

Appendix E

Hunt Plan

for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR

Hunt Plan for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge

1. Introduction

General Refuge Information. The Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge (NWR or Refuge) is located at the south end of the Salton Sea, approximately 20 miles north of El Centro in Imperial County, California (Figure 1). The Refuge consists of approximately 37,660 acres; however most of this area is currently located below the surface of the Salton Sea. Two portions of the Refuge are located on uplands to the south of the Sea including: Unit 1, which encompasses approximately 3,835 acres and is located in the vicinity of the northern terminus of the New River; and Unit 2, which consists of approximately 1,415 acres, is located along the southeastern edge of the Salton Sea near the terminus of the Alamo River (Figure 2).

With the exception of the Salton Sea, the majority of the habitats on the Refuge (including permanent open water wetlands, seasonal freshwater wetlands, cattail marsh habitat, tree rows, and farm fields that provide forage for wintering geese) are highly managed to support a diverse array of migratory and resident birds. Situated along the Pacific Flyway, this Refuge provides habitat to support an abundance of bird life, with some species only present for a short time during migration, while others spend the summer or winter at the Refuge. The Refuge also supports secretive marsh birds, including the Federal endangered Yuma Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris yumanensis*), resident upland and waterbirds, and migratory songbirds.

Refuge Establishment and Purposes. In 1930, President Hoover issued Executive Order 5498 establishing the “Salton Sea Wild Life Refuge.” Per the Executive Order, the Salton Sea Wild Life Refuge (as it was referred to in 1930) was set aside as a sanctuary and breeding ground for birds and other wildlife. Over the years, additional lands have been acquired or leased to be managed as part of the Refuge for the following purposes: “for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose for migratory birds” (Migratory Bird Treaty Act [16 U.S.C., Section 715d]); “for the management and control of migratory waterfowl and other wildlife” (Lea Act of 1948 [16 U.S.C. § 695]); and “primarily for the production of crops to provide wintering feed for waterfowl and to aid and assist in the control of depredation by waterfowl to commercial crops in the area” (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 [16 U.S.C. 742a-742j]).

Public Use. At the time of Refuge establishment, the intent was to set aside the original acreage as a reserve and breeding ground for birds and wild animals, with little if any public use. As this area became inundated and other lands were acquired to meet Refuge purposes, the potential for providing opportunities for public use expanded. Waterfowl hunting has been conducted on the Refuge since at least 1953 according to Refuge records, and in recent years, the hunting program has supported about 1,000 hunter visits per year. Wildlife observation, particularly birdwatching, became a popular activity on the Refuge in the 1960s and continues to draw people to the area from all over the world.

