

Chapter 4 — Project Implementation

Land Protection Options

No ACTION

Under the no-action alternative, the areas outside of existing protected areas would largely remain in private ownership and subject to changes in land use and/or land cover. Some protection in addition to the SCCA is likely because of ongoing conservation easement initiatives in the San Luis Valley and Sangre de Cristo Mountains by public entities such as NRCS and nongovernmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and Colorado Open Lands.

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS UNDER SCCA (PROPOSED ACTION)

It is the Service's policy to acquire the minimum interest in a property necessary to accomplish its conservation objectives. It can be possible to achieve most of these objectives with conservation easements. The preservation of working landscapes such as farms and rangeland is more cost effective, socially acceptable, and politically popular than acquiring fee-title land, and it often promotes the preservation of unfragmented, quality habitat. Under the proposed action, the Service seeks to protect up to 250,000 acres through conservation easements in the SCCA.

Project Objectives and Actions

The SCCA sits in the San Luis Valley and the adjoining Sangre de Cristo Mountains of central southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. The project area contains land in Costilla County in Colorado, as well as a small portion of Taos County in New Mexico. The SCCA boundary includes the Sangre de Cristo's tributaries of the Rio Grande River between Blanca Peak and the watershed of Costilla Creek. Within the project boundary, the Service will strategically identify and acquire from willing sellers an appropriate interest in upland, wetland, and riparian habitats on privately owned lands.

The Service plans to buy or receive donated conservation easements on those identified areas within the project boundaries, and would consider accepting donated fee-title lands as well. These easements will connect and expand existing lands under public and private conservation protection. Based upon the area of privately held priority habitat in the SCCA boundary, and to allow for some flexibility in easement acquisition, the objective of the SCCA project is to protect 250,000 acres of uplands, wetlands, and riparian areas through easements.

EASEMENT TERMS AND REQUIREMENTS

The Service has successfully implemented easements in many projects, and existing language and guidelines would contribute substantially to the drafting of the SCCA easement language. Given the Service's conservation goals in the SCCA, the easements will be drafted with standard language to preclude subdivision and development and conversion of native vegetation to cropland, as well as to protect existing wetlands from being drained or filled.

In addition, because of the scarcity of water resources in the valley and impending changes to ground water law in the State of Colorado, there may be provisions regarding water use. The types of wetland and associated upland habitats in which we are interested are largely supported by current water use practices. Easements may include a stipulation that changes in water use cannot adversely affect the quality of habitats that we seek to protect in the easements, and that water rights currently owned for use on a property under an easement could not be sold or transferred for use on other properties unless such a transfer was deemed beneficial to wildlife. These would be new easement terms for the Service, and require further investigation before they could be implemented as part of the SCCA program.

The protection of riparian corridors is critically important in the SCCA, particularly since much of the lower-elevation habitat has, or has the potential to have, the constituent elements of critical habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher³. While easement language would not prescribe specific management practices on these lands, landowners with suit-

³FR 76(157), 50542-50629. *Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Designation of Revised Critical Habitat for Southwestern Willow Flycatcher*. Agency: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Action: Proposed Rule. August 15, 2011

able or potentially suitable riparian habitat would be encouraged to work with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program or the new Working Lands for Wildlife Program (NRCS 2012) to develop alternative strategies such as fencing of riparian corridors and off-river stock watering to prevent overgrazing of regenerating riparian vegetation.

CONTAMINANTS OR HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

Level 1 pre-acquisition site assessments will be conducted on individual tracts before the purchase of any land interests. The Service's environmental contaminants specialists from the Ecological Services offices in Colorado and New Mexico will be contacted to ensure that policies and guidelines are followed before acquisition of conservation easements or fee title.

ACQUISITION FUNDING

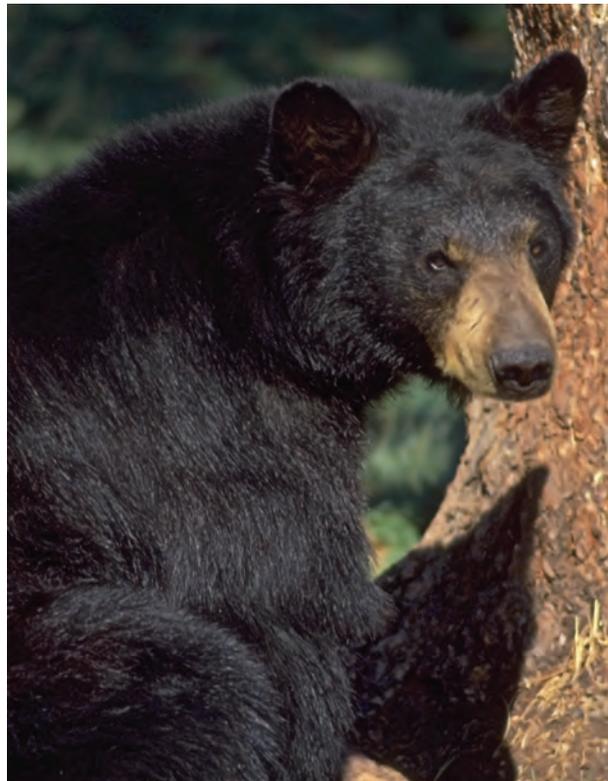
The Service will acquire easements in the SCCA primarily through Land and Water Conservation Fund monies. These monies are derived primarily through revenue generated from oil and gas leases on the Outer Continental Shelf, motorboat fuel taxes, and the sale of surplus Federal property. Monies in this fund are not derived from general taxes. While Land and Water Conservation Fund monies are intended for land and water conservation projects, funding is subject to annual appropriations by Congress for specific acquisition projects. If it is reauthorized by Congress, the Federal Land Trust Facilitation Act could also be used to fund specific acquisitions. This act is a law that allows the BLM to dispose of certain public lands in order to generate revenue for strategic conservation of habitat not currently in Federal trust.

The SCCA project area includes several other government and nongovernmental organizations with overlapping conservation objectives. In the development of the SCCA, we have prioritized land for acquisition by the Service, but our Land Protection Plan may also guide acquisitions for conservation by the NRCS (Wetland Reserve Program), The Nature Conservancy, Colorado Open Lands, and the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, among others.

