



Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR & Coachella Valley NWR

Planning Update 2 - January 2012

Greetings!

This is the second in a series of *Planning Updates* for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge Complex 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 alternatives. We will further refine these alternatives after considering the additional input we receive from you over the next month. Once completed, the alternatives will be evaluated in the draft CCP, which will be available for review in Spring 2012.

Update from the Refuge Manager

It has been a busy year for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex. In addition to our normal management activities, we have been hard at work preparing for the development of the draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).

When we initiated the CCP last year, we requested and received comments from you telling us how you would like to see our two refuges in the Complex, the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR and Coachella Valley NWR, managed over the next 15 years. After considering your comments, which are summarized on page 2 of this Planning Update, and conducting a review of the Refuge Complex's current wildlife and habitat management practices and public use programs, we developed draft goals and alternatives for each Refuge.

We encourage you to review the draft goals and alternatives, which are presented on pages 5 and 6 of this Planning Update, and over the next month provide us with any comments or suggestions that you feel should be considered during the preparation of the draft CCP. Guidance on how to provide these comments is provided on pages 4 and 7.

I appreciate your continued involvement and welcome your input on CCP and other refuge-related matters.

Chris Schoneman, Refuge Manager
Sonny Bono Salton Sea
National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Inside this update:

Summary of Issues Raised during the Public Scoping Process.	2
Developing Refuge Goals.	3
Refuge Purposes	4
Developing Management Alternatives	4
We Invite Your Comments.	4
Draft Alternatives for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR.	5
Draft Alternatives for the Coachella Valley NWR	6
Contact Information	7
Planning Schedule.	8



Opportunities for wildlife observation and photography have been expanded on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR. This accessible observation deck extends over a portion of the Refuge's managed wetlands in Unit 1, where a variety of migratory shorebirds and seabirds can be observed throughout the year. We invite you to come check it out!

Summary of Issues Raised during the Public Scoping Process

The issues, concerns, and recommendations received during the scoping process fall into several categories, including wildlife and habitat management, public use, refuge operations (e.g., law enforcement, facilities maintenance), and environmental effects.

The public and agency comments relevant to the **Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR** are summarized below.

Wildlife/Habitat Management

- Optimize crop productivity in fields managed for foraging winter geese.
- Implement predator control to protect seabird chicks and eggs from predation.
- Expand nesting opportunities to improve seabird nesting productivity, particularly for gull-billed terns.
- Identify and implement strategies, including habitat restoration, to address the physical and biological effects of a shrinking Salton Sea.
- Ensure that Refuge planning is consistent with the larger restoration planning being conducted for the Salton Sea, including the Salton Sea Species Conservation Habitat Project.

Public Use

- Continue to provide opportunities of waterfowl hunting and consider expansion of these opportunities on the Refuge, including allowing hunting in Unit 1.
- Expand waterfowl hunting to include wing shooting.
- Discontinue waterfowl hunting on the Refuge.
- Expand opportunities for bird watching and other wildlife observation, as well as interpretation and environmental education.
- Include the topic of climate change in environmental education programs.
- Improve trail accessibility.

Cultural Resources

- Evaluate potential impacts to cultural resources and consult with affected tribal governments.

Refuge Operations

- Increase staff, including the hiring of a law enforcement officer for the Complex, to implement refuge activities.
- Coordinate with surrounding landowners and other partners, and establish a Friends group.
- Implement repairs and improvements to public facilities, including restrooms and parking areas.
- Evaluate current and future land tenure issues.

Environmental Effects

- Evaluate and implement measures to address air quality impacts associated with newly exposed Salton Sea sediments in areas managed by the Refuge.
- Evaluate long-term water availability for current and future management practices.
- Evaluate existing and future water quality issues including increases in temperature and concentrations of constituent of concern.
- Address the effects of climate change on Refuge resources and management.
- Evaluate the potential cumulative impacts of implementing the management proposals.
- Address effects of alternative energy development.
- Address potential geological hazards to Refuge structures.

Summarized below are the various comments received for the **Coachella Valley NWR**.

Wildlife/Habitat Management

- Control invasive weeds on the Refuge.
- Describe how changes in sand transport could affect Refuge species.
- Enforce restrictions on vehicle use within the Refuge.

List and Sensitive Species Management

- Monitor listed and other sensitive species which occur or have the potential to occur on the Refuge.
- Manage some areas of the Refuge to support the flat-tailed horned lizard.

