



Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek and Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuges

Planning Update #3 - August 2010

An update on CCP progress

This is the third planning update for the CCP process. The previous planning update presented the draft vision statements and 1997 interim refuge management goals for Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek, and Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs). Our next steps are to refine the draft vision statements and goals, and develop objectives and strategies for the CCP with consideration of the issues identified during the public and internal scoping processes.

Although the scoping period for the CCP closed on May 21, 2010, there will be additional opportunities for input in the future. Some of the highlights from the scoping information we received are included on the following pages of this update. Look for a more complete scoping summary report on our website (www.fws.gov/hoppermountain/) soon.

The comments received on the 2008 Bitter Creek Grassland Management Environmental Assessment (EA) will also be incorporated into the scoping process for the CCP on Bitter Creek NWR. We will consider this information in developing draft management alternatives and evaluating the environmental consequences of these alternatives.

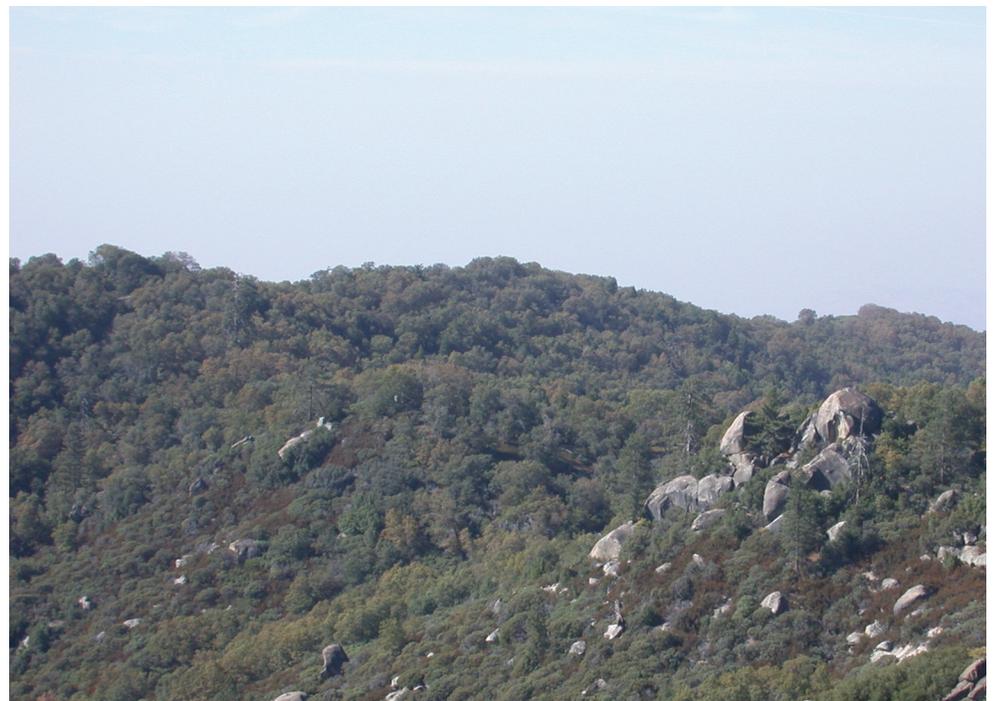
The Independent Range Review (IRR) for Bitter Creek NWR that was underway during the scoping period is now completed. The final report (IRR) prepared by Mel George, UC Davis Cooperative Extension, along with comments from advisory team member, Dr. Beth Painter, are now available on our website (listed above). This report and other information will be helpful as we develop objectives and strategies for improving wildlife habitat management on Bitter Creek NWR. Ongoing habitat, visitor services, and cultural resources management reviews will also be considered as we continue to develop the CCP for all three refuges.

Greetings from the Project Leader

Thank you for your participation earlier this year in the initial scoping process for the Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek and Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuges' Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). I appreciate the feedback we received from you at the scoping meetings, and via letters and e-mails. We are carefully considering all of the information received from you, other members of the public, organizations, and elected officials.

There will be further opportunities to learn more about the refuges and provide your input into the CCP process over the next two years as we continue to work on developing this 15-year management plan for the refuges. Resources and contact information for CCP questions and more information are listed on the last page of this update. Thank you for your continued interest and support in this important planning process.