Protection Priorities

The Service, in consultation with internal divisions (Migratory Birds, Fisheries, Ecological Services), nongovernmental organization partners, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and BLM, selected six focal species whose habitat needs have driven the prioritization of the SCCA. Each of these focal species represents a group of species that are vulnerable to the same threat processes (Lambeck 1997). The species selected were Canada lynx, Rio Grande cutthroat trout, willow

flycatcher, Lewis' woodpecker, Gunnison sage-grouse, and sage thrasher. All of these are Federal trust species and/or have State or regional conservation status, making them worthy of protection on their own; however, conserving habitat for these species will also protect habitat for other species with similar habitat requirements (Figure 15).



Steve Torbit/USFWS

Protection of habitat for Federal trust species will also ensure connectivity for state-managed species such as the American black bear.

SPECIES-HABITAT MAPPING METHODOLOGY

Some of the chosen species, by virtue of their having special conservation status, had already been the subject of detailed habitat mapping in the project area. For others, simple conceptual models were developed based upon literature reviews.

The southwestern willow flycatcher is a genetically distinct subspecies (Paxton 2000) of willow flycatcher that inhabits the woody riparian corridors of the desert southwest. Its population has declined significantly because of habitat loss, and it is listed as endangered by the States of Colorado and New Mexico as well as under the Federal Endangered Species Act. The willow and cottonwood riparian habitats necessary for willow flycatcher breeding in the San Luis Valley have been mapped in detail as part of the development of the draft San Luis Valley Habitat Conservation Plan for that species (ERO Resources, unpublished data). The data also capture the gallery cottonwood habitat

needed for both the Lewis' woodpecker in this portion of its range and for the breeding habitat of the yellow-billed cuckoo. The existing data were used as core habitat in this prioritization scheme; as a second priority, a 200-meter buffer was used to minimize disturbance of the core habitat (Terry Ireland, USFWS Ecological Services, personal communication, February 2012). These priorities are illustrated in Figure 2.

Canada lynx are federally listed as threatened and State listed in Colorado as endangered. Lynx range through the montane forests of the Rocky Mountains. They are resident in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and the junction between the Sangre de Cristo Range and the Culebra Range of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains has been identified as a particularly important corridor for the species (L. Ellwood, USFWS Ecological Services Colorado Field Office, personal communication, January 2012). Its habitat in the project area has already been mapped by Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service. A small portion of the project area in northern New Mexico had not been covered by previous mapping but is known to be actively used by lynx. Therefore, a minimum convex polygon for this region was created that captured the land cover that largely comprises the Colorado Parks and Wildlife habitat (Rocky Mountain aspen forest and woodland, Rocky Mountain lodgepole pine forest, Southern Rocky Mountain mesic montane mixed conifer forest and woodland, and Rocky Mountain subalpine dry-mesic spruce-fir forest and woodland) using 30-meter Landfire data (USGS 2010). Lynx habitat is identified in Figure 3.

The habitat of the Endangered Species Act candidate Rio Grande cutthroat trout has been mapped throughout the species' range; in addition, information on barriers to fish passage and data on genetic integrity has been incorporated into a spatial database. Because interbreeding has been a problem for cutthroat trout species, the signatory parties to the 2009 Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Agreement identified populations with less than 10 percent genetic introgression and defined them as conservation populations (Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Team 2009). These conservation populations were chosen as representing priority habitat for the species in this land protection plan (Figure 4).

The range of the Gunnison sage-grouse is much more geographically limited than it once was. The Gunnison Sage-Grouse Steering Committee revised earlier, coarser-scale historic range mapping for the species (Schroeder et al. 2004) and identified current and suitable but unoccupied habitat (Gunnison Sage-grouse Rangewide Steering Committee 2005). In the project area, there are no known leks, but there is a large expanse of vacant and/or unknown habitat identified in Costilla County. Current range polygons were selected to represent priority habitat for this

species; the historic range is also displayed for reference (Figure 5).

Sage thrasher is a migratory bird that has been declining throughout its range due to habitat loss and degradation, and is a Service Region 6 bird of conservation concern as well as a Migratory Birds focal species. A range-wide conceptual model for the species was developed by the American Bird Conservancy based on Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory sampling data (Beason, Levad, and Leukering 2005) and ReGap land cover data. The population estimates they assign to these land cover classes are further stratified based on the classification of vegetation quality as good, fair, or poor, which was in turn derived from shrub cover density and prevalence of invasive plants. In the absence of data on vegetation quality for the San Luis Valley, the "fair" quality was selected for all land cover types. The model developers determined that Inter-Mountain Basins Big Sagebrush Shrubland, Inter-Mountain Basins Montane Sagebrush Steppe, and Colorado Plateau Mixed Low Sagebrush Shrubland would support, on average, 0.0528252 birds per acre; this group of vegetation types was selected as the first priority in the sage thrasher-specific map. Inter-Mountain Basins Mixed Salt Desert Scrub, Inter-Mountain Basins Greasewood Flat, and Inter-Mountain Basins Semi-Desert Shrub Steppe support 0.009348 birds per acre; these vegetation classes were selected as the second priority for the species. Within these two priority levels, only polygons greater than 100 hectares in area were included because sage thrasher are known to be somewhat area sensitive and are found most commonly in patches of that size or greater (Knick and Rotenberry 1995). Priority habitat for this species is displayed in Figure 6.