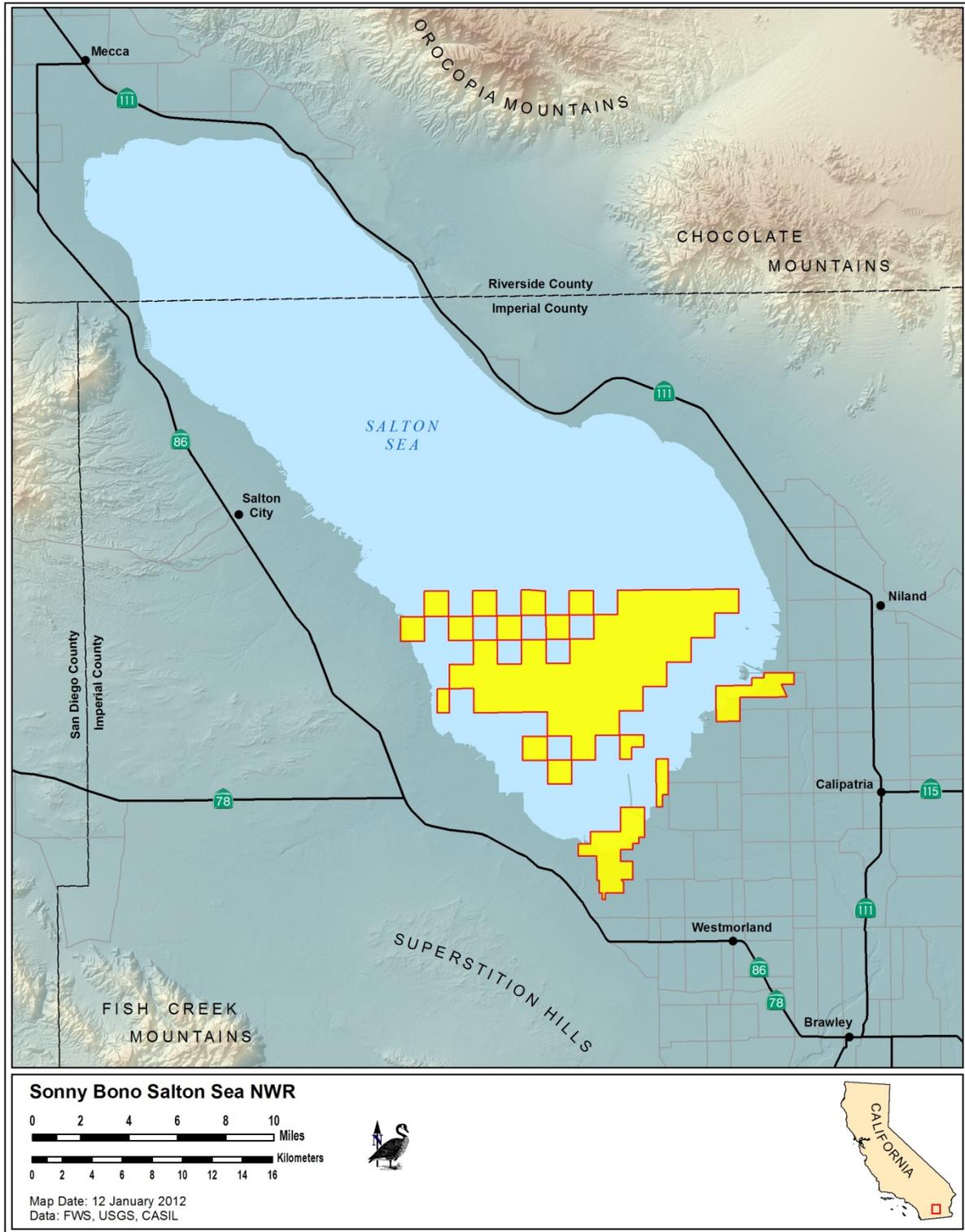


Figure 1. Location Map – Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge

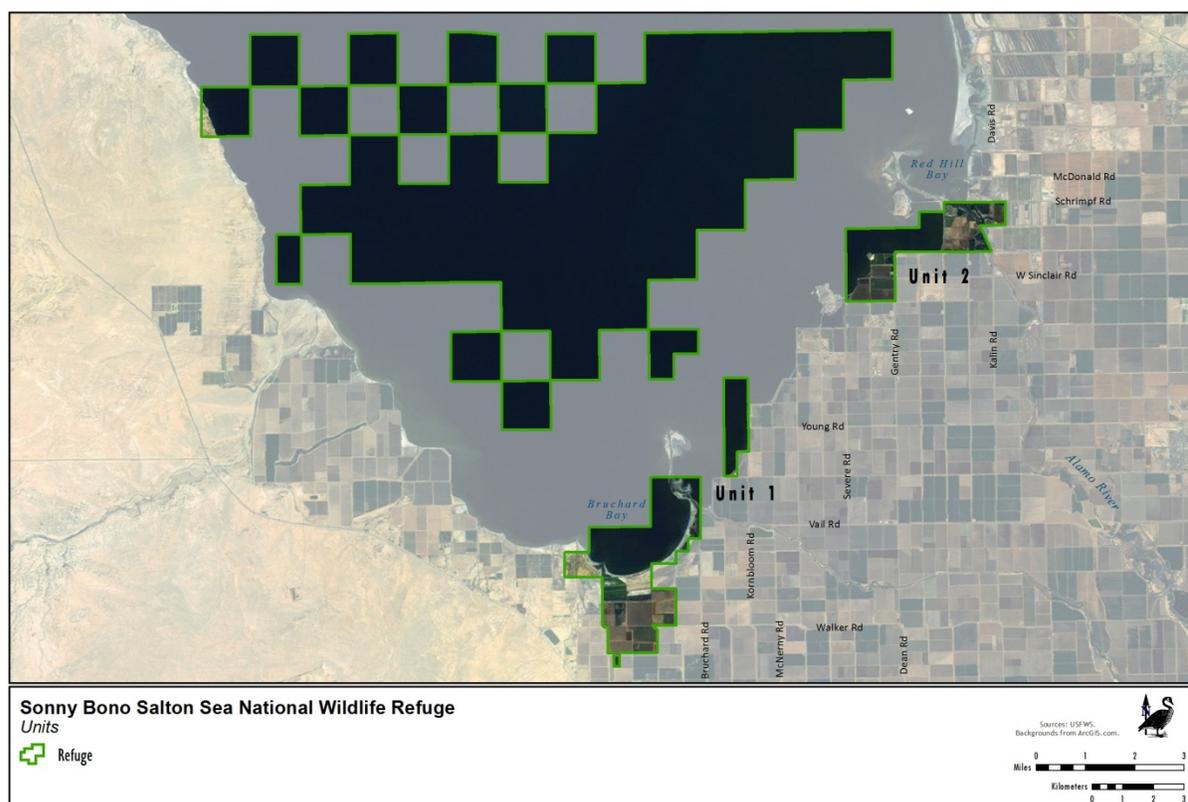


Figure 2. Site Map - Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, Units 1 and 2

There are several public hunting areas in the vicinity of the Refuge, all managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). These areas include the State's Wister and Finney-Ramer Units of the Imperial Wildlife Area. The Wister Unit is located on the east side of the Salton Sea along Highway 111, five miles northwest of Niland. This area provides opportunities for waterfowl, quail, dove, and pheasant hunting. The Finney-Ramer Unit, located along the Alamo River south of Calipatria, provides opportunities for waterfowl hunting from boats. Opportunities for hunting also exist on some private lands in the vicinity of the Refuge.

Recreational fishing was very popular at the Salton Sea in the 1960s through the 1990s. Although the Sea once supported a variety of game fish species, the only known game fish species still present at the Salton Sea today is the Mozambique tilapia (*Oreochromis mossambicus*). Fishing activities permitted on the Refuge are limited to boat fishing in open waters of the Salton Sea during daylight hours from April 1 through September 30. The area is closed to all access during the remainder of the year (October 1 through March 31) to reduce disturbance to wintering, resting, and foraging birds and other wildlife and their habitats. A boat launch that provides boating access to the Refuge's portion of the Salton Sea is located on the south shore of the Salton Sea at Obsidian Butte. Fishing is not permitted on the remainder of the Refuge, including along the shoreline of the Salton Sea and New and Alamo Rivers, within open water wetland habitat, and in drainage and irrigation channels located within the Refuge boundaries.

Purpose. The purpose of this hunt plan is to outline how the hunt program is operated on the Refuge. It has been prepared in association with the development of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) which provides a 15-year blueprint for how the Refuge should be managed. In accordance with the CCP, this hunt plan describes a hunting program that is

consistent with how Refuge has operated the hunting program in past years. The hunt plan also documents how the Refuge provides safe hunting opportunities that avoid impacts to sensitive Refuge resources and minimizes the potential for conflicts with other priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has determined that the hunting of waterfowl (i.e., ducks and geese), black brant (*Branta bernicla*), American coot (*Fulica americana*), and common gallinule (also referred to as common moorhen) (*Gallinula galeata*) on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR is a compatible wildlife-dependent recreational use (refer to Appendix A of the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex CCP [USFWS 2013]). The environmental assessment prepared in association with the CCP also concluded that wildlife and habitat resources managed on the Refuge are healthy and robust enough to support regulated hunting in designated portions of the Refuge and fishing in the Salton Sea. In addition, the Service has concluded that these activities are not likely to adversely affect any of the special status species on the Refuge including: the Federal endangered Yuma clapper rail, desert pupfish (*Cyprinodon macularius macularius*), California least tern (*Sternula antillarum browni*), least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*), and southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*), as well as the State endangered bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), Gila woodpecker (*Melanerpes uropygialis*), and little willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii brewsteri*) and the State threatened California black rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis coturniculus*), Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), greater sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis tabida*) and bank swallow (*Riparia riparia*).

