



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

Summary

*Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan
and Environmental Impact Statement*

August 2015





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Summary Overview

This document summarizes the draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge (Conte Refuge, refuge). The draft CCP/EIS evaluates four alternatives for managing the refuge over the next 15 years. To download the full draft CCP/EIS, visit: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Silvio_O_Conte/what_we_do/conservation.html

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is releasing the draft CCP/EIS for a 90-day public comment period. During this comment period, we hope you will take the opportunity to review the document and provide us with comments. We will be accepting written comments, as well as oral comments at four public hearings. For more information on how to submit written comments, see the end of this summary document. For public hearing dates, times, and locations, please visit the website listed above. The comment method does not impact how they will be considered as part of this public process (i.e., oral comments do not carry more weight than written comments).

We recognize that the draft CCP/EIS is very lengthy, so we have developed this summary to highlight the major proposals in the draft plan and point readers to where they can find more detailed information in the full-text version of the draft plan. The Reader's Guide on the last page of this summary lists and describes each of the chapters and appendixes in the full draft CCP/EIS. In general, we believe the majority of readers will be most interested in chapter 4 and appendix A. Chapter 4 describes the four proposed alternatives in detail, including our proposals for working with partners throughout the watershed. Appendix A describes how we propose to manage existing and future refuge lands under Alternative C—the Service-preferred alternative.

It is important to note CCPs are strategic documents that guide long-term refuge management and prioritize actions. Because they are strategic and long-term in nature, CCPs sometimes detail program levels that are above current budget allocations. CCPs do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

Cover photo credit: View of Connecticut River from Mount Sugarloaf/Lamar Gore

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Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service, we) is pleased to announce the release of the draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge (Conte Refuge, refuge). The draft plan is being released for a 90-day public review and comment period. Once final, the CCP will provide long-term management direction for the refuge over the next 15 years.

The draft plan consists of two volumes. Volume 1 includes seven chapters, a bibliography, a glossary, and lists of acronyms and species scientific names. Volume 2 includes 14 appendixes with supporting information. This summary provides highlights of the draft plan. The full text of the draft plan is available at: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Silvio_O_Conte/what_we_do/conservation.html.

When a Federal action is proposed, such as developing a CCP, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (Public Law 91-190; NEPA) requires the agency to identify a proposed action, while also developing and analyzing a reasonable range of alternatives to the proposed action. The draft CCP/EIS for Conte Refuge describes and analyzes four alternatives for managing the refuge. The proposed action, and Service-preferred alternative, is alternative C in the draft plan. Each alternative proposes various strategies for working with partners to manage habitats and species, offer public recreational opportunities, and strategically protect land within the Connecticut River watershed. We propose to implement a CCP for the refuge that is the best combination of actions to most effectively achieve refuge purposes and goals, and would best contribute to conserving Federal trust resources on refuge lands and throughout the Connecticut River watershed. Federal trust resources include federally threatened and endangered species, migratory birds and fish, and wetlands.

There are several reasons why the refuge needs a CCP. First, the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 requires us to write a CCP for every national wildlife refuge to help achieve the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) and ensure the refuge has a strategic vision for achieving its purposes and goals. Second, we developed this draft CCP/EIS to address key issues, concerns, and opportunities identified by Service staff, partners, and the public related to habitat and species management, public recreational opportunities, land protection, partnerships, and the socioeconomic environment. The CCP considers these issues in the context of a changing landscape. The watershed's natural environment, the influences of societal and land use changes, and the implications of climate change, have all affected the refuge setting since the 1995 Final EIS authorizing the refuge was approved. This CCP is designed to address those changes through management and protection of valuable natural resources into the future.

Please see chapter 1 of the full-text version of the draft CCP/EIS for more information on the purpose and need for the CCP and chapter 2 for a detailed list of the key issues, concerns, challenges, and opportunities.

Brief History of Refuge Establishment

Conte Refuge was established to conserve, protect, and enhance native fish, wildlife, and plants, and the ecosystems they depend upon throughout the Connecticut River watershed. The 7.2-million acre watershed represents the refuge's legislated boundary, and covers portions of four states: Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. The watershed provides important habitat for hundreds of breeding and migrating birds, numerous migratory fish, and several federally listed threatened and endangered plant and wildlife species. As of October 2013, the refuge consisted of 35,989 acres on 9 refuge divisions and 9 refuge units across the watershed (map 1). The largest refuge divisions are the 26,605-acre Nulhegan Basin Division in Vermont and the 6,405-acre Pondicherry Division in New Hampshire. Chapter 3 in the draft CCP/EIS provides detailed information on all existing refuge lands.



Sharon Lindsay

Lewis Pond, Nulhegan Basin Division

The Purpose of, and Need for, Action

Map 1. Location of Existing Conte Refuge Divisions and Units as of October 2013



This map shows the refuge ownership as of October 2013. Acquisitions in 2014 included the Mascoma River Division in New Hampshire and Fannie Stebbins and Hatfield Units in Massachusetts. Please contact the refuge for the latest refuge ownership information.

Refuge Purposes

The refuge is named after the late U.S. Congressman Silvio O. Conte from Massachusetts who dreamed of conserving the Connecticut River watershed's natural resources for future generations. The Conte Refuge Act of 1991 (Public Law 102-212) created a refuge with the following legislated purposes:



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Bald eagle

- To conserve, protect, and enhance the Connecticut River valley populations of Atlantic salmon, American shad, river herring, shortnose sturgeon, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, osprey, black ducks, and other native species of plants, fish, and wildlife.
- To conserve, protect, and enhance the natural diversity and abundance of plant, fish, and wildlife species and the ecosystems upon which these species depend within the refuge.
- To protect species listed as endangered or threatened, or identified as candidates for listing, pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.).
- To restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of wetlands and other waters within the refuge.
- To fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States relating to fish, wildlife, and wetlands.
- To provide opportunities for scientific research, environmental education, and fish and wildlife-oriented recreation and access to the extent compatible with the other purposes stated in this section.

Refuge Vision

This vision statement was developed by the CCP planning team and is intended to capture the essence of what is important as we reflect on the refuge's purposes and look to the future:



USFWS

Nulhegan River

The Connecticut River is treasured by all for its majesty and significance in supporting life along its winding 410-mile passage through urban and rural communities in New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Working with our partners, we are inspired to protect and enhance the natural and cultural richness throughout the watershed, especially on lands and waters entrusted to our agency as the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge.

Together with our partners, we design, support, and implement strategic conservation actions across the watershed, and communicate conservation needs and successes through extensive outreach and education programs. On refuge lands, we offer visitor programs and activities that promote an appreciation of the Connecticut River watershed as an intact, interconnected, and healthy ecosystem. Visitors respond to this greater awareness by becoming active stewards of the watershed's natural and cultural resources. Our actions exemplify the Service's vital role in conserving the Connecticut River watershed and the refuge's important contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Refuge Mission Statement

Work in partnership with others to inspire stewardship, magnify achievements, and celebrate shared successes that enhance, nurture, and protect the natural, cultural, and sustainable economic richness of the Connecticut River and its watershed on public and private land.

Refuge Goals

Our planning team developed these four goals for the refuge after reviewing the refuge purposes, the missions of the Service and Refuge System, our proposed vision, and the mandates, plans, and conservation strategies affecting resources in the watershed. Goals set the stage for all refuge activities because they lay the foundation for developing more specific refuge objectives and strategies.

Goal 1. Habitat Conservation

Promote the biological diversity, integrity, and resiliency of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems within the Connecticut River watershed in an amount and distribution that sustains ecological function and supports healthy populations of native fish, wildlife, and plants, especially Federal trust species of conservation concern, in anticipation of the effects of climate, land use, and demographic changes.

Goal 2. Education, Outreach, and Interpretation

Inspire residents and visitors to actively participate in the conservation and stewardship of the exceptional natural and cultural resources in the Connecticut River watershed, and promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the role of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge in conserving those resources.

Goal 3. Recreation

Promote high quality, public recreational opportunities in the Connecticut River watershed that are complementary between ownerships and provide regional linkages, with emphasis on promoting wildlife-dependent activities that connect people with nature in the outdoors.

Goal 4. Partnerships to Conserve and Enjoy the Connecticut River Watershed

Enhance the conservation, protection, and stewardship of natural and cultural resources, and promote wildlife-dependent recreation, throughout the Connecticut River watershed by initiating, supporting, and promoting partnerships with other Federal, state, and local agencies, Tribal governments, and private organizations.



USFWS

Mollie Beattie Bog, Nulhegan Basin Division, Vermont

Alternatives

The four alternatives developed for this draft CCP/EIS represent a range of different approaches to managing the refuge and working with partners in the watershed over the next 15 years, including habitat management, public use, land conservation, and refuge administration.

Actions Common to All of the Alternatives

Although the alternatives differ in important ways, there are also many actions that are common to all four alternatives. Some of these actions are required by law or policy, or represent management decisions that have already undergone NEPA compliance documentation and public review. Below are highlights of some of the actions common to all alternatives. For a full list of common actions, refer to chapter 4 of the full-text draft CCP/EIS.

Acquiring New Refuge Lands

Under all alternatives, we would continue to acquire lands within the refuge's approved acquisition boundary from willing sellers to protect and restore important habitats. The Service only acquires an interest in land from willing sellers when there is an agreement on terms and price and funding is available. Lands within the refuge's approved acquisition boundary do not become part of the refuge unless their owners willingly sell or donate them to the Service; the boundary has no impact on property use or who an owner can choose to sell to. We do not intend to acquire all the lands within each CFA. For example, we would not generally seek to acquire lands that are already permanently protected by another conservation agency or organization. Under alternatives A and B we do not propose to expand the refuge's acquisition authority—however, alternatives C and D do propose a refuge expansion.



Paul Cooper

Connecticut River from French King Bridge

Ryan Hagerly - USFWS



Canadian bunchberry

Distributing Refuge Revenue Sharing Payments

Under all alternatives, we would continue to make annual refuge revenue sharing payments. The Service, as part of the Federal government, does not pay property taxes on lands it owns. However, the Service does distribute annual refuge revenue sharing payments to help offset potential tax losses to the towns and/or counties where refuge lands occur. As we describe in chapter 3, we pay municipalities annual refuge revenue sharing payments based on the acreage and the appraised value of refuge lands within their jurisdiction. These annual payments are calculated by a formula determined by Congress and paid for with fees for the use of refuge products and privileges, supplemented by funds from Congress. Additional municipalities would be added to the program with future acquisitions.

Supporting the Working Landscape–Integrating Conservation with Commercial Agricultural and Forest Lands

Under all alternatives, we would continue to support working forests and farms. We will seek opportunities to support enrolling these lands into Federal and State agricultural and working forest protection programs. The refuge does not intend to target these lands for acquisition. Instead, our priority would be to work with individual landowners, agricultural organizations, States, and other Federal agencies to protect these lands as part of an integrated, working landscape. There are many State and Federal programs that focus on protecting these lands while also promoting economically viable practices that benefit wildlife, help protect water quality, and provide other ecosystem services. We will continue to help landowners interested in these programs to connect with the proper State and Federal programs through our private lands program. Occasionally, we may acquire agricultural and working forest lands from willing sellers when other programs are not available to keep the land in production. In these situations, we may purchase these lands to prevent development, ensure that their conservation values to wildlife are protected, and to support access for public recreation.

Evaluating Uses for Appropriateness and Compatibility and Activities Not Allowed on Refuge Lands

Under all alternatives, we would continue to comply with the Refuge Improvement Act and Service policies to evaluate whether proposed uses are appropriate and compatible on a national wildlife refuge. Conte Refuge offers a variety of wildlife-dependent public recreational opportunities. In particular, we strive to provide opportunities for the Refuge System’s six priority public uses wherever possible on refuge lands: wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, interpretation, hunting, and fishing. However, we occasionally receive requests to allow non-priority, non-wildlife dependent activities on the refuge. Some of those uses have the potential to harm wildlife and habitats or are not consistent with public safety.

According to Service policy (FW 603 1), an appropriate use must meet at least one of the following conditions:

- It is a wildlife-dependent recreational use as defined in the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 (hunting, fishing, environmental education, interpretation, wildlife observation, and photography).
- It contributes to fulfilling refuge purposes, the Refuge System mission, and/or refuge goals and objectives from an approved refuge plan (e.g., CCP).
- The refuge manager has evaluated the use against 10 criteria and found it appropriate. These criteria include determining if the use: complies with applicable laws, regulations, and policies; is consistent with public safety; can be managed with current or future resources; will not impair existing, compatible, wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities; and will contribute to the public’s understanding and appreciation of the refuge’s natural and cultural resources.

Sharon Lindsay



Puddles, the Refuge System mascot, birdwatching

At Conte Refuge, the following activities have been determined to be not appropriate: all-terrain vehicles and other off-road vehicles, target shooting, model airplane flying, landing and launching of ultralight and other aircraft, and off-road bicycling. Appendix D in the draft CCP/EIS fully documents our decision to not allow these uses. Most of these activities are sufficiently provided nearby on other ownerships; therefore, the lack of access on the refuge does not eliminate the opportunity to engage in these activities in surrounding communities.

For uses that are found appropriate, the refuge must then evaluate if the use is also compatible on refuge lands. According to Service policy (603 FW 2), a compatible use will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the refuge’s purposes or the Refuge System mission. To make this determination, a refuge manager uses the best available science coupled with sound professional judgement to evaluate all of the potential impacts of the use on refuge resources. Appendix D in the draft CCP/EIS includes the compatibility determinations for the refuge under alternative C—the Service’s preferred alternative.

Controlling Invasive Species

Under all alternatives, we would continue to work with partners to identify and respond to invasive plant and animal species that pose a threat to the native diversity of the watershed, particularly where refuge lands are threatened. The Refuge System has adopted an integrated pest management approach to eradicate, control, or contain invasive species on refuges. Conte Refuge has a long history of collaborative invasive plant control both on- and off-refuge lands. Invasive species of particular concern on the refuge include: Japanese stiltgrass, Japanese knotweed, purple loosestrife, pale swallowwort, water chestnut, mile-a-minute vine, didymo (also known as “rock snot”), zebra mussels, and mute swans. Under all alternatives, we will continue to train staff and partners to identify and report those species deemed by state and regional experts as posing the highest threat. These species would be the highest priority to control, if found. Another priority would continue to be eradicating new or very small occurrences of any invasive species before they have a chance to establish in order to keep areas weed-free.

Conducting and Facilitating Research

Under all alternatives, we would continue to promote research activities throughout the watershed that contribute to the body of information on species and habitats of conservation concern, and would help inform refuge management decisions. Generally, on refuge lands we would prioritize issuing special use permits for compatible research that would contribute to the conservation or enhancement of native species and biological diversity, inform climate change predictions, or address regional conservation information needs.



Removing invasive water chestnut

Maddie List - USFWS

Brief Descriptions of the Four Alternatives

Here we provide a brief overview of the four alternatives evaluated in detail in the draft plan. For the complete descriptions, please see chapter 4 of the full-text draft CCP/EIS.

Alternative A—Current Management

NEPA requires a “No Action” alternative to serve as a baseline to which all other alternatives are compared. For this draft plan, we define the “no action” alternative as continuing current management. Alternative A generally reflects the management direction outlined in the refuge’s 1995 Final EIS. Under alternative A, refuge staff would continue current management activities and programs for the next 15 years.

Wildlife and Habitat Conservation

Under alternative A, we would continue our modest habitat management program to benefit a variety of species. We would continue to improve forest habitat for American woodcock and other early successional forest-dependent species on the Nulhegan Basin Division, and manage grasslands and shrublands to benefit woodcock or grassland-dependent breeding birds on the Pondicherry and Fort River Divisions. Refuge staff would continue to work on an opportunistic basis with interested private landowners, state and local agencies, and organizations to help manage and restore habitats and wildlife populations on their lands, as funding allows.

The refuge currently has the authority to acquire up to 97,830 acres within the watershed. In the refuge’s 1995 Final EIS, 65 Special Focus Areas (SFAs) were identified as target areas for refuge acquisition. The majority of the SFAs are small, scattered sites, with an emphasis on rare natural communities and habitats for endangered, threatened, rare, and uncommon species. Since 1995, the Service has acquired approximately 36,000 acres of habitat. Under alternative A, the refuge would continue to acquire lands within this existing approved acquisition boundary.

Environmental Education, Interpretation, and Outreach

Under alternative A, limited environmental education and interpretation programs would continue on refuge lands. The programs would be conducted by refuge staff and volunteers, as funding allows. Most of these activities would continue to be done in cooperation with partners at their visitor facilities. We would also continue to encourage the use of refuge lands for self-led programs, and conduct community outreach through the mobile Watershed-on-Wheels (WoW) Express, Adopt-a-Habitat program, Urban Refuge Initiative, and Conte Corners (see chapter 3 of the draft CCP/EIS for more information).

Recreation

Under alternative A, we would continue to offer our existing recreational opportunities on refuge divisions and units (see chapter 3 in draft CCP/EIS). In particular, we would continue to emphasize opportunities for the Refuge System’s six priority wildlife-dependent public uses: wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, interpretation, hunting, and fishing. As we acquire new lands, we would continue to open them to compatible priority public uses wherever possible. Some restrictions on public use and access may occur to protect sensitive species and habitats, or to ensure public safety.

Partnerships

We would continue to support partnerships with Federal, State and local agencies, partners, and private landowners that are essential to achieving refuge purposes and goals. We would continue to develop new partnerships, with special effort to promote conservation, recreation, and education and outreach programs in urban and rural areas within the watershed.



Michael Goulet

Nulhegan Basin Division, VT



USFWS

Fort River Division, MA

Alternative B—Consolidated Stewardship

Under alternative B, we would enhance our current habitat and visitor services programs on existing refuge lands. Another major difference between alternatives A and B is that under alternative B we would strategically focus our priority work with partners in 14 geographic areas called Conservation Partnership Areas (CPAs). CPAs are relatively large areas, generally defined along subwatershed boundaries, which include concentrations of Federal trust and other resources of conservation concern. Within these CPAs, we would concentrate our limited resources (e.g., staff, funds, equipment) and help facilitate the work of our partners. We would also reprioritize our future refuge acquisitions into 18 Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs). CFAs are nested within CPAs and are areas of particularly high conservation value for Federal trust species. We would not increase the acreage of the refuge's current approved acquisition boundary under alternative B.

Wildlife and Habitat Conservation

Under alternative B, we would enhance our habitat management to create and maintain high-quality habitat for a wider variety of species of conservation concern. We would expand our forest, grassland, and shrubland management programs on existing refuge lands, and explore opportunities to further expand these habitats on lands we acquire in the future. We would inventory and assess habitat conditions on newly acquired lands and develop more detailed habitat management plans (HMPs) for each CFA to carefully guide our management.

