Appendix G

Steve Maslowski/USFWS

Wood thrush

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Finding of No Significant Impact

John Hay National Wildlife Refuge
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In February 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (Draft CCP/EA) for John Hay National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The approved Refuge boundary covers approximately 80 forested acres on the shores of Lake Sunapee in Newbury, New Hampshire. John Hay Refuge is administered by staff from the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge (Conte Refuge) located in Sunderland, Massachusetts. The John Hay Refuge Draft CCP/EA evaluates three alternatives for managing the Refuge over the next 15 years. It carefully considers their direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the environment and their potential contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). The Draft CCP/EA restates the Refuge's purposes, creates a vision for the next 15 years, and proposes three goals to be achieved through plan implementation. Alternative B is identified as the Service-preferred alternative. Chapter 3 in the draft plan details the respective goals, objectives, and strategies for each of the three alternatives. Chapter 4 describes the consequences of implementing those actions under each alternative. The draft plan's appendices provide additional information supporting the assessment and specific proposals in Alternative B. A brief overview of each alternative follows.

Alternative A (Current Management): The Council of Environmental Quality regulations on implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require this "No Action" alternative, which we define as current management. Alternative A includes our existing Refuge programs and activities and serves as the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives. Under Alternative A, we would continue to passively manage Refuge lands through collaboration with partners. The Service would have minimal presence. Habitat management would be limited to promoting visitor safety (e.g., dropping snags that pose a threat along the Ecology Trail) and responding to invasive plants or animals that can impact habitat integrity or priority wildlife. No other active wildlife or habitat management would occur except the existing mowing of the meadow and viewing corridor, which provides early succession forest habitat. Minimal coordination with The Fells, Forest Society, Lake Sunapee Protective Association, and New Hampshire Audubon for wildlife, water quality and habitat protection would continue on an as-needed basis. The current level and types of visitor services would continue on the Refuge. Administration of visitor services, land protection, biological and law enforcement activities would be handled by existing staff from the Conte Refuge. We would maintain minimal visitor services, biological program management, and law enforcement. These activities would continue to be administered from the Sunderland office as funds and staffing permit.

Alternative B (the Service-preferred alternative): This alternative includes an array of management actions that, in our professional judgment, work best toward achieving the purposes of the Refuge, our vision and goals for those lands, the Refuge System mission, and the goals in State and regional conservation plans. Under Alternative B, we would emphasize the management of specific Refuge habitats to support focal species whose habitat needs benefit other species of conservation concern in the Lake Sunapee region. In particular, we would emphasize habitat for priority bird species of conservation concern in the Bird Conservation Region 14 and Partners In Flight Physiographic Area 27 plans, New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan, Birds of Conservation Concern 2008, and other conservation plans at State and national scales. We would strive to integrate the habitat management objectives for species of concern with maintaining the cultural heritage of the former John Hay estate. In addition, we would focus on making improvements to our visitor services through the addition of seasonal on-site staff, fishing as an approved public use, and a minor expansion of our trail system on the Refuge. We would construct an alternate route for the John Hay II Forest Ecology Trail to allow visitors to return to the trailhead without entering The Fells' property, post explanatory

signage at the trailhead and at the point of entry to The Fells, install a kiosk at the trailhead and interpretive and informational signs throughout the Refuge to incrementally increase visitor awareness of Refuge resources, add a spur trail to the fen and back, with informational signage on the ecology of fens, and install a footbridge(s) where stream crossing of Beech Brook is a concern for public safety and stream health. Finally, our biological program would be enhanced through partnerships that would increase our ability to conduct surveys and long-term monitoring.

Alternative C: Alternative C is similar in many respects to Alternative B, but proposes more intensive forest management and wildlife dependent recreation, with a philosophy of maintaining the character and history of the forest, to the extent that it does not compromise the Refuge purposes and goals. Generally, white pine (*Pinus strobus*) and other native species would be encouraged to regenerate. The addition of permanent staff would enhance the visitor services program through a much broader array of programming and outreach. In addition to the trail and signage improvements proposed with Alternative B, under Alternative C we would improve the Ecology Trail to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and lead to a viewing platform at the lakeshore. Both fishing and hunting would be added as new public uses at the Refuge. Biological programs would incorporate more surveys and the ability to conduct habitat improvements.