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) considerations by the Service for hunted migratory game bird species are addressed by the programmatic document, "Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement: Issuance of Annual Regulations Permitting the Sport Hunting of Migratory Birds (FSES 88- 14)," filed with the USEPA on June 9, 1988. The Service published a Notice of Availability in the Federal Register on June 16, 1988 (53 FR 22582), and the Record of Decision on August 18, 1988 (53 FR 31341). This document addresses the NEPA requirement to analyze the potential effects of issuing annual regulations permitting the sport hunting of migratory birds. In addition, the Service in 2010 (75 FR 39577) issued a draft Supplemental EIS on the setting of annual regulations permitting the hunting of migratory birds. These documents address waterfowl hunting at the national level.

The Office of Migratory Bird Management sets the Migratory Bird Frameworks through their annual regulations permitting the sport hunting of migratory birds. The individual States set seasons within those frameworks. Each Refuge considers the cumulative impacts to hunted migratory species of these frameworks and develops their hunting program accordingly. Season dates and bag limits for Refuges open to hunting are never longer or larger than the State regulations, and in many cases, such as on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR, the number of days the Refuge is open for waterfowl hunting are more restrictive than the State regulations.

The Service Regional and Refuge biologists along with scientists from the U.S. Geologic Survey-Biological Resources Division (Office of Migratory Bird Management) and university researchers meet twice annually with State flyway representatives to discuss inventory data and survey reports for migratory game bird populations which are hunted, proposed for hunting, and closed to hunting. The Service bases its migratory waterfowl season length and bag limits for the various species on these surveys. The annual breeding ground survey is one of the most important surveys and has been conducted since 1955. This cooperative effort between the Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service covers Canada, Alaska, and the northern United States prairies where 90 percent of the continental waterfowl populations breed. Results are summarized in various publications, including the annual fall flight forecast. Other important data include harvest and survival rate

estimates from band returns. Whether to open a season for a species or not and the establishment of the season length and bag limits are determined by the population objectives for each species. A species must have a harvestable surplus to be considered for hunting. Population objectives for each species are calculated using data from population surveys and banding data.

2. Conformance with Statutory Authorities

National Wildlife Refuges are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System); purposes for which individual Refuges were established; and policies, laws, and international treaties. Relevant guidance includes the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Administration Act), as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) (16 U.S.C. 668dd-ee), the Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 (16 U.S.C. 460k), and selected portions of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) and Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge Manual.

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” (Improvement Act); and two of the stated goals of the Refuge System include:

- Provide and enhance opportunities to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation); and
- Foster understanding and instill appreciation of the diversity and interconnectedness of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

The Administration Act states that Refuge management must focus first and foremost on the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats, while the Recreation Act authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to administer areas within the Refuge System for public recreation as an appropriate incidental or secondary use only to the extent that doing so is practicable and not inconsistent with the primary purpose(s) for which Congress and the Service established the areas.

The Improvement Act further defines the priorities for public uses on Refuges and establishes six wildlife-dependent recreational uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation) as the priority general public uses of the Refuge System. These uses are to receive priority consideration in Refuge planning and management; and when the Secretary determines that a proposed wildlife-dependent recreational use is a compatible use within a Refuge, that activity should be facilitated, subject to such restrictions or regulations as may be necessary, reasonable, and appropriate.

To implement the provisions of the Improvement Act, the Service has adopted a Compatibility Policy (*Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, Part 603 FW 2*) that includes guidelines for determining if a use proposed on a Refuge is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. A compatible use is defined in the policy as a proposed or existing wildlife-dependent recreational use or any other use of a NWR that, based on sound professional judgment, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the NWRS mission or the purposes for which the Refuge was established. Sound professional judgment is defined as a finding, determination, or decision that is consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management and administration, available science and resources (e.g., funding, personnel, facilities, other

infrastructure), and applicable laws. The Service strives to provide wildlife-dependent recreational uses when compatible. If financial resources are not available to design, operate, and maintain a priority use, the Refuge Manager will take reasonable steps to obtain outside assistance from the State and other conservation interests.

Hunting is identified in the Improvement Act as a priority use for Refuges when it is compatible with Refuge purposes and mission of the Refuge System. The conclusion of the compatibility determination prepared to address waterfowl hunting on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR is that the continuation of the current waterfowl hunting program on the Refuge is compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established. Therefore, the CCP (USFWS 2013) recommends the continued implementation of this program. The Compatibility Determination for hunting is provided in Appendix A of the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex Comprehensive Conservation Plan (USFWS 2013).

Finally, the provisions governing hunting and sport fishing on Refuges are provided in 50 CFR, part 32.1. Hunting and sport fishing on a Refuge is regulated to:

- Ensure compatibility with refuge purpose(s);
- Properly manage the fish and wildlife resource(s);
- Protect other refuge values;
- Ensure refuge visitor safety; and
- Provide opportunities for quality fish- and wildlife-dependent recreation.

3. Hunting Program Goals

Refuge goals, as detailed in the CCP for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR (USFWS 2013), include:

- Goal 1: Manage suitable habitat for migratory birds, including wintering populations of waterfowl.
- Goal 2: Protect, manage, and, where appropriate, restore or enhance habitat to support the federally and State listed threatened and endangered species and other species of concern currently present on the Refuge.
- Goal 3: Support native wildlife diversity by providing appropriate upland and wetland habitats within the Refuge.
- Goal 4: Work in partnership with other Federal, State, and local agencies and tribes to implement projects within the greater Salton Sea area intended to preserve habitat functions that support fish and bird life, and/or to protect other resources of region-wide significance.
- Goal 5: Enhance the public's awareness, appreciation, and enjoyment of the Refuge's biological resources by providing opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses.

