

Chapter 1—Introduction and Project Description

“The Sangre de Cristo Mountains...have the glamour of lost history – dim memories of Indian bands, of French explorers and Spanish troops; they have the spell of the remote, the mystery of recesses that are little known; they are the kind of mountains one’s imagination builds.”

– Albert Ellingwood after completing the first ascent of Crestone Needle, 1916

Rising as a singular wall of rock to heights of more than 14,000 feet from the surrounding valleys and plains, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains strike an impressive and poetically inspiring profile. They are also the southernmost range of the Rocky Mountains, and thus mark a transition from the Intermountain West to the ecosystems of the shortgrass prairie and desert southwest. Through the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area (SCCA; figure 1), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service or USFWS) hopes to permanently protect an important piece of these mountains.

As with many of the mountain ranges of the western United States, much of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains are conserved in perpetuity as national forest land. However, the central part of the range, from Blanca Peak in Colorado to northern Taos County in New Mexico, is entirely private. While there are some large ranches protected by conservation easements in this part of the range, there are still large gaps. This region has been identified as an important corridor linking populations of federally threatened Canada lynx in northern New Mexico with the larger population in the Rockies. In addition to the montane forests and alpine areas of the mountains themselves, the western slope of these mountains borders the San Luis Valley, a large intermountain valley bounded by the San Juan Mountains on the west and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the east, whose rain shadows result in high desert conditions. The southeastern corner of the valley is essentially the edge of the West’s “sagebrush sea,” and contains potential habitat for the Endangered Species Act candidate Gunnison sage-grouse and other declining sagebrush-dependent species. This western slope is also riddled with riparian corridors that provide important habitat for the Endangered Species Act candidate Rio Grande cutthroat trout, the federally endangered southwestern willow flycatcher, and countless other migratory birds.

Anthropogenic factors, including agriculture, changes in fire regime, and climate change, have changed the historical vegetation of the San Luis Valley. Low human population density associated with the largely agricultural economy of the valley have enabled the San Luis Valley and central Sangre de Cristo Mountains to keep substantial parts of their biological value, particularly for migratory birds. However, rising agricultural costs, including those resulting from the recent State of Colorado requirement to augment surface flows to offset the impacts of ground water use, have led to an unsettled agricultural economy. The risk of second home development in the already heavily subdivided Costilla County continues, and would substantially reduce the quality of that habitat for sagebrush-dependent species. Substantial residential development or unsustainable logging practices in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains would also degrade that habitat for threatened and endangered species.

The SCCA will conserve a network of vital wildlife habitat through up to 250,000 acres of voluntary conservation easements. The SCCA acquisitions will focus on the protection of sagebrush habitat as well as riparian corridors and associated uplands.

Planning for the SCCA began as part of the proposed San Luis Valley Conservation Area (SLVCA), for which a draft environmental assessment and land protection plan (EA and LPP) was released in May 2012. The Service has chosen to decelerate planning for the SLVCA to more effectively incorporate its goals with those of the ongoing comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) process for the San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex. The SLVCA LPP, should be completed sometime in or before 2014. In the interim, the Service recognizes the conservation need and opportunity on the west slope of the central Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and because this land is less integrated with the goals of the three refuges in the valley, we are moving forward to authorize the smaller Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area as part of the original vision.

