U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Land Protection Planning

Proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area

Blanca Peak in the San Luis Valley / Joe Zinn

The proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area is a landscape-scale project designed to conserve wildlife habitat in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, specifically in the southeastern portion of the San Luis Valley, a montane-high desert region. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains in this area provide habitat for wildlife species ranging from Rio Grande cutthroat trout to Canada lynx.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) released a draft Land Protection Plan (LPP) and associated Environmental Assessment (EA) for the larger San Luis Valley Conservation Area, of which the proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area is a component, on May 9, 2012. The 30-day comment period for those documents closed on June 8, 2012. The draft LPP addressed conservation goals and the approach the Service would use to determine priority properties considered for partnerships and perpetual conservation easements with interested landowners. The associated EA detailed the potential impacts of the proposed federal action.

Any potential acquisitions of conservation easements would be from willing sellers. Lands under easement would remain in private ownership. Access to these lands would be controlled by the landowner and agricultural production would continue. These lands would also remain on local tax rolls. The Service would administer any such lands acquired for this project as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's premier network of lands and waters managed for the conservation of fish and wildlife.

Canada lynx / E. Bauer

Project Overview

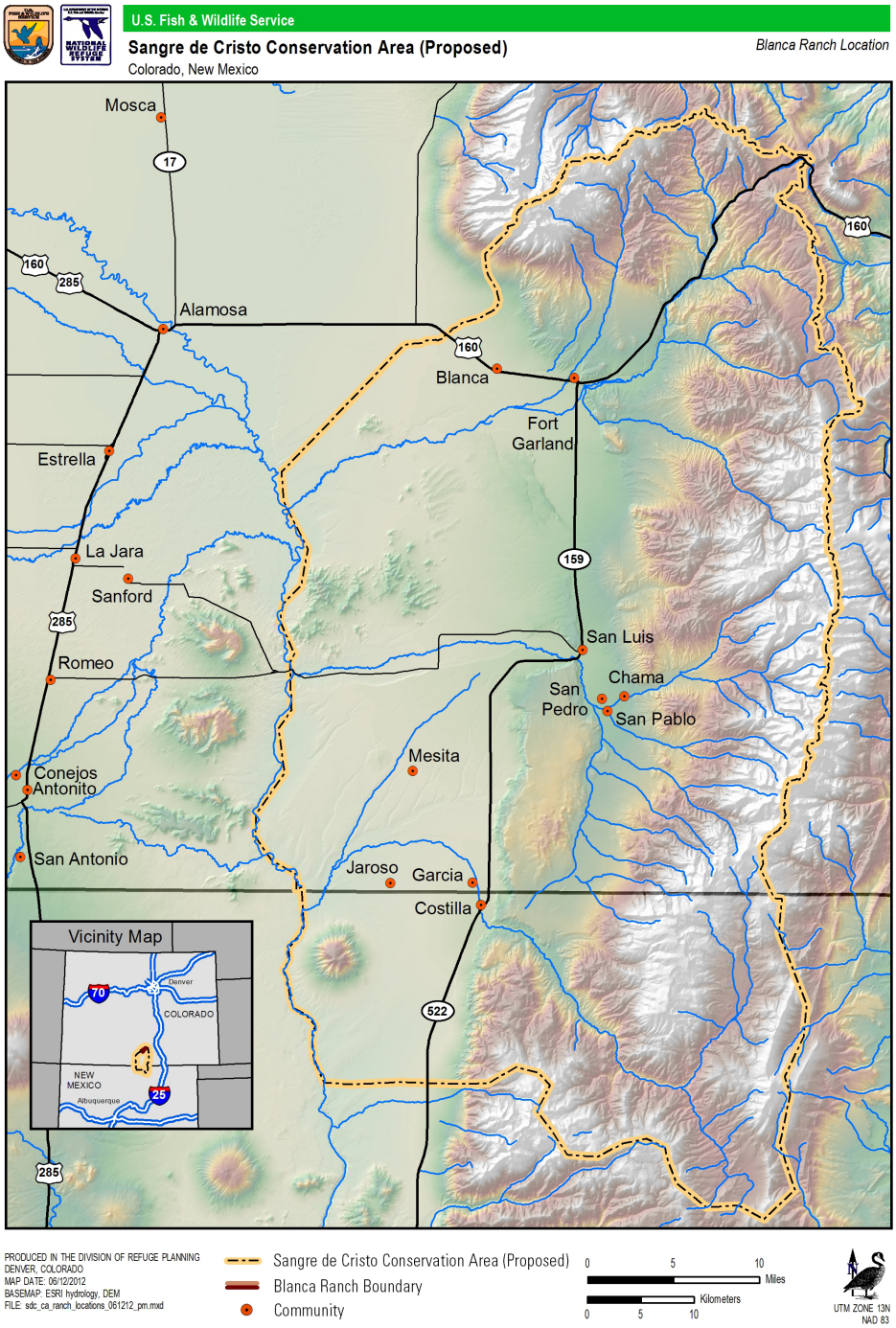
The San Luis Valley is home to numerous conservation assets, including the San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex, the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, other federal and state conservation lands, and nongovernmental initiatives led by local land trusts and private citizens. Together, this network of public and private partners are working to conserve the rich and largely intact wildlife habitat in the Valley and promoting connectivity for both migratory and resident species ranging from shorebirds, which nest seasonally in the Valley, to the federally protected Canada lynx, which moves locally between alpine environments in Colorado and New Mexico.

Seeking to build on these partnerships, the Service proposes to acquire an interest in lands within the boundary of the proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area to protect habitat for federal trust species and to connect and enhance existing conservation lands to promote connectivity for wildlife in the face of rapid environmental change. Key habitat types include high desert shrub-steppe, mountain grasslands, and alpine forest and tundra. Overall, the Service proposes to protect up to approximately 250,000 acres of land within the boundary of the proposed

Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area and up to an additional approximately 280,000 acres of currently unprotected land within the larger San Luis Valley, resulting in a total proposed conservation "footprint" of up to approximately 530,000 acres for the entire Valley. The Service anticipates that funding for the project will come primarily from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Prioritization of land for acquisition in the proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area will be based on habitat needs for focal species including Canada lynx, Rio Grande cutthroat trout, Gunnison sage-grouse, southwestern willow flycatcher, sage thrasher, and Lewis' woodpecker.

Next Steps

The Service is currently reviewing public comments submitted during the 30-day public comment period on the draft LPP and EA for the San Luis Valley Conservation Area, of which the proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area is the first potential component in the Service's phased implementation approach for the Valley. The Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service must approve formal establishment of the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area as a new unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System. After the Director has approved that step, the Service will continue to work closely with private landowners and other partners in the proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area acquisition boundary while simultaneously strengthening conservation partnerships with agencies, organizations and individuals throughout the larger San Luis Valley.



Map of Proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area / USFWS

Mike Blenden, Project Leader
San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex
9383 El Rancho Lane
Alamosa, CO 81101
(720) 589-4021

Mike Dixon, Planning Team Leader
Division of Refuge Planning
PO Box 25486, DFC
Denver, CO 80225
(303) 236-8132

Website:
www.fws.gov/alamosa/planning

E-mail comments to:
SLVrefugeplanning@fws.gov

For State relay service
TTY / Voice: 711

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
http://www.fws.gov

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