The hunting program would benefit from the actions implemented to achieve Goals 1, 3, 4, and 5, while the special conditions applied to the hunting program will assist in achieving Goals 1, 2, 3, and 5.

4. Hunting Program Objectives

The CCP includes the following hunting objective that is intended to support the Refuge's public use goal (Goal 5):

Hunting

Throughout the life of the CCP, continue to conduct a high quality waterfowl hunting program on the Refuge that provides opportunities for approximately 1,000 annual hunting visits (depending on season length and climatic conditions) on approximately 130 acres on the Union Tract and approximately 380 acres on the Hazard Tract by 2013.

This objective is consistent with the intent of the Improvement Act, which specifies that priority general public uses, including hunting, should receive enhanced consideration over other general public uses in planning and management and that opportunities for families to experience compatible wildlife-dependent recreation shall be provided, particularly opportunities for parents and their children to "safely engage in traditional outdoor activities, such as fishing and hunting." Hunting is recognized by the Service as a healthy, traditional outdoor pastime, deeply rooted in the American heritage; an activity that can instill a unique understanding and appreciation of wildlife, their behavior, and their habitat needs. The Refuge's hunting program includes an after season Junior Waterfowl Hunt, an event dedicated to supporting family participation in the tradition of waterfowl hunting.

The CCP and this hunting plan support the continued availability of quality waterfowl hunting opportunities on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR. The hunting program, which is managed by CDFW through a cooperative agreement with the Service, will continue to be conducted in a safe and cost-effective manner and will be carried out consistent with State regulations.

5. Assessment

- A. *Are wildlife populations present in numbers sufficient to sustain optimum population levels for priority Refuge objectives other than hunting?*

Yes, wildlife populations are present in sufficient numbers for priority Refuge objectives for wildlife management and for wildlife-dependent recreational uses. The Refuge adopts harvest regulations set by the State, which uses concepts of density dependent compensatory mortality and adaptive harvest management to ensure sustained waterfowl species populations. In addition, impacts to non-target species are minimized through regulations related to when, where, and how hunting can occur on the Refuge. Further, the majority of Unit 1 is closed to all public use to provide areas of sanctuary for target and non-target species.

High quality opportunities for other wildlife-dependent recreational uses including wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation are provided in portions of Unit 1 and in proximity to Refuge headquarters, which are closed to hunting.

- B. *Is there competition for habitat between target species and other wildlife?*

Possibly; while each species occupies a unique niche, there is only a finite amount of space available to satisfy various habitat requirements of water, food, cover, breeding, and roosting.

C. *Are there unacceptable levels of predation by target species on other wildlife forms?*

No, target species (i.e., waterfowl, brant, coot, common gallinule) generally do not prey on other species at unacceptable levels.

D. *Are target species exotic or non-endemic to the refuge?*

No, all target species are migratory birds typically present in wetlands located along the Pacific Flyway.

E. *If applicable, is hunting addressed as a strategy in the refuge's Habitat Management Plan?*

A Habitat Management Plan has not yet been prepared for the Refuge.

6. Measures Taken to Avoid Conflicts with Other Management Objectives

A. Biological Conflicts

To avoid significant adverse effects to non-target species, particularly species of conservation concern, the following conservation measures, which are outlined in the CCP (*USFWS 2013*), would be implemented as part of the hunting program:

- Limit hunter access within designated hunt areas by restricting hunting to assigned blinds on the Union Tract and within 100 feet (30 meters) of blind sites on the Hazard Tract, except when shooting to retrieve crippled birds.
- Provide sanctuary areas in Unit 1 to support all target species, and provide four non-hunt days within the hunt area to provide opportunities for undisturbed foraging and resting.
- Preserve a minimum of 75 acres of cattail habitat within the Hazard Unit to ensure no net loss of habitat for major life history requirements (i.e., breeding, feeding, resting cover) of Yuma clapper rail and to provide sanctuary for other secretive marsh birds, songbirds, and associated wildlife.
- Prohibit hunting in proximity to rail occupied territories during the breeding and molting seasons (March 15–September 1).
- Conduct annual surveys of Yuma clapper rail on the Refuge to monitor population size and allow for quantitative comparisons of population size within occupied rail sites on the Refuge both within the Hazard Tract and outside the designated hunting area to discern any potential effects of disturbance on rails occupying the marsh habitat within the Hazard Tract.
- Restrict the type of shot permitted on the Refuge to approved non-toxic shot.
- Ensure periodic law enforcement presence in the area throughout the hunt season to minimize excessive harvest and other infractions (e.g., illegal use of lead shot, take of non-game species, littering, illegal access into closed areas).

- Post information about the importance of protecting non-target species at kiosks, on the Refuge website, and in hunting related Refuge outreach materials.

B. Visitor Services Conflicts

As presented in the CCP, the Refuge's hunting program is conducted in a manner that provides for safe hunting opportunities while minimizing conflicts with other priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses. Other visitor uses occur on different areas or at different times of the year, thereby minimizing potential conflicts.

Specifically, the hunting area in the Union Tract of Unit 2 is only open to the public for hunting on designated days. No other public uses are permitted in this area at any time; therefore, there is no potential for conflicts between uses in this area. In addition, no hunting is permitted in Unit 1; therefore, there is no potential for conflicts between hunting and the other wildlife-dependent recreational uses occurring in Unit 1.

Although use of the Hazard Tract by the public is currently only open for hunting, the CCP proposes the establishment of a seasonal trail to accommodate wildlife observation. This trail would only be open for public use outside of the hunting season. During the hunting season, there are areas within Unit 1 that provide comparable opportunities for wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education.