Public Use

- Provide opportunities for hunting upland bird and large and small game on the Refuge.
- Expand opportunities for wildlife observation and interpretation.

Refuge Operations

- Increase staff, including the hiring of a law enforcement officer for the Complex, to implement refuge activities.
- Coordinate with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on flood control proposals for the Thousand Palms area.
- Coordinate with surrounding land managers and other partners, and establish a Friends group.
- Describe current land ownership and in-holdings.

Environmental Effects

- Address the effects of climate change on Refuge resources and management.
- Evaluate the potential cumulative impacts of implementing the management proposals.

Developing Goals for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR and Coachella Valley NWR

Goals are one of the unifying elements of successful Refuge management. They identify and focus management priorities and provide a context for resolving issues and concerns raised during the scoping process. Refuge goals also guide specific projects, provide rationale for decisions, and offer a defensible link among the management actions, Refuge purposes, Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) policy, and National Wildlife Refuge System mission. The Refuge System defines a goal as a “. . . descriptive, open-ended, and often broad statement of desired future conditions that conveys a purpose but does not define measurable units” (Service Manual, 602 FW 1).

The CCP planning team drafted the following Refuge goals based on: 1) input provided during the scoping process for the CCP; 2) discussions with various public agencies and interested organizations; and 3) internal Fish and Wildlife Service review.

Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR

- Goal 1: Manage suitable habitat for migratory birds, including wintering populations of waterfowl.
- Goal 2: Protect, restore, and enhance Refuge lands and waters for federally and state listed threatened and endangered species and species of concern.
- Goal 3: Support native wildlife diversity by providing appropriate upland and riparian habitat.
- Goal 4: Work in partnership with other federal, state, and local agencies and Tribes to develop an effective management program to preserve the habitat functions of the Salton Sea.



Photo by USFWS

Geese foraging on the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR

- Goal 5: Enhance the public’s awareness, appreciation, and enjoyment of the Refuge’s biological resources.

Coachella Valley NWR

- Goal 1: Protect, restore, and enhance Refuge lands to ensure the survival of the federally threatened Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard and federally endangered Coachella Valley milk-vetch, as well as protect other species of concern.
- Goal 2: Work in partnership with federal, state, and local agencies, nonprofit land management organizations, and Tribes to support the implementation of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan.
- Goal 3: Enhance the public’s awareness and appreciation for the Refuge’s sensitive ecological functions and geological processes through compatible interpretive and environmental education opportunities.



Photo by Ginny Short

Flat-tailed horned lizard
on the Coachella Valley NWR

Refuge Purposes

A Refuge purpose is the purpose specified in or derived from the law, proclamation, executive order, agreement, public land order, donation document, or administrative memorandum establishing, authorizing, or expanding a national wildlife refuge, national wildlife refuge unit, or national wildlife refuge subunit. The Refuge purpose(s) for the establishment of the refuges within the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex are presented below.

Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR - Refuge purposes include “. . . a refuge and breeding ground for birds and wild animals . . .” (Executive Order 5498, dated 11/25/30); “. . . for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds” (16 U.S.C. § 715d, Migratory Bird Conservation Act); and “. . . for the management and control of migratory waterfowl and other wildlife . . .” (16 U.S.C. § 695, Lea Act).

Coachella Valley NWR - The purpose of this Refuge is “. . . to conserve (A) fish and wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species . . . or (B) plants . . .” (Endangered Species Act of 1973).

Developing Management Alternatives for the Draft CCP

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 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.

A summary of the management alternatives developed for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR is presented on page 5 and for the Coachella Valley NWR on page 6. (For a more detailed discussion of the draft alternatives for both refuges, please visit our CCP website located at <http://fws.gov/saltonsea> and scroll down to the bottom of the page, or contact the Refuge Planner [see page 7] to have this information sent to you.) As you review the various alternatives for each Refuge, you will find that the alternatives presented for a particular refuge 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 the scope and range of management alternatives presented for each refuge. Let us know if there is an issue or management proposal that is not included within the current range of alternatives that you feel should be addressed. To have your comments considered in time for incorporation in the draft CCP, please provide any comments to Victoria Touchstone, Refuge Planner, by February 27, 2012 (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/EA.