LANDSCAPE PRIORITIZATION

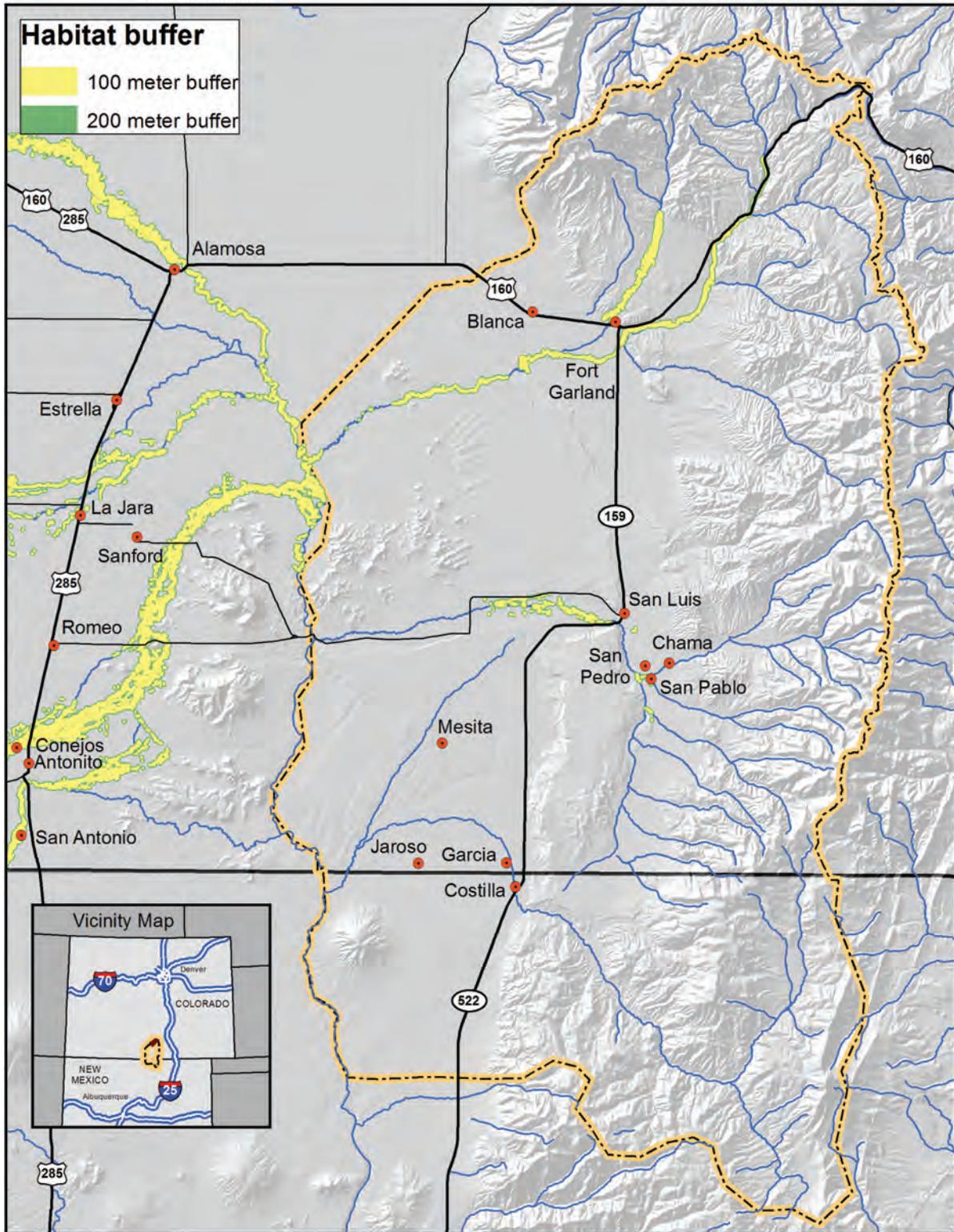
The species-specific maps are useful for determining where in the landscape the key habitats are for the identified focal species. However, they do not assist decision makers with determining which areas would provide the most effective conservation returns overall. In addition to the presence or absence of habitat for individual species, it is important to take into account issues such as connectivity, cost, and unequal conservation need for each species. Therefore, the simulated-annealing algorithm implemented in the software package Marxan (Ball, Possingham, and Watts 2009) was used to identify "optimal" solutions for conservation prioritization within the SCCA. Marxan permits the user to specify individual conservation targets for conservation features (in this case, area of focal species habitat) and species-specific penalties for models that do not meet conservation targets. This allows the user to individually weight features, for example, upweight penalties for not including enough habitat for species of higher conservation concern, or reduce the amount



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area
Colorado, New Mexico

Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and Lewis' Woodpecker Habitat



PRODUCED IN THE DIVISION OF REFUGE PLANNING
DENVER, COLORADO
MAP DATE: 07/05/2012
BASEMAP: ESRI hydrology, DEM
FILE: SSWF_SCCA.mxd

— Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area

• Community

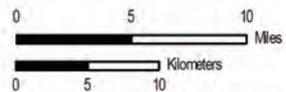


Figure 2. Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and Lewis' Woodpecker Habitat