C. Administrative Conflicts

Potential conflicts could arise from hunters not familiar with current regulations. To avoid such conflicts, hunting information is provided on the Refuge website, in CDFW publications and Refuge outreach materials, and on signs posted in appropriate parking areas. In addition, the Refuge's Hunting Program Working Group (e.g., Friends of Wister) assists in communicating with the hunting community about the manner in which the hunt is conducted on the Refuge. This group also helps maintain the Refuge's hunting program and associated facilities.

7. Audiences

The hunting program generally accommodates about 1,000 hunter visits per year, with the majority of the hunters coming from the southern California area. In recent years, only about half of the blinds on the Hazard Tract, which is open to waterfowl hunting, are filled during most of the season. The hunting blinds on the Union Tract, which provide opportunities to hunt geese, are filled more frequently, reaching 100 percent capacity on all open hunt days late in the season.

A youth hunt, open to hunters 15 years of age and younger, is offered at the Refuge the weekend following the end of the regular hunting season. A sampling from recent years shows an average participation level of 11.25 youths on that weekend. Actual numbers range from 7 to 19 youths participating in the event annually.

8. Description of Hunting Program

A. Overview

Designated areas of Unit 2 of the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR (Figure 3) are open for waterfowl hunting on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. A total of 80 hunters can be accommodated on the Refuge each hunt day.

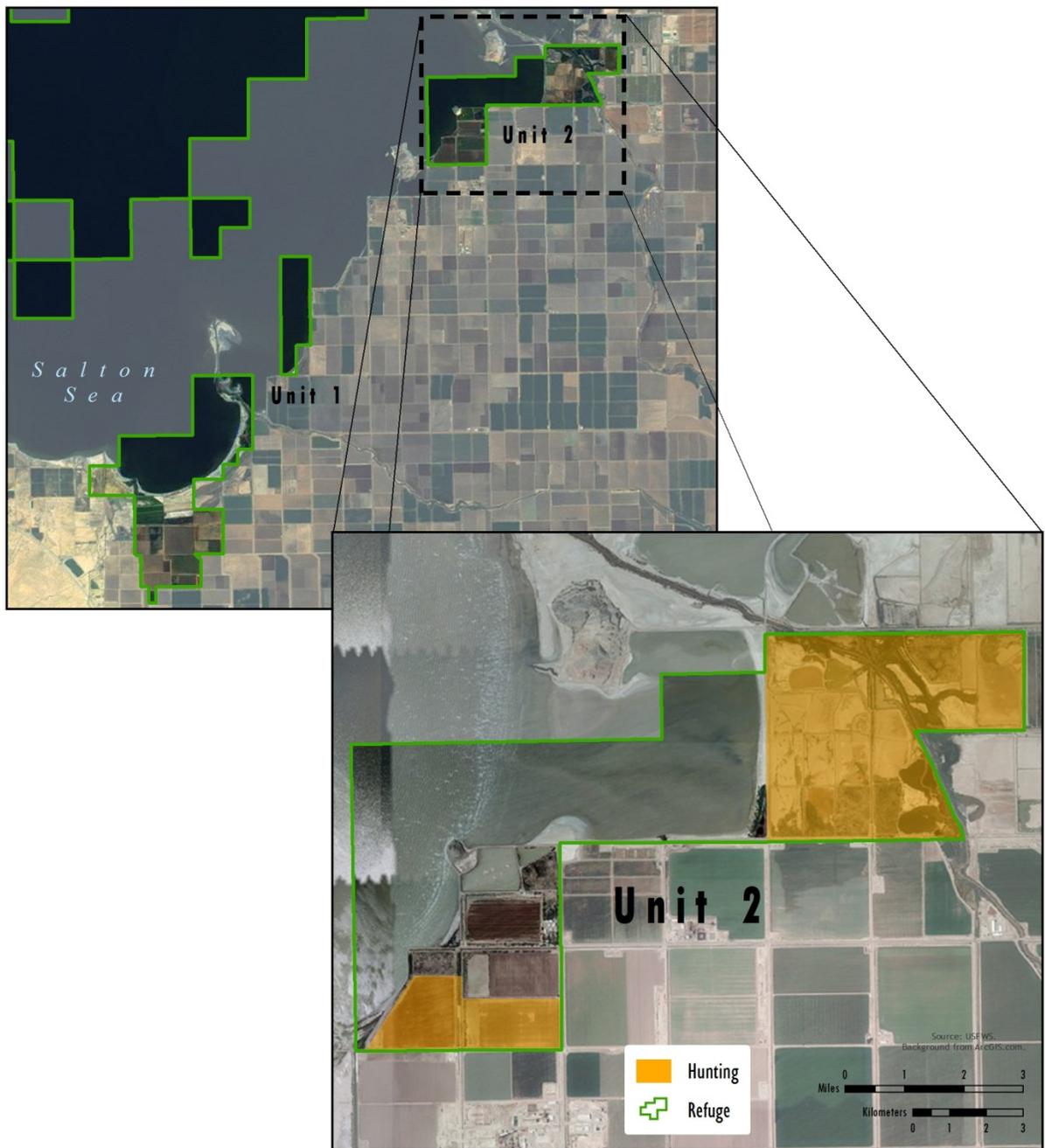


Figure 3. Location of Designated Hunting Areas on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR

Hunters must register and acquire a permit from the Imperial Wildlife Area’s Wister Unit check station prior to entering the Refuge’s designated parking areas. The kill record portion of the permit must be carried at all times, and filled out and returned to the check station immediately after leaving the hunt area. All equipment is carried in and out each day.

The majority of the hunting blinds on the Refuge are concrete pit blinds large enough to accommodate two hunters per blind with two blinds per site. Up to four hunters may apply on an application (except for H12 and H13, which are limited to two hunters per site). Each hunting party may bring up to two junior hunters. A separate drawing is conducted for the three universally accessible blind sites. Non-reserved blinds are available on a first come first serve basis to all hunters.