Marc Weitzel, Project Leader
Hopper Mountain NWR Complex



Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuge

Photo: USFWS

Public scoping highlights

In April and May of this year, three public scoping meetings were held by the Service to collect information about topics and issues the public would like to have considered during the preparation of the CCP. Public comments were documented by refuge staff during the scoping meetings.

Over 70 people attended the Taft public meeting, one attended the meeting in Porterville, and none attended the Fillmore meeting. In addition to the comments voiced at the meetings, comments were received during the scoping period via letters and e-mails (19), completed issues workbooks (4), comment cards (1), meeting evaluations (6), and a petition letter with more than 250 signatures. The following issues were raised by the public to be addressed in the CCP process. These issues will provide a basis for developing a range of alternatives to be considered in the CCP and environmental assessment. Some of the highlights are included below.

Wildlife Management

Many of the respondents were supportive of the purposes of the refuges, to protect habitat for the endangered California condor. A few comments recommended that no management action be taken that does not contribute to condor recovery. Many individuals encouraged the use of grazing as a condor management activity, as further discussed below.

Habitat Management

Vegetation. Several comments called for inventories and monitoring programs to establish the location and density of existing plant species, determine the desired plant community, and evaluate the impact of future management practices.

A group of conservation organizations requested that the CCP evaluate how land use activities can effect the establishment and spread of invasive species and outline a plan for continuing eradication efforts. Another conservation organization urged the Service to consider restoration without intervention by mechanical, chemical, or grazing disturbances (no livestock, no burning, no mowing, and no herbicides). The organization instead recommended a program of active seeding or replanting native plants where appropriate. Comments at one public meeting noted that

spraying herbicides may have a negative effect on water sources and suggested that the refuge be a part of a Weed Management Area.

Three conservation organizations stated that their volunteer programs would welcome the opportunity to assist the Service with habitat restoration projects.

Livestock Grazing. Scoping comments reflected conflicting opinions on cattle grazing at Bitter Creek NWR. Some respondents, including the petition signatories, were in favor of grazing, some were opposed, and others recommended that it be allowed only when necessary to attain a specific ecological goal.

Many comments in support of grazing discussed its long history and important cultural role in the area. Many responses emphasized the economic benefits of grazing, stating that the reduction or elimination of grazing on the refuge would have negative economic impacts for Kern County residents and businesses conducted on public land.

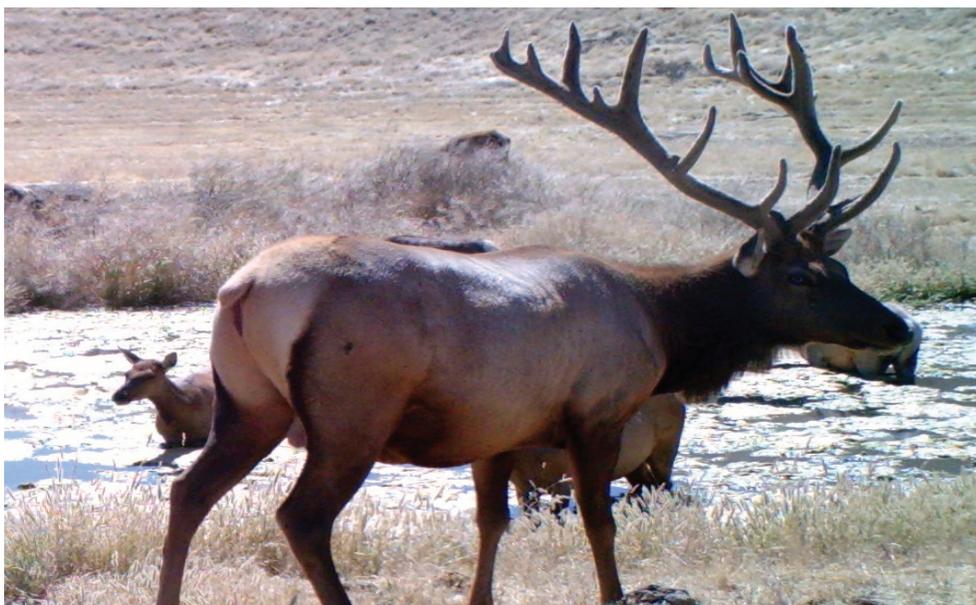
Many of the individuals in favor of grazing suggested that it was compatible with and beneficial to the protection of the California condor. Several comments stated that ranch land provides condors with good habitat and an ample food source and expressed concern that eliminating grazing would negatively impact the condors by removing a food source. Several comments also stated that grazing plays a positive role in vegetation management. Several comments stated that un-grazed

land created a heightened wildfire risk, posing a threat to plants, wildlife, and people and imposing a potential cost on Kern County taxpayers.

