



## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Otay-Sweetwater Unit and Vernal Pools Stewardship Project

## *Planning Update 3 - March 2008*

### Greetings!

This is the third in a series of *Planning Updates* for the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). We provide these *Planning Updates* to keep you informed of our progress on the CCP and to solicit your input at various points throughout the process. In this update, we are seeking your comments regarding our draft Refuge goals and proposed management alternatives. The alternatives will be further refined following consideration of any additional input we receive over the next month. Once refined, the alternatives will be evaluated in the draft CCP, which will be available for review this summer.

### Update from the Refuge Manager

Much has happened since our December 2006 *Planning Update*. We have met with various agencies and interested members of the public to identify Refuge issues; we have drafted Refuge goals and proposed management alternatives; and, along with so many of you, experienced the fury of the Harris Fire.

The Harris Fire that occurred in October 2007 consumed about 4,137 acres of the Refuge's 8,400-acre Otay-Sweetwater Unit. Large areas of coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and grasslands burned in the fire; including lands that supported habitat for the endangered Quino checkerspot butterfly and threatened coastal California gnatcatcher and Otay tarplant.

Recent rains have initiated the slow recovery of the area's native vegetation, but these rains are also aiding in the growth of .



Shooting stars are adding color to the charred landscape.

non-native grasses and exotic weeds. Heavier rains have contributed to erosion within disturbed areas, such as old roads and trails.

We will be receiving funding to address some of the fire's

adverse effects on the native habitat, but we need your help as well.

Please restrict your trail use to well-established trails; do not create new trails or travel across open burn areas. Successfully restoring the area's native habitat depends in large part on how we protect exposed soil.

In addition to addressing fire issues, we have also continued working on the CCP. In January 2007, we conducted a Public Use Workshop, which was very well attended. Participants shared their ideas about the types of public uses that should be provided on the Refuge (details are provided on page 2).

In early September 2007, I became the Refuge Manager for the San Diego NWR and joined the CCP team. I am enjoying the challenges of managing a Refuge that protects so many sensitive species and regionally important habitats. I am also excited to be working with all of you, as we plan for the future of the Refuge.

I appreciate your continued involvement and welcome your input on CCP and other refuge-related matters. My contact information is provided on page 7.

*Jill Terp*

Jill Terp  
Refuge Manager

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## Notes from the January 2007 Public Use Workshop

As a follow up to our initial Public Scoping meetings, we conducted a Public Use Workshop in early January 2007. This meeting was held to receive additional input regarding the types of recreational uses the public would like to see occurring on the San Diego NWR. The workshop was attended by about 50 people, representing various user groups and adjacent property owners.

The major topics of discussion at the workshop included hunting and trail use. After a brief presentation on the Fish and Wildlife Service's policies regarding public uses on National Wildlife Refuges, we began the group discussion. Hunting topics included the types of species to be hunted, the hunting methods to be employed, the areas within the Refuge that might be opened to hunting, and the proximity of residential development to potential hunting areas. We indicated that as part of the CCP process, we would be evaluating an upland game (rabbit, mourning dove, and quail) and deer hunting program for some portions of the Refuge, and that surveys for these species were currently underway. There were some who felt that the hunting program should include the full range of species addressed in the Fish and Game Code, including crows and predator species. Others, who were concerned about including deer in the hunting program, requested that the extent of deer hunting be reevaluated each year based on ongoing monitoring of the Refuge's deer population. Adjacent property owners and some trail users raised concerns regarding safety and stressed the need to take into consideration the provision of adequate buffers between uses, the hunting methods to be permitted (e.g., archery, shot guns, rifles), development of a Refuge-specific safety and hunting education program, adequate posting of hunting areas, and adequate dissemination of information about when and where hunting would be occurring on the Refuge. A request was also made to allow falconry on the Refuge.

During the trail discussion, there was considerable interest in allowing non-motorized multiple use trails (i.e., hiking, biking, and equestrian use) on the Refuge. It was

requested that these trails connect with the County's approved regional trail system and that loop trails be provided as connections to other community trails occurring adjacent to the Refuge. There was a strong desire for a well designed trail system with good signage to ensure that users stay on the designated trails. Several people agreed to assist us in more detailed trail planning for the Refuge.

Other topics included leashed and unleashed dog activity, camping, environmental education programs, and the need for trail staging areas.