The use of retrieving dogs is permitted and encouraged in all areas open to waterfowl hunting. These dogs must be kept on a leash, except when engaged in authorized hunting activities, at which time they must be under the immediate control of a licensed hunter. Any hunter who allows his/her dog to disturb wildlife is not well received by other hunters who do not want waterfowl disturbed on the ponds that they are hunting. When present, game wardens and Federal wildlife officers will enforce regulations requiring owners to maintain control over their dogs while on the Refuge. Although the use of dogs is not a form of wildlife-dependent recreation; they do in this case support a priority wildlife-dependent use.

B. Refuge Areas Supporting Target Species and Open for Hunting

Waterfowl hunting on the Refuge is managed by CDFW and is permitted on approximately 480 acres in Unit 2 of the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR (Figure 2). A total of 22 spaced hunting blinds, three of which are universally accessible, are provided in two areas. Eighteen of the blind sites are in traditional duck pond habitats (managed seasonal wetlands and open water areas) on the Hazard Tract portion of Unit 2, which encompasses about 350 acres. The remaining four blinds are in the Union Tract portion of Unit 2 in a 130-acre area that consists of agricultural fields planted with forage crops to support wintering geese.

C. Target Species

Target species include waterfowl (i.e., ducks and geese), black brant (*Branta bernicla*), American coot (*Fulica americana*), and common moorhens (*Gallinula galeata*).

D. Seasons

The Service annually establishes Migratory Bird Hunting Early Seasons and Bag and Possession Limits and Migratory Bird Hunting Late Seasons and Bag and Possession Limits. Following the issuance of these final rules for the upcoming migratory bird hunting season, the California Fish and Game Commission meets to approve hunting seasons and bag limits for the upcoming waterfowl hunting season in California. The hunting season and bag limits for the Refuge are based on these recommendations. The hunting season and bag limits that were applicable on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR during the 2012/2013 waterfowl hunting season are presented in Table 1.

E. Justification for Permits

Permits are required because there are a limited number of blinds available on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR. The permit process, which is managed by CDFW, also facilitates the gathering of information about the hunting program. Permits also allow for appropriate allocation of the Refuge's three universally accessible blind sites.

Table 1
Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR
Hunting Season and Bag and Possession Limits for 2012-2013

Species	Dates	Limits
Waterfowl – Ducks	From Oct 20 to Jan 27 on Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesdays only	Daily Bag Limit: 7 ducks total with no more than: - 2 female mallards, - 2 pintails (either sex) - 1 canvasback (either sex) - 2 redheads (either sex) - 7 scaup (either sex) Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit
Waterfowl – White Geese (Ross' or Snow)	From Nov 3 to Jan 27 on Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesdays only	Daily Bag Limit: 6 Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit
American Coot and Common Gallinule (Moorhens)	From Oct 20 to Jan 27 on Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesdays only	Daily Bag Limit: 25, either all of one species or a mixture of these species Possession Limit: 25
Black Brant	From Nov 10 through Dec 9 on Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesdays only	Daily Bag Limit: 2 Possession Limit: double the daily bag limit
Youth Waterfowl Hunting Days (for youth 15 years of age or younger, accompanied by a non-hunting adult 18 years of age or older)	The Saturday and Sunday following the closing of waterfowl season	Daily Bag Limit and Possession Limit Same as Regular Season

F. Procedures for Ongoing Consultation and Coordination with the State

The Refuge maintains close communication with the State regarding the hunting program and consultation and coordination are facilitated through the cooperative agreement that allows for the State to manage the hunting program for the Refuge. The number of days the Refuge is open to hunting is more restrictive than State regulations and this determination is made by considering the purposes for which the Refuge was established, as well as the need to minimize conflicts with non-target species.

G. Methods of Control and Enforcement

The hunt program is managed by CDFW and field checks are conducted periodically by the Game Warden and the Southern California Federal Wildlife Zone Officer. The Refuge does not currently have a full time Federal wildlife officer on staff. The Zone Officer periodically monitors activities within the hunting areas to ensure compliance with applicable regulations, and plans, conducts, and coordinates visits with Refuge staff, CDFW, and other agencies.

Other methods of control are described here.

- The daily quota of hunters on the Refuge is filled by those holding advance reservations, which are issued by CDFW.

- Hunters with reservations must present them at the Wister Check Station no later than 1.5 hours before shooting time.
- Vacancies occurring from no show reservation holders and from hunters leaving the area are filled according to the order established in the previous night's drawing at the Wister Check Station.
- Hunters must obtain a permit at the Wister Check Station, which is to be in the hunter's possession while hunting on the Refuge.
- Hunters are permitted to enter only the assigned blind site for which the permit is issued.
- On the Hazard Tract, hunters must hunt from within 100 feet of their assigned blind sites or stakes, and can only leave this area to retrieve downed birds.
- On the Union Tract, hunters are required to hunt only from within their blinds, except to retrieve downed birds.
- All hunters are required to check out at the Wister Check Station, report hunting results, and return their permits before leaving the area.

H. Funding and Staffing Requirements

Direct costs to administer the hunt program are primarily in the form of staff time. The day-to-day administration of the hunt program during the hunting season is implemented by CDFW through a Cooperative Agreement. Refuge staff communicates with CDFW about the hunting conditions at the various blinds within the Refuge, and provides updates on any changes in blind conditions that may occur throughout the season. The Refuge is responsible for checking and emptying parking lot trash cans and paying for a sanitation company to pump out the portable toilets that are provided at each parking lot during the hunt season. Outside of the hunt season, staff develop habitat in the wetlands where the blinds are located, work with volunteers to clean blinds, replace directional signs, and, as necessary, maintain access roads and parking lots. Approximately \$50,000 is spent each year to maintain this program. The Refuge currently has adequate funding and staff to manage the hunt program.

I. Fees

A daily hunting fee of \$20.00 is collected from all persons 16 years and older.

