

**Compatibility Determination  
for  
Visitor Contact Station on the  
San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge  
Sweetwater Marsh Unit**

**Use:** Visitor Contact Station

**Refuge Name:** San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Sweetwater Marsh Unit, San Diego County, Cities of Chula Vista and National City, California

**Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:** The authorities for the establishment of the Sweetwater Marsh Unit are the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531-1543); Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, as amended (16 U.S.C. 742a-742j, not including 742d-742l); and the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act of 1934, as amended (16 U.S.C. 661-667e).

**Refuge Purpose(s):** The Sweetwater Marsh Unit of the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established:

“...to conserve (A) fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species...or (B) plants” (Endangered Species Act of 1973); and

“...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources...for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude...” (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956).

[This refuge] “shall be administered by him [Secretary of the Interior] directly or in accordance with cooperative agreements...and in accordance with such rules and regulations for the conservation, maintenance, and management of wildlife, resources thereof, and its habitat thereon...” (Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act of 1934).

**National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:** The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) 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 Administration Act of 1966, as amended [16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee]).

**Description of Use(s):** The focus of this compatibility determination is the construction and operation of a visitor contact station at the Sweetwater Marsh Unit of the San Diego Bay NWR. Public uses at the Sweetwater Marsh Unit currently consist of environmental education, environmental interpretation, wildlife observation, and wildlife photography. These public uses were analyzed and evaluated in a series of compatibility determinations

completed for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan in 2006. Each of those public uses was determined to be compatible on this Refuge unit. NEPA compliance for the CCP consisted of an Environmental Impact Statement and a Record of Decision (*USFWS 2006*). The CCP/EIS and compatibility determinations presented a thorough analysis of the public use program to the public. We are not proposing to change or add a new public use; however, development of a visitor contact station at the Sweetwater Marsh Unit will facilitate the current public uses. Although administrative offices would also be part of this facility, the focus of this CD is the construction and operation of a visitor contact station to facilitate public uses on the Sweetwater Marsh Unit. A compatibility determination is not required for construction of Service administrative facilities. For a detailed discussion of the public use program, see the 2006 Final CCP and EIS for San Diego Bay NWR, Sweetwater Marsh and South San Diego Bay Units.

The visitor contact station will serve as the portal to introduce visitors to the National Wildlife Refuge System and San Diego Bay NWR and encourage them to access Refuge trails, observe wildlife, and connect with nature. Through its design, the visitor contact station would also draw visitors from the Chula Vista Nature Center onto the Refuge to explore trails. The visitor contact station would also interpret the historical and biological resources of Gunpowder Point and Sweetwater Marsh. The visitor contact station includes a series of exhibit areas that will be installed along the new walkway that links the Chula Vista Nature Center and administrative facility.

**Availability of Resources:** Staff costs to implement the public use program are listed and described in the 2006 final CDs for the Sweetwater Marsh Unit in the 2006 CCP. Approximately \$6,000,000 is needed to construct the administrative and visitor contact facilities. Funds to operate and maintain the facility will be provided by the annual Refuge budget.

**Anticipated Impacts of the Use(s):** Anticipated impacts of the public use program are described in detail in the final CDs for the Sweetwater Marsh Unit in the 2006 CCP. Since we are not proposing any changes to the public use program, no additional analysis of the public use program is necessary. Therefore, this section evaluates the potential effects that construction of the facility could have on refuge resources. A draft environmental assessment that analyzes the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects from construction, operation, and maintenance of the facility was provided for public review and comment in April 2009.

Construction of the facility would be located in an area previously disturbed by the Hercules Powder Company, other industrial uses, and long-term farming operations. This site is dominated by invasive non-native species, with some native upland vegetation. Grading and site preparation would occur in a manner that would direct drainage from the site away from adjacent wetland areas. The facility would be placed adjacent to the existing Chula Vista Nature Center. The proposed facility will be designed to architecturally blend with the character of the area, be less than 30 feet in height, and incorporate materials and color schemes that blend with the environment and existing Nature Center structures. Native landscaping would be installed around the building to minimize impacts.

The effects of construction on wildlife would be minimal. The site would be located on disturbed upland habitat that is of limited quality for native wildlife. The site is close to existing human disturbance at the Chula Vista Nature Center, and there is approximately 30 acres of undeveloped upland habitat on Gunpowder Point outside the construction area that would be preserved. The proposed site does not provide any nesting, loafing, or feeding habitats for the California least tern, light-footed clapper rail, western snowy plover, or coastal California gnatcatcher.

**Public Review and Comment:** The draft compatibility determination will be made available to the public for a 14-day review period. The draft compatibility determination will be posted on the Refuge's website. The final compatibility determination will address any comments received on the draft.

**Determination:**

Use is Not Compatible

Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

**Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:** While potential construction impacts have been assessed to be minimal, stipulations would still be required to ensure fish, wildlife, and cultural resources are adequately protected. As a result, a number of stipulations have been identified below that will be carried out concurrently with construction.

- Construction will cease immediately and consultation will be conducted with archeologists upon discovery of any cultural and/or previously unknown historic resource while carrying out construction activities.
- Following construction, interpretive materials will be developed that describe the relationship between the historic features with the remaining features on Gunpowder Point that are associated with the historic Hercules Powder Company production facility.
- BMPs, such as the installation of silt fencing and fiber rolls during construction, limiting ground disturbance outside the footprint of the facility, to protect water quality in adjacent wetland areas will be implemented during construction.
- To minimize the potential for erosion after construction, disturbed areas will be revegetated with native plants within 60 days of project completion. All parking surfaces will be sloped to prevent pooling of surface water and to direct runoff to storm water management systems and away from the marsh.
- Pervious surface materials will be used to the extent feasible when constructing drive and parking areas to minimize storm water runoff.
- Facilities would be constructed to meet the LEED Green Building Rating System, Silver standard.
- Disturbed areas will be replanted with native trees, shrubs, and grasses in the vicinity of the structure. Native plant landscaping will be maintained to deter the growth and spread of invasive plant species.

- Major construction activities such as excavation and demolition at the service building and parking lot construction sites will only be permitted between June 30 and March 15 to ensure protection of the nesting endangered light-footed clapper rail and State-listed Belding's savannah sparrow.
- A preconstruction meeting, involving appropriate Refuge staff, the Service's on-site project manager, and all construction crew foremen for the primary contractor and any subcontractors, will be conducted to review all environmental mitigation requirements and special site requirements.

**Justification:** One of the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) is providing the public an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology, wildlife habitat and the human role in the environment. The Service strives to provide priority visitor uses when compatible with the purpose and goals of the Refuge and the mission of the System. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 identifies environmental education and interpretation as priority public uses for National Wildlife Refuges, along with hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography. Through construction of the visitor contact station, we will facilitate the public use program at the San Diego Bay NWR.

**Mandatory Reevaluation Date** (provide month and year):

Mandatory 15-year Reevaluation Date (for priority public uses)

Mandatory 10-Year Reevaluation Date (for all uses other than priority public uses)

**NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision** (check one below):

Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Statement

Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Statement

Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact

Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision

**References:**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2009. Construction, Operation, and Maintenance of the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex Administrative Facility and Service Building and Minor Amendment to the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Draft Environmental Assessment.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2006. Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Sweetwater marsh and South San Diego Bay Units.

Prepared by: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature) (Date)

Refuge Manager/  
Project Leader  
Approval: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature) (Date)

Concurrence

Refuge Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature) (Date)

Assistant Regional  
Director, Refuges: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature) (Date)