Under alternative B, we propose to move away from acquiring small, scattered SFAs, toward protecting larger, more biologically sound and ecologically resilient CFAs. By protecting the larger, more contiguous CFAs, we would more effectively conserve habitats and species populations over the long term. As we acquire lands, we would strive to connect a diversity of habitats covering a range of elevations, latitudes, aspects, and natural processes. One of the CFAs, the Quonotuck CFA, represents the approximate 100-year floodplain of the Connecticut River and the lower reaches of some of its major tributaries. In the Quonotuck CFA, our priority would be conserving floodplain forests and wetlands, as well as tidal (salt, brackish, and freshwater) wetlands. We would seek to protect areas where these habitats currently occur, they can be restored, and/or they are projected to migrate to due to climate change.

Environmental Education, Interpretation, and Outreach

We would enhance our existing environmental education, interpretation, and outreach programs. We would expand our WoW Express, Conte Corners, and the Adopt-a-Habitat programs and emphasize making refuge programs more relevant, especially to urban communities.

Recreation

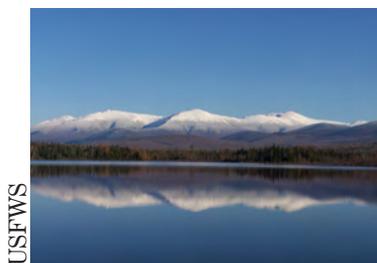
Under alternative B, we would continue to offer compatible recreational opportunities on the refuge to connect people to nature. On existing and future refuge lands, we would focus on providing hiking trails and access to the Connecticut River and its tributaries. In particular, we would try to offer more Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) universally accessible trails and visitor facilities.

Partnerships

We would continue the valuable partnerships we currently have, but also seek to expand existing and develop new partnerships in the 14 CPAs. Our emphasis would be collaborating with others and leveraging resources to accomplish conservation, education, and recreation goals. We would also actively seek research, inventories, and monitoring that would advance our understanding of watershed resources and support science-based decisionmaking.

Alternative C—Enhanced Conservation Connections and Partnerships - The Service-preferred Alternative

Similar to alternative B, we identify CPAs and CFAs as a geographic focus for our work. However, under alternative C, we would seek to expand the refuge's approved acquisition authority to up to 197,296 acres (map 2), and propose 17 CPAs and 22 CFAs in support of refuge goals and objectives. The expanded networks of CPAs and CFAs would allow for greater flexibility and opportunity in working with partners to achieve common landscape-scale conservation goals. By expanding the refuge, we would be better able to permanently protect areas of significance to Federal trust resources and promote a landscape that can better adapt and be resilient despite anticipated future climate and land use changes. Under alternative C, we would also conduct more active management to improve habitats for priority fish and wildlife species in consultation with the states, partners, and public. Based on the four alternatives we examined, we have selected alternative C as our Service-preferred alternative. In our professional judgement, alternative C would best accomplish refuge goals and objectives and most effectively support the refuge purposes.



USFWS

Pondicherry Division, NH

Wildlife and Habitat Conservation

We propose to appreciably expand our forest, grassland, and shrubland management programs on existing and future refuge lands. The proposed refuge expansion would potentially double the opportunities for active management on acres more widely distributed across the watershed. For each CFA, appendix A in the draft CCP/EIS identifies the priority resources of concern and details management objectives and strategies we would implement under alternative C. Similar to alternative B, we would develop detailed step-down HMPs for each CFA to explain how we would manage for those resources and our plans to inventory, monitor, and evaluate habitat conditions.

Appendix C in the draft CCP/EIS is the proposed land protection plan for the refuge under alternative C. It provides details on the process used to select the 22 CFAs, what approvals are being sought, the national policies and procedures the Service would employ for expanding the refuge, what tracts are under consideration and how we have prioritized them, and what acquisition methods and options would be available if approval is granted and there are willing sellers.

Environmental Education, Interpretation, and Outreach

We would appreciably expand and enhance our existing environmental education, interpretation, and outreach programs, with an emphasis on providing opportunities for audiences in urban areas. With increased capacity and landbase, we would be able to reach a larger, more diverse audience.

Recreation

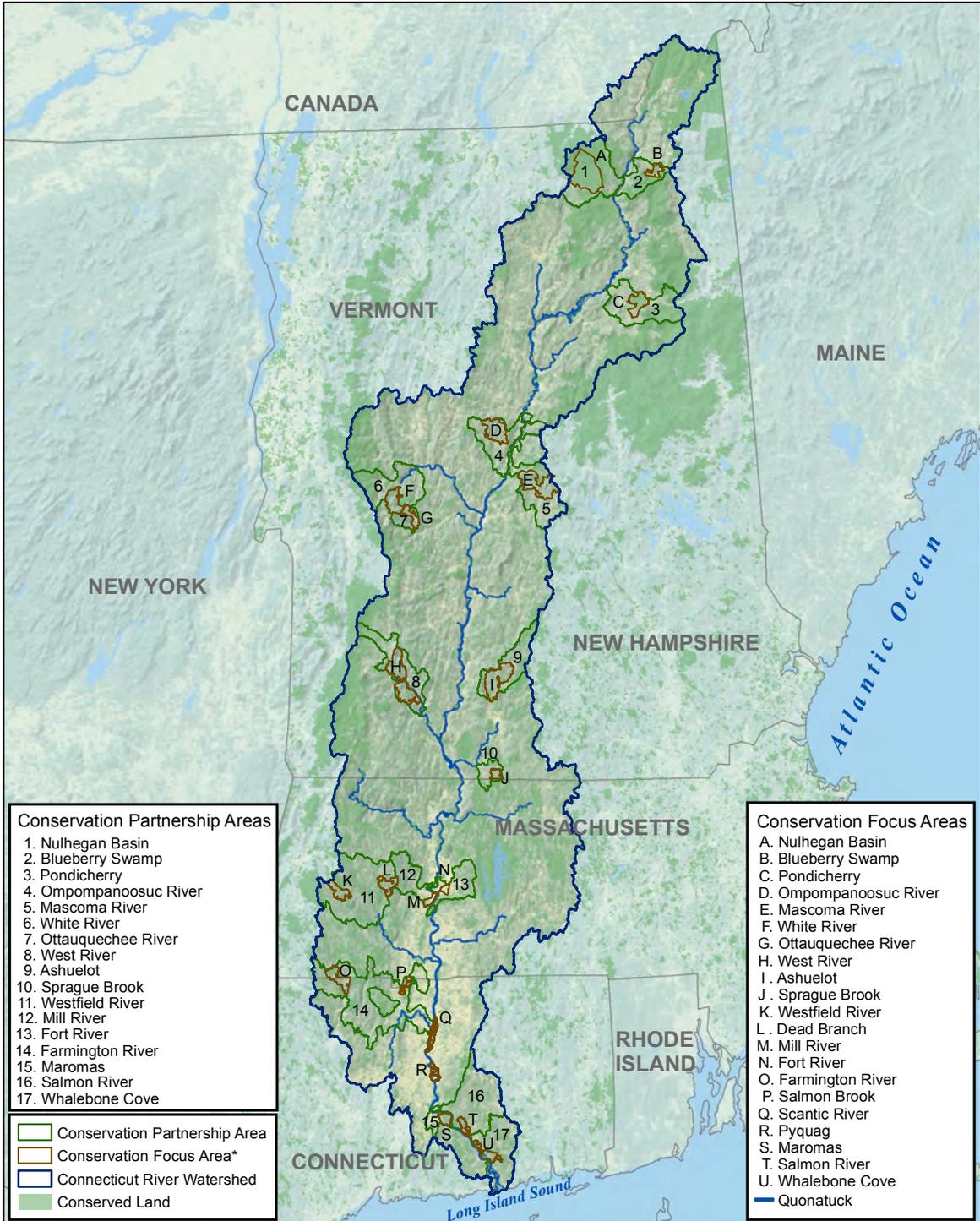
We would expand our recreational opportunities under alternative C similar to those described under alternative B. By doubling the size of the refuge, we would significantly increase the opportunities we could provide for visitors throughout the watershed, including public access to the Connecticut River and its tributaries. In particular, we would strive to provide ADA universally accessible trails and visitor facilities.

Partnerships

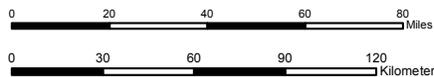
Under alternative C, our partnership strategies would build off those discussed under alternative B. Alternative C proposes four additional CPAs, thus expanding our ability to support partners' efforts. With increased capacity and an expanded private lands program, we would be better able to support conservation, education, and recreation opportunities within the watershed.

Map 2. Conservation Partnership Areas (CPAs) and Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) Proposed Under Alternative C—the Service’s Preferred Alternative

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service *Silvio O. Conte Conservation Partnership and Focus Areas*
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



This map is not intended for use as a land survey or as a representation of land for conveyance or tax purposes. The conserved lands layer (2012) was obtained from Trust for Public Land. Other base layers were obtained from ESRI. Refuge lands information provided by the Service. For more information visit the USFWS Northeast Region GIS website at <http://northeast.fws.gov/gis/>
 Map Print Date: 3/23/2015



NOTE: *Boundary may vary among draft CCP/EIS Alternatives



Alternative D—Reduced Management with Emphasis on Backcountry Recreation

Alternative D focuses on promoting natural ecological functions and processes with little Service intervention. This alternative would significantly reduce active habitat management and offer a more “backcountry” recreational experience. Alternative D also proposes the largest refuge expansion. We would seek approval to expand the refuge boundary to a total of 235,782 acres. Alternative D includes the same 18 CPAs and 22 CFAs identified for alternative C, but some of the CFAs are larger, and would provide greater ecological benefits and improve connections among conserved lands across the watershed.

Wildlife and Habitat Conservation

Under alternative D, we would generally not conduct active habitat management, except where needed to restore natural ecological functioning (e.g., floodplain restoration, dam removal, invasive species control) or to help recover federally threatened and endangered species. Overall, this alternative would benefit species that require older forests and large, unfragmented areas. Protecting large forest blocks would provide greater flexibility in adapting to climate and other landscape changes within a watershed context.

Environmental Education, Interpretation, and Outreach

Similar to the other alternatives, we would continue to work with partners to develop and offer environmental education and interpretive programs. However, under alternative D, these programs would emphasize natural processes and natural ecosystems, and would not demonstrate the benefits of active habitat management for early successional forest, grassland, or shrubland species.

Recreation

Under alternative D, we would continue to promote public access to refuge lands for compatible recreational activities. This alternative would promote backcountry, non-motorized, low-density, low-development public use opportunities and experiences (e.g., less developed trails and fewer kiosks, boardwalks, signs). Snowmobiling would no longer be allowed.

Partnerships

Under alternative D, our strategy to establish, support, and maintain partnerships would be the same as those under alternative C. However, due to the focus on less active management and more backcountry recreation, the types of partners interested in working with us may shift accordingly.



Friends of Conte

Salmon River Division, CT

Comparison of the Four Alternatives

Table 1 compares and contrasts the major differences among the four alternatives analyzed in the draft CCP/EIS. One of the biggest differences among the alternatives is the respective proposals for acquiring additional refuge lands. As mentioned above, under alternatives B, C, and D, we propose to focus our allocation of staff, funding, and other resources in CPAs, and our land acquisition in CFAs. Table 2 lists the total acres we propose to acquire by CFA. After table 2, you will find maps of the individual proposed CFAs (maps 3 through 25). Each map depicts the areas proposed for acquisition under the four alternatives.

For a more comprehensive description of the alternatives, please see chapter 4 of the full-text draft CCP/EIS. Appendix A of the draft CCP/EIS also provides detailed information on how we propose to manage each CFA and refuge unit under the Service-preferred alternative C.

Table 1. Summary of Major Actions Proposed Under the Four Alternatives

Alternative A <i>Current Management</i>	Alternative B	Alternative C <i>Service-preferred</i>	Alternative D
Habitat Management on Refuge Lands			
<p>Continue to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage approximately 225 acres of forest for American woodcock. Manage approximately 200 acres of grassland to benefit grassland birds. Work with partners to control invasive species on and off refuge lands. Protect and manage habitats for federally threatened and endangered species, such as Puritan tiger beetle and northeastern bulrush. 	<p>Continue management for federally threatened and endangered species.</p> <p>Continue to work with partners to control invasive species.</p> <p>Manage approximately 7,660 acres of forest to create a diversity of forest structure, age classes, and types over the next 15 years for a variety of migratory birds and other forest-dependent species.</p> <p>Manage approximately 422 acres of grassland for grassland-dependent species, such as bobolink and eastern meadowlark.</p> <p>Manage approximately 775 acres of shrubland for native shrubland birds and New England cottontail (a candidate for Federal listing).</p>	<p>Similar to alternative B, except we would increase acres under forest management (approximately 11,550 acres) and grasslands management (approximately 548 acres) over the next 15 years as we acquire additional refuge lands. Actively managed acres may be adjusted during development of HMPs, which will detail techniques, timing, and priority of management actions.</p> <p>Floodplain and riparian forest restoration would be an additional focus in our forest management program.</p>	<p>Generally, allow natural processes to occur without intervention. No active habitat management, except:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where restoration is needed to improve severely degraded habitats. To respond to a major catastrophic or epidemic event. When necessary for the recovery of federally threatened or endangered species.
Hunting and Fishing on Refuge Lands			
<p>Continue to offer quality hunting and fishing programs consistent with state regulations on existing refuge lands.</p>	<p>In addition to alternative A, wherever compatible, officially open newly acquired refuge lands to public hunting and fishing, consistent with state fishing and hunting regulations. Develop hunting and fishing plans with state agencies, partners, and the public and complete other administrative requirements to formalize the opening of programs.</p>		
Environmental Education and Interpretation			
<p>Continue to offer environmental education and interpretive programs primarily through the mobile WoW Express, at partner facilities, at Conte Corners, and at existing refuge offices.</p> <p>Continue to support environmental education and interpretation programs at partner facilities.</p>	<p>Enhance existing partnerships, programs, and materials, and promote new opportunities as new refuge lands are acquired by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with partners to develop and offer high-quality environmental education and interpretation opportunities in the proposed CPAs. Expanding Conte Corner locations. Promoting refuge and partner lands as outdoor classrooms and developing new infrastructure, as needed and funding allows. Implementing an Adopt-a-Habitat program for schools, updating and expanding the WoW Express program, and developing programming on climate change. Emphasizing environmental education programs in urban areas. 		<p>Similar to alternatives B and C, except that environmental education themes and messages would focus on natural processes and climate change. Infrastructure on refuge lands would be limited to support programs.</p>

Continuation of Table 1. Summary of Major Actions Proposed Under the Four Alternatives

Alternative A <i>Current Management</i>	Alternative B	Alternative C <i>Service-preferred</i>	Alternative D
Wildlife Observation, Photography, and Other Public Uses on Refuge Lands			
<p>Continue to allow wildlife observation and photography on existing refuge lands. To facilitate these uses, continue to allow visitors to hike, cross-country ski, and snowshoe along refuge trails.</p> <p>Continue to allow snowmobiling on designated trails on the Nulhegan Basin, Pondicherry, and Dead Branch Divisions.</p>	<p>In addition to alternative A, as new lands are acquired, continue to open refuge lands to these uses, whenever compatible. Where possible, create ADA universally accessible trails and facilities. To the extent practicable, create at least one hiking trail on each CFA, with priority to provide river access, including canoe and kayak boat launch sites. Require pets be leashed to limit impacts to wildlife.</p> <p>As new refuge lands are acquired that have established state- or regional-designated trails, continue to allow snowmobiling where compatible.</p>		<p>Offer opportunities that emphasize backcountry-type experiences, promoting pedestrian and non-motorized boating access. Trails and facilities would have less infrastructure. Eliminate snowmobiling.</p>
Partnerships			
<p>Continue to maintain existing partnerships throughout the Connecticut River watershed to help protect the region's wildlife and habitats, enhance water quality, offer high-quality public recreation, and provide environmental educational and interpretive opportunities.</p>	<p>In addition to alternative A, emphasize developing and enhancing partnerships in 14 CPAs.</p> <p>Promote private lands partnerships and enhance coordination Federal agencies.</p> <p>Increase partnership opportunities that engage a diverse and urban audiences to connect people with nature.</p>	<p>In addition to alternative B, emphasize developing and enhancing partnerships in 17 CPAs (map 2).</p>	
Refuge Land Protection			
<p>Continue to acquire lands in the current approved acquisition boundary (up to 97,830 acres in SFAs and other small, scattered sites described in 1995 Final EIS).</p>	<p>Reallocate the existing approved refuge acquisition authority into 18 larger, more contiguous CFAs (approximately 96,703 acres).</p>	<p>Expand approved refuge boundary and focus acquisition in 22 CFAs (approximately 197,296 acres).</p>	<p>Expand approved refuge boundary and focus acquisition in 22 CFAs (approximately 235,782 acres).</p>

Table 2. Proposed Refuge Acquisition Authority by CFA Under the Four Alternatives*

Conservation Focus Area (CFA)/Refuge Unit Name and State	Acres owned by Service as of October 2013	Alternative A†	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D
Nulhegan Basin CFA–VT	26,605	26,789	27,537	32,541	32,541
Blueberry Swamp CFA–NH	1,166	2,040	2,114	4,754	6,618
Pondicherry CFA–NH	6,405	6,677	6,677	10,242	10,513
Ompompanoosuc CFA–VT	-	-	4,464	15,071	15,071
Mascoma River CFA–NH	-	-	9,263	20,601	20,601
White River CFA–VT	-	-	-	10,031	14,474
Ottauquechee River CFA–VT	-	-	-	5,985	8,525
West River CFA–VT	-	-	9,549	22,020	22,020
Ashuelot CFA–NH	-	-	7,152	17,753	17,753
Sprague Brook CFA–NH	-	-	-	3,016	8,545
Westfield River CFA–MA	125	225	2,556	6,520	12,252
Dead Branch CFA–MA	97	100	1,123	6,012	6,012
Mill River CFA–MA	249	3,200	1,336	2,359	2,359
Fort River CFA–MA	261	2,429	1,517	1,662	2,366
Farmington River CFA–MA & CT	-	-	5,411	8,866	16,143
Salmon Brook CFA–CT	-	-	-	2,770	4,520
Scantic River CFA–CT	-	2,040	2,136	4,128	4,128
Pyquag CFA–CT	-	4,085	2,956	2,956	2,956
Maromas CFA–CT	-	-	1,941	3,935	3,935
Salmon River CFA–CT	425	2,550	2,742	3,699	4,948
Whalebone Cove CFA–CT	67	2,750	1,640	3,786	10,913
Quonatauck CFA–Along Entire Main Stem and Major Tributaries	-	8,480	6,000	8,000	8,000
<i>Acres outside of CFAs</i>	-	<i>36,465</i>	-	-	-
Putney Mountain Unit–VT	285	285	285	285	285
Wissatinnewag Unit–MA	21	21	21	21	21
Third Island Unit–MA	4	4	4	4	4
Mount Toby Unit–MA	30	30	30	30	30
Mount Tom Unit–MA	141	141	141	141	141
Honeypot Road Wetlands Unit–MA	21	21	21	21	21
Dead Man's Swamp Unit–CT	31	31	31	31	31
Roger Tory Peterson Unit–CT	56	56	56	56	56
Totals	35,989	97,830†	96,703	197,296	235,782

*This table is an abbreviated version of table 4.5 in chapter 4 of the draft CCP/EIS. Table 4.4 in the draft CCP/EIS explains the relationship between the 1995 Final EIS SFAs and the CFAs proposed under alternatives B, C, and D.

