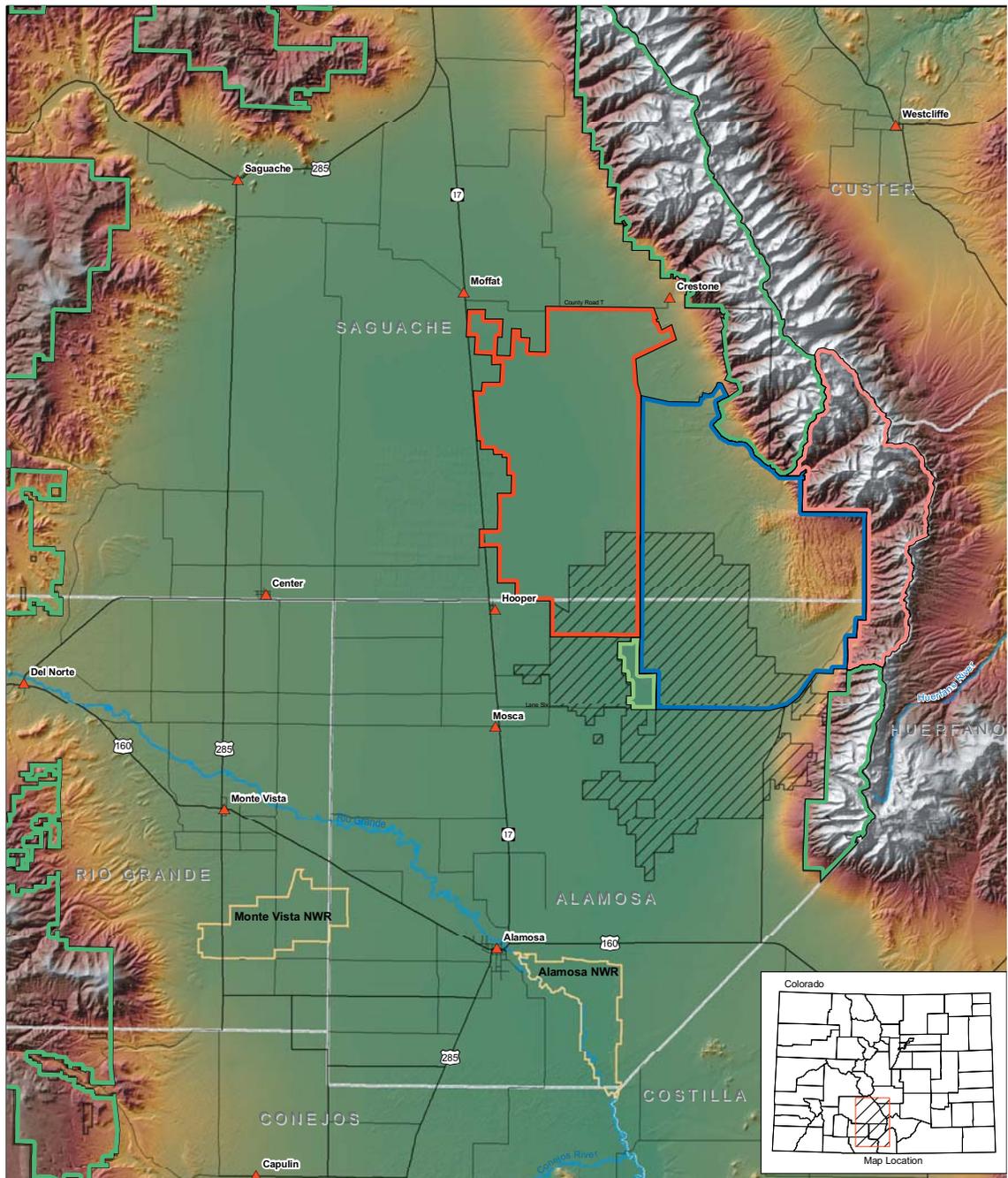
Baca National Wildlife Refuge was authorized by

Figure 1. Vicinity Map – San Luis Valley



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Baca National Wildlife Refuge
 Saguache and Alamosa Counties, Colorado

Vicinity Map – San Luis Valley



Legend

- Baca NWR Acquisition Boundary
 - Great Sand Dunes NP Acquisition Boundary
 - Great Sand Dunes National Preserve
 - Rio Grande National Forest*
 - Medano Zapata Ranch (TNC)
 - San Luis State Park and Wildlife Area
- * Inholdings not depicted



Congress on November 22, 2000, with the signing of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act. In addition to establishing the refuge, the Act authorized the federal acquisition of lands adjacent to the Great Sand Dunes National Monument for the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. The legislation was sponsored by Colorado Senator Wayne Allard and Congressman Scott McInnis and received widespread bi-partisan support within Congress, as well as overwhelming state and local support in the San Luis Valley. This legislation was the successful culmination of federal, state and local attempts over the previous 15 years to protect the region's vast water resources from trans-basin water exportation efforts originating from the 97,000 acre Baca Ranch. The legislation establishing the refuge and the Park mandates protection of the region's hydrology which the Great Sand Dunes ecosystem depends upon, and exceptional biological, ecological, and cultural resources of the area.