### Public Uses on National Wildlife Refuges - A Brief Overview

The National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) Improvement Act of 1997 identified the priority public uses of the NWRS as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation. The law identified these uses, when determined to be compatible, as legitimate and appropriate public uses of the Refuge System that should receive priority consideration in refuge planning and management. To initiate or permit one of these uses or any other new use on a National Wildlife Refuge or to expand, renew, or extend an existing use, the Refuge Manager must determine that the use is a compatible use, pursuant to our Compatibility Policy (Section 603 FW 2 of the Fish and Wildlife Service Manual). When a wildlife-dependent recreational use is determined to be a compatible use and is not inconsistent with public safety, the NWRS Improvement Act states that the activity should be facilitated.

In order for any other general public use (e.g., mountain biking, equestrian use, boating) to be permitted on a Refuge, the use must first be found to be appropriate in accordance with the Appropriate Refuge Uses Policy (Section 603 FW 1 of the Fish and Wildlife Service Manual). If a particular use is determined to be appropriate, it must then be evaluated to determine if the use is compatible with the Refuge purpose and consistent with public safety. A more detailed discussion about public uses on National Wildlife Refuges was provided in Planning Update 2, which can be found on our CCP website at <http://www.fws.gov/sandiegorefuges/new/ccp2/ccp2.htm>.

## San Diego NWR - Refuge Purposes

To protect, manage, and restore habitats for federally listed endangered and threatened species and migratory birds and to maintain and enhance the biological diversity of native plants and animals.

## Developing Goals for the San Diego NWR

The CCP planning team drafted the following goals for the San Diego NWR based on: 1) the interim refuge goals presented in the Final Land Protection Plans for the Otay-Sweetwater Unit and the Vernal Pools Stewardship Project; 2) input provided during the scoping process for the CCP and subsequent agency and stakeholder meetings and workshops; and 3) internal Fish and Wildlife Service review.

- Goal 1 Protect and manage federally endangered and threatened species and the habitats that support such species.
- Goal 2 Protect, manage, and restore the biological diversity of southwestern San Diego County and the habitats that support this diversity, for its inherent value and to reduce the likelihood that listing of additional species will be required in the future.
- Goal 3 Create partnerships and provide leadership in coordinating land management activities in support of the Multiple Species Conservation Program.
- Goal 4 Provide safe and high quality opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses that foster public appreciation of the unique natural heritage of the San Diego region.