†Alternative A represents the current, existing refuge acquisition authority. There are no CFAs proposed under alternative A, however; many of the lands proposed for refuge acquisition under alternative A fall into the CFA boundaries proposed under the other alternatives. For ease of comparison, we have chosen to list these acres under the CFA they correspond with. An additional 36,465 acres fall outside of CFAs under alternative A. Those acres were part of the Special Focus Areas in the original 1995 Final EIS for the refuge.

Maps Comparing the Land Acquisition Proposal By Alternative

The following maps show the CFA refuge acquisition boundaries proposed under the four alternatives. As mentioned above, lands within a refuge's approved acquisition boundary do not become part of the refuge unless their owners willingly sell or donate them to the Service; the CFA boundaries have no impact on property use or who an owner can choose to sell to. Also, the refuge does not generally seek to acquire lands that are already permanently protected by another conservation agency or organization. Existing conserved lands under other ownerships are shown in green on the maps.

The alternatives are shown as additive on the map (e.g. alternative C includes alternatives A and B, plus alternative C). You will also notice that not all CFA maps depict all four alternatives. This may be because not every CFA occurs in each alternative (e.g. some CFAs do not exist in alternatives A and B) or because some of the alternatives are the same for a given CFA (e.g., alternative D is the same as alternative C for several CFAs). Alternative C is the Service-preferred alternative and is outlined with a gold line on each map. To minimize confusion, we recommend you reference table 2 while looking at the maps.

Map 24 shows the extent of the Quonotuck CFA, which differs from the other proposed CFAs because we are not proposing to acquire lands within a discrete area. As described earlier, the Quonotuck CFA represents the approximate 100-year floodplain of the Connecticut River and of the lower reaches of some of its major tributaries. In the Quonotuck CFA, our priority would be acquiring floodplain forests and wetlands, as well as tidal (salt, brackish, and freshwater) wetlands. Under alternative B, we propose to acquire up to 6,000 acres of these habitat types scattered throughout the watershed along the river segments shown on the map. Under alternatives C and D, we propose to acquire up to 8,000 acres.

For more information on each CFA, please see appendixes A and C in the draft CCP/EIS. Appendix A provides more detailed information on each CFA, including habitat maps, lists of priority wildlife species and habitats, and specific management objectives and strategies proposed under alternative C, the Service-preferred alternative. Appendix C describes our proposed refuge expansion under alternative C, including an explanation of the process we used to select the CFAs, as well as respective CFA parcel maps and tables with parcel information.



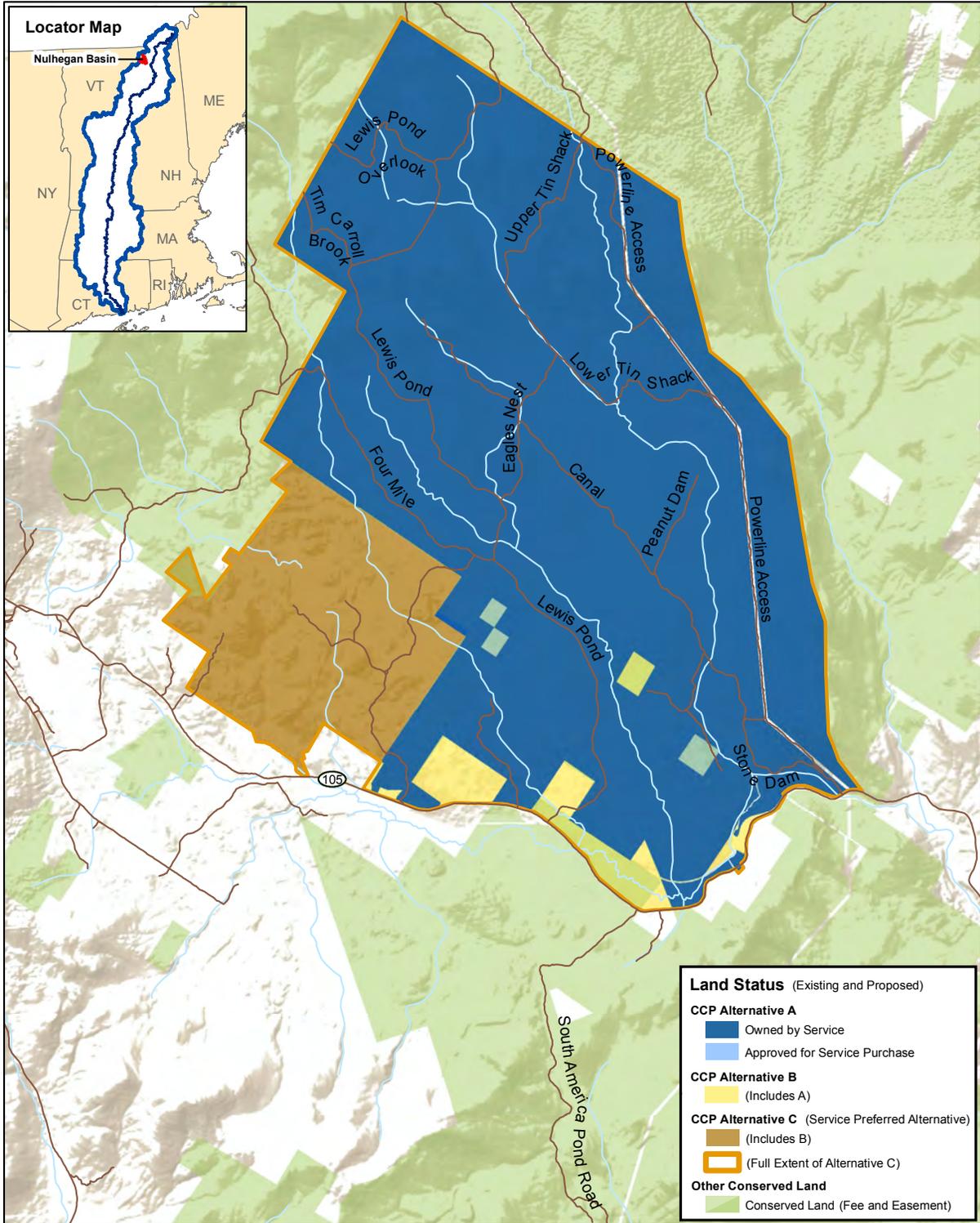
James Weliver-USFWS

Fall at Fort River Division

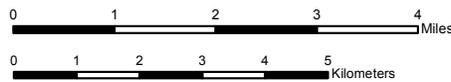
Map 3. Nulhegan Basin Conservation Focus Area
(Lewis, Bloomfield, Brunswick, Ferdinand, and Brighton, Vermont)



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service *Nulhegan Basin CFA by CCP Alternative*
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

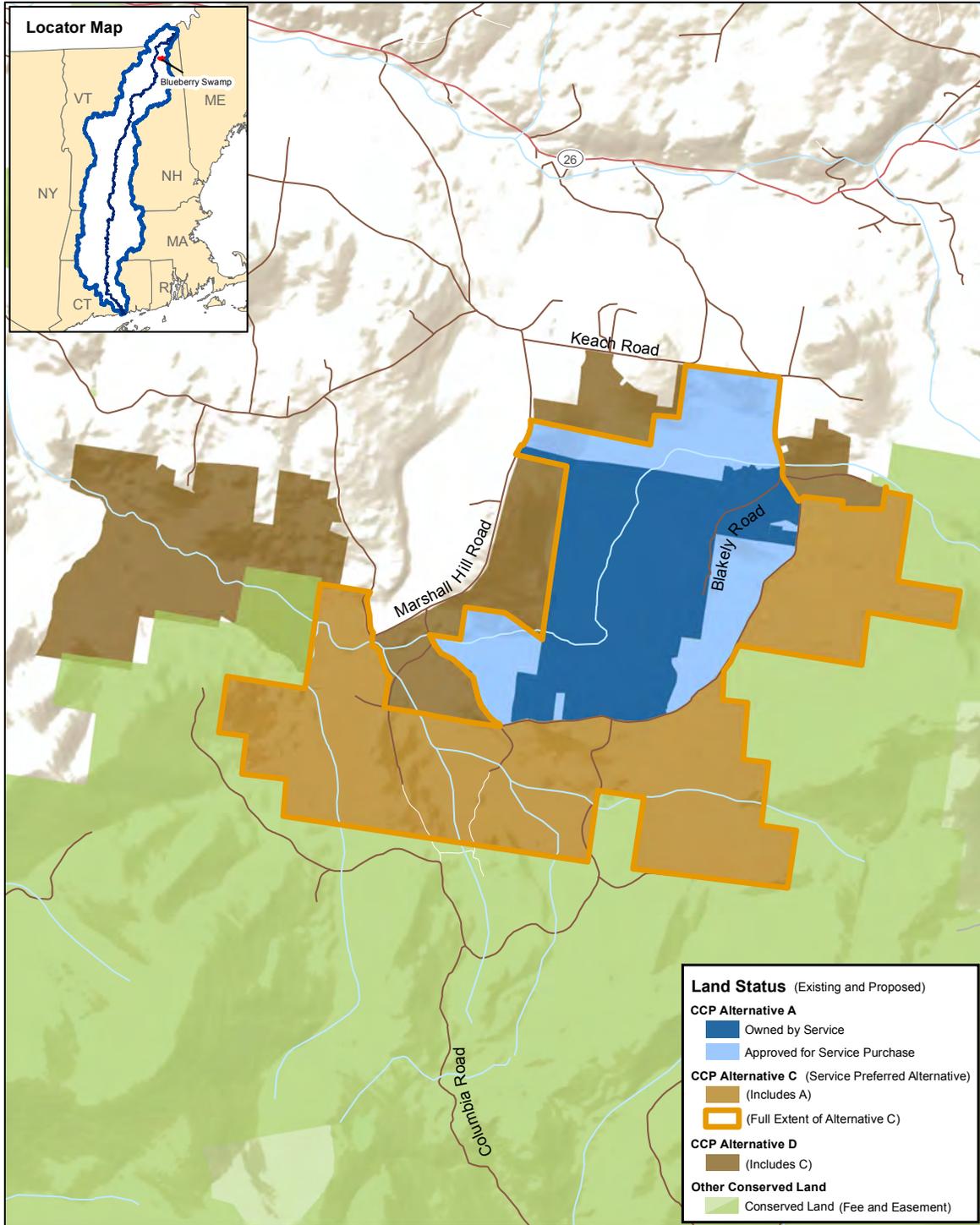


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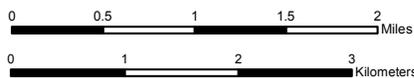


Map 4. Blueberry Swamp Conservation Focus Area
(Columbia, New Hampshire)

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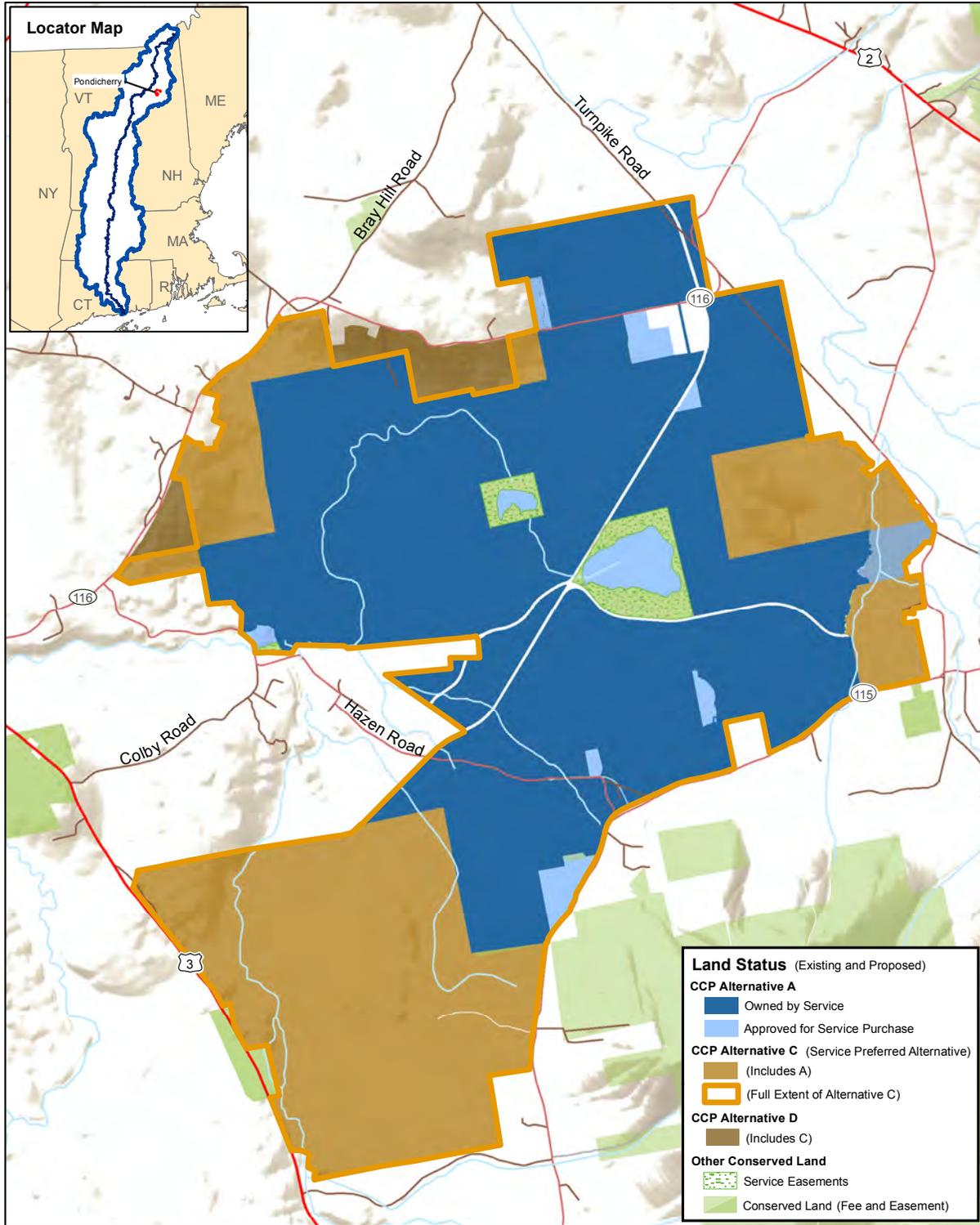
Map 5. Pondicherry Conservation Focus Area
(Whitefield, Jefferson, and Carroll, New Hampshire)



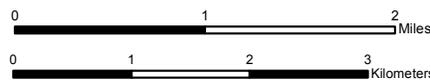
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Pondicherry CFA by CCP Alternatives

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



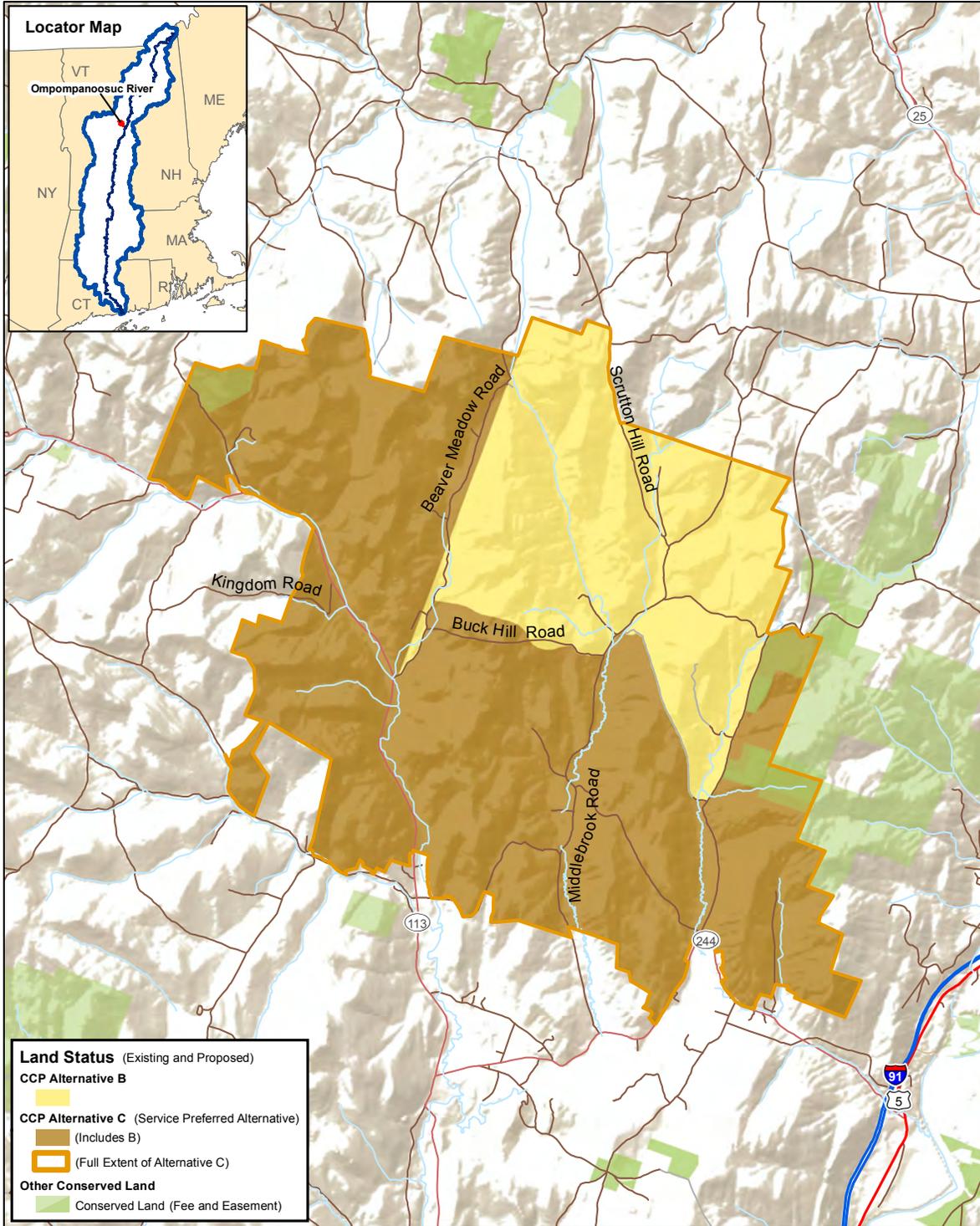
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Map 6. Ompompanoosuc River Conservation Focus Area
(Vershire, Fairlee, and West Fairlee, Vermont)