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 participated in the public scoping process; we encourage your continued involvement. This is your opportunity to provide input regarding the draft refuge goals, as well as the management alternatives to be evaluated in the EA. If you have comments, please provide them via mail, fax, or email to the Refuge Planner (see contact information on page 7) no later than February 27, 2012.

We plan to release the draft CCP/EA for review and comment in Spring 2012. If you are not on our mailing list and would like to be notified when the draft is available, please contact the Refuge Planner.

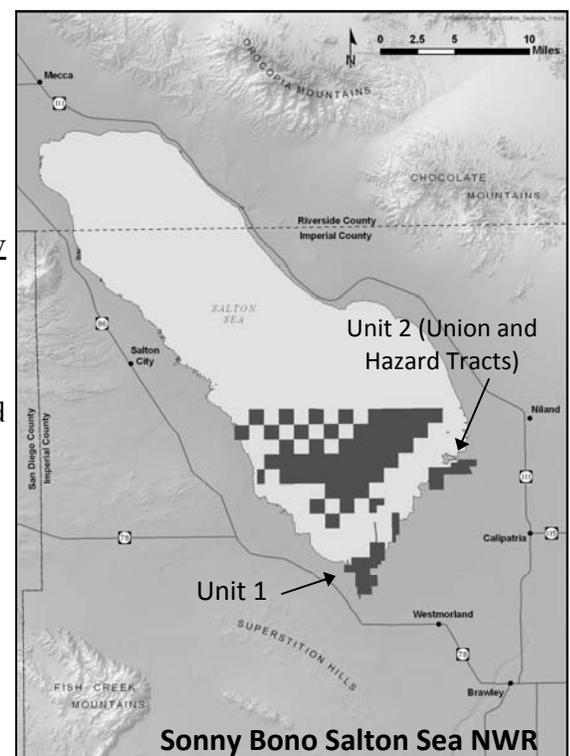
Draft Management Alternatives for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR

We propose to analyze three alternatives for managing the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR over the next 15 years, including a no action alternative and two action alternatives. Under Alternative A (No Action), management of the Refuge would continue as it is occurring today. Alternative B, currently identified as the proposed action, proposes to restore and enhance habitat to support migratory birds and listed species and to make improvements to existing public use facilities and programs. Alternative C also proposes to restore and enhance habitats for migratory birds and listed species, although some management actions may differ from those described in Alternative B, and to expand current public uses on the Refuge. Each of these alternatives is summarized below.

Alternative A - No Action. Alternative A assumes no changes to current management practices. Current wildlife and habitat management and other Refuge operations would continue per available funding. Existing public use programs, involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and environmental education would continue. This alternative represents the baseline from which other “action” alternatives will be evaluated.

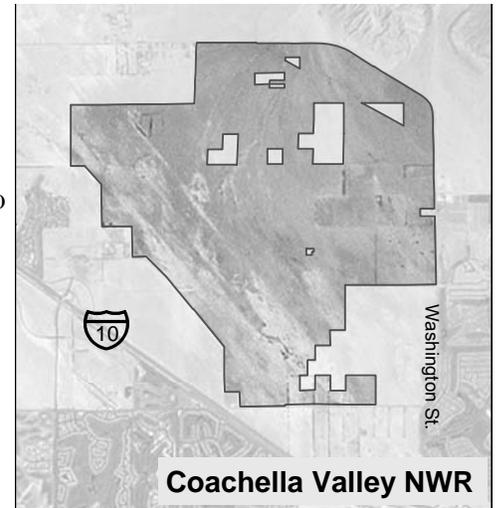
Alternative B - Restore and Enhance Habitat to Support Migratory Birds and Listed Species; Improve Existing Public Use Facilities (Proposed Action). Under this alternative, actions would be taken to restore or enhance existing managed habitats on the Refuge such as geese foraging fields, permanent cattail marshes, and shallow seasonal wetlands, as well as areas on the Refuge where the Salton Sea has receded leaving behind exposed seabed, such as in Red Hill Bay. The potential for permitting cooperative farming on the portions of the Refuge designated as foraging areas for wintering geese will also be evaluated. The Refuge’s Wildlife Disease Program would continue, but coordination with other agencies will be implemented to identify a new site for launching boats used in avian disease surveillance. A predator management plan is also proposed to control native and non-native predators responsible for taking seabird eggs and chicks. This alternative also includes a proposal to develop a robust program to monitor species abundance and diversity in the Refuge’s various managed habitats with the goal of identifying trends and variations that may occur as a result of changes at the Salton Sea, climate change, and/or changes in management practices. With respect to public use, a number of facility improvements are proposed including repairs to and possible expansion of the public restroom, repair or replacement of the walkways around the visitor contact station and public parking lot, upgrades to existing photo blinds, and surface modifications to the interpretive trails in Units 1 and 2 to improve accessibility. The hunting program would be modified to eliminate hunting on Wednesdays during the hunting season in the Union Tract, while also providing an additional hunting blind in this area for use on Saturdays and Sundays.