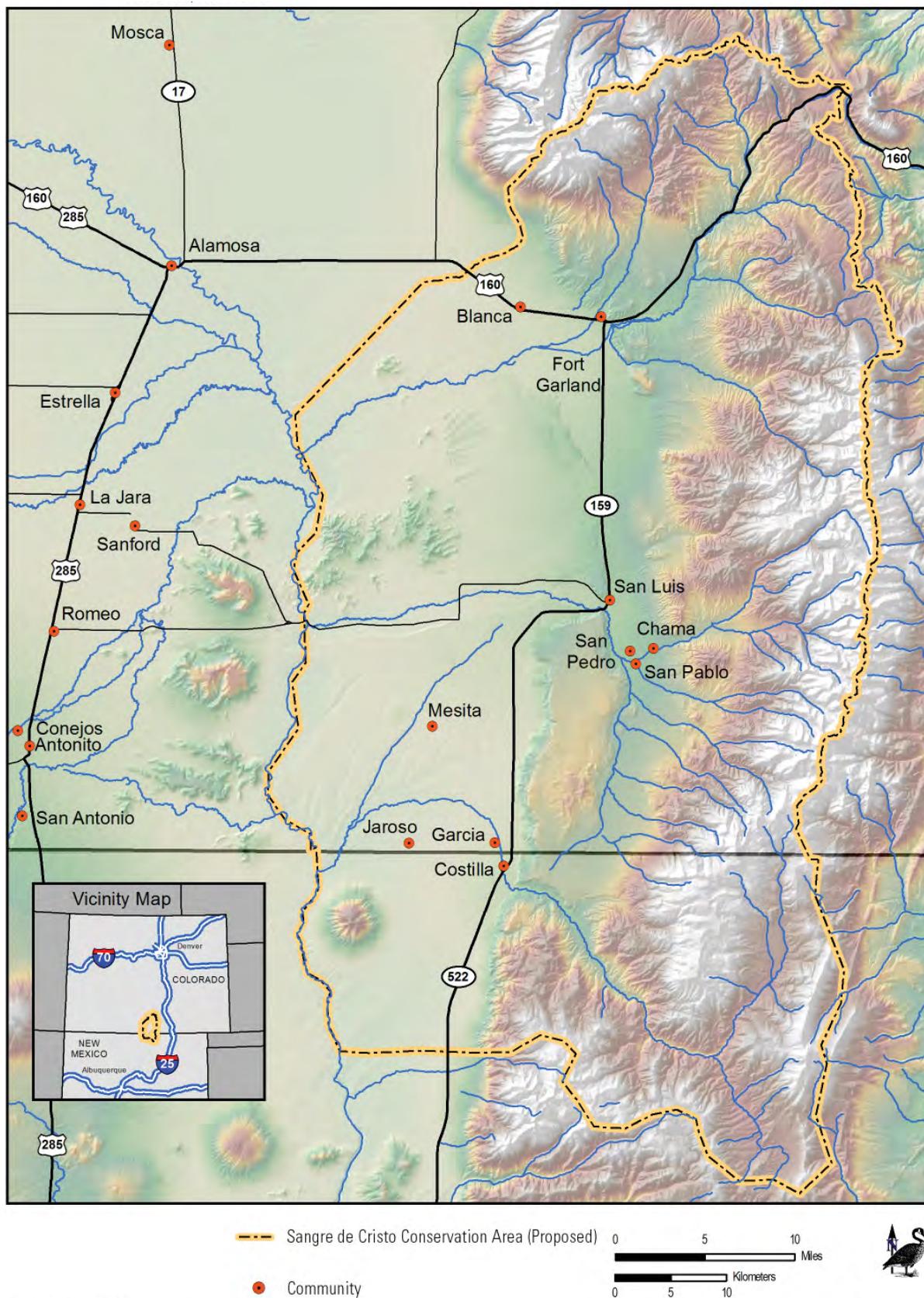


Figure 1. Boundary and Location of the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area, Colorado and New Mexico.

Purpose of the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area

The purpose of the SCCA is to protect the high-elevation wildlife habitats of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and the uplands of the southeastern San Luis Valley, with an emphasis on migratory birds and imperiled species. Acquisitions within, and administration of, the SCCA will focus on promoting the adaptive capacity and resilience of these ecosystems by ensuring connectivity between existing protected areas and by protecting wildlife movement corridors, particularly riparian areas.

This aligns with, but does not supersede, the vision and purposes of the three existing refuges—Alamosa, Monte Vista, and Baca—within the San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex, as described below.

SAN LUIS VALLEY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX

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 San Luis Valley National Wildlife 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, the refuges support and foster a collaborative spirit between their neighbors and partners to conserve the valley's treasured resources.

ALAMOSA AND MONTE VISTA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX

Vision:

Lands of the Alamosa and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge Complex and those owned by our partners will be managed in a way that



© Trinchera Ranch

The Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area contains a rich mosaic of working ranch lands and important wildlife habitat.

contributes to the migratory bird resource in the San Luis Valley to the greatest extent possible to benefit people of the valley and the United States. Management will emphasize protection, enhancement, restoration, and, where proper, creation of a variety of wetland and riparian habitats in this water-rich yet arid mountain valley. Local residents and visitors will view refuge lands with a sense of pride and value their relationships and accomplishments with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Purpose:

Alamosa and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuges were established under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act "...for use as inviolate sanctuaries, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds."