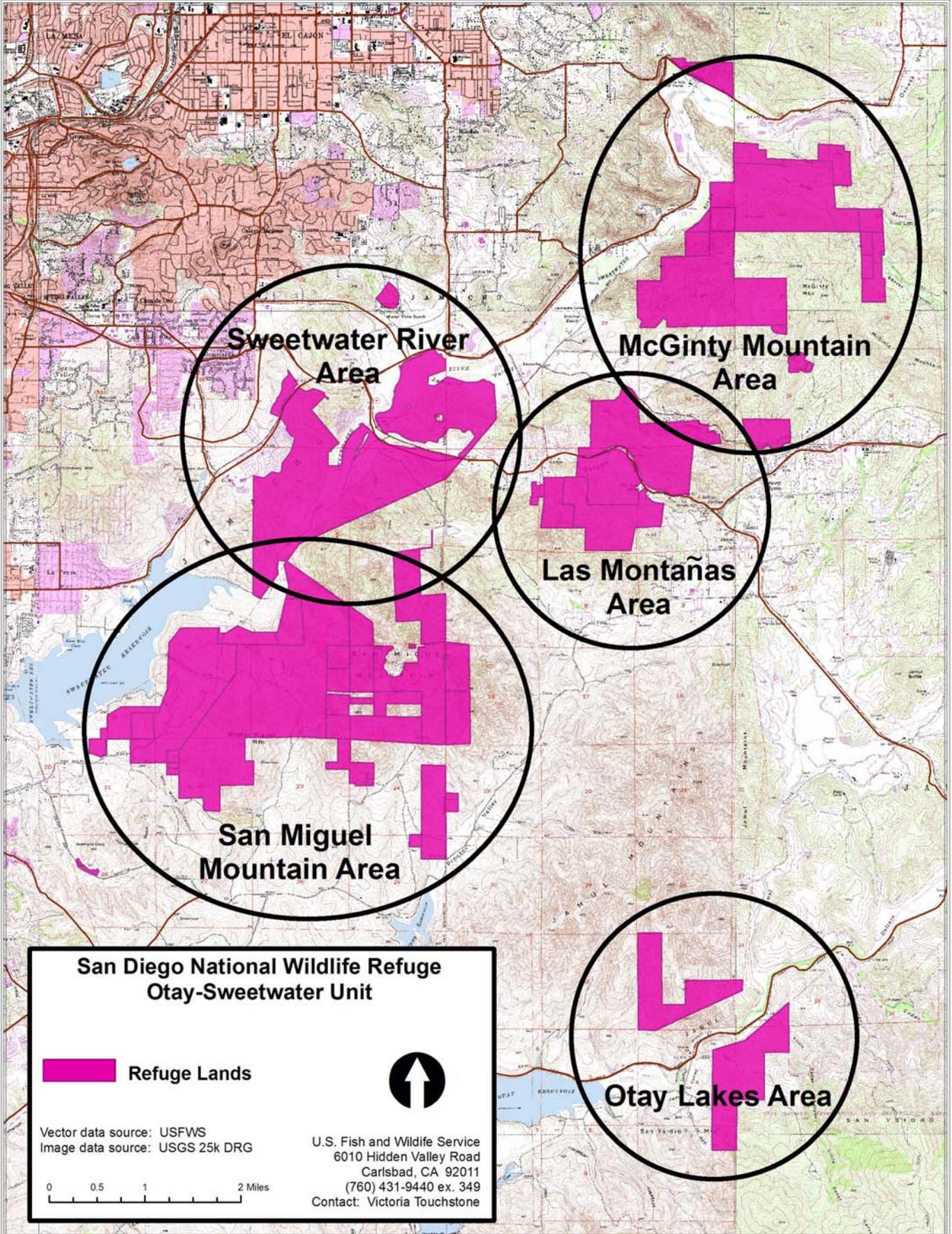


The San Diego horned lizard is one of many MSCP-covered species that occur on the San Diego NWR.

Photo by John Martin, USFWS

### Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System

*“The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”*



## Management Alternatives Proposed for Evaluation in the Draft CCP/EA

As part of the CCP process, the planning team is tasked with developing a range of alternatives for how a refuge should be managed. These alternatives are then analyzed in the draft CCP and accompanying environmental assessment (EA) to help determine which alternative would best achieve the Refuge purposes and goals. The process of developing alternatives involves analyzing current conditions, identifying various measures that if implemented would help achieve Refuge goals, and incorporating, as appropriate, input provided during the public scoping process and other information gathered during subsequent meetings and workshops and from various interested individuals, agencies, and organizations.

The management alternatives proposed for inclusion in the San Diego NWR CCP are presented below. The various alternatives differ in the extent and focus of the wildlife and habitat management actions to be implemented on the Refuge, as well as in the types and levels of public use opportunities to be provided. We encourage you to provide us with your comments on this proposed range of management alternatives. Is there an issue or management proposal that is not included within the current range of alternatives that you feel should be addressed? If so, let us know. To have your comments considered in time for incorporation in the draft CCP, please provide any comments to Victoria Touchstone, our Refuge Planner, by April 28, 2008 (contact information is provided on page 7). After considering any additional input, these alternatives will be refined and then fully described in the draft CCP. The potential environmental consequences of implementing the various alternatives will be analyzed in the accompanying EA. The draft CCP/EA should be available for review in July 2008, at which time we will again be soliciting your comments.

### Draft Management Alternatives:

We propose to analyze four alternatives for managing the Refuge over the next fifteen years, including a no action alternative and three action alternatives. Under Alternative A (No Action), management of the Refuge would continue as it is occurring today. Alternative B proposes to expand current management and formalize the existing wildlife dependent recreational uses and certain trail uses. Alternative C (the preferred alternative) would optimize wildlife and habitat management and expand public use to include hunting. Alternative D would maximize wildlife and habitat management and expand public use beyond that proposed in Alternative C. The details of each alternative are summarized below, with expanded information about each alternative provided on our CCP website (see page 7 for the website address).

**Alternative A - No Action.** Alternative A assumes no change to past and present management activities. Current conservation and management actions, including vernal pool restoration and the restoration and enhancement of Otay tarplant habitat on the Trimark parcel, would continue per available funding. Monitoring in accordance with the Multiple Species Conservation Program would also continue. Existing public uses, including the wildlife-dependent recreational uses of wildlife observation, photography, and environmental interpretation, as well as non-motorized trail use, would continue. This alternative represents the baseline from which other “action” alternatives will be evaluated.