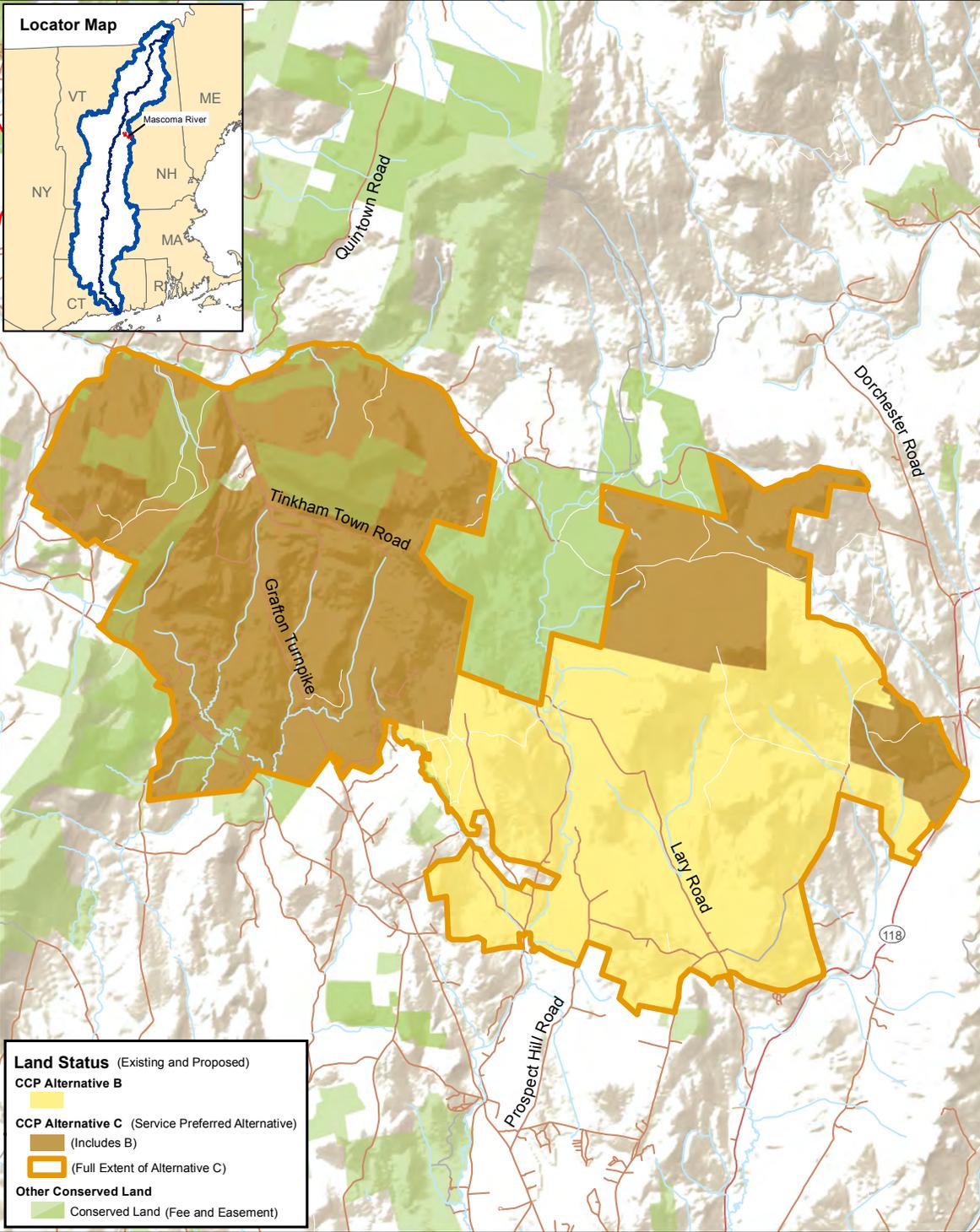
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Ompompanoosuc River CFA by CCP Alternative
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



Map 7. Mascoma River Conservation Focus Area
(Lyme, Dorchester, Hanover, and Canaan, New Hampshire)



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Mascoma River CFA by CCP Alternative
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



Land Status (Existing and Proposed)

CCP Alternative B

CCP Alternative C (Service Preferred Alternative)

(Includes B)

(Full Extent of Alternative C)

Other Conserved Land

Conserved Land (Fee and Easement)

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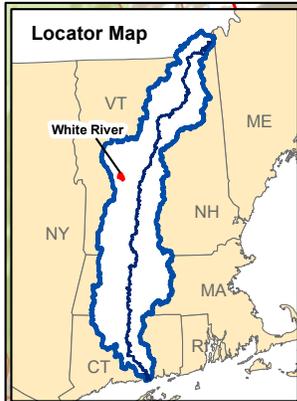
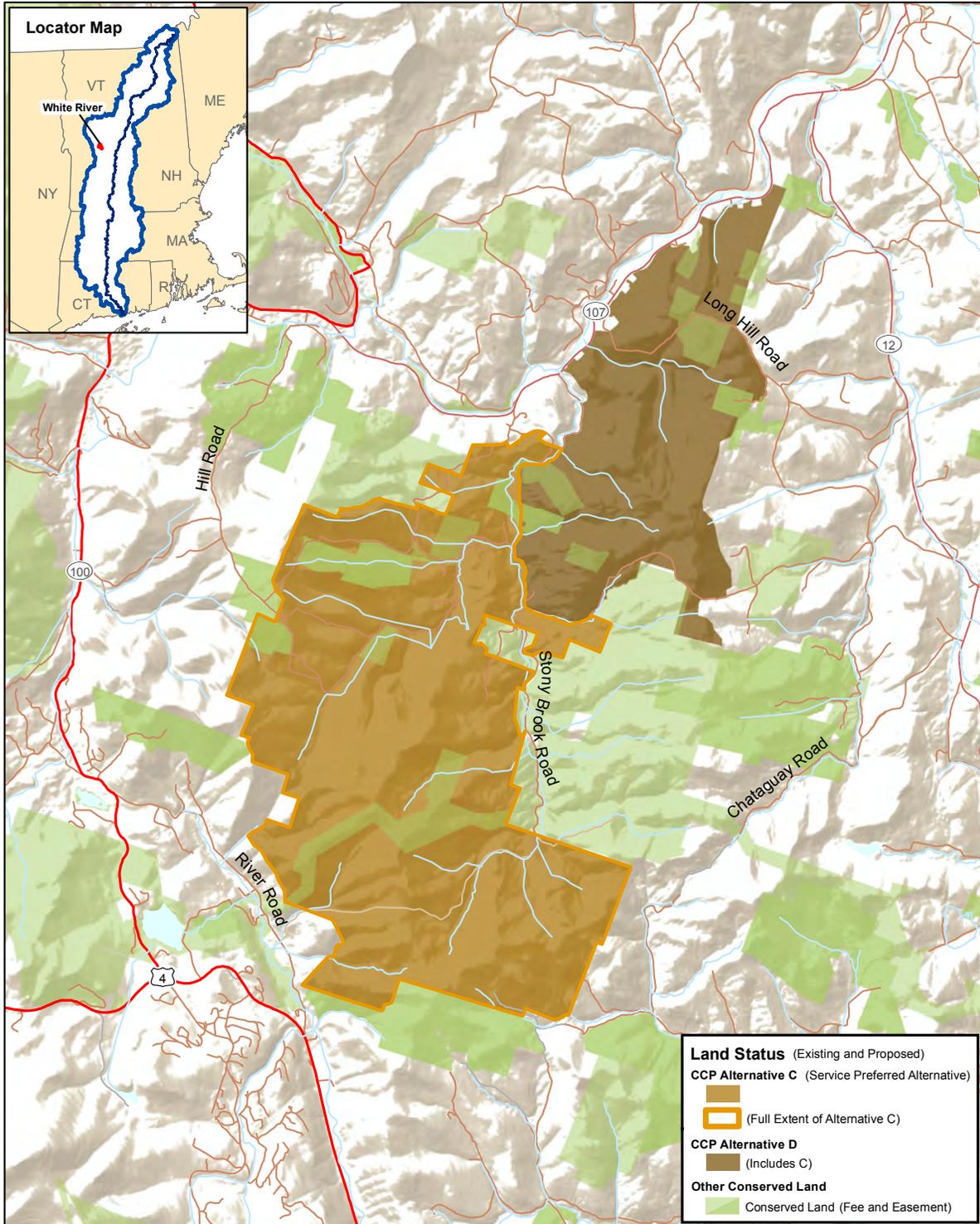
Map 8. White River Conservation Focus Area
(Stockbridge and Killington, Vermont)



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White River CFA by CCP Alternative

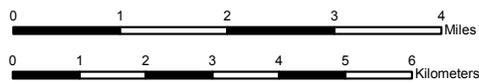
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



Land Status (Existing and Proposed)

- CCP Alternative C** (Service Preferred Alternative)
 - (Full Extent of Alternative C)
- CCP Alternative D** (Includes C)
 -
- Other Conserved Land**
 - Conserved Land (Fee and Easement)

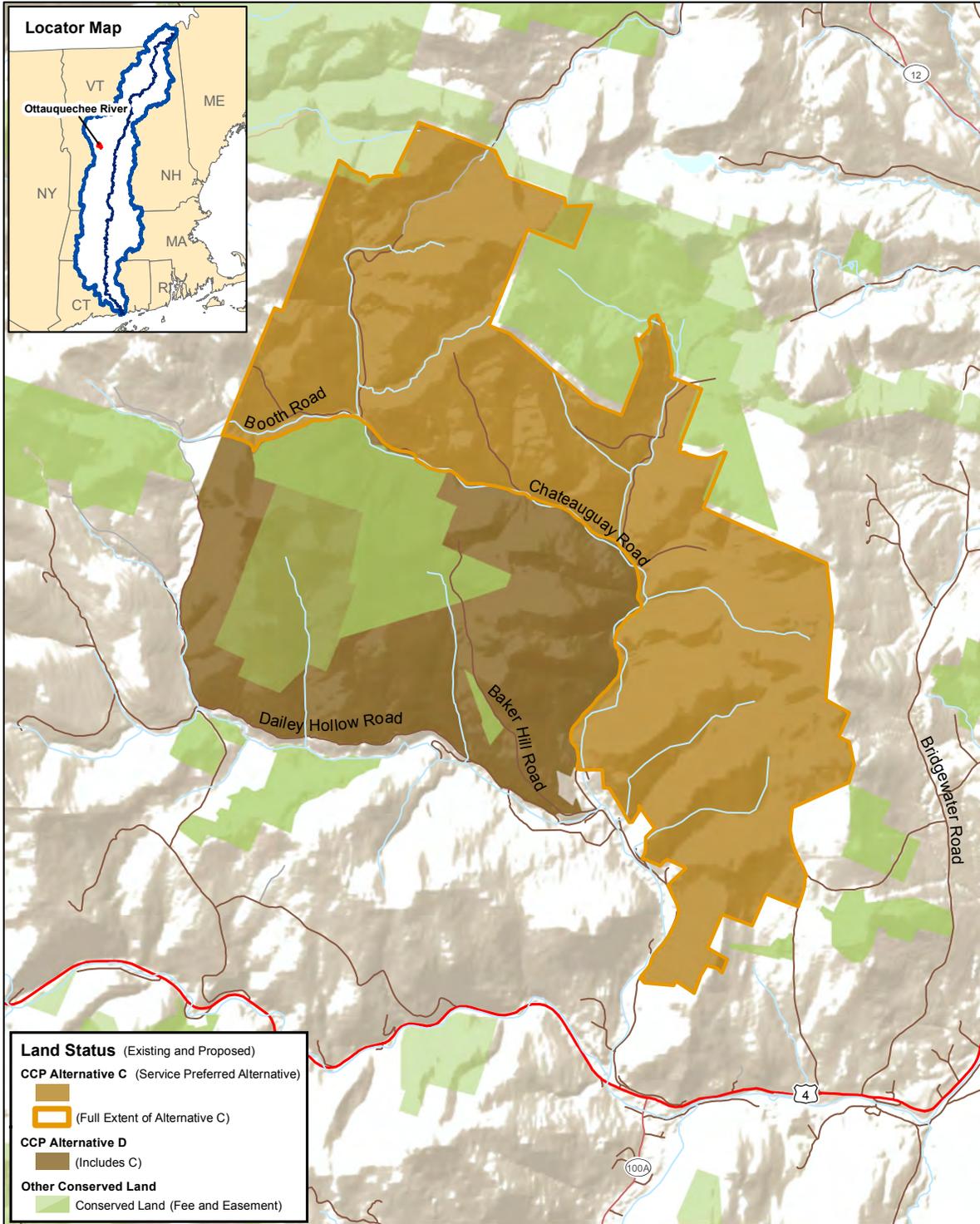
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Map 9. Ottauquechee River Conservation Focus Area
(Bridgewater, Vermont)




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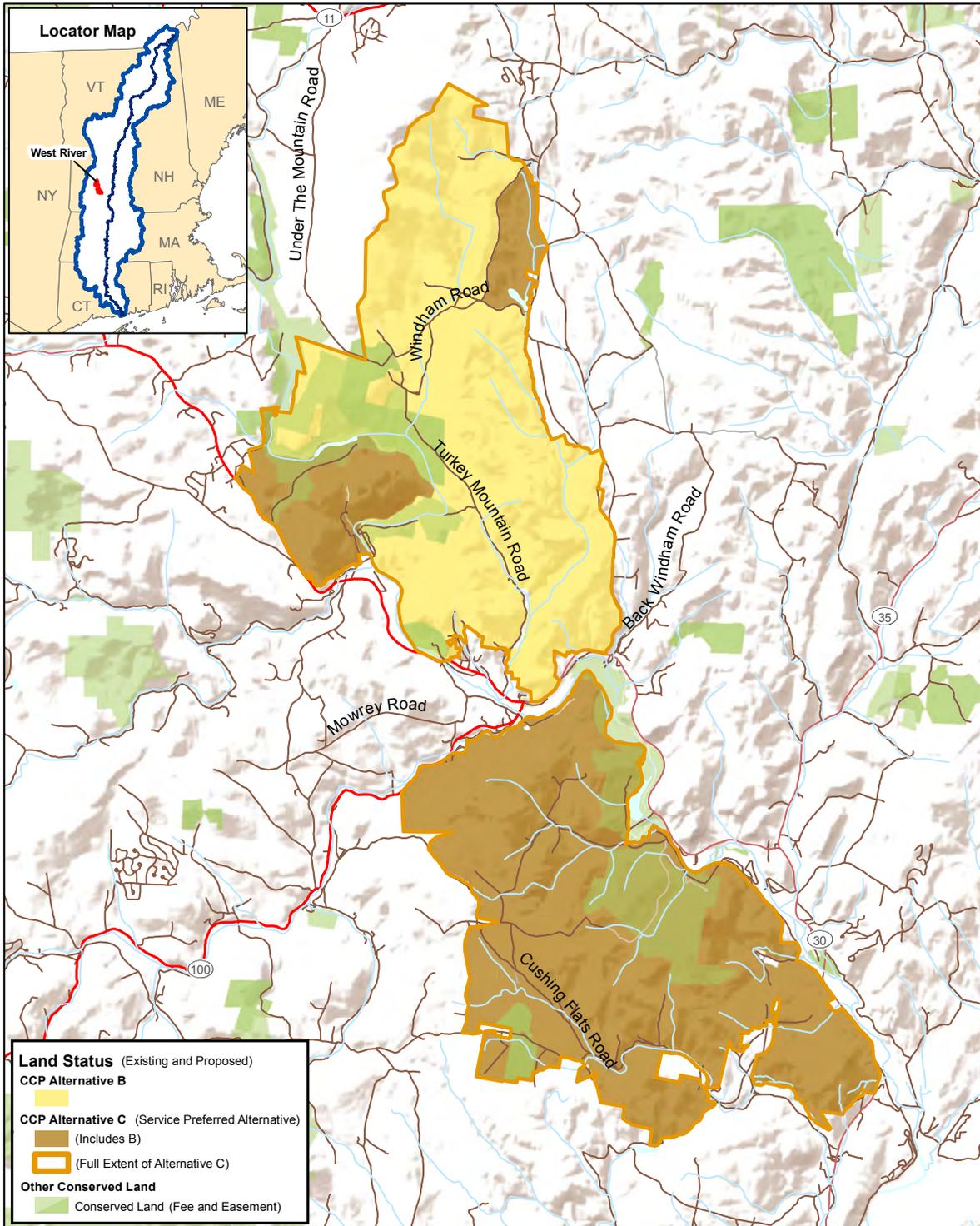
Map 10. West River Conservation Focus Area
(Londonderry, Windham, Jamaica, Townshend, Newfane, and Wardsboro, Vermont)



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

West River CFA by CCP Alternative

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



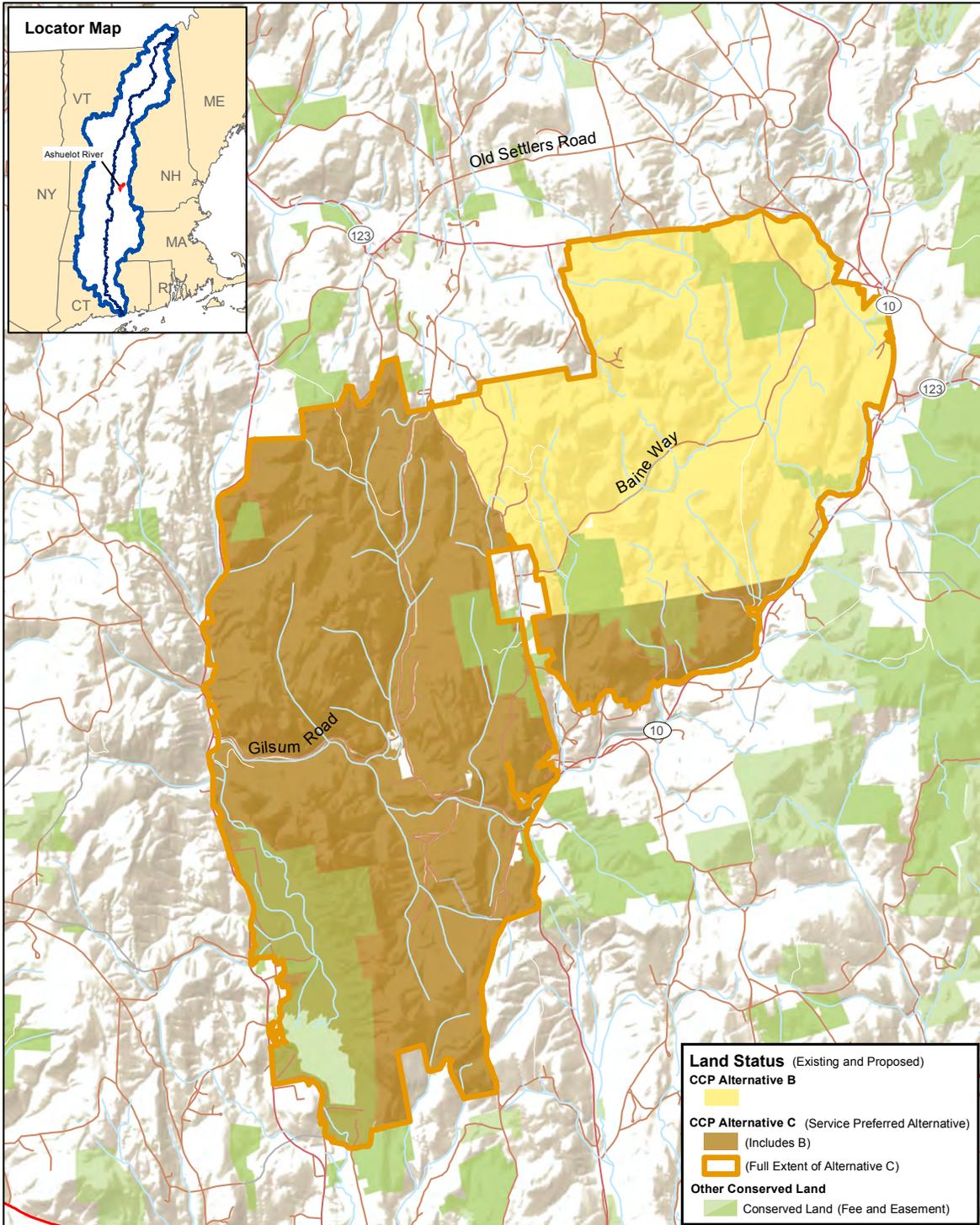
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Map 11. Ashuelot River Conservation Focus Area
(Alstead, Marlow, Surry, and Gilsum, New Hampshire)