BACA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Purpose:

The purpose of the Baca National Wildlife Refuge shall be to restore, enhance, and maintain wetland, upland, riparian, and other habitats for native wildlife, plant, and fish species in the San Luis Valley. In administering the Baca National Wildlife Refuge, the Secretary shall, to the maximum extent practicable— (A) emphasize migratory bird conservation; and (B) take into consideration the role of the refuge in broader landscape conservation efforts; and (C) subject to any agreement in existence as of the date of enactment of this paragraph, and to the extent consistent with the purposes of the refuge, use decreed water rights on the refuge in approximately the same manner that the water rights have been used historically.

Issues Identified and Selected for Analysis

The Service solicited comments about the SLVCA from the public through direct mailings, news releases, public meetings, and direct contacts. These comments were incorporated into what has become the SCCA.

- On March 15, 2011, the Service opened a scoping period for the public with the publication of a notice of intent in the Federal Register (FR Doc. 2011–5924). The notice of intent notified the public of the Service’s intention to begin the coplanning and NEPA review for the CCP and LPP for the San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

- Public scoping meetings were held on March 29, 2011, in Alamosa, Colorado; March 30, 2011, in Monte Vista, Colorado; and March 31, 2011, in Mofat, Colorado. The scoping meetings were attended by approximately 50 people, many of whom provided input for the scoping process. Additionally, 14 written comments were received from organizations and members of the public.
- A press event and public meeting was held at Adams State College in Alamosa, Colorado, on January 4, 2012, at which the Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, organized the presentation of several complementary initiatives for the San Luis Valley and Sangre de Cristo Mountains. One of these initiatives was landscape scale conservation, which Dan Ashe, the Director of the Service, presented as being embodied by the SLVCA. Questions were answered and comments taken at a breakout session following the main meeting.
- The project’s planning Web site (<http://www.fws.gov/alamosa/planning>) was established in early March of 2011. The site provides information about meetings and downloadable versions of public documents. Individuals can also sign up to be on the project mailing list through the Web site.

During scoping, the CCP and LPP were still being planned simultaneously. However, the two plans have since been separated and the LPP process has been moved up to take advantage of conservation opportunities that may not exist in the future. As such, many of the issues identified during scoping are not specific or relevant to the LPP. The applicable issues and questions identified during the scoping process and during internal conversations among the SCCA planning team are:

- The SCCA must protect the wildlife habitat, specifically wetlands, riparian corridors, grasslands, and shrublands, of the San Luis Valley, while also supporting the rural agricultural aesthetic that defines the region.
- What role can the conservation area play in protecting listed species and species of concern?
- How will the SCCA affect water use in the valley?
- The SCCA should not negatively affect private property rights in the valley.
- Develop partnerships for land protection.
- How will the public be able to use lands protected under the SCCA?
- Make sure that the SCCA planning process incorporates the importance of protecting cultural resources.
- How will the SCCA increase the capacity to adapt to climate change on the existing refuges and habitat throughout the valley?

- The plan should account for air, soil, sound, and visibility effects.

Public Review of, and Comments on, the Draft Environmental Assessment and Land Protection Plan

The Service released the draft SLVCA EA and LPP on May 9, 2012 for a 30-day public review period. This draft has become the basis for the final SCCA EA and LPP. The draft documents were made available to the public via the project Web site, as well as to Federal officials and agencies, State officials and agencies, 17 Native American tribes with aboriginal interests, and members of the public who had asked to be added to the project mailing list. In addition, three public meetings were held in Alamosa, San Luis, and Mofat, Colorado on May 14, 15, and 16, 2012, respectively. Approximately 50 members of the public attended these three meetings. In addition to several comments voiced at these public meetings, the Service received eight written comments from government agencies and nongovernmental organizations and corporations, and six written comments from individuals. Comments were reviewed and incorporated into the administrative record. Comments and responses to substantive comments are included in appendix D.