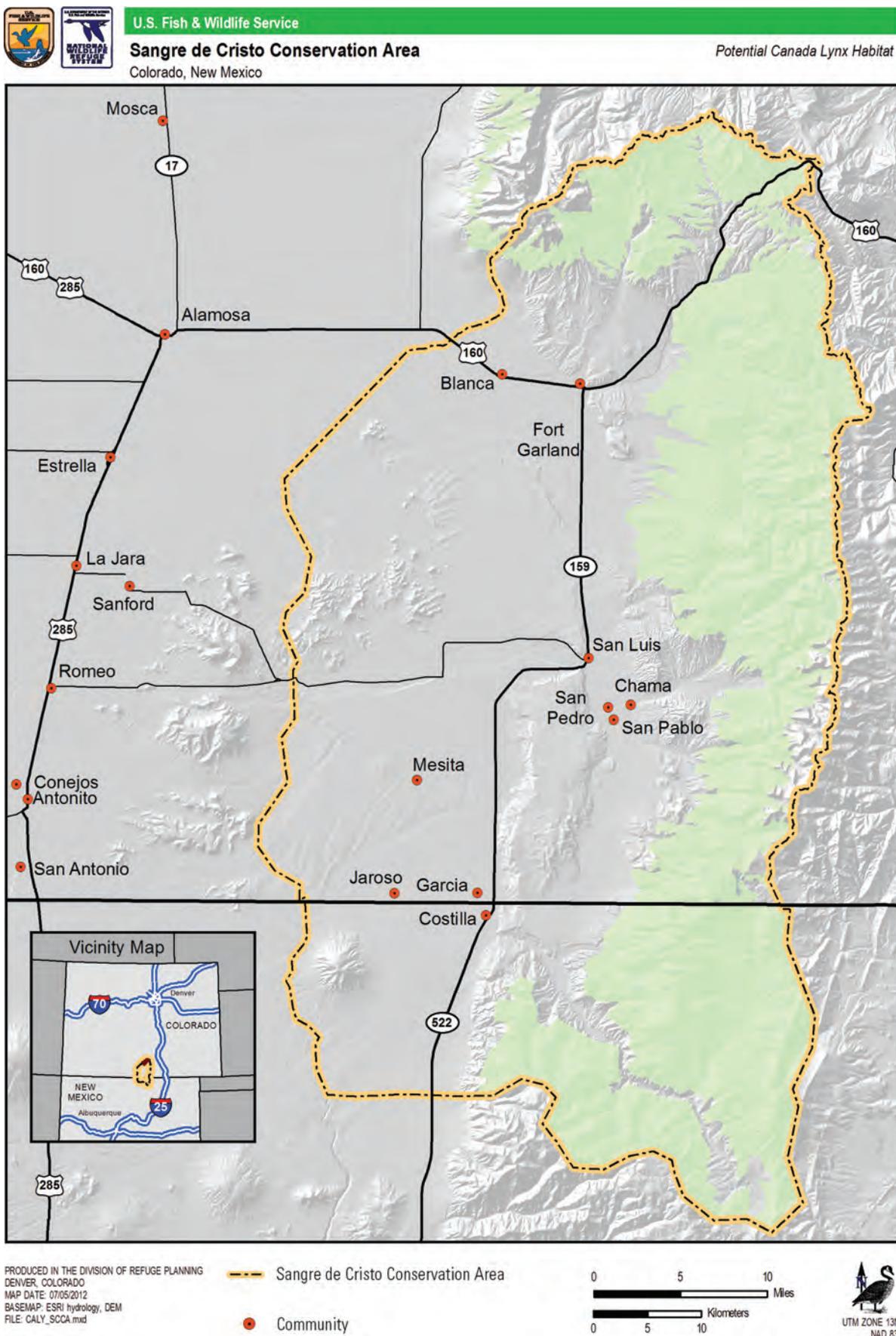


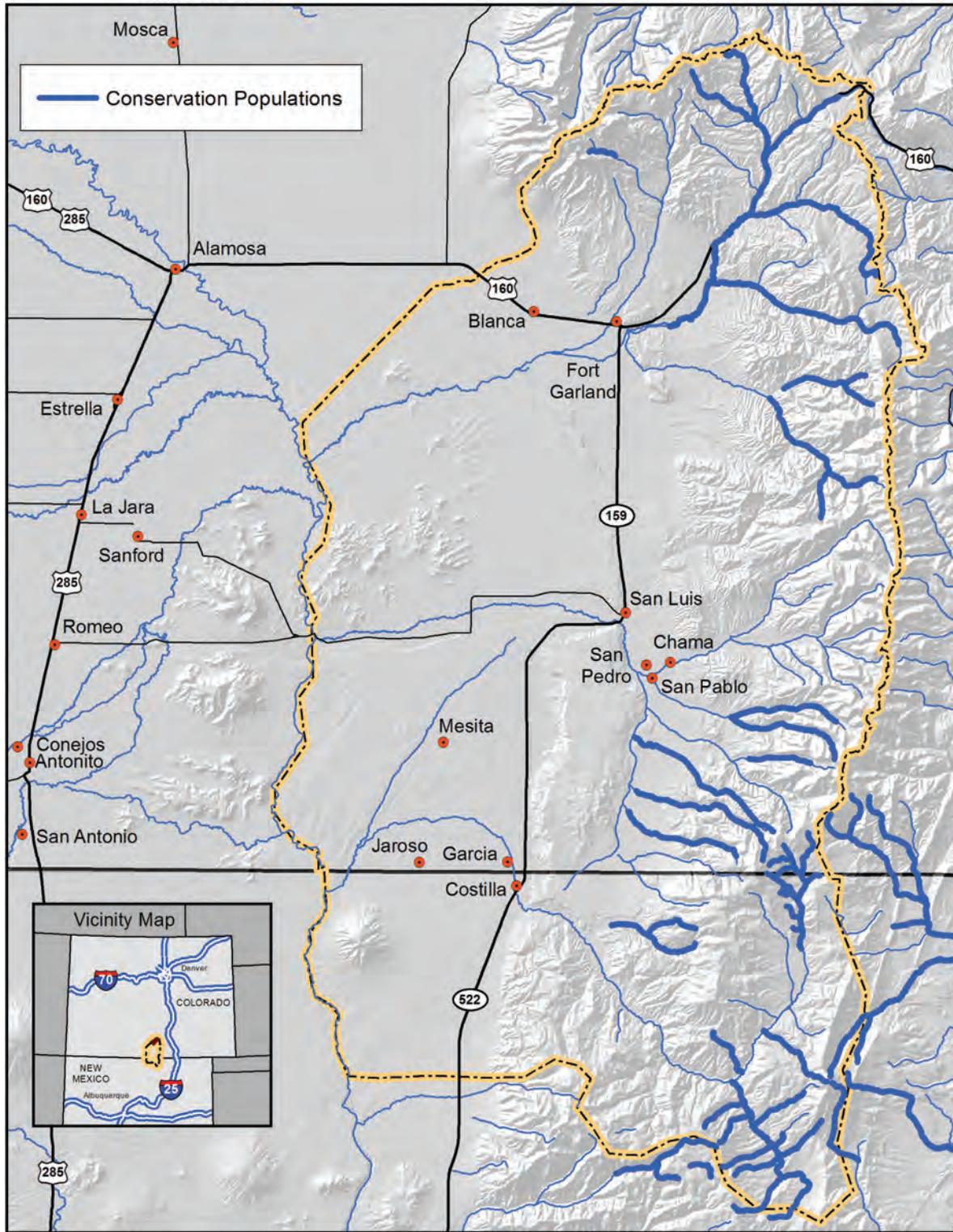
Figure 3. Canada Lynx Habitat



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area
Colorado, New Mexico

Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Populations



PRODUCED IN THE DIVISION OF REFUGE PLANNING
DENVER, COLORADO
MAP DATE: 07/05/2012
BASEMAP: ESRI hydrology, DEM
FILE: RGCT_SCCA.mxd

--- Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area
● Community

0 5 10 Miles
0 5 10 Kilometers



Figure 4. Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Populations

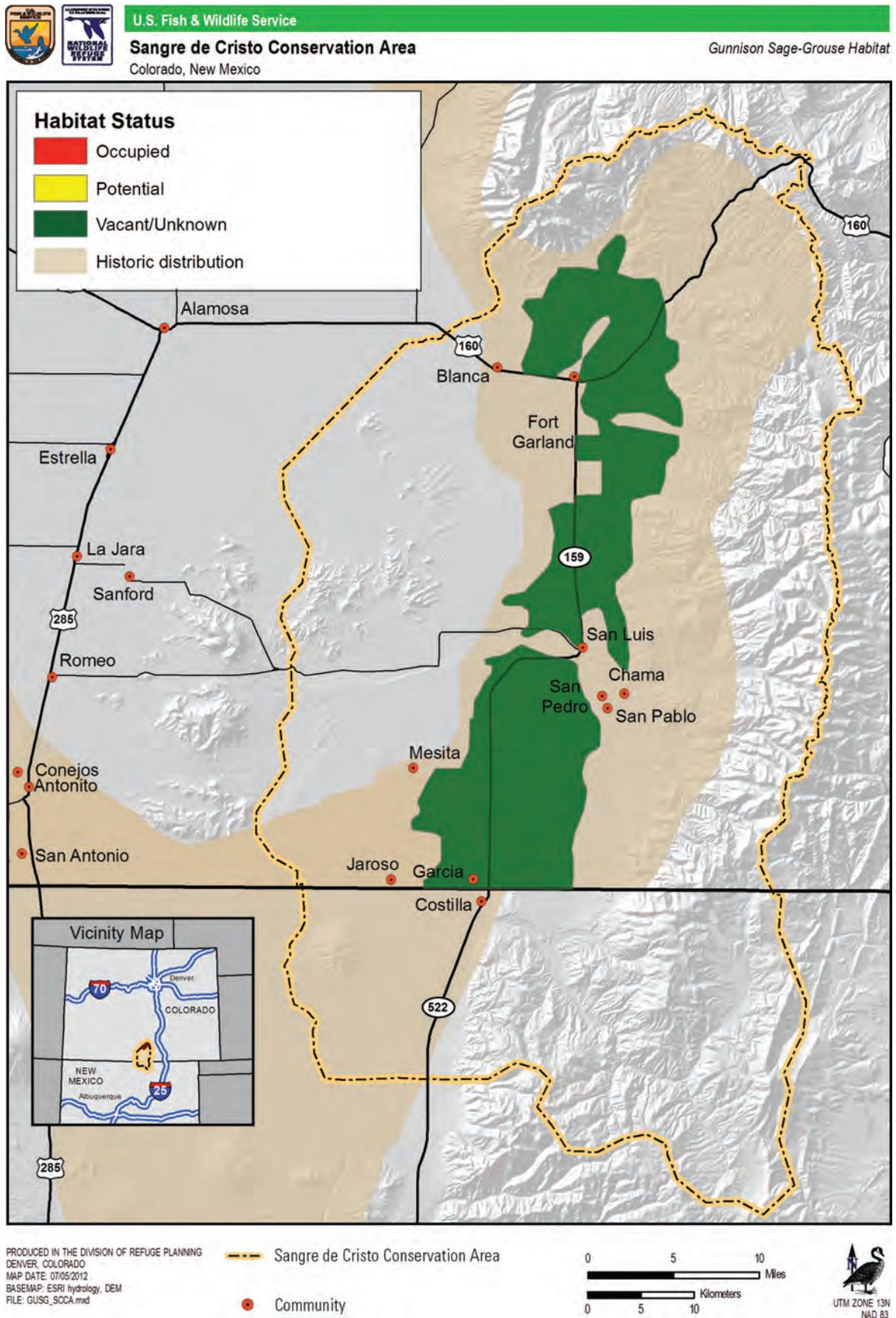


Figure 5. Gunnison Sage-Grouse Habitat

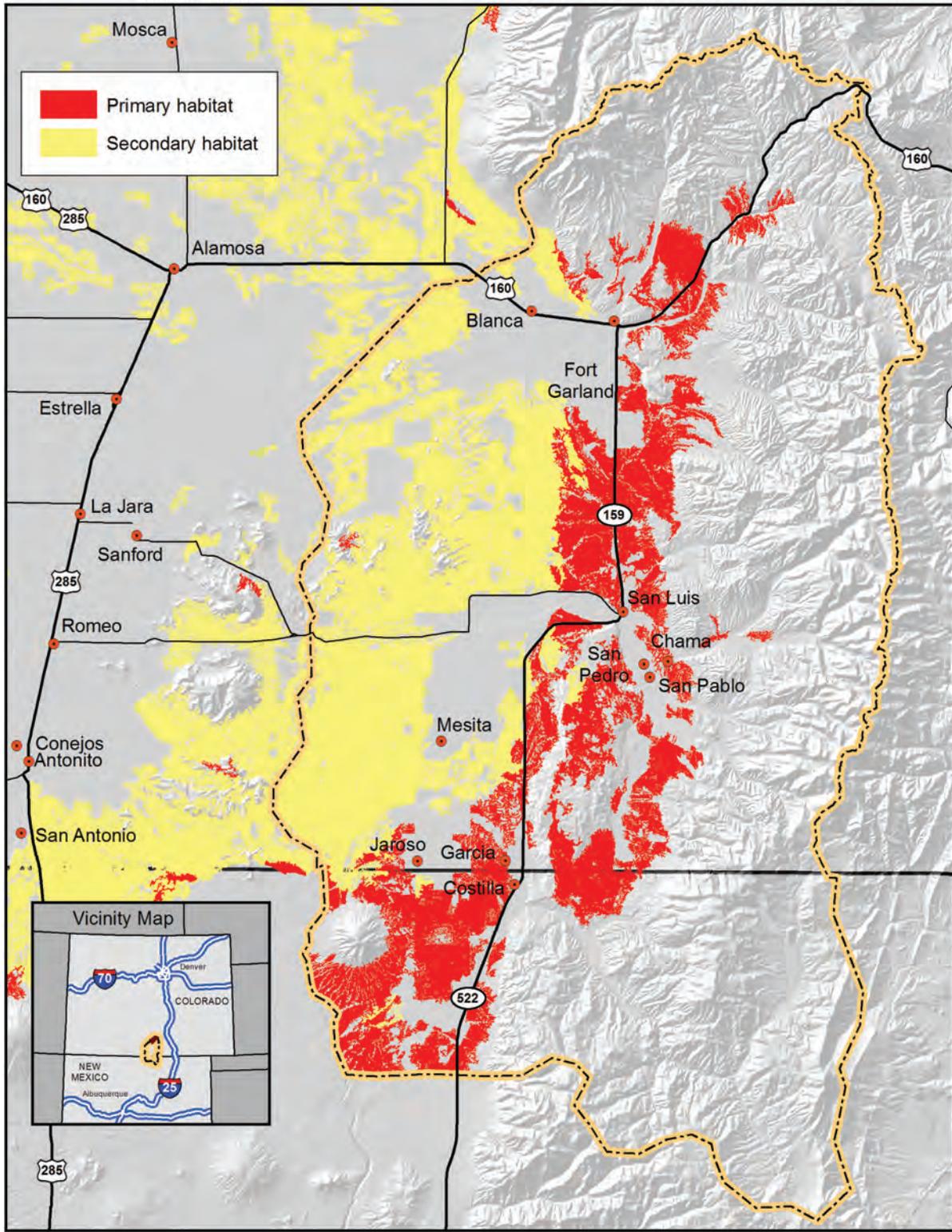
[Note that there is currently no occupied or potential habitat for the Gunnison sage-grouse in the project area.]