The approved acquisition boundary for the refuge is approximately 92,500 acres (figure 2). In April 2003, the Service obtained the first unit of the refuge when the 3,315-acre White Ranch property was transferred from the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) to the Service. The Notice to establish the refuge appeared in the Federal Register on March 11, 2003 (Vol. 68 No. 47). BOR purchased the White Ranch as part of a mitigation settlement for wetland losses resulting from the construction and operation of the Closed Basin Project, a division of the San Luis Valley Project. The Closed Basin Project was authorized by Congress in 1972 to assist Colorado in meeting its delivery requirements to New Mexico and Texas under the Rio Grande Compact (1938). The Closed Basin Project consists of numerous

shallow wells and canals that deliver water to the Rio Grande via the 42-mile Franklin Eddy canal.

The Baca Ranch is approximately 97,000 acres, of which approximately 53,500 acres are within the refuge acquisition boundary. TNC, along with the U.S. Department of the Interior (NPS and the Service) officially purchased the Baca Ranch in September 2004. The federal buyout of TNC by the Department occurred on March 8, 2005. Prior to the buyout, there existed a considerable amount of uncertainty as to when the federal buyout would actually occur. To deal with this uncertainty and ease transition to the Department, the Service along with the NPS and the USFS, entered into an agreement with TNC to co-manage the Baca Ranch until the buyout occurred. A general agreement was signed September 2004 and later amended in February 2005. The current amended general agreement between the Service and TNC outlines management and procedural details for the refuge through 2005. A copy of the September 2004 and February 2005 general agreement documents can be found in Appendix A. With acquisition of the Baca Ranch, Service ownership within the refuge is approximately 57,000 acres (62 percent). For more information on future land acquisition for the refuge, see Chapter 5.

1.5 REFUGE PURPOSE

A refuge purpose may be derived from federal law, proclamation, executive order, agreement, public land order, donation document, or administrative memorandum. The purposes for which a refuge is established carry special importance. Not only does the purpose help provide a vision or mission for



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Sandhill cranes

the refuge, it serves as the basis for compatibility determinations. Each refuge use must be determined to be compatible with, and not materially detract from, the purpose for which the refuge was established. The legislation creating the refuge did not specify a refuge purpose. By default, the purpose of the refuge is the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System until a new purpose is approved. Based on analysis of the intent of the enabling legislation, the following purpose is proposed and some form of it will likely be approved in the near future.

- The purpose of the Baca National Wildlife Refuge is to restore, enhance and maintain wetland, upland, riparian and other habitats for wildlife, plants and fish species that are native to the San Luis Valley, Colorado. Management of the refuge will emphasize migratory bird conservation and will consider the refuge's role in broader landscape conservation efforts.

1.6 INTERIM REFUGE GOALS

Within the next 3 to 5 years, refuge staff, (given sufficient resources) will strive to achieve the following goals at the refuge and, in doing so, protect and foster a better understanding of the ecological processes that have shaped and will continue to shape this unique landscape.

- Evaluate pre-acquisition management strategies in relation to wetland, upland, and riparian habitats.
- Assemble resource information including wildlife and biological, hydrological, and cultural resources.
- Assemble visitor services information and needs for the development of the visitor services program.
- Assemble operational and funding needs including staff requirements and inventorying real property assets such as fences, buildings, irrigation facilities, and roads.
- Maintain and evaluate pre-acquisition irrigation strategies.
- Ensure law enforcement protection including but not limited to facilities, boundaries, cultural resources, and refuge-specific regulations.

- Respond to public concerns and provide information in a timely manner.

1.7 LEGAL POLICY AND GUIDANCE

Baca National Wildlife Refuge will be managed as a part of the Refuge System in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 as amended with the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, Executive Order 12996, and other applicable Service and federal land management policies.

Figure 2. Approved Acquisition Boundary



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Baca National Wildlife Refuge
Saguache and Alamosa Counties, Colorado

Approved Acquisition Boundary
Figure 2