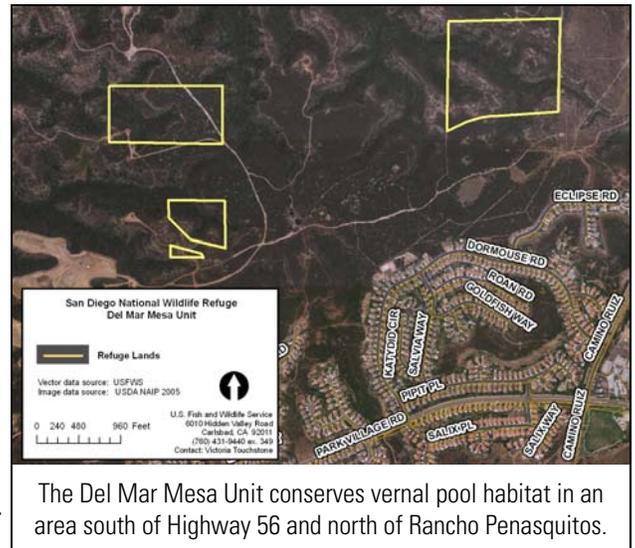
**Shinohara Vernal Pool Restoration Site**

**Restoration of vernal pool habitat near Sweetwater Summit County Park would continue under Alternative A.**

### **Alternative B - Expand Current Wildlife and Habitat Management; Actively Manage Current Public Use.**

Under this alternative, the current wildlife and habitat management activities occurring on the Refuge would be expanded. Vernal pool habitat on Del Mar Mesa would be more actively managed and we would partner with the other preserve land managers to finalize and implement a management plan for the area. Current invasive plant control on the Otay-Sweetwater Unit would be expanded to include: dethatching operations in additional grassland areas; mechanically and chemically controlling invasive plants in wetland areas; and spraying invasive weeds in recent burn areas. Surveying and monitoring efforts for listed and sensitive species would increase; baseline data for sensitive species and habitats would be improved; and strategies would be developed for addressing productivity and survivorship for declining species.

Wildlife-dependent recreational uses would be expanded to include an environmental education program, which we hope to develop in partnership with one or more schools located in proximity to the Refuge. In addition, an interpretive trail would be developed south of State Route 94 near the Sweetwater River. Current trail use would be managed to eliminate indiscriminant travel through the Refuge. A designated trail system would be established with some trails open to multiple use (i.e., hiking, biking, and horseback riding), while other trails would be signed for hiking only. Multiple use trails would be limited to County-designated regional trails, with some loop trails established to provide connections with adjacent community areas. All of the trails within the Refuge's designated trail system would be signed and a trail map would be prepared for distribution to the public. Many of the trails present on the Refuge would be closed and revegetated to protect listed and sensitive species. Dogs would only be permitted on the Refuge when leashed and walked on designated multiple use trails.



The Del Mar Mesa Unit conserves vernal pool habitat in an area south of Highway 56 and north of Rancho Penasquitos.

### **Alternative C - Optimize the Extent and Quality of Wildlife and Habitat; Expand Wildlife-Dependent Recreational Use.**

Alternative C is currently identified as our preferred alternative. However, a final decision on which alternative to implement will not be made until after the draft CCP/EA has completed public review and all of the comments provided have been considered. Under Alternative C, we would work to develop partnerships intended to improve the protection and enhancement of habitat quality, including cooperative actions to reduce illegal access onto private and public lands. Through cooperative management within the Sweetwater drainage, habitat linkages would be reestablished in an effort to facilitate the recolonization of the Refuge by arroyo toads. This alternative also includes proposals to restore coastal sage scrub and riparian habitat, plant native trees to enhance riparian and woodland habitats, and improve habitat quality for the Quino checkerspot butterfly. A major focus of Alternative C is the establishment of new populations of San Diego thornmint, willow monardella, and listed vernal pool species within the Refuge. Reintroduction of the southwestern pond turtle in a portion of the Sweetwater River is also proposed. To complement these efforts, a comprehensive integrated pest management plan would be implemented to control exotic plants and animals.