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area
Colorado, New Mexico

Sage Thrasher Shrubland Habitat



PRODUCED IN THE DIVISION OF REFUGE PLANNING
DENVER, COLORADO
MAP DATE: 07/05/2012
BASEMAP: ESRI hydrology, DEM
FILE: SATH_SCCA.mxd

--- Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area

● Community

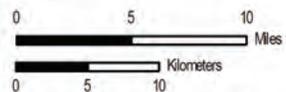


Figure 6. Sage Thrasher Shrubland Habitat

of land necessary for generalist widespread species. By designating a boundary length modifier, the user can generate a more compact reserve system. The landscape can also be classified by cost, which can be made as simple as just land area or made more complex and meaningful by accounting for variables like land costs or metrics of the human footprint.

Because of the degree of flexibility allowed by Marxan, the values for these parameters need to be optimized by successive iterations of the program. For this analysis, hexagonal planning units were selected, as these have been shown to result in less fragmented, more efficient reserve networks (Nhancale and Smith 2011). Hexagons were 15 acres in area (approximately 6.1 hectares), which provides resolution that is sufficient for making land protection decisions while covering the SCCA in few enough planning units to not be computationally overwhelming. Hexagons already in a permanent protected status (existing conservation easements) may be locked out of the model, but because those easements may or may not meet the objectives of the Service, easement-encumbered lands were left in the model. Marxan was run for 100 runs at 100 million iterations. The species-specific data were included as features in the Marxan model. In addition, we included the “Potential Conservation Areas” identified by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP 2011). These potential conservation areas were selected based on their biodiversity value, and serve to incorporate State interests, in addition to Federal interests in the model. A boundary length modifier of 0.0001 was used to create a slightly more compact reserve network. Increasing that value to 0.001 oversimplified the reserve network and did not meet the intent of the SCCA. Targets for protection were set at 50 percent of the land holding a particular conservation feature, except southwestern willow flycatcher and Rio Grande cutthroat trout, which because of inherently connective nature of their habitat, had their targets set at 75 percent. The frequency with which individual hexagons were selected in the final solution for each of the 100 models is shown in Figure 7.

EVALUATION OF EASEMENT POTENTIAL

As described in Section 1, acquisition of conservation easements is not a new tool for achieving conservation objectives within the SCCA; the NRCS has a small number of easements, and nongovernmental organizations hold tens of thousands of acres of easements in the project area. These organizations have overlapping, but not identical missions to the Service. The Service does not currently hold easements in the project area; however, the Service has more than 50 years of experience acquiring conservation easements in other parts of the country.

The landscape modeling described above has generated maps of species-specific conservation priorities

for each of the priority species, as well as a consensus map that shows where conservation returns for Federal funds would be maximized for the suite of species examined. Biologists and realty specialists will work cooperatively to use these tools to identify parcels whose conservation will result in the greatest benefit to trust species.

When a willing seller approaches the Service or if the Service wishes to proactively seek out sellers, the following criteria will guide their decision making:

- *Overall conservation value* – Is the property located, in whole or in part, in an area that was selected in 70 percent or more of the spatial conservation priority runs in Marxan, as indicated by Figure 22?
- *Trust species value* – Does the parcel contain priority habitat that was identified in any of the species-specific maps in the previous section?
- *Previously unidentified conservation value* – If neither of the preceding thresholds are reached, is there another compelling reason (for example securing of important water rights, promoting critical habitat connectivity, identification of new species of conservation concern, simplified management of an existing refuge unit, or donation of intact or easily restored habitat) which justifies the property’s protection?

Nothing in these guidelines is intended to limit the appropriate exercising of discretion and professional judgment by realty specialists and refuge staff. Acquisition would comply with realty policy and potential acquisitions would be subject to scrutiny to determine that the habitat for which the property was identified as a priority is, in fact, present on the parcel. As mentioned in the third criterion, there may also be additional reasons why acquisition of interest in a parcel is justified, even if it did not rank highly in models for selected priority trust species at the time that this plan was approved.