We distributed the Draft CCP/EA for a 30-day period of public review and comment from February 18 to March 22, 2010, and held a public meeting on March 11, 2010, in Newbury, NH. We received 18 unique letters and oral comments representing individuals, organizations, and State agencies. Appendix F in the final CCP includes a summary of those comments and our responses to them.

After reviewing the proposed management actions, and considering all public comments and our responses to them, I have determined that the analysis in the EA is sufficient to support my findings. I am selecting Alternative B, as presented in the Draft CCP/EA with the minor changes listed below, to implement as the final CCP. Changes we made in the final CCP are:

1. We clarified that the shoreline will be monitored for impacts related to angler access once the fishing program is implemented (Chapter 4 of the final CCP, pages 4-26 and 4-27).
2. We inserted language in the strategies to implement Objective 2.2 (Chapter 4 of the final CCP, page 4-27) that we will consult with the Town of Newbury, New Hampshire, the Department of Transportation and the New Hampshire State Historic Preservation Office to ensure that the new angler parking area will be safe and will minimize effects to cultural and historical resources.
3. We revised the language in the draft CCP which stated we will pursue a new Memorandum of Understanding with The Fells. We replaced the language “MOU” with “Partnership Agreement” in the final CCP.
4. We made minor edits to some of the Findings of Appropriateness in Appendix B to include more recent justification(s) language.
5. We updated the staffing chart in Appendix E to reflect current staffing personnel.
6. We corrected all format and typographical errors that were brought to our attention.

I concur that Alternative B, with the above changes and in comparison to the other two alternatives, will: best fulfill the mission of the Refuge System; best achieve the Refuge’s purposes, vision, and goals; best maintain and, where appropriate, restore the Refuge’s ecological integrity; best address the major issues identified during the planning process; and is most consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management. Specifically, in comparison to the other two alternatives, Alternative B would make an important contribution to conserving Federal trust resources of concern in northern New England forests and maintaining the cultural heritage of the area. It also provides the most reasonable and effective improvements to existing public use programs with minimal impacts to wildlife and habitats. The plans to increase staffing and develop new infrastructure are reasonable, practicable, and will result in the most

efficient management of the Refuge and best serve the American public. This Finding of No Significant impact incorporates the EA by reference.

I have reviewed the predicted beneficial and adverse impacts associated with Alternative B that are presented in Chapter 4 of the Draft CCP/EA, and compared them to the other alternatives. I specifically reviewed the context and intensity of those predicted impacts over the short- and long-term, and considered cumulative effects.

Socio-economic, natural and cultural resource, and visitor impacts would be generally positive or negligible over the long-term. Regarding socio-economic impacts, no additional Service land acquisition is planned, so there would be no negative effects on local property tax revenues. In addition, Refuge revenue sharing payments would continue. The predicted 15 percent annual increase in Refuge visitation due to visitor infrastructure and program enhancements would provide a minimal net benefit to the local economy over the next 15 years. This is based on the fact that labor and materials purchases would be from local vendors to the extent possible, and visitors are likely to make local purchases in conjunction with their visit. Regarding natural resources, some impacts are expected to soils and vegetation from trail relocations and improvements; however, the long-term impacts would be limited in scope and scale to the designated trail footpaths. Importantly, the John Hay trail relocation would move the trail away from more sensitive riparian habitat to a more upland location. No other wetlands are impacted by the proposed actions. Setting back succession on up to three acres to enhance existing meadow habitat may have some short-term, temporary impacts to soils and water quality during management activities, but would provide long-term benefits to habitat diversity and species of conservation concern. Some wildlife would be temporarily disturbed or displaced during trail and meadow enhancement work, but no major impact to local populations of any species is predicted. Regarding visitor impacts, the planned infrastructure improvements, coupled with opening the Refuge to new fishing opportunities and hiring seasonal staff to improve outreach and education, are long-term benefits that would help satisfy demand and public expectations. No conflict among user groups, or with Refuge neighbors, is predicted.

In summary, my evaluation concludes that implementing Alternative B would not result in any concerns with public health or safety, nor result in adverse implications to any unique cultural or natural characteristics of the geographic area, including wetlands or federally listed species. I have considered how the proposed actions would interact with other past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions to determine there is no major cumulative impact. I find that implementing Alternative B adheres to all legal mandates and Service policies, and will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, in accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. Therefore, I have concluded that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required, and this Finding of No Significant Impact is appropriate and warranted.

Sherry R. Morgan

Acting Marvin E. Moriarty
Regional Director, Region 5
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

6/24/2010
Date