Willowy Monardella

The wildlife-dependent recreational uses described in Alternative B would be expanded to include upland game and deer hunting. Approximately 560 acres in the vicinity of Las Montañas (see page 4) would be open for seasonal hunting. A step-down hunting plan to further define the program would be prepared after Final CCP approval. Environmental education and interpretive programs would be expanded to include an outdoor classroom and the creation of a children's discovery area. The designated trail system would limit biking and horseback riding to the County's adopted regional trail system and the approved Sweetwater Loop Trail. There is also a proposal to work with the County and Caltrans to identify a suitable location for a trail staging area along State Route 94. All dog activity would be prohibited on the Refuge except in designated hunting areas during appropriate hunting seasons when accompanied by a licensed hunter with a current permit to hunt on the Refuge.

### **Alternative D - Maximize the Extent and Quality of Wildlife and Habitat; Maximize Public Use.**

The wildlife and habitat management actions proposed in Alternatives B and C would be implemented under Alternative D. In addition, the riparian habitat along the Sweetwater River would be managed to mimic the natural disturbance regime (e.g., vegetation height, density, extent of coverage, and species composition would be managed to reflect the historic pattern of periodic flooding within the river channel). Under these conditions, it is possible that species, such as the red-legged frog, which once occurred here, could be successfully reintroduced. Additional vernal pool habitat would be restored on the Otay-Sweetwater Unit and appropriate non-listed vernal species would be introduced to the Shinohara vernal pools.

The level of public use on the Refuge would be expanded under this alternative. Approximately 965 acres in the McGinty Mountain and Las Montañas areas (see page 4) would be opened to seasonal upland game and deer hunting following completion of a step-down hunting plan. The wildlife-dependent recreational uses described in Alternatives B and C, as well as the proposal to identify a suitable location for a trail staging area, would all be implemented under this alternative. An interpretive walking trail is also proposed for the Shinohara vernal pool restoration site.

The number of multiple use trails provided under this alternative would be expanded beyond that proposed in Alternative B. Specifically, additional loop trails would be opened to non-motorized multiple use. Leashed dog walking would be allowed on all trails within the designated trail system.



Southwestern Pond Turtle  
Photo by Chris Brown, USGS

## **We Invite Your Comments**

One of the goals of the CCP process is to ensure public involvement in refuge management decisions. Many of you have been active participants during public scoping and at our workshops; we encourage your continued involvement. Any comments you might have regarding the Refuge goals or the range of management alternatives proposed for evaluation in the draft CCP/EA should be mailed, faxed, or emailed to the Refuge Planner (see below for contact information) by April 28, 2008.

Later this summer, we will release the draft CCP/EA for review and comment. If you are not on our mailing list and would like to be notified when the draft is available, please contact the Refuge Planner.

## **Contact Information**

For information about the CCP process or to provide any comments, contact:

### **Victoria Touchstone, Refuge Planner**

San Diego NWR Complex  
6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad, CA 92011  
760-431-9440 ex. 349 (phone)  
760-930-0256 (fax)  
Email: Victoria\_Touchstone@fws.gov

Concerns regarding current Refuge operations should be directed to:

### **Jill Terp, Refuge Manager**

San Diego NWR  
P.O. Box 746, Jamul, California 91935  
619 468-9245 ex. 226 (phone)  
619-468-9249 (fax)  
Email: Jill\_Terp@fws.gov

## **Visit Our San Diego NWR CCP Website**

For a more detailed description of the alternatives currently being considered for evaluation in the draft CCP/EA and to review the alternative trail proposals, visit our CCP website (<http://sandiegorefuges.fws.gov>). Once at the website, click on "SD NWR CCP" located in the "Refuge Planning" box on the left side of the screen.



**United States Department of the Interior  
Fish & Wildlife Service  
San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex  
6010 Hidden Valley Road  
Carlsbad, CA 92011**

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### **CCP Planning Schedule**

<b>May 2006</b>	<b>Initiated Public Scoping</b>
<b>June 2006</b>	<b>Held Public Scoping Meetings</b>
<b>January 2007</b>	<b>Public Use Workshop</b>
<b><u>April 28, 2008</u></b>	<b>Comments Due on Management Alternatives (see pages 5 and 7)</b>
<b>July 2008</b>	<b>Publish Draft CCP/EA for Public Review and Comment</b>
<b>August 2008</b>	<b>Public Meeting on Draft CCP/EA</b>
<b>January 2009</b>	<b>Publish Final CCP</b>

If you did not receive this *Planning Update* through the mail and would like to be on our mailing list, or if you would like to be removed from the list, contact the Refuge Planner (see page 7 for contact information).