Several comments addressed other aspects of a potential grazing program. Recommendations included mapping of grazed areas, a study of previous grazing practices, fair distribution of allotments, hiring of a range manager, and the consideration of predators like coyotes.

A second group of commenters either questioned or refuted the compatibility of grazing with the purpose of the refuge. Several people stressed that wildlife needs should come before grazing or commercial interests. One commenter recommended that all grazing management decisions be based on the habitat needs of refuge wildlife, and that grazing only be applied if and when necessary to attain a specific ecological goal. There were several suggestions, from individuals and conservation organizations, for reintroduction of native ungulates as an alternative to cattle grazing, noting that these species served as a historic food source for condors.

Several responses from individuals and organizations emphasized the negative impacts of grazing and stated that overgrazing was a major concern. A few comments enumerated the effects of previous overgrazing on the refuge, including habitat degradation, stream bank erosion, introduction and spread of invasive species, diminished plant diversity, disruption of native wildlife, trampling and con-



Tule elk at Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge

Photo: USFWS

continued from page 2

sumption of native plants, and damage to archeological and cultural sites.

Two letters from organizations supported an immediate end to year-round grazing on the refuge, but the organizations provided differing recommendations regarding seasonal grazing. Both mentioned the scientific debate over whether seasonal grazing is effective for reducing the presence of nonnative plants or meeting other management needs.

Fire Management

Fire management also generated conflicting opinions. The majority of comments regarding fire management were strongly opposed to prescribed burns. The most common concern, raised by many individuals, elected representatives, and the Kern County Planning Department, was that prescribed burns would have a negative effect on air quality and result in adverse health effects for Kern County residents.

Several comments emphasized that the San Joaquin Valley already has very poor air quality, suggesting that prescribed burns are not appropriate or require a higher level of environmental review than in other areas of California. One elected representative noted that the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is developing rules that would severely restrict agricultural burning, at great cost to farmers, and asked that the refuge avoid burning as well in consideration of the region's air quality challenges.

Several comments specifically called for the elimination of prescribed burns from consideration as a management tool. Several others requested a more detailed environmental review.

A group of conservation organizations asked the Service to identify and describe the natural and historic role of fire within the refuges. They suggested that the CCP process provides a good opportunity to revise the refuges' fire management plans. They also recommended prescribed burning only be used if, based on the best available science, it is determined to be necessary to restore an historic fire regime or to restore native habitat.

Other Land Management Issues

The comment letter from a group of

conservation organizations addressed several additional land management issues including: oil and gas development, water resources, and wilderness review.

With respect to oil and gas development, the organizations noted that while the Service may or may not possess the authority to regulate aspects of the extractive process, it does have enforcement authority under the Endangered Species Act for take of endangered species. They requested that the CCP provide mechanisms and authority to remediate oil and gas activities on refuge and adjacent lands and ensure that activities on existing or proposed drilling pads near or inside the refuges are not harming listed species. They also provided a list of recommended actions for addressing oil and gas development in the CCP. The organizations also requested that a basic water resources assessment be conducted for the refuges.

Finally, the organizations urged the Service to include a wilderness review in the CCP to determine whether wilderness designation may be appropriate for portions of Bitter Creek or Hopper Mountain NWRs. They requested that, if necessary, the Service assess the need for roads or other infrastructure and include plans and authority to remove unnecessary structures or roads such that wilderness designation is no longer precluded.

Wildlife-Dependent Recreation

A few people were concerned about the lack of visitor services at the refuges and requested that recreation and interpretation opportunities be addressed during the development of the CCP. Additional suggestions included wildlife viewing opportunities, supervised condor viewing trips, volunteer programs, and a monthly designated access day.