Of those comments that showed a clear opinion in favor or opposed to the project, 75 percent were supportive in nature. The comments generally in favor of the SLVCA (which then included what has since become the SCCA) mention items such as:

- The SLVCA is entirely a willing seller program, not an imposition
- The Service has emphasized the collaborative nature of the project – The SLVCA is one of many conservation initiatives
- The plan was comprehensive
- The Service’s conservation goals are complementary with those of residents in Crestone and Baca Grande who would like to see perpetual conservation easements in those municipalities
- The prioritization strategy emphasizes promoting capacity for climate change adaptation
- Easement language should allow changes in water use only if beneficial to wildlife; and similar comments arguing for a more aggressive stance by USFWS to restore historical hydrology in the San Luis Valley
- An emphasis on sustainability in the San Luis Valley could help bolster its already strong or growing nonagriculture sectors such as finance, services, and tourism.
- The land protection strategy is transparent and guided by habitat needs for identified trust species
- Recognition that conservation easements are effective and more popular than new Federal land acquisition
- Appreciation of the landscape-scale nature of the project
- In addition to full market value, the Service should consider bargain sales for easements
- Appreciation for the gradual nature of and phased approach to the SLVCA
- Suggestions to include more areas in northern New Mexico (Chama Peaks area, Jicarilla Apache lands) in project boundary
- In addition to habitat value, the Service consider other qualities such as historical, open space, and public access
- Easement program should accommodate small parcels, such as the vara strips associated with acequia irrigation practices.
- Program will protect both wildlife and agriculture

Comments not in support of the project identified the following concerns:

- Bad past experiences with easements restricting changes in agricultural operations
- Request that the Service consider impacts of easement restrictions on ability of utility companies to promote electrical reliability and renewable energy
- Industry was not reached during scoping
- General dissatisfaction with the impact of the Federal Government on land access and quality of life
- Concerns by the Rio Grande Water Conservation District about the potential competition between the USFWS easement program and their attempts to acquire land for mitigation for the San Luis Valley Habitat Conservation Plan.

The following substantive questions were raised that were neither in opposition to nor in support of the SLVCA and SCCA:

- How will being within the SLVCA boundary influence decisionmaking (for example grazing permits) by other Federal agencies?
- How will the presence of an easement on an adjacent property affect a landowner who chooses not to sell an easement?
- How will the SLVCA’s establishment affect traditional use rights for Hispanos in Costilla County?

National Wildlife Refuge System and Authorities

The SCCA will be part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, whose mission is "...to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where proper, 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). National wildlife refuges provide important habitat for native plants and many species of mammals, birds, fish, insects, amphibians, and reptiles. They also play a vital role in conserving threatened and endangered species. Refuges offer a wide variety of wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, and many have visitor centers, wildlife trails, and environmental education programs.

Conservation of more wildlife habitat in the SCCA will be consistent with the following policies and management plans:

- Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918)
- Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (1934)
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Act (1956)
- Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (1962)
- Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (1965)
- Endangered Species Act (1973)
- Migratory Non-Game Birds of Management Concern in the U.S. (2002)
- Alamosa and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge Complex Comprehensive Conservation Plan (2003)
- Baca National Wildlife Refuge Conceptual Management Plan (2005)

The acquisition authorities for the proposed easements and property acquisition are the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742a–j) and the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 668dd–668ee), as amended. Land will be acquired with the use of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is derived primarily from oil and gas leases on the Outer Continental Shelf, motorboat fuel taxes, and the sale of surplus Federal property. As proper, the Service could also buy land interest through the use of Federal Duck Stamp revenue from the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act of 1934. There could also be more money to acquire lands, water, and interests for fish and wildlife conservation purposes as identified by Congress or donations from nonprofit organizations. Any acquisition from willing sellers would be subject to available money.

Related Actions and Activities

The Sangre de Cristo Mountains and San Luis Valley contain many public lands and private protected areas, some of which are contiguous with other protected areas and some of which are isolated. Several existing State, Federal, and private land trust programs promote the conservation of habitats in the SCCA.

SAN LUIS VALLEY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX (SERVICE)

The San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex has three existing units: the Alamosa, Baca, and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuges. These refuges were established for different purposes, as outlined earlier in this chapter, and protect 12,026 acres, 92,500 acres, and 14,800 acres, respectively. All three refuges now contain a variety of habitats, with a special emphasis on wetlands and riparian systems. Management practices include vegetation manipulation and the artificial movement of water.

