



Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek and Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuges

Planning Update 6 – November 2013

Refuge Complex Manager Announces CCP Completion

We are pleased to announce that the Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (CCP/EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek, and Blue Ridge NWRs was signed on September 30, 2013. The signing of the FONSI signifies the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's approval of the CCP and the adoption of Alternative B (analyzed in the March 2012 Draft and September 2013 Final CCP/EA, and highlighted in Planning Update 5).

The Final CCP outlines the management direction and strategies for the three refuges for the next 15 years. Management activities will focus on the conservation of the refuges' resources, particularly wildlife and plants that are federally-listed as threatened or endangered, and their habitats. Management of Bitter Creek and Blue Ridge NWRs will also provide opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, including wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

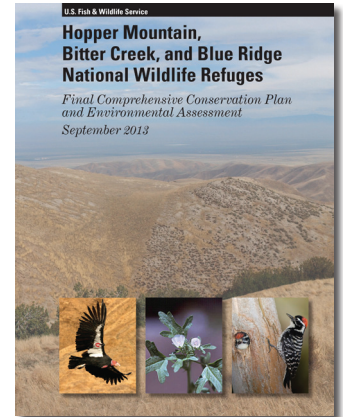
The planning team and I wish to thank you for your comments and suggestions throughout the CCP process.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for your help and your time.

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Final CCP/EA and FONSI Available!

The planning process for Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek, and Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuges' Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (CCP/EA) is now complete. The Final CCP/EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) are available online for downloading at www.fws.gov/hoppermountain/. A CD copy of the Final CCP/EA and FONSI may be requested by writing to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Attn: Refuge Planning, 2800 Cottage Way, W-1832, Sacramento, CA 95825, or you can send an e-mail to fw8plancomments@fws.gov. Please include "Hopper CCP" in the subject line.



Kern mallow photo © 1989 Dean Wm. Taylor. Nuttall's woodpecker photo by Mike Baird. Other photos by USFWS.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Pacific Southwest Region
2800 Cottage Way, W-1832
Sacramento, CA 95825

Alternative B Selected

The Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek, and Blue Ridge NWRs outlines how the refuges will fulfill their legal purposes and contribute to the National Wildlife Refuge System's wildlife, habitat and visitor service goals. The refuges were established to protect the endangered California condor and other wildlife and plants protected under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).



Blue Ridge NWR. Photo: USFWS

During the 60-day public review period last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) received 25 letters and e-mails on the Draft CCP/EA. The CCP planning team reviewed each of these letters and found over 750 comments. The comments were incorporated into the CCP, when possible, and the Service's responses to the comments are provided in Appendix K of the Final CCP. The Service has completed section 7 ESA compliance on the implementation of CCP activities for all three refuges.

In the FONSI, Alternative B was selected for implementation and is the basis for the CCP. Implementation of the CCP will be subject to the availability of funding and other resources, and may occur incrementally over the life of the 15-year plan. The FONSI documents the decision of the Service and is based on the information and analysis contained in the Final EA.

Under the selected alternative, the refuges would achieve an optimal balance of biological resource objectives and visitor services opportunities.



California condor over Hopper Mountain NWR. Photo: USFWS

For Hopper Mountain NWR, the Service plans to increase condor management and support actions, collect baseline data for refuge resources with emphasis on special status species, improve management of all habitat types on the refuge, and increase outreach and Service-guided visitor and volunteer opportunities. Hopper Mountain NWR would remain closed to public use.



Blunt-nosed leopard lizard. Photo: © 2008 William Flaxington

For Bitter Creek NWR, the Service plans to increase condor management and support actions, build a 1,000-square-foot condor treatment facility, collect baseline data on refuge resources with emphasis on special status species, restore some springs and drainages, and expand visitor services by opening a new interpretive trail and building a new refuge administrative office with visitor area, and condor observation area.

The Service will also use grazing and other methods to improve habitat quality to support special status San

Joaquin Valley wildlife and plants. The Hopper Mountain NWR Complex is beginning the process to select a grazing cooperator and issue a permit or agreement for livestock grazing to achieve the resource management objectives outlined in the Final CCP for selected areas at Bitter Creek NWR. Grazing cooperators will be selected based on their ability to meet the Service's habitat objectives for the particular management unit(s). Prospective cooperators will be evaluated based on a variety of factors such as past experience and performance with similar prescribed grazing efforts, availability of stock to meet grazing prescriptions and schedules, and in-kind work commitments. Grazing is anticipated to begin on portions of the refuge in fall/winter 2014, subject to available staffing and funding.

The Service considered all aspects of grassland management at Bitter Creek NWR and chose not to implement prescribed fire for habitat management at this time.



Springville clarkia. Photo: © 2011 California Native Plant Society, San Luis Obispo Chapter

For Blue Ridge NWR, the Service plans to improve current management by increasing condor management activities, collecting baseline data for special status species, and adding volunteer opportunities. Portions of the refuge would be opened to public use.