Ecosystem Management and Landscape Conservation

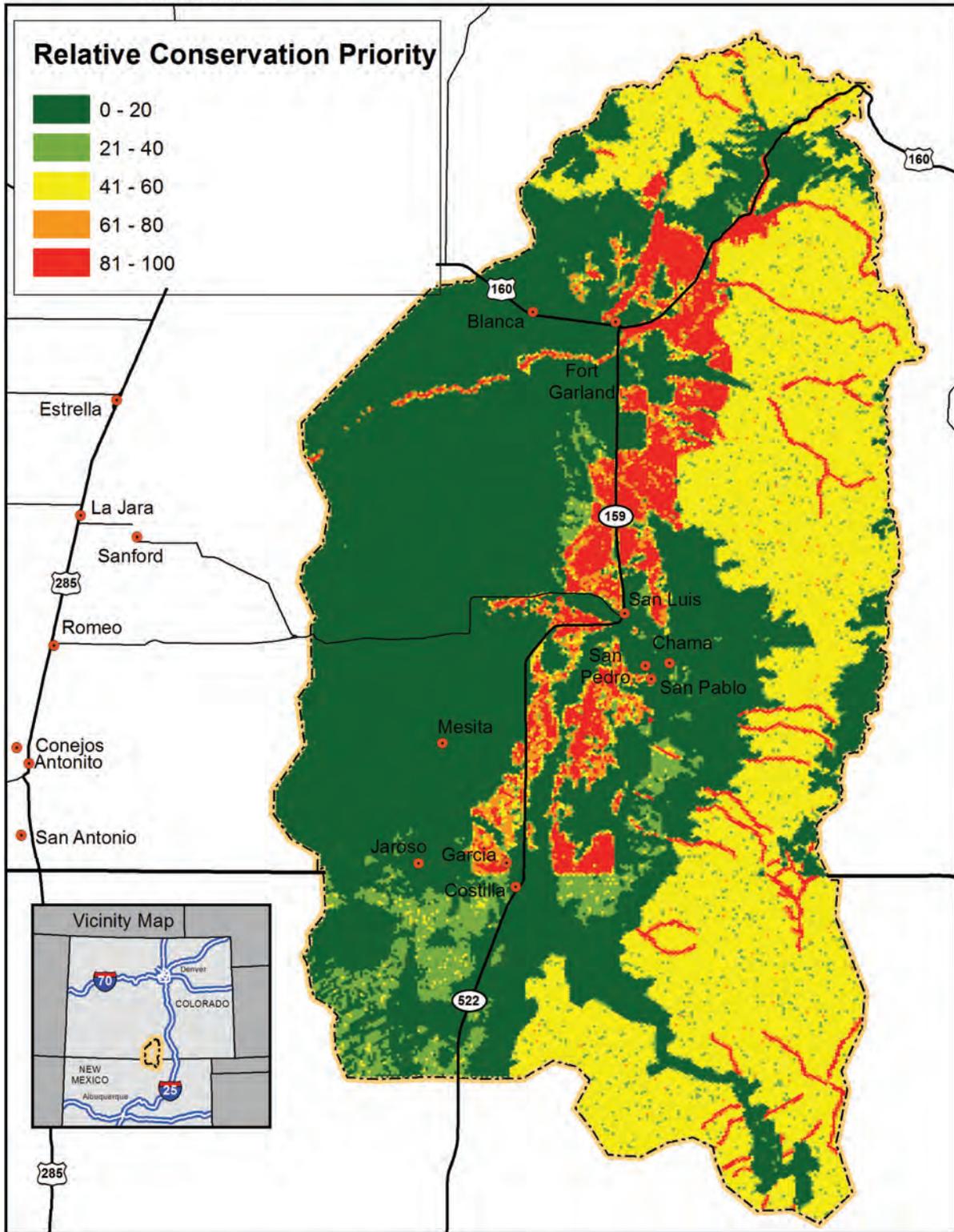
To carry out the project, the Service will engage the Southern Rockies Landscape Conservation Cooperative, which is intended to deliver applied science to inform resource management decisions on landscape-scale issues such as climate change. The Landscape Conservation Cooperative incorporates State, Federal, nonprofit, and university partners; this planning across agency jurisdictions and boundaries is necessary to ensure that conservation happens at the scale necessary to ensure that wildlife can adapt, migrate, and colonize new areas in response to environmental



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area
Colorado, New Mexico

Spatial Conservation Prioritization



PRODUCED IN THE DIVISION OF REFUGE PLANNING
DENVER, COLORADO
MAP DATE: 07/23/2012
BASEMAP: ESRI hydrology, DEM
FILE: SCCA_MarxanOutput_07231012.mxd

— Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area (Proposed)

● Community

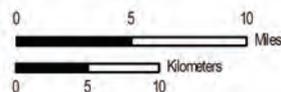


Figure 7. Spatial Conservation Prioritization

change. The Southern Rockies Landscape Conservation Cooperative is still in its formative stages, but the framework for collaborative conservation in its area of responsibility, including the SCCA, has been developed.

INCORPORATING SCIENCE AND STRATEGIC HABITAT CONSERVATION IN THE SCCA

The SCCA encompasses approximately one million acres in a region where demand for conservation easements already far exceeds available funding. Given the likelihood that there may be more land available for conservation easements than appropriated funding, it is important to ensure that the money that is available is spent in a way that maximizes returns for trust species and/or helps ensure the connectivity, resiliency, and long-term function of the ecosystems in the project area. Toward this end, the SCCA will incorporate the elements of strategic habitat conservation. Strategic habitat conservation is based on an adaptive management framework and entails starting with strategic conservation planning, followed by conservation design, conservation delivery, and monitoring/research to assess results.

Strategic Biological Planning

Biological planning requires the identification of specific biological objectives or focal species so that the relative success of a strategy can be assessed following implementation. The focal species identified to guide prioritization of the SCCA were chosen because of the Service's obligations to them as Federal trust species (candidate, threatened, and endangered species and migratory birds), and because land protection undertaken to benefit these species is likely to have conservation benefits for other species of conservation concern, such as species that are federally or State listed as threatened or endangered, USFWS Region 6 Birds of Conservation Concern, and USFWS Migratory Birds focal species. For example, protection of cottonwood riparian habitat for Lewis' woodpecker, a conspicuous regional bird of conservation concern, may also protect habitat for the more elusive yellow-billed cuckoo, an Endangered Species Act candidate species. Because of a lack of systematic nesting surveys for these species in the project area, assumptions were made based on scientific literature and expert opinion regarding which types of habitat were important for maintaining viable populations of the focal species. In particular, given the limited amount of quality wetland and riparian habitat present compared to pre-settlement conditions, it was assumed that the continued presence of those riparian types was a limiting resource in the life history of species that are thought to be obligate breeders in such habitat.

These focal species were chosen with the knowledge that there are gaps in existing data and that the

habitat in the project area is likely to evolve over time in the face of environmental change and changes in human water use. As new data become available or as conditions change to the point that this conservation strategy is no longer effective, biological planning will be revisited.

Conservation Design and Delivery

Preventing loss of habitats identified for the diverse suite of focal species is the goal of the prioritization scheme outlined in section 4.3. Decisions regarding how to rank competing parcels with limited available funds will follow the outline described in that section.

The recovery plan for southwest willow flycatcher requires a minimum of 50 occupied breeding territories in the San Luis Valley (USFWS 2002), and specific reaches of the Rio Grande and Conejos River were identified to maintain that level.⁴ As previously discussed, this habitat will be granted highest priority for land protection, and all easement opportunities within the priority lands for that species should be considered in the interest of providing redundancy to currently occupied habitat, even if they are unoccupied.