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Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



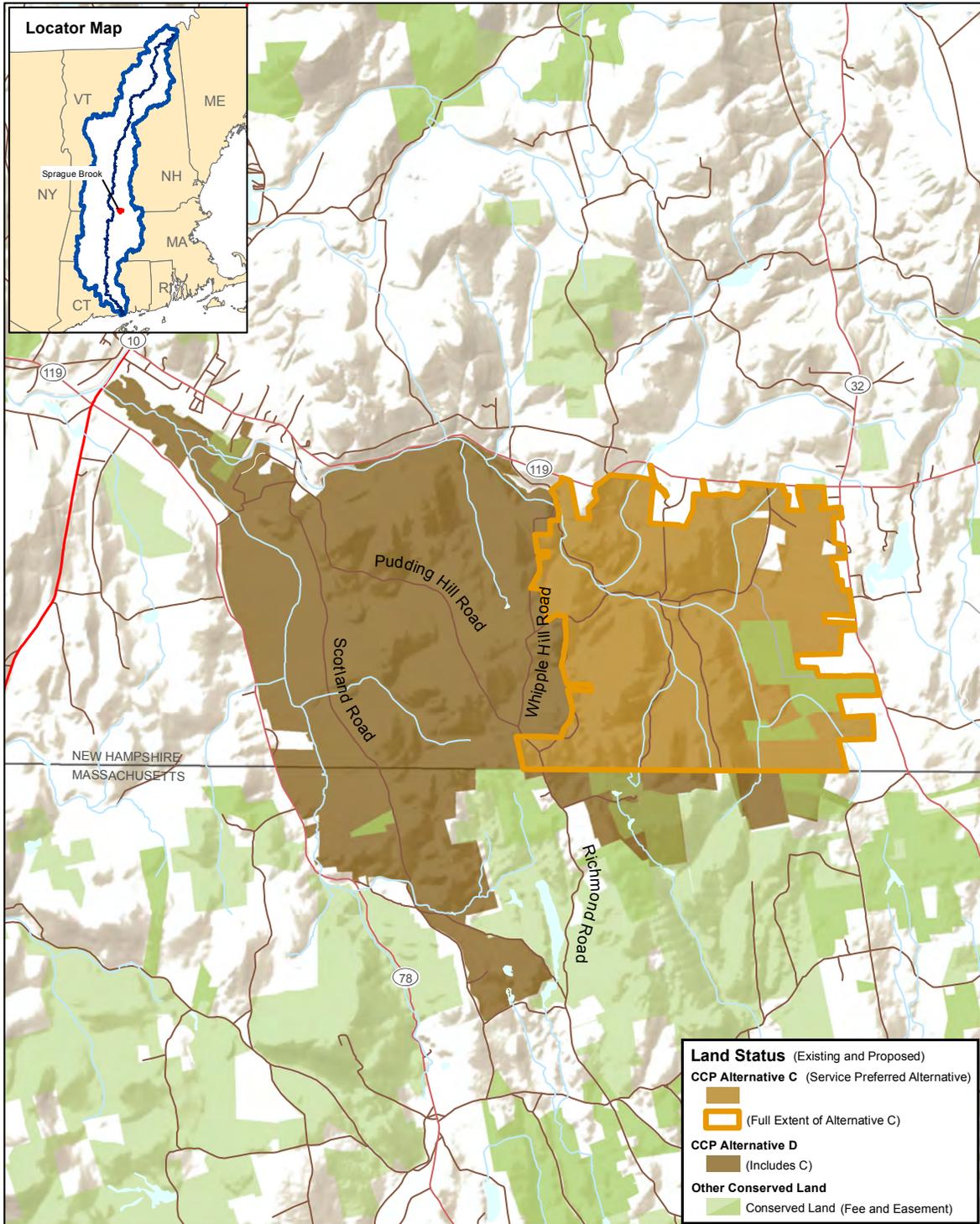
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Map 12. Sprague Brook Conservation Focus Area
(Richmond and Winchester, New Hampshire and Warwick, Massachusetts)



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Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



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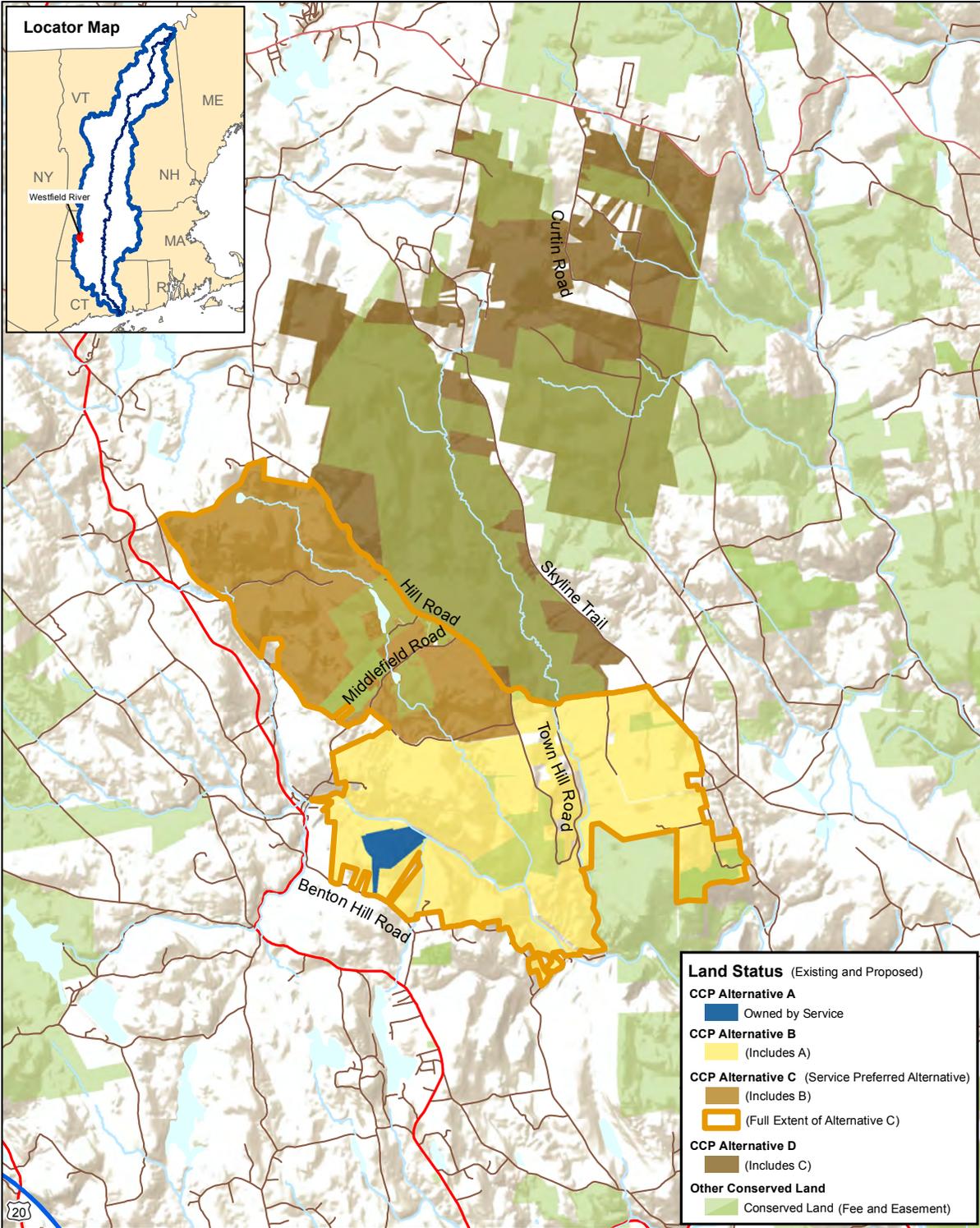
Map 13. Westfield River Conservation Focus Area
(Washington, Middlefield, Becket, Hinsdale, and Peru, Massachusetts)



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Westfield River CFA by CCP Alternative

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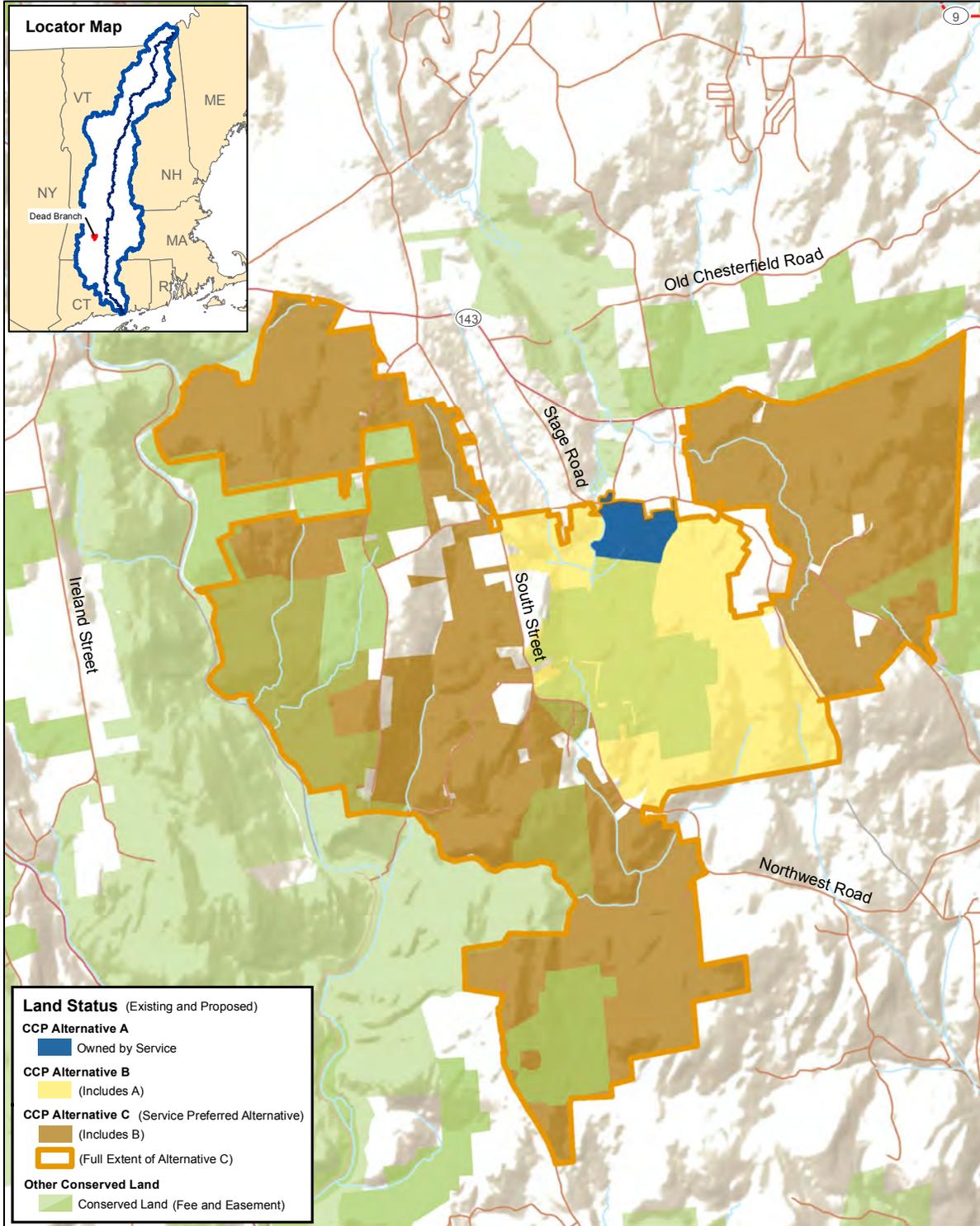


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Map 14. Dead Branch Conservation Focus Area
(Chesterfield, Westhampton, and Huntington, Massachusetts)

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Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

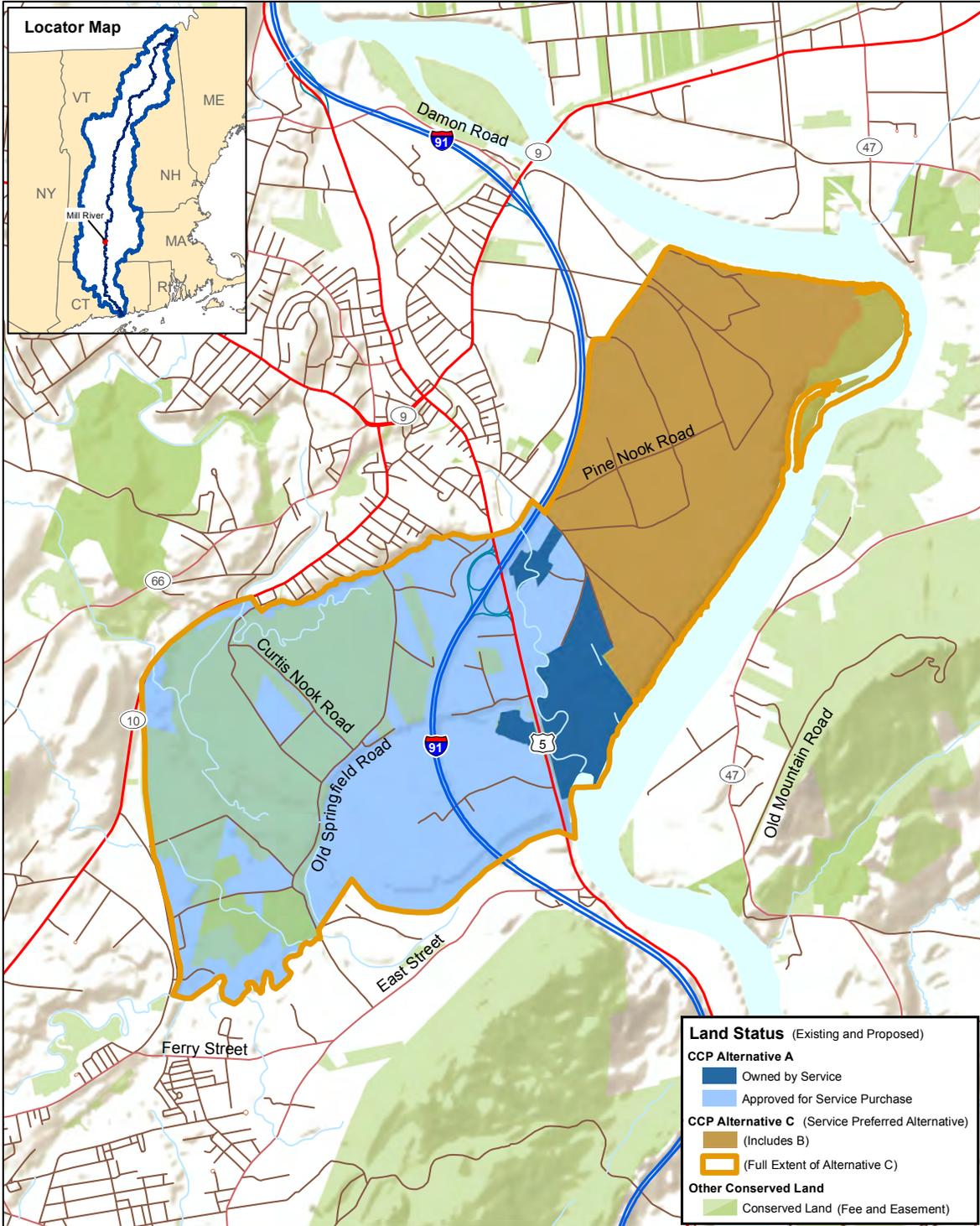


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Map 15. Mill River Conservation Focus Area
(Northampton and Easthampton, Massachusetts)