J. Description of Existing Facilities

Hunting is permitted within portions of the Hazard and Union Tracts within Unit 2 of the Refuge (Figure 4). A total of 22 spaced blinds, three of which are universally accessible, are provided on the Refuge. Four blinds are located within the Union Tract in agricultural fields planted with crops intended to provide forage for wintering geese. Eighteen of the blind sites are in traditional duck pond habitats on the Hazard Tract. Hunt blind 7B, one of the accessible sites on the Hazard Tract, requires the use of a dog or non-motorized boat to retrieve birds. No hunting is permitted from the boat.

Other than the universally accessible blinds and sites H12 and H13, designated hunting sites consist of concrete pit blinds large enough to accommodate two hunters per blind with two blinds per site. Parking areas are provided with numbered parking spaces that correspond to the blind or pond for which a hunting party is assigned.

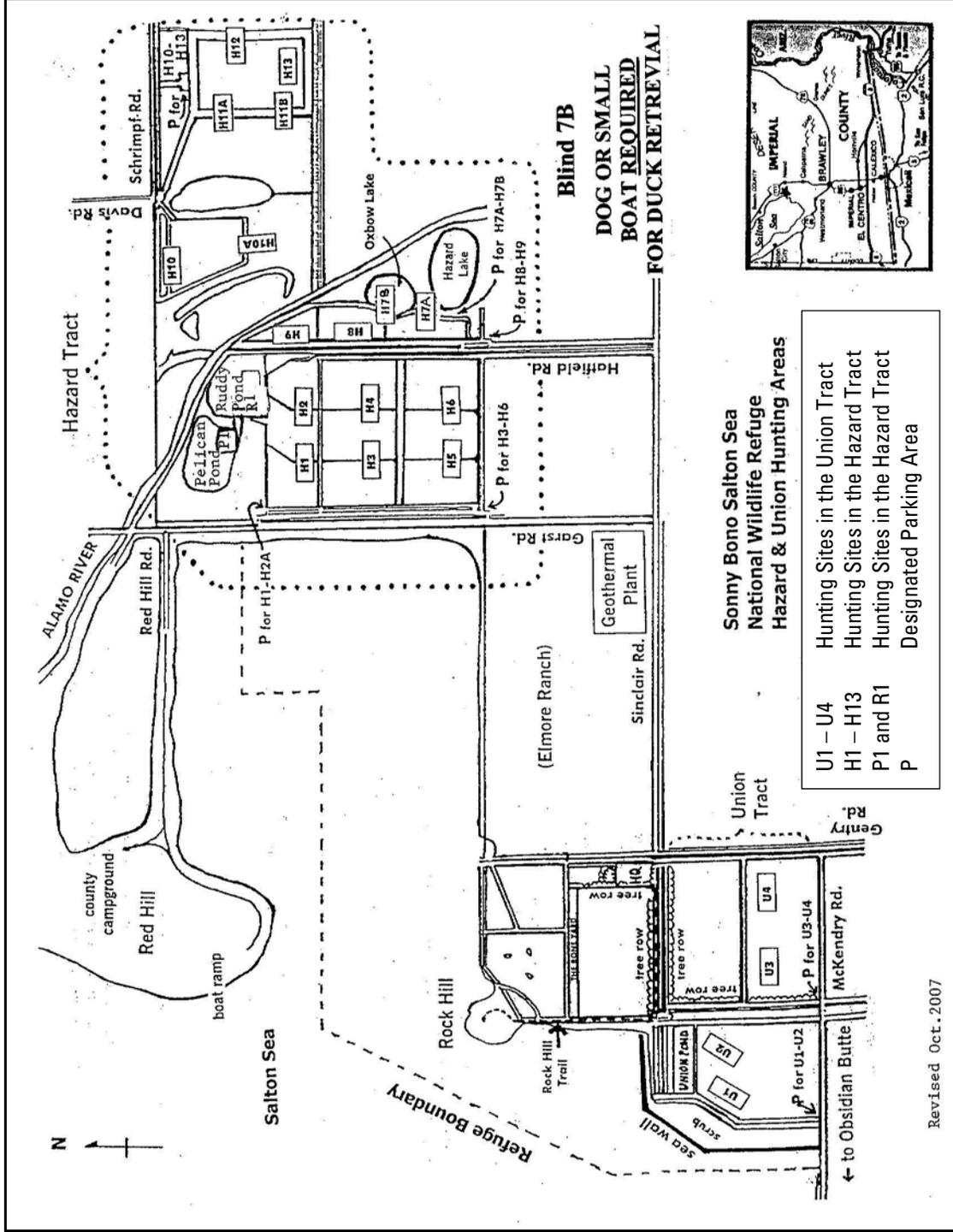


Figure 4 – Locations of Hunting Areas on Unit 2 of the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge

9. Conduct of the Hunt

A. Refuge-specific Hunting Regulations

The following special regulations have been previously published in the Federal Register and currently appear in 50 CFR 32.24 (California) as presented. They are also published annually in CDFW's Waterfowl Hunting Regulations under "Federal Regulations." No changes to the current regulations are proposed.

Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge

- A. Migratory Game Bird Hunting. Hunting of geese, ducks, coots, and common moorhens [gallinules] is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:
 - 1. Hunters using the Union Tract must use goose decoys.
 - 2. You must hunt from assigned blinds on the Union Tract and within 100 feet (30 m) of blind sites on the Hazard Tract, except when shooting to retrieve crippled birds.
 - 3. Firearms must be unloaded while being transported between parking areas and blind sites.
 - 4. Hunters may not possess more than 25 shells while in the field.
- B. Upland Game Hunting. [Reserved]
- C. Big Game Hunting. [Reserved]
- D. Sport Fishing. Fishing is permitted only on designated areas of the refuge inundated by the Salton Sea subject to the following conditions:
 - 1. Fishing is permitted from April 1 through September 30.
 - 2. Only boat fishing is permitted.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunt and Outreach Efforts

Most of the public is expected to support the continuation of the current hunting program on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR. Hunting has occurred on the Refuge since at least 1953. The current program provides for a safe hunt that intends to optimize the quality of the hunt, while also providing for other compatible wildlife uses elsewhere on the Refuge.