In the absence of specific population goals for the remaining focal species, no acreage numbers or breeding pair densities have been selected. Following the principle that between 25 and 75 percent of a region must be conserved to meet targets for biodiversity (Noss et al. 2012), the initial targets for easement delivery are to protect 50 percent of existing priority habitat that currently exists on private lands for the other focal species. As survey data for the valley informs the role of the SCCA in meeting specific regional or continental population objectives for other species, the delivery of easement and limited fee-title acquisition can be adjusted accordingly.

Monitoring and Research

Essential to the success of strategic habitat conservation is an effective monitoring program to ensure that conservation delivery is resulting in net positive benefits for the focal species around which the project was designed. While the consensus conservation model is primarily meant to guide effective easement acquisition, the individual species maps are intended to guide conservation delivery for those species. Monitoring of populations will help ensure the efficacy of the program; if negative population trends for those species are detected within the project area or at a regional or continental scale, then further literature review and/or targeted research can be applied to adjust conservation planning for the SCCA. Some of the monitoring phase of strategic habitat conservation can be carried out using the capacity of the refuge biologist and Service Inventory and Monitoring

⁴FR 76(157): *Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants: Designation of Revised Critical Habitat for Southwestern Willow Flycatcher*. pp. 50542-50629

assistance. However, it is important to recognize that similar monitoring will be carried out by partner agencies, and communication among these agencies is crucial for effective monitoring in the face of limited personnel and financial resources. Further, Service staff should leverage biological expertise at regional academic institutions in order to facilitate basic and applied research while addressing research gaps as they are identified.

Specifically, monitoring and research should include:

- Developing, improving, and assessing landscape models for priority species. Emphasis will be placed on the highest priority species with the greatest degree of uncertainty regarding limiting factors and the effectiveness of management actions, including acquisition under the SCCA program, at minimizing and reducing the limiting factors for those species. Data from existing surveys such as Breeding Bird Survey routes in the project area will be evaluated and incorporated into spatial models. When necessary, additional data will be collected to evaluate assumptions used in the modeling process and assessments will be adjusted accordingly. These methods will provide an estimate of the population response of trust species on easement lands and on non-easement properties. Similar modeling approaches may be developed or incorporated for priority nontrust species in cooperation with partners such as State wildlife agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and universities.
- Evaluating assumptions and addressing uncertainties identified through the biological planning, conservation design, and conservation delivery elements. When warranted, assumptions such as increased redundancy of occupied southwest willow flycatcher habitat through protection of riparian vegetation will be evaluated.
- Identifying appropriate population goals for priority species and assessing the contribution of land protection toward meeting the population goals. This will allow the Service and conservation partners to evaluate the contribution of the program to meeting the population goals and refine conservation delivery to ensure maximum effectiveness.
- Determining how changing environmental conditions may influence the effectiveness of this conservation design as increased evaporation, social and economically driven changes in water use, and evolution of the type and timing of precipitation and runoff influence the hydrology of the SCCA.

Socioeconomic Considerations

As discussed in detail in Section 2, the population in the project area is relatively low. Much of the land is cropland or rangeland. Landownership patterns vary widely, from dense 5- to 10-acre parcel subdivisions to ranches of more than 90,000 acres. Some facets of the agricultural economy are likely to be challenged by new ground water augmentation laws. The potential infusion of capital from the SCCA conservation easement program may provide farmers with resources to invest that would allow them to continue operation. That money will largely be invested within the San Luis Valley, so there will be short-term benefits to the local economy as well. Local governments are supportive of the initiative for these reasons, and because the program is easement-based and therefore should not significantly impact revenues.

Because the wildlife resources for which the SCCA was designed already occur in these agricultural lands, sustaining this cornerstone of the regional economy is important to the mission of the Service. Maintaining these practices will also preserve the rural aesthetic which defines the region's culture and the character of the San Luis Valley.

Public Involvement and Coordination

SCOPING

At the beginning of the planning process, the planning for the SCCA was conducted in tandem with that for the San Luis Valley Refuge Complex CCP, at the time in the context of a broader, valley wide conservation area. Public scoping meetings were held on March 29, 2011, in Alamosa, Colorado; March 30, 2011, in Monte Vista, Colorado; and March 31, 2011, in Moffat, 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 the Director of the Service presented as being embodied by the then-SLVCA. Questions were

answered and comments taken at a breakout session following the main meeting. The meeting was attended by over 300 members of the public.

Together, these meetings and subsequent feedback helped the Service to identify the questions and concerns of the public, as well as to refine the project boundary.

PUBLIC REVIEW OF THE DRAFT EA AND LPP

The Service released the draft EA and LPP on May 9, 2012 for a 30-day public review period. The draft documents were made available to Federal elected officials and agencies, State elected officials and agencies, 17 Native American tribes with aboriginal interests, and other members of the public who asked to be added to our mailing list.

In February and May of 2012, Refuge staff met with members of the land protection community in the San Luis Valley to discuss conservation priorities in the region. At these meetings, the Service discussed the SCCA with representatives from entities including Rio Grande Headwaters Trust, Colorado Open Lands, Orient Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Trust for Public Lands, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Positive, constructive feedback received at those meetings guided the Service in the development of the draft and final LPP/EA.

In addition, three public meetings were held in Alamosa, San Luis, and Moffat, Colorado on May 14, 15, and 16, respectively. Approximately 50 residents and representatives of elected officials attended the 3 meetings. While the meetings presented a broader, valley-wide vision for the conservation area, the SCCA is encompassed entirely within that boundary, and the Service is considering the SLVCA NEPA review to have captured the potential impacts of the SCCA. The Service received 14 written comments which have been entered into the administrative record. Please see Appendix D for the submitted comments and responses.

Distribution and Availability

Copies of the Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment were made available to Federal and State legislative delegations, tribes, agencies, landowners, private groups, and other interested individuals. Additional copies of the document are available from the following offices and contacts:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Region 6 Division of Refuge Planning
P.O. Box 25486-DFC
Denver, CO 80225
303/236- 8132

<http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/planning/lpp.htm>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
San Luis Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex
8249 Emperius Road
Alamosa, CO 81101
719/589 4021