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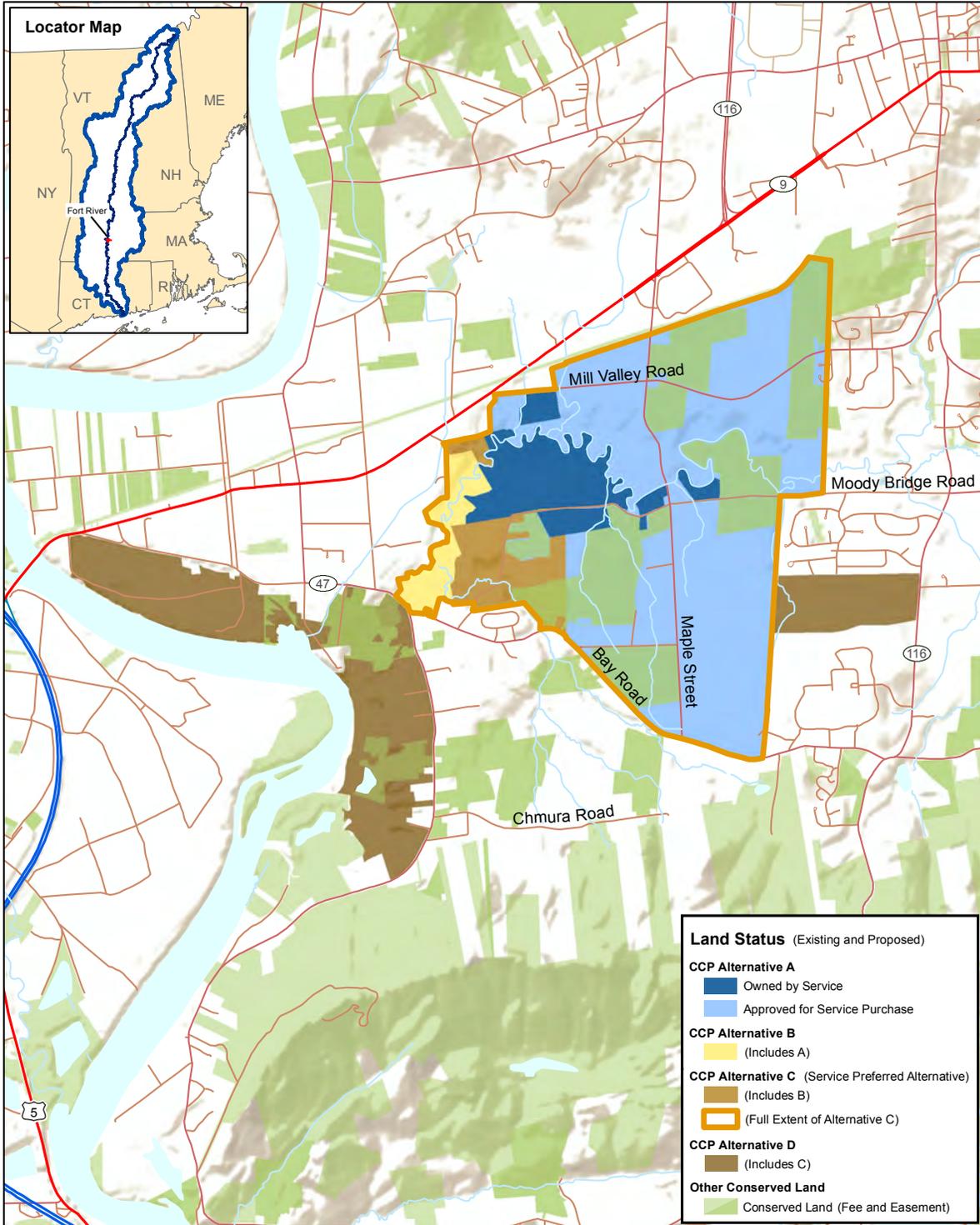


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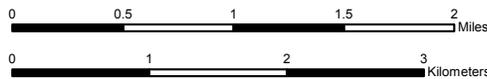


Map 16. Fort River Conservation Focus Area
(Hadley and Amherst, Massachusetts)

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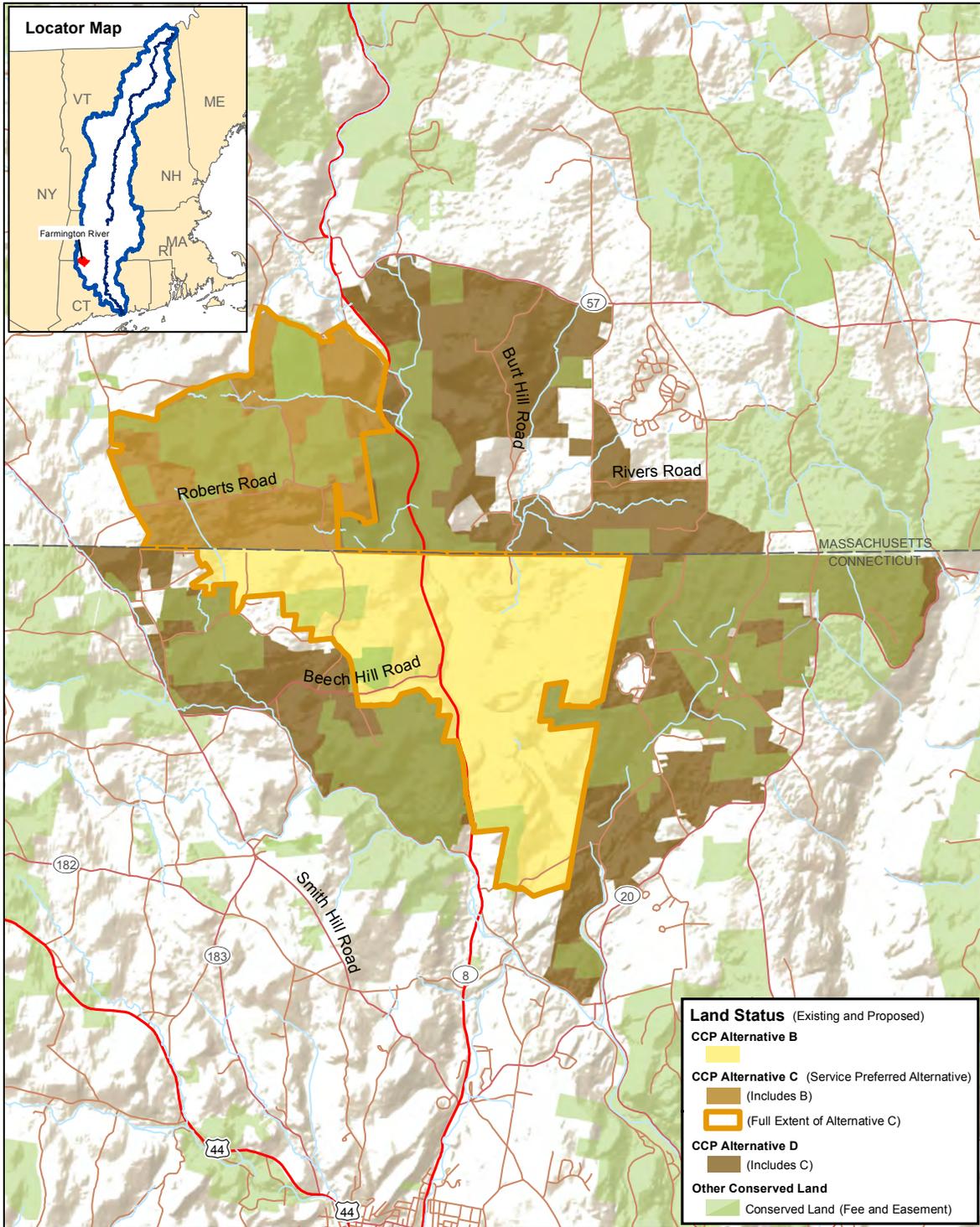
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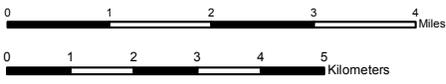
Map 17. Farmington River Conservation Focus Area
(Colebrook and Hartland, Connecticut and Sandisfield and Tolland, Massachusetts)



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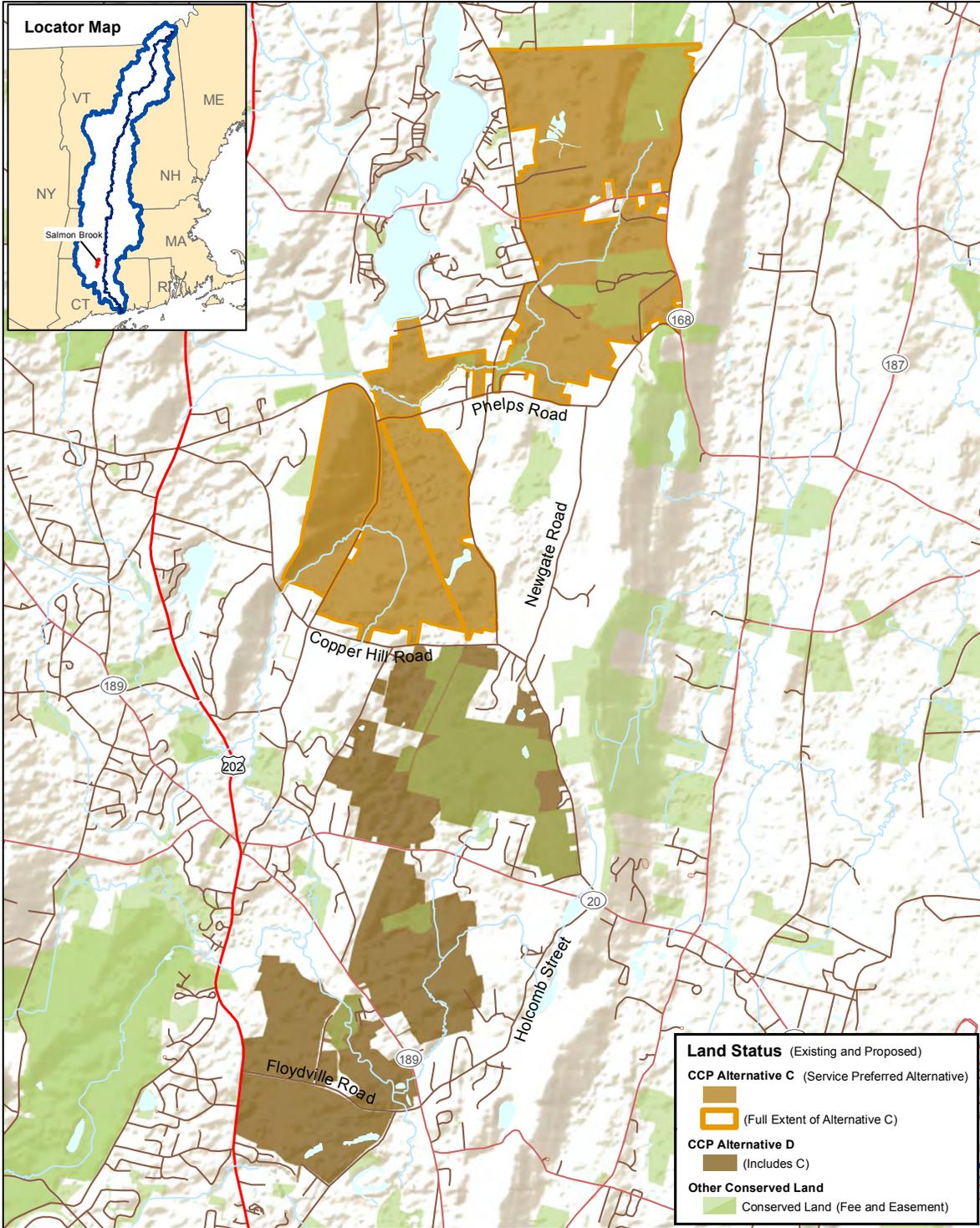
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Map 18. Salmon Brook Conservation Focus Area
(Suffield, Granby, and East Granby, Connecticut)



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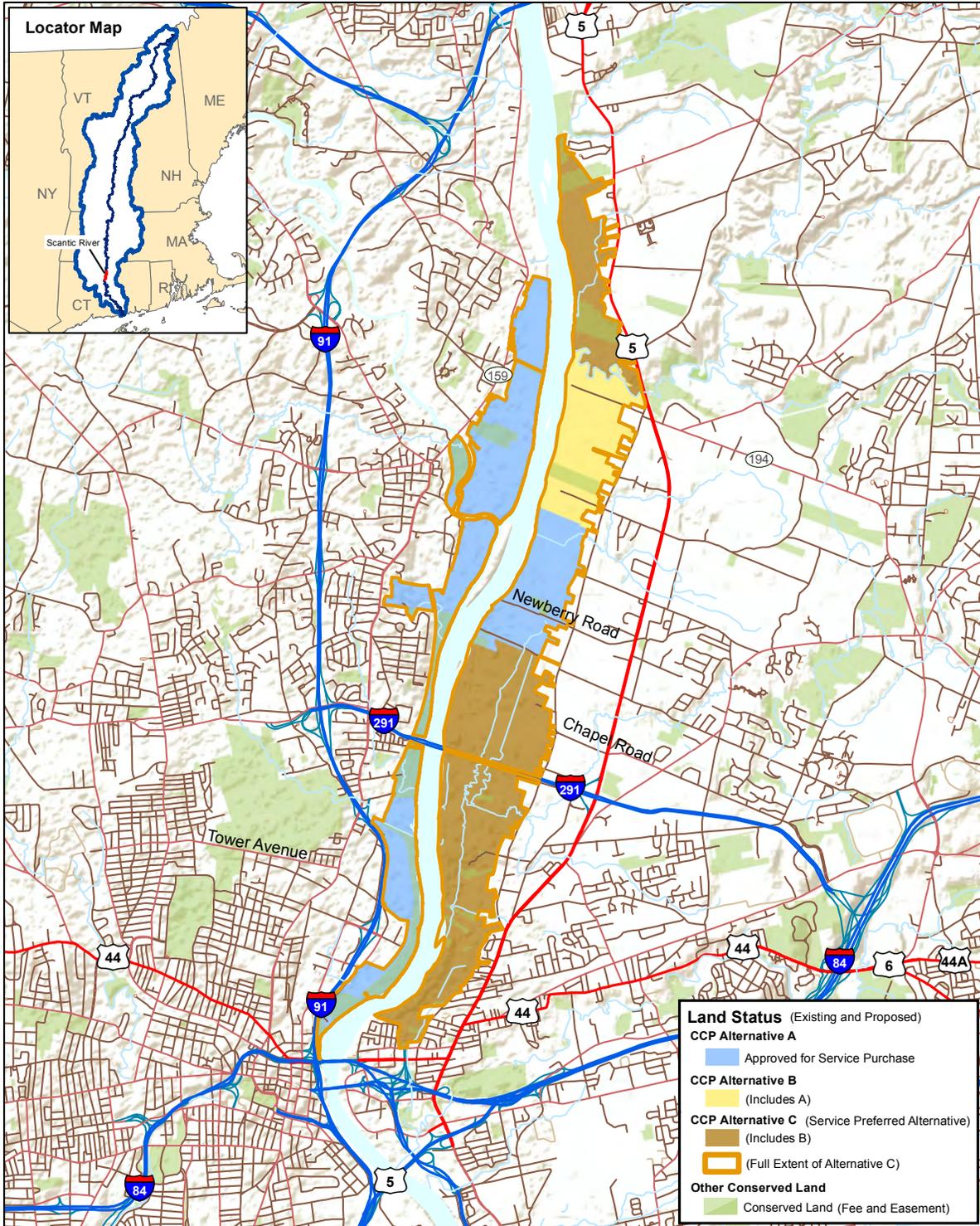
Map 19. Scantic River Conservation Focus Area
(Windsor, East Windsor, South Windsor, Hartford, and East Hartford, Connecticut)



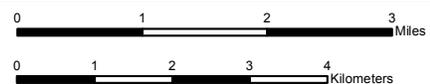

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Scantic River CFA by CCP Alternative



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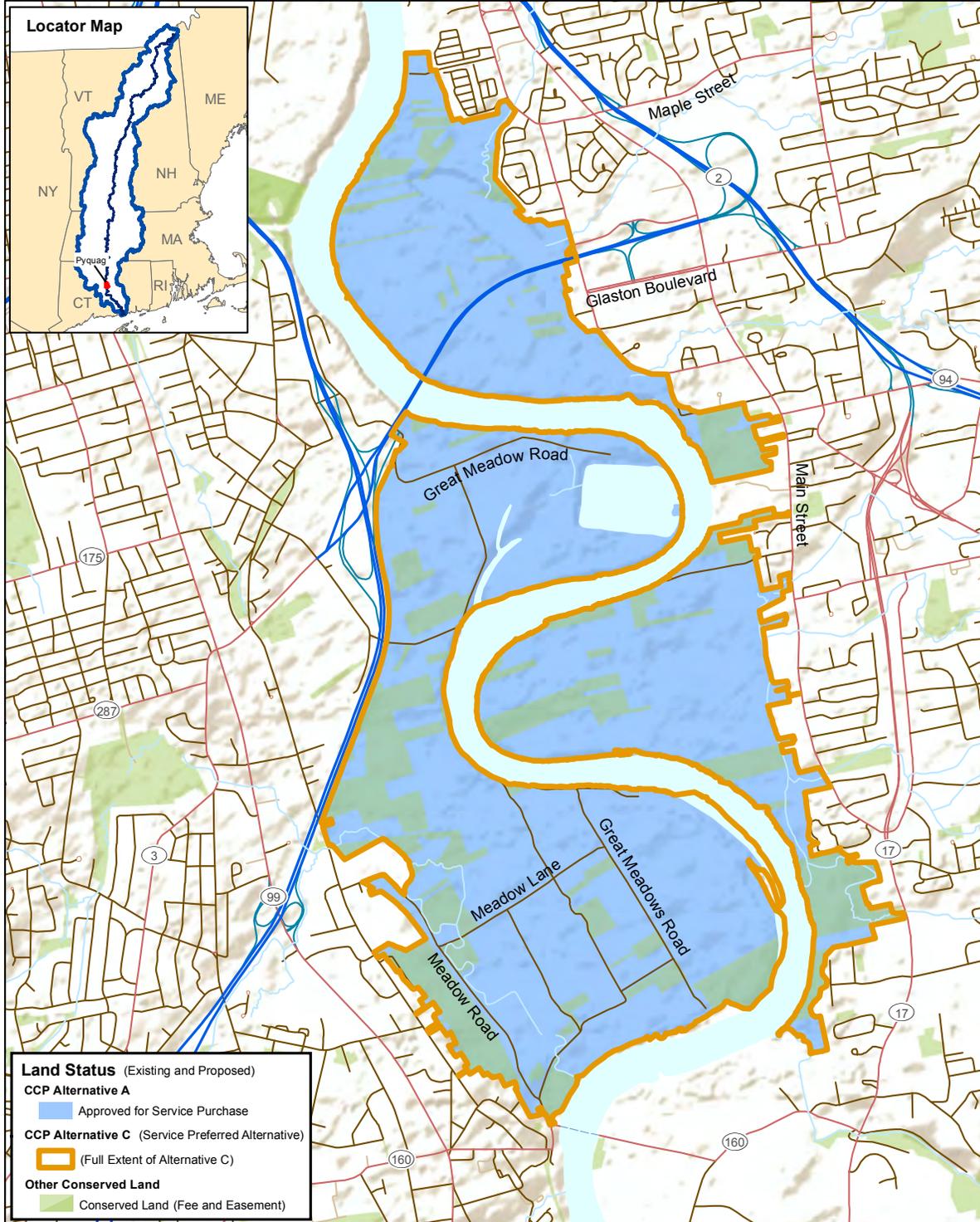
Map 20. Pyquag Conservation Focus Area
(East Hartford, Wethersfield, Glastonbury, and Rocky Hill, Connecticut)



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Pyquag CFA by CCP Alternative