Through the CCP process, the Refuge has received a variety of comments related to hunting on the Refuge. The majority of those comments support hunting on the Refuge, with many commenters voicing opposition to any reduction in the number of hunt days provided during the season. Others requested that the hunting program be expanded to include hunting of geese in Unit 1; however, to ensure that hunting is compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established, Unit 1 will not be opened to hunting. Some individuals who are opposed to hunting on National Wildlife Refuges voiced their objection to any hunting on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR.

The Refuge has determined that a quality hunt can continue under the program as currently implemented, therefore, no changes to the current program are proposed at this time. Over the past few years, the Refuge has received about 1,000 hunter visits annually. More visits could be accommodated during most of the season, particularly on the Hazard Tract. The Union Tract hunting blinds are filled more frequently, reaching 100 percent capacity on all open hunt days late in the season.

C. Hunter Application and Registration Procedures

The daily quota of 80 hunters per hunting day is filled by those holding advance reservations, which are issued by CDFW. Hunters with reservations must present them at the Wister Check Station no later than 1½ hours before shooting time. Vacancies occurring from no show reservation holders and from hunters leaving the area shall be filled according to the order established in the previous night's drawing at the Wister Check Station. Furthermore, a permit must be obtained at the Wister Check Station and must be in the hunter's possession for hunting on the Refuge. Hunters are permitted to enter only the assigned blind site for which the permit is issued. A fee is required for all persons 16 years and older. All hunters are required to check out at the Wister Check Station, report hunting results, and return their permits before leaving the area.

D. Description of Hunter Selection Process

Reservations to hunt on State-controlled hunting areas, including the Refuge's Hazard and Union Tracts, are issued by drawing. Hunters may apply as many times per season as desired but no more than once for each area for each shoot-day. Each reservation assures entry to the area selected for the date issued. Numbered reservations will be honored in numerical order at the time the check station starts issuing permits for the hunt day. Application for a reservation and more detailed instructions are available at the CDFW website. The accessible sites are also assigned on a first-come-first-served basis for those that can provide proof of a disability standard as defined by the State of California.

E. Media Selection for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunt

The hunting program on the Refuge has been in place for many years and the hunting community is aware of when and how the hunting program is implemented on the Refuge. In addition, the CDFW Waterfowl Hunting booklet announces what hunt opportunities are available where and when, and the Refuge website provides information on application procedures and provides a link to the CDFW website where additional information about current season bag limits and Refuge-specific regulations can be found.

F. Description of Opportunities for Hunters to become Familiar with the Hunt Area

The areas in which hunting is permitted are not open to the public year-round; therefore, there are no provisions for pre-hunt scouting. However, Refuge staff are available and willing to discuss habitat conditions with the public for specific refuge areas if they have questions. The staff can be contacted via phone or in person at the visitor contact station located at the Complex headquarters. In addition, portions of the hunting area are visible from adjacent public roads, providing hunters with an opportunity to observe the general abundance and diversity of waterfowl in the area.

G. Hunter Requirements

(1) State determined age requirement

- Youth hunters, 15 year or younger, must be accompanied by an adult 18 years or older. On Youth Waterfowl Hunting Days, Federal regulations require that hunters must be 15 years of age or younger and be accompanied by a non-hunting adult 18 years of age or older.

(2) Allowable equipment

- Method of take: federally approved non-toxic shot is required for waterfowl, coot, and common gallinule hunting. No rifles or pistols may be used or possessed on the Refuge and the use or possession of shotguns larger than 12-gauge are prohibited.
- Hunters using the Union Tract must use goose decoys.
- Hunters may not possess more than 25 shells while in the field, and firearms must be unloaded while being transported between parking areas and blind sites.
- Dogs are required to be kept on a leash, except for hunting dogs engaged in authorized hunting activities and under the immediate control of a licensed hunter (see 50 CFR 26.21(b)).
- All personal property, including decoys, must be removed at the end of each day (see 50 CFR 27.93).

(3) Use of open fires

- Fires are prohibited on the Refuge.

(4) Licensing and Permits

California hunting license and tags are required, and any adult license holder taking ducks, geese, or brant must have a current State of California duck stamp affixed to their license. In addition, it is unlawful for any person aged sixteen years or older to take any migratory waterfowl unless at the time of such taking the person carries in his or her immediate possession an unexpired Federal duck stamp validated by his or her signature written by him or herself in ink across the face of the stamp prior to any taking of such birds.

Hunters must also obtain a permit to hunt in the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR at the Wister Check Station. This permit, which indicates where the hunter is permitted to hunt on the Refuge, must be in the hunter's possession while on the Refuge.

(5) Reporting harvest

Hunters must fill out and return the kill record portion of the permit to the Wister Unit check station immediately after leaving the Sonny Bono Salton Sea hunt area.

(6) Hunter training and safety

Hunters are required to successfully complete a hunter education course in order to purchase a California hunting license.

(7) Other information

- Waterfowl hunting: the use of trained retrieving dogs is allowed and encouraged.
- Falconry is not allowed.
- Dog trials are not allowed.

10. Future Actions

The hunt plan for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR is administered and maintained as described here for the life of the CCP, or until changes in site conditions or other factors warrant a reevaluation of the current program.

11. Monitoring and Evaluation

The number of hunter visits to the Refuge annually will be provided by the CDFW which issues permits for all hunters present on the Refuge. Harvest limits will be estimated using stratified sampling, self-reporting, patrol, and direct observations.

Use levels, trends, and needs will be evaluated through hunters' harvest report/comment cards, hunter contact in the field, comments during working group, agencies, and public meeting, e-mails and letters. Visitor use will be recorded annually in the current refuge management data system.

12. Appendices to the Hunt Plan

An opening package is not required as no changes to the current hunting program for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR are proposed.

The following documents accompany the Hunt Plan:

- Compatibility Determination (Appendix A-1, Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex CCP)
- Finding of No Significant Impact and accompanying NEPA documentation for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWRC CCP; and
- Endangered Species Act Section 7 evaluation for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWRC CCP.