USDA FOREST SERVICE (USFS)

The Rio Grande, San Isabel, and Carson National Forests border the SCCA to the north, east, and south. These forests contain nearly 4.5 million acres of public lands in the Sangre de Cristo, Saguache, and San Juan Mountains. The forests contain habitat ranging from pinyon-juniper savanna in the lower areas up to alpine tundra and scree fields at elevations more than 14,000 feet. Much of this is designated wilderness. These national forests are important habitat for Federal trust species, including Canada lynx and Rio Grande cutthroat trout, and for nonlisted but climate change-imperiled species, such as American pika and white-tailed ptarmigan.

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT (BLM)

Much of the land between the national forest boundaries and the largely private valley floor is administered by the BLM as the San Luis Resource Area. The BLM is actively working to restore the historical playa wetlands in the South San Luis Lakes and Blanca Wetlands areas, the latter of which has been designated as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern. These intermittent wetlands are particularly important for migratory shorebirds, some of which nest in the valley, and are also a priority habitat for the Service. There is also a proposal to establish a Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area in northern New Mexico next to the SCCA boundary. This initiative would place certain added management guidelines on public lands within that boundary.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS)

Just to the northwest of the SCCA boundary is the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. Together these comanaged NPS units protect approximately 150,000 acres, from valley floor rabbitbrush scrub and the tallest sand dunes in North America to peaks more than 13,000 feet in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)

The NRCS actively works in the San Luis Valley through its Wetlands Reserve Program, a voluntary easement program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. They do not own land in fee title, but rather provide technical and financial support to help landowners with wetlands restoration efforts.

STATE OF COLORADO

The State of Colorado owns thousands of acres throughout the region and administers State Wildlife Areas and State Habitat Areas on many private lands. There are several school sections, managed by the State Land Board to provide revenue for K–12 education in the State. Some of these State Land Board parcels, such as La Jara Reservoir, allow recreational use as part of the Public Access program with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. There are a handful of regionally important wetlands and riparian corridors managed as State Wildlife Areas, including Russel Lakes; San Luis Lakes; and Rio Grande, Higel, and Hot Creek State Wildlife Areas. South of Baca National Wildlife Refuge and west of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve is San Luis Lakes State Park, which provides important habitat for migratory birds as well as opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation and watersports.

LAND TRUSTS

Tens of thousands of acres are protected in either fee title and easement programs paid for, or administered by, several conservation and land trust organizations, including but not limited to the Wetlands America Trust, The Nature Conservancy, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Colorado Open Lands, the American Farmland Trust, Ducks Unlimited, the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, and the Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust. These organizations have many different objectives; some focus on the preservation of undeveloped agricultural land to provide resources for the future, some are interested in protecting specific wildlife resources such as wetlands, and some have cultural or recreational objectives. The efforts of each of these organizations complement each

other as well as efforts being undertaken by public agencies, including the Service. The locations of easements on private land are largely confidential, but there are some important land trust properties held in fee title as well, such as The Nature Conservancy's Medano-Zapata Ranch, which borders Baca National Wildlife Refuge and Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. This property is a 103,000-acre working ranch and is home to a herd of 2,500 bison that are managed to mimic natural grazing patterns in the high desert shrub and grasslands.

Habitat Protection and the Easement Acquisition Process

Habitat protection will occur through the purchase of conservation easements. It is the Service's long-established policy to acquire the minimum interest in land from willing sellers to achieve habitat protection goals, and conservation easements are an effective tool for achieving these goals.

The acquisition authority for the SCCA is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742a–j). The Federal money used to acquire conservation easements will largely come from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is derived from oil and gas leases on the Outer Continental Shelf, motorboat fuel tax revenues, and the sale of surplus Federal property. There could be more money to acquire interests in habitat and water through direct congressional appropriations, donations, and the Federal Land Trust Facilitation Act if Congress votes to reauthorize it.

Conservation Easements

An easement is a conservation tool that has been extensively employed in the SCCA project area and throughout the larger region by other organizations. Easements involve the acquisition of certain rights to the property, such the right to subdivide or develop certain types of new infrastructure, while leaving the land title in the hands of the private property owner. Easements tend to be a cost-effective and socially acceptable means of habitat conservation. Many of the current agricultural land use practices are consistent with wildlife resource protection, and the use of easements will help ensure a strong and vibrant rural lifestyle.