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

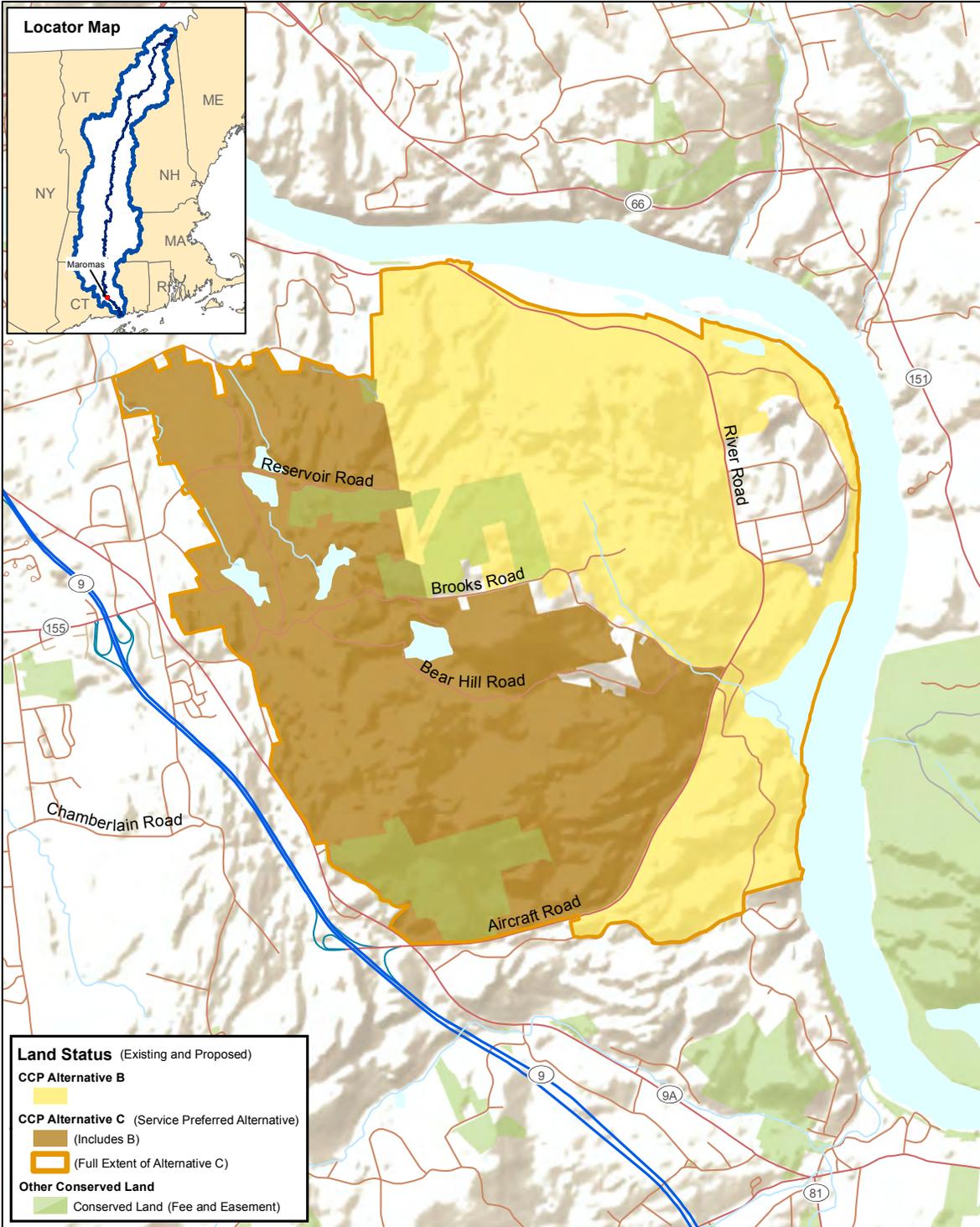


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Map 21. Maromas Conservation Focus Area
(Middletown, Connecticut)

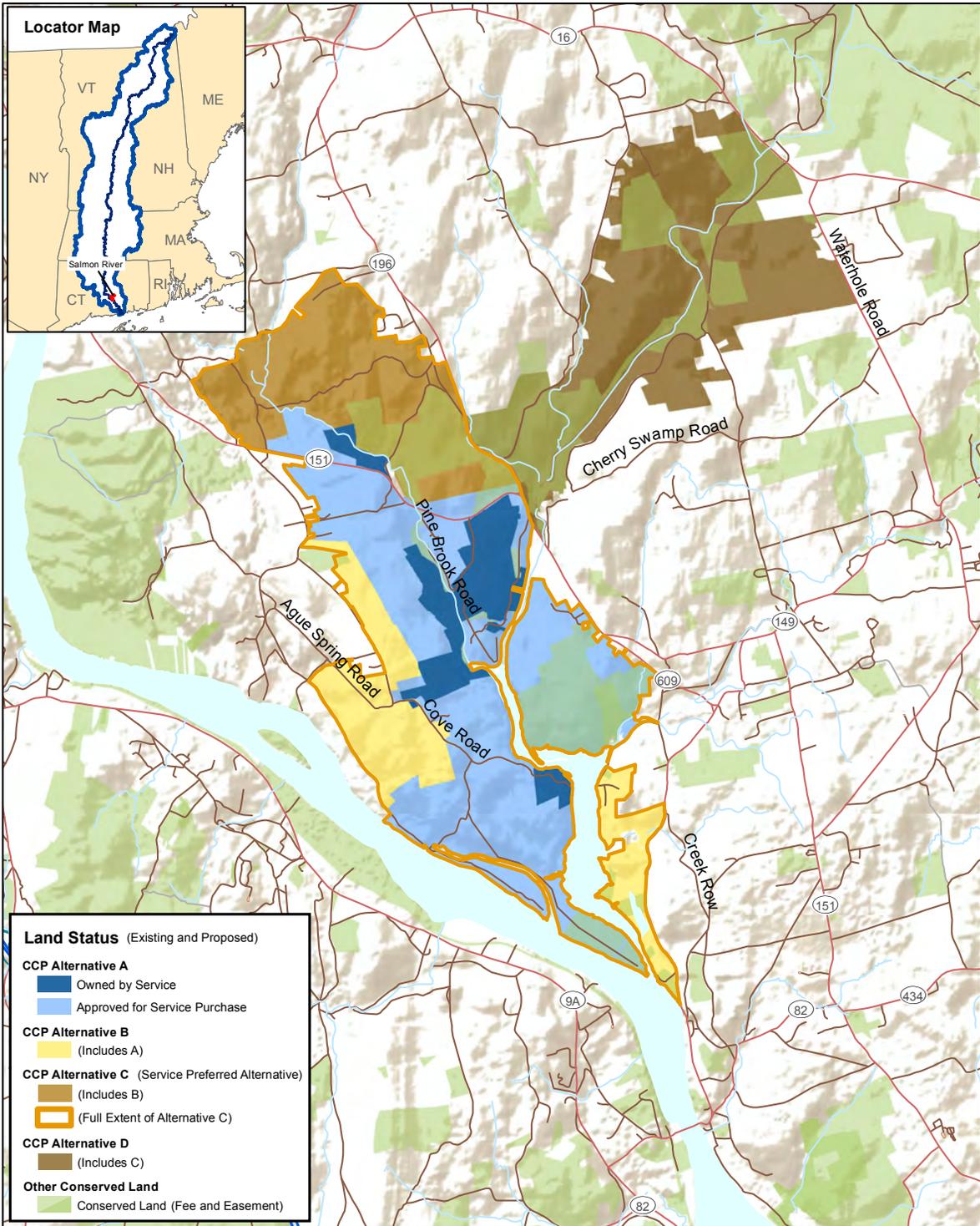
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Maromas CFA by CCP Alternative
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



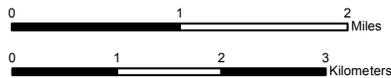
This map is not intended for use as a land survey or as a representation of land for conveyance or tax purposes. The conserved lands layer (2012) was obtained from Trust for Public Land. Other base layers were obtained from ESRI. Refuge lands information provided by the Service. For more information visit the USFWS Northeast Region GIS website at <http://northeast.fws.gov/gis/> Map Print Date: 3/18/2015

Map 22. Salmon River Conservation Focus Area
(East Hampton, Haddam and East Haddam, Connecticut)

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Salmon River CFA by CCP Alternative
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

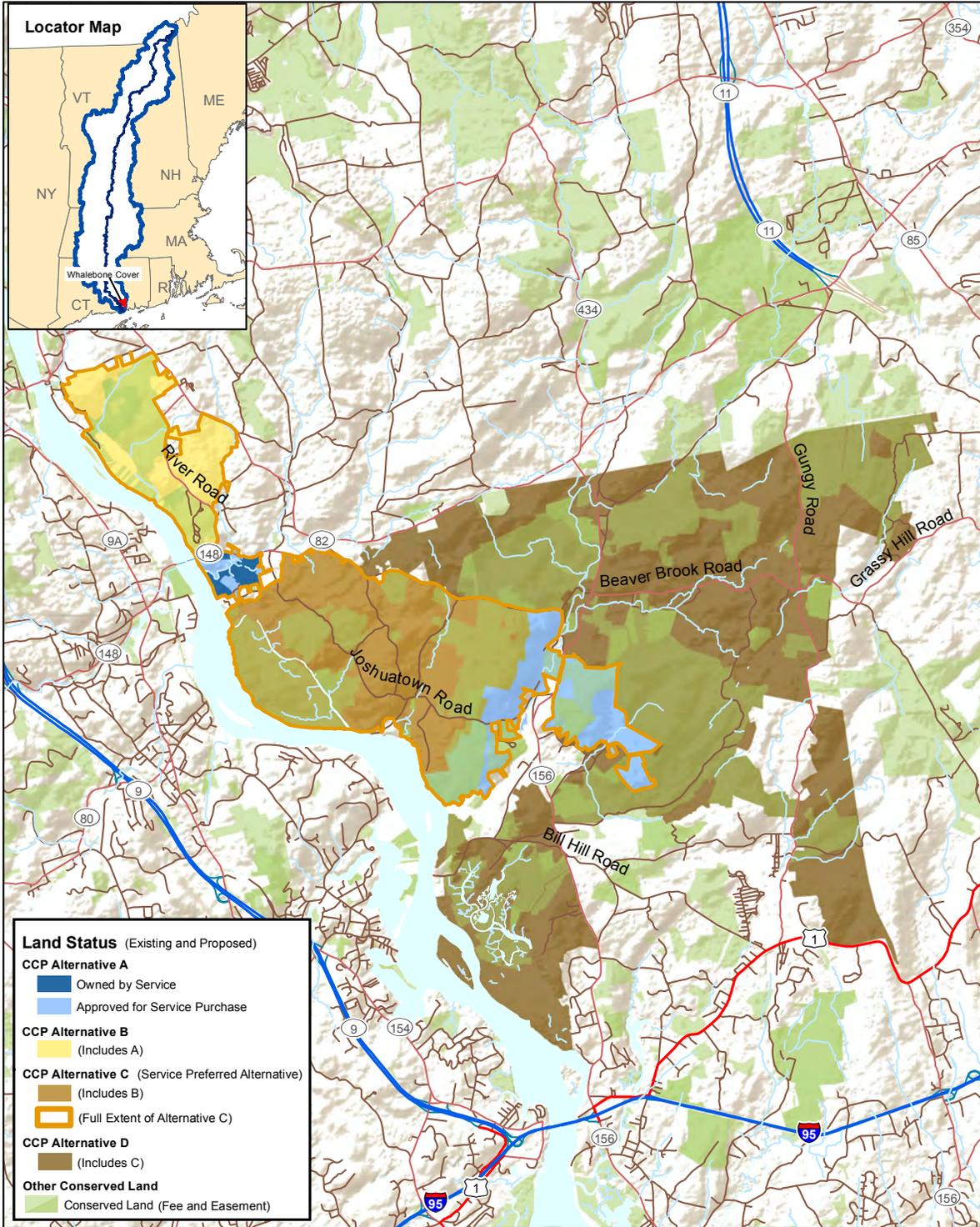


This map is not intended for use as a land survey or as a representation of land for conveyance or tax purposes. The conserved lands layer (2012) was obtained from Trust for Public Land. Other base layers were obtained from ESRI. Refuge lands information provided by the Service. For more information visit the USFWS Northeast Region GIS website at <http://northeast.fws.gov/gis/> Map Print Date: 3/18/2015

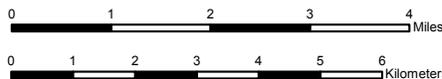


Map 23. Whalebone Cove Conservation Focus Area
(East Haddam and Lyme, Connecticut)

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service *Whalebone Cove CFA by CCP Alternative*
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



This map is not intended for use as a land survey or as a representation of land for conveyance or tax purposes. The conserved lands layer (2012) was obtained from Trust for Public Land. Other base layers were obtained from ESRI. Refuge lands information provided by the Service. For more information visit the USFWS Northeast Region GIS website at <http://northeast.fws.gov/gis/> Map Print Date: 3/18/2015



Map 24. Quonotuck Conservation Focus Area
 (Approximates 100-year Floodplain Along Connecticut River Main Stem and the Lower Reaches of Major Tributaries)



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Connecticut River and Major Tributaries

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



This map is designed for refuge management. It is not intended for use as a land survey or as a representation of land for conveyance or tax purposes. For more information visit the USFWS Northeast Region GIS website at <http://northeast.fws.gov/gis/>
 Map Print Date: 4/22/2015



Environmental Consequences

Chapter 5 in the draft CCP/EIS provides a detailed analysis of the impacts of each of the four alternatives on the physical, biological, and socioeconomic environment. In that chapter, we evaluate both the beneficial and adverse effects from implementing the four alternatives. Table 3 below summarizes and compares the predicted environmental impacts by alternative. In the table, we define short-term as within the next 15 years and long-term as beyond the next 15 years.

Table 3. Comparison of Anticipated Environmental Impacts by Alternative

Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C <i>Service Preferred</i>	Alternative D
Impacts to Regional and Local Economies			
Socioeconomic impacts that do not vary between the alternatives: We would continue to pay refuge revenue sharing payments to municipalities where refuge lands are located. Regardless of alternative, refuge jobs, refuge expenditures, and visitor spending would negligibly contribute to respective local and regional economies.			
<i>Refuge purchase of goods and services and refuge personnel salary spending</i>			
We would continue to maintain our current level of staffing and, therefore, we would expect personnel salary spending to continue at current levels.	Same as A.	Compared to alternatives A and B, we predict an increase in annual spending. Over the long term, we would potentially add up to 16 new staff (dependent upon funding and regional priorities).	Same as D.
<i>Refuge visitation and visitor spending in the local economy</i>			
<p><i>Over short term:</i> Visitation/visitor spending would continue at current levels at existing divisions and units and contribute negligibly to the local economy.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> As we acquire additional lands in the southern portion of the watershed, visitation/visitor spending is expected to increase in those areas.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> As new lands are acquired and additional trails are built, we expect visitation/visitor spending to increase about 10 percent above current levels.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> No major increases predicted.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Compared to alternative B, we expect a slightly greater increase in visitation/visitor spending (about 13 percent above current levels) as additional refuge lands are acquired. Overall, we still predict that visitation/visitor spending would be a negligible contribution to local and regional economies.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> No major increases predicted.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Decrease in visitation/visitor spending at Nulhegan Basin Division from eliminating snowmobiling, but impact on the local economy would be minor as many other snowmobile trails exist nearby.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> We anticipate that non-snowmobile visitation/visitor spending would increase, but less than under alternatives B and C because we plan less public use infrastructure.</p>
<i>Economic contributions from habitat management</i>			
<p><i>Over short term:</i> Our annual habitat management would continue to generate small amounts of timber products and hay and contribute negligibly to local and regional economies.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> No major increases predicted.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> As we acquire new refuge lands, we would actively manage more acres of grassland, forest, and shrublands on the refuge, generating a negligible to minor amount of timber products and hay for the local economy.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> We would actively manage more habitat than under alternative B (about 45% more), but the local and regional economic impact would still be negligible to minor.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> We expect this alternative would have the smallest economic contribution from habitat management because we would not actively manage habitats except in rare circumstances.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> No major increases predicted.</p>

Continuation of Table 3. Comparison of Anticipated Environmental Impacts by Alternative

Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C <i>Service Preferred</i>	Alternative D
Impacts to Regional Air Quality			
<p>Air quality impacts that do not vary between the alternatives: None of the alternatives would violate EPA standards; all would comply with the Clean Air Act. All alternatives would have short- and long-term negligible adverse impacts (e.g., emissions from vehicles, equipment, and buildings) and negligible to minor long-term beneficial impacts (e.g., preventing further development, sequestering carbon, and filtering air from permanently protecting native habitats) on regional air quality. We would reduce refuge emissions by replacing or upgrading equipment, vehicles, and facilities with more efficient models and by using alternative energy sources.</p>			
<p><i>Over short term:</i> Negligible adverse impacts from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintaining existing refuge administrative and public use facilities. Emissions from refuge facilities and from refuge staff and visitor vehicles, including snowmobiles. Emissions from equipment used in existing habitat management projects. <p><i>Over long-term:</i> Negligible long-term beneficial impacts to regional air quality from protecting up to 97,830 acres of habitat from further development.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to alternative A, similar long-term beneficial impacts from protecting a similar amount of habitat (up to 96,703 acres), but also slightly greater potential for adverse, short-term impacts from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emissions from managing greater amounts of habitat Emissions and fugitive dust from constructing new trails in each CFA. An increase in refuge visitation, and related increase in vehicle emissions. 	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to other alternatives, greatest potential for adverse, short-term impacts from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emissions from greatest amount of habitat management. Emissions and fugitive dust from constructing new trails in more CFAs. Largest increase in refuge visitation and related increase in vehicle emissions. <p>Compared to alternatives A and B, greater potential for benefits from protecting up to 197,296 acres.</p>	<p><i>Over short-term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long-term:</i> Compared to other alternatives, greatest potential to benefit regional air quality from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protecting the greatest amount of habitat (235,782 acres) and discontinuing active management. Allowing the least amount of motorized use (e.g., eliminating snowmobiling, reducing number of roads). Proposing few new construction projects (e.g., new hiking trails and other public use infrastructure).
Impacts to Upland Habitats, Vegetation, and Soils on Refuge Lands			
<p>Upland habitats, vegetation, and soil impacts that do not vary between the alternatives: Under all alternatives, we predict long-term benefits from protecting, managing, and/or restoring upland habitats on the refuge. There is the potential for short-term adverse impacts to habitats and soils from habitat and invasive plant management, new trail construction, and refuge visitation; however, we would minimize these impacts by using best management practices and encouraging visitors to stay on trails to limit potential to trample native vegetation and for soil erosion and compaction.</p>			
<p><i>Over short term:</i> Negligible adverse short-term, localized impacts from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visitor use impacts (e.g., vegetation trampling, soil compaction and erosion alongside trails). Road and trail maintenance. Invasive plant control (e.g., herbicide application). Continuing to manage habitat. <p><i>Over long term:</i> Negligible to minor long-term beneficial impacts from permanently protecting habitat.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Similar to alternative A, except slightly greater benefits from protecting larger blocks of habitat. These benefits are slightly diminished from actively managing greater amounts of habitat, constructing new trails on each CFA, and an increase in refuge visitation.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Similar to alternative B, except greater benefits from protecting more acres of habitat. These benefits are slightly diminished from actively managing more acres of habitat, constructing more new trails, and the largest projected increase in refuge visitation.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Compared to other alternatives slightly fewer impacts because of little to no active habitat management.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to other alternatives, greatest potential benefits from protecting the most habitat and allowing natural processes to occur with no to limited active management. Also, we would construct less developed trails and eliminate snowmobiling trails.</p>