A few comments supported the continued closure of the refuges, at least in the near

term. One individual requested that the Service install signs to indicate why the refuge is closed to public access and provide a phone number to call to report violations. Two people listed off-road vehicle access or trespass as an issue of major concern. One person listed hunting as an issue of major concern, and two comments recommended that hunting not be allowed. A group of conservation organizations requested that the CCP evaluate the extent of poaching and trespass and contain specific actions to reduce such illegal activity, including increased law enforcement presence.

Environmental Education

Several responses encouraged the development of educational programs for school children and the general public. Another comment suggested that refuge staff and volunteers visit schools to provide outreach about the value of protecting and enhancing refuges. It was also recommended that the Service educate the public about economic benefits provided by the refuge and distribute brochures to local chambers of commerce.

Cultural Resources

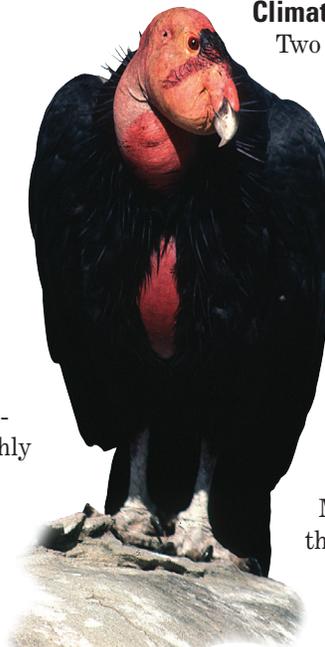
Several comments addressed cultural resources. A conservation organization requested that the CCP and associated NEPA document identify and describe the refuges' archaeological and historical resources and analyze potential effects resulting from proposed plan actions.

Climate Change

Two comment letters from conservation organizations stated that the potential impacts of climate change should be a central consideration in the development of the CCP.

General CCP Framework

Many comments, and the petition, called for the CCP to be science-based. A group of conservation organizations recommended that the CCP emphasize endangered species protection over all other uses. Many comments also emphasized that the CCP must be fair and balanced and avoid predetermined outcomes.



California condor Photo: D. Clendenon

continued from page 3

The petition requested that the Service set attainable and measurable restoration goals. The petition also listed several additional recommendations for the CCP: that it define terminology used; that it avoid prejudicial and subjective statements; that it identify statements based on incomplete or unavailable information; and that it be concise, understandable, and available to the public upon request.

Public Involvement

Public involvement in the decision-making process was an issue of concern raised in many of the comments at the Taft meeting. Many comments, from members of the public and elected representatives, reflected dissatisfaction with a separate, but related document, the Bitter Creek Grassland Management and Restoration Plan and accompanying Environmental Assessment (EA).

Several responses requested that all previous comments on the Grassland Habitat Management and Restoration Plan and EA be incorporated into the CCP process and reviewed by the CCP team. Numerous people expressed a desire for increased collaboration and transparency moving forward.

For more details on the information received during the CCP/EA scoping period, please check our website (www.fws.gov/hoppermountain/) in September for a scoping summary report.



CCP progress

- Pre-planning
- Public Scoping & Identify Issues
- Develop Draft Vision Statement & Goals
- Develop Draft Alternatives; Objectives & Strategies
- Prepare Draft CCP/EA
- Public Review of Draft CCP/EA
- Prepare Final CCP/EA
- Public Notice of Decision

Please feel free to contact us!

We distribute updates periodically throughout the CCP process when new information is available, but please check our website for updates, refuge tour dates and previously released documents:

www.fws.gov/hoppermountain/

We are available to provide additional information about CCP accomplishments to date and to answer any questions about the planning process. Feel free to call, write, e-mail, or fax. If you did not receive this newsletter through the mail and would like to be on our mailing list, please contact us. You may also obtain information from our website (above).

If you would like to be removed from the mailing list or are receiving multiple copies of these notices, please let us know.

Sandy Osborn, Refuge Planner
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Pacific Southwest Region
2800 Cottage Way, W-1832
Sacramento, CA 95825
FAX: (916) 414-6497
E-mail: fw8plancomments@fws.gov
Phone: (805) 644-5185