Continuation of Table 3. Comparison of Anticipated Environmental Impacts by Alternative

Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C <i>Service Preferred</i>	Alternative D
Impacts to Wetlands, Hydrology, and Water Quality on Refuge Lands			
<p>Freshwater wetland impacts that do not vary between the alternatives: None of alternatives would have a significant adverse effect on any freshwater wetland habitats. Under all alternatives, we predict negligible to minor long-term benefits from protecting and/or restoring wetland habitats on the refuge. We would also use best management practices to minimize adverse impacts to wetlands, hydrology, and water quality from new construction (e.g., building outside of wetland areas), trail and road maintenance, invasive species control (e.g. only using approved herbicides and/or using other non-chemical controls, preventing leaks and spills), and habitat management (e.g., buffering wetlands and riparian areas). The majority of habitat management will occur away from freshwater wetlands, unless it is a restoration project. We would also encourage visitors to stay on trails to reduce impacts to wetland vegetation and wildlife.</p>			
<p><i>Over short term:</i> Negligible adverse, short-term, localized impacts from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitor use. • Road and trail maintenance. • Invasive plant control. • Continuing to manage habitats following best management practices. <p><i>Over long term:</i> Negligible to minor long-term beneficial impacts to wetlands from permanently protecting habitat.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Similar to alternative A, except we anticipate slightly greater benefits from protecting larger blocks of habitat. These benefits are slightly diminished from actively managing greater amounts of habitat, constructing new trails on each CFA, and an increase in refuge visitation.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared alternatives A and B, greater benefits wetlands by permanently protecting more habitat. These benefits are slightly diminished from actively managing more acres of habitat, constructing more new trails, and the largest projected increase in refuge visitation.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to other alternatives, except slightly less impacts to wetlands because of very little to no active habitat management.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to other alternatives, the greatest potential to benefit wetlands from protecting the greatest amount of habitat with no to limited active management. Also, we would construct less developed trails and eliminate snowmobiling trails.</p>
Impacts to Native Wildlife and Plants on Refuge Lands			
<p>Native wildlife and plant impacts that do not vary between the alternatives: All alternatives would permanently protect habitat for a wide-range of species across the watershed. There is the potential for negligible, short-term impacts to wildlife and rare plants species from habitat management, public use, and facilities maintenance and construction. However, we will minimize these impacts by using best management practices and encouraging visitors to stay on trails and closing sensitive areas to public use. Any active habitat management would be designed to enhance refuge habitats, and therefore, is expected to have long-term benefits to certain focal species. We would also continue to work with partners to conserve aquatic species in the Connecticut River main stem and its tributaries.</p>			
<p><i>Over short term:</i> Negligible adverse, short-term impacts from visitor use and continuing existing active habitat management.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Negligible to minor long-term beneficial impacts from permanently protecting up to additional acres of habitat. Negligible to minor localized benefits to species requiring actively management habitats.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Similar to alternative A, except we anticipate slightly greater benefits from protecting larger blocks of habitat. The alternative with the second greatest benefit to species that require actively managed habitats, such as forests, grasslands, and shrublands. Compared to alternative A, slightly greater potential for adverse, short-term impacts from constructing hiking trails on each CFA and increased visitation.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to B, greater potential benefits from protecting more acres of habitat. Also, a greater benefits to species that require actively managed habitat and species that require large, contiguous, relatively undisturbed blocks of mature forest.</p> <p>Compared to alternative B, slightly greater potential for adverse, short-term impacts from constructing more hiking trails and the greatest increase in visitation.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to other alternatives, except no active habitat management, except in rare circumstances. Thus resulting in the greatest adverse impact to species that require actively managed habitats.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to the other alternatives, the greatest benefit to species that require large, contiguous, relatively undisturbed blocks of mature forest. Also, the fewest impacts from public use from eliminating snowmobiling and creating less developed public use facilities.</p>

Continuation of Table 3. Comparison of Anticipated Environmental Impacts by Alternative

Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C <i>Service Preferred</i>	Alternative D
Impacts to Federally Listed Threatened and Endangered Species on Refuge Lands			
<p>Listed species impacts that do not vary between the alternatives: None of the activities proposed in any of the alternatives would adversely affect federally listed or candidate species. We would continue to consult with the Service’s Endangered Species staff under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. Under all alternatives, we will continue to actively protect federally listed species that occur on existing refuge lands and work with partners to help conserve listed species throughout the watershed. We will also work with the Connecticut River Coordinator’s office to conserve federally listed aquatic species that occur in the Connecticut River main stem and its tributaries.</p>			
<p>Same as those described under impacts that do not vary among the alternatives.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Same as A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Minor beneficial impacts to New England cottontail (Federal candidate species) from actively managing approximately 775 acres of shrubland habitat.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Same as A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Same as B.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Same as A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Same as A.</p>
Impacts to Archaeological, Historical, and Cultural Resources of Refuge Lands			
<p>Archaeological, historical, and cultural resource impacts that do not vary between the alternatives: We expect negligible to minor benefits to cultural resources from continuing to consult with Service archaeologists and state and Tribal historic preservation officers prior to ground-disturbing activities. Also, we would protect any known sites or resources on the refuge and incorporate information on these resources into refuge interpretive and educational programs.</p>			
<p>Same as the impacts that do not vary by alternative.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Compared to alternative A, greater benefits because we would increase identification and protection through more extensive survey work.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> No additional major changes.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Same as B.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Same as B.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to alternatives B and C, except less potential to disturb these resources because of fewer ground-disturbing activities.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> No additional major changes.</p>
Impacts to Public Use and Access on Refuge Lands			
<p>Public use and access impacts that do not vary between the alternatives: Under all alternatives, we would continue to provide opportunities for the six, priority, wildlife-dependent public uses where compatible (wildlife observation and photography, environmental education, interpretation, fishing, and hunting). Some sensitive areas of the refuge would be closed to public uses to protect wildlife and cultural resources.</p>			
<p><i>Over short term:</i> Negligible beneficial impacts from permanently protecting public access on refuge lands. We would continue to offer existing public uses and access on existing refuge divisions and units. We would also allow these uses on newly acquired lands, if found compatible. Based on current low levels of visitation, we anticipate negligible short-term, adverse impacts from conflicts between user groups.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> No additional major changes.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to alternative A, slightly greater potential for conflicts between user groups as visitation increases (by approximately 10 percent). We expect slightly greater benefits to visitors from constructing hiking trails on each CFA. In particular, we expect benefits to individuals requiring ADA-accessible facilities.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Similar to A.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to alternative B, slightly greater potential for conflicts between user groups as visitation increases (by approximately 13 percent). We expect slightly greater benefits to visitors from securing public access on more acres and constructing more trails. In particular, we expect benefits to individuals requiring ADA-accessible facilities.</p>	<p><i>Over short term:</i> Compared to other alternatives, greater benefits to users who prefer a backcountry experience, but adverse impacts to users who prefer more developed trails/facilities. Adverse impacts to snowmobilers from closing refuge snowmobile trails; however, we expect these impacts to be minor as extensive snowmobile trails are available on other ownerships nearby.</p> <p><i>Over long term:</i> Compared to other alternatives, slightly less potential for conflicts between snowmobilers and other users.</p>

Next Steps in the Planning Process



USFWS

Brook trout

After the 90-day public review and comment period closes, we will compile and summarize the comments we received. In response, we may update or modify the alternatives, the impact analysis, or other features when we prepare a final CCP/EIS. The final CCP/EIS will include an appendix with our response to the public comments we received.

We will then distribute the final CCP/EIS for a 30-day review period. The availability of the final CCP/EIS will be published in the *Federal Register* (<https://www.federalregister.gov/>). This review period gives those who commented on the draft the opportunity to see how their comments were addressed. It also allows other agencies to confirm that our actions would be in compliance with all applicable laws and regulations.

Once that final review period closes, we will share all public comments, our responses, and our final recommendation with our Regional Director. The Regional Director's decision will be documented in a "Record of Decision" (ROD), which will be published in the *Federal Register* and the final CCP.

The final selected alternative will become the primary component of a stand-alone final CCP. Implementation of the CCP can start once the ROD is published. Management activities and projects will be implemented as funds become available. The final plan does not constitute a commitment for funding or staffing, and future budgets could influence priorities and scheduling.

How to Submit Comments

Public comments are a vital part of the planning process and help us shape and improve our final plan for the refuge. You can submit comments by any of the following methods. We treat all comments the same, regardless of method used (e.g., oral comments do not hold more weight than written comments).

1. Electronically via the Federal eRulemaking Portal at <http://www.regulations.gov>. In the "Search" box, enter the project docket number (FWS-R5-NWRS-2015-0036). Comments can be submitted by clicking on "Comment Now!" You can add attachments to the comment form.
2. By hard copy via U.S. mail or hand-delivery to:
Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R5-NWRS-2015-0036
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
MS: BPHC; 5275 Leesburg Pike
Falls Church, VA 22041-3803.
3. Via oral public testimony at one of the four public hearings that will be scheduled. We plan to hold one hearing in each of the states (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire). At each of the public hearings, we will welcome comments on proposals in any of the four states.

All comments will be posted to <http://www.regulations.gov> and will be publicly available. This generally means that any personal information you provide us will be posted with the comment.

During the public review and comment period, a series of informal information meetings and open houses will be held in the vicinity of each CFA. These meetings provide an opportunity for the public to ask questions and inform the comments they would like to submit.

In addition, formal public hearings will be held in each of the four states in the watershed. The hearings provide an opportunity for the public to make oral comments on the draft plan. For a full list of the dates, times, and locations of the open houses and public hearings, visit our website: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Silvio_O_Conte/what_we_do/conservation.html.



Steve Masklowski - USFWS

American black bear

We are committed to providing access to these meetings and hearings for all participants. Please direct all requests for sign language interpreting services, close captioning, or other accommodation needs to refuge staff at 413-548-8002 (TTY 800-877-8339) with your request at least 1 week prior to the event.

How to Get a Copy of the Draft CCP/EIS

You can download a copy of the full-text draft CCP/EIS online at: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Silvio_O_Conte/what_we_do/conservation.html. Additionally, hard copies are available at the following town offices for viewing during normal business hours. We selected one centrally located town per CFA. For the Nulhegan Basin Division CFA, the copy will be available at the refuge's Nulhegan Basin Division Office (5396 VT-105, Brunswick, VT). Copies will also be available at the Northeast Regional Office (300 Westgate Center Drive, Hadley, MA).



USFWS

Snowy egret

Connecticut:

- Haddam
- Lyme
- Glastonbury
- Middletown
- South Windsor
- Suffield

New Hampshire:

- Alstead
- Columbia
- Jefferson
- Lyme
- Richmond

Massachusetts:

- Hadley
- Middlefield
- Chesterfield
- Northampton
- Sandisfield

Vermont:

- Bridgewater
- Stockbridge
- West Fairlee
- Windham

To request a copy of the draft CCP/EIS on CD-ROM or for more information on the planning process, contact:

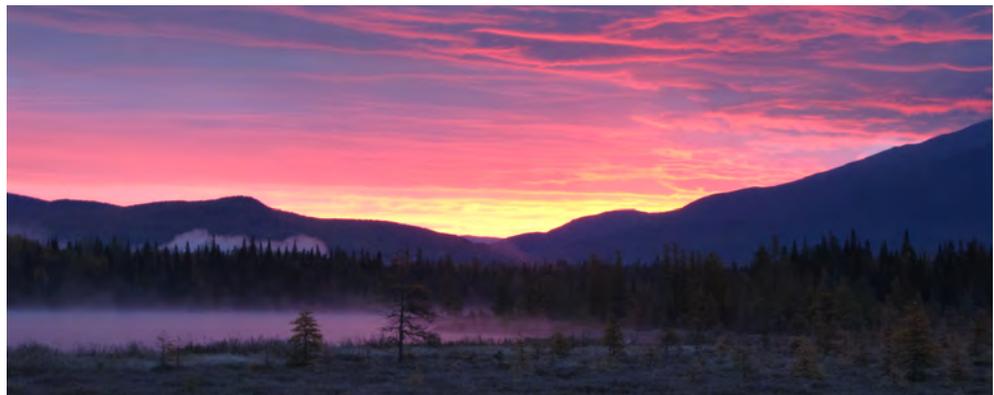
Nancy McGarigal, Natural Resource Planner
 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Northeast Regional Office
 300 Westgate Center Drive
 Hadley, Massachusetts 01035
 Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov

How to Contact Us

For more information about the Conte Refuge, contact refuge staff:

Andrew French, Project Leader
 103 E. Plumtree Road
 Sunderland, Massachusetts 01375
 Phone: 413-548-8002 ext. 111; Fax: 413-548-9725

You can also visit the refuge's website at:
http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Silvio_O_Conte/



Sunrise at Pondicherry Division

Dave Govatski

Relationship of CCP to the Connecticut River Watershed Landscape Conservation Design Pilot Project

Simultaneous with the development of the draft CCP/EIS, the Service's Northeast Region initiated a pilot project to develop an Landscape Conservation Design (LCD) for the Connecticut River watershed. Over 25 partners, including Federal and state agencies and nongovernmental organizations, participated on the LCD core team. The objectives of the pilot project are to identify priority areas for conserving ecosystems and species in the watershed, as well as actions and strategies necessary to sustain them into the future.

The primary outcome of the pilot project is a recommended strategic network of core areas and connectors to guide future conservation efforts. Additional products will help conservation practitioners assess habitat restoration potential, and predict future impacts on ecosystems and species from climate and land use change.

CCP planning team members participated in this pilot project and exchanged information between core teams to ensure consistency in prioritizing areas for protection and evaluating management priorities on refuge lands. The draft CCP/EIS is consistent with the results of the LCD pilot project. To learn more about the Connecticut River Watershed LCD pilot project, visit: <http://northatlanticlcc.org/groups/connecticut-river-watershed-pilot/about-the-pilot-1>.

Reader's Guide

The following Reader's Guide lists and describes each of the chapters and appendixes in the full draft CCP/EIS. In general, we feel the majority of readers will be most interested in chapter 4 and appendix A. Chapter 4 describes the four proposed alternatives in detail. Appendix A describes how we propose to manage existing and future refuge lands under Alternative C—the Service-preferred alternative.



Connecticut River

Ben Byrne-Creative Commons

Reader's Guide to the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

Chapter 1: Purpose of, and Need for, Action gives an overview of why the refuge needs a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) and provides background on the refuge's establishment history and its purposes, vision, and goals.

Chapter 2: The Planning Process describes the planning process, the laws and Service policies that guide our planning, and summarizes the public and partner issues, opportunities, and concerns we addressed in the draft CCP.

Chapter 3: Affected Environment gives an overview of the Connecticut River watershed and the existing refuge's natural and socioeconomic environments including: air quality, water quality, wildlife, fish, plant, and habitats, and historical and archaeological resources. It also describes refuge administration and existing public use opportunities on refuge lands.

Chapter 4: Alternatives, Including the Service's Preferred Alternative details four alternative scenarios for managing the refuge: Alternative A—Continuing Current Management; Alternative B—Consolidated Stewardship; Alternative C—Enhanced Conservation Connections and Partnerships (the Service's Preferred Alternative); and Alternative D—Reduced Management with Emphasis on Backcountry Recreation.

Chapter 4 presents broad, watershed-level objectives for achieving refuge goals in collaboration with partners throughout the watershed. It introduces the concepts of Conservation Partnership Areas (CPAs) and Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs). The table at the end of chapter 4 compares and contrasts some of the major actions proposed under the four alternatives. Appendix A is the companion to chapter 4 and focuses on more specific sub-objectives and strategies for managing existing and proposed refuge lands.

Chapter 5: Environmental Consequences analyzes the anticipated beneficial and adverse impacts from implementing the four different alternatives. The table at the end of chapter 5 summarizes and compares the impacts of the actions proposed under the four alternatives.

Chapter 6: Coordination and Consultation lists public and partner meetings we attended or held during the planning process.

Chapter 7: List of Preparers lists all of the Service, state, and other partner personnel who worked on the plan.

Bibliography lists all of the literature cited for the chapters. **Glossary, Acronyms, and Species Scientific Names** defines technical terms, lists the scientific names for all the species mentioned, and defines the acronyms used in the chapters.

Appendix A: Resources Overview and Management Direction for Conservation Focus Areas and Refuge Units describes our proposed management actions on existing refuge lands (divisions and units) and where we propose future refuge acquisitions (CFAs). Appendix A takes the broad, watershed level goals and objectives from chapter 4 and steps them down more specifically for refuge lands. This appendix is focused on our proposals under Alternative C (Service-preferred alternative), but is also relevant to refuge lands under alternative B. This appendix is organized by alphabetically by state.

Appendix B: Process for Establishing Priority Refuge Resources of Concern describes how we identified refuge species and habitat priorities.

Appendix C: Land Protection Plan provides detailed information on the proposed refuge expansion under alternative C.

Appendix D: Findings of Appropriateness and Compatibility Determinations explains which public uses we propose to allow and not allow on existing and proposed refuge lands under alternative C.

Appendix E: Wilderness Review evaluates existing refuge lands for their potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. At this time, we do not recommend any refuge lands for wilderness designation.

Appendix F: Wild and Scenic Rivers Review describes river segments in existing and proposed refuge lands and the process for evaluating their eligibility as National Wild and Scenic Rivers. At this time, we recommend working with partners to evaluate entire rivers, beyond just the segments of rivers on existing and proposed refuge lands.

Appendix G: Refuge Operations Needs System and Service Asset Maintenance Management System reflects staffing, operations, and maintenance needs and costs for alternative C.

Appendix H: Staffing Charts depicts the current and proposed staffing under each of the alternatives.

Appendix I: U.S. Geological Survey Report: Economic Impacts of Current and Proposed Management Alternatives describes the current regional economic setting. It also analyzes and compares the projected socioeconomic impacts of implementing the four alternatives.

Appendix J: Forest Management Guidelines provides additional details on the desired future condition of refuge forests, the specific forest management techniques we propose to use to actively manage refuge forests, and provides a glossary of forestry terms.

Appendix K: Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Act of 1991 is the full-text of the refuge's establishing legislation.

Appendix L: Fire Management Program Guidance outlines guidance for fire management, explains the fire management planning process, and describes the current fire management program at the refuge.

Appendix M: Conservation Plans and Initiatives Guiding the Development of the CCP lists and describes the conservation plans and initiatives we use to develop the CCP, including national and regional bird plans, state wildlife action plans, recovery plans for federally listed species, and regional recreation plans.

Appendix N: List of Partnerships highlights the extent and importance of the partnership network in the watershed and lists some of the refuge's important partners, including government agencies, nonprofits, recreational and environmental educational organizations, academic institutions, and refuge Friends groups.

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge
103 E. Plumtree Road
Sunderland, MA 01375
Phone: 413-548-8002
Fax: 413-548-9725
http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Silvio_O_Conte/

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Website
<http://www.fws.gov>

Federal Relay Service
for the deaf or hard of hearing
1800/877 8339

August 2015