Alternative C - Restore and Enhance Habitat to Support Migratory Birds and Listed Species; Expand Current Public Uses. The majority of the wildlife and habitat management activities described in Alternative B would also be implemented under Alternative C. One exception is that under Alternative C consideration would be given to contracting some or all of farming operations on the Refuge designated as foraging areas for wintering geese. Expansion of public uses on the Refuge would include: a proposal to open a hunting area in Unit 1, where geese forage during the hunting season; development of a birding trail within the Hazard Unit for use outside of hunting season; and exploring with other partners the potential for developing a multiple agency auto tour route along the south end of the Salton Sea to interpret the fate of the Salton Sea, wetland restoration, migratory birds, water management, agriculture, geothermal development, and other issues important to this portion of the Imperial Valley.



Draft Management Alternatives for the Coachella Valley NWR

We also propose to analyze three alternatives for managing the Coachella Valley NWR over the next 15 years, including a no action alternative and two action alternatives. Under Alternative A (No Action), management of the Refuge would continue as it is occurring today. Alternative B, currently identified as the proposed action, proposes to expand management activities to support listed and sensitive species and current public uses would be expanded to include off-Refuge interpretation at an appropriate site. Alternative C also proposes to expand management activities to support listed and sensitive species, as well as expand current interpretive opportunities. These alternatives are summarized below.



Alternative A - No Action. Alternative A assumes no changes to current management practices. Current wildlife and habitat management would continue per available funding. Existing public uses supporting wildlife observation and interpretation would continue and a public trail extending along portions of the Refuge’s western and northern boundary would remain. This alternative represents the baseline from which other “action” alternatives will be evaluated.

Alternative B - Expand Management Actions to Support Listed and Sensitive Species; Maintain Current Public Uses on the Refuge (Proposed Action). Under this alternative, Refuge management would be expanded to include: 1) greater staff involvement in annual protocol monitoring of listed species and species covered by the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan; 2) design and implementation of a long-term program to control Sahara mustard and other invasive plants through an integrated approach to pest management; 3) enhancement of disturbed desert habitat, such as the old vineyard site, by reseeded areas following invasive plant control with native desert annuals; and 4) development and implementation, in cooperation with other agencies and research partners, of a long-term sand transport monitoring plan and a plan to monitor and evaluate the effects of climate change on the resources preserved on the Refuge and within the greater Thousand Palms Conservation area. Also under this alternative, monitoring and enforcement of unauthorized pedestrian and vehicular access within the Refuge would be increased. Occasional guided tours would continue and the Service would develop an off-Refuge interpretive program for use at the Coachella Valley Preserve Visitor Center and/or other public facilities in the area.

Alternative C - Expand Management Activities to Support Listed and Sensitive Species; Expand Current Public Use Program. Alternative C includes the same wildlife and habitat management actions described in Alternative B, but rather than simply enhance disturbed desert habitat, this alternative proposes to develop and implement a comprehensive restoration plan for the old vineyard site. In addition to the public use proposals included in Alternative B, this alternative also proposes the design and installation of a roadside interpretive station at an appropriate location on the Refuge perimeter. Refuge staff would also coordinate with adjacent developers and local agencies in an effort to identify other opportunities for interpretation in areas immediately to the south of the Refuge along the edge of future residential development.

A Note about Alternatives: Following consideration of the comments received during public review of the draft CCP/EA, the proposed action for each Refuge may be altered as follows: 1) one or more of the actions addressed in another alternative may be added to the preferred alternative; 2) one or more actions included in the proposed action may be deleted or modified; or 3) one of the other two alternatives may be selected as the preferred alternative, either as described in the draft CCP/EA or as modified to include one or more actions included in the other two alternatives. The potential effects to the environment of all actions proposed in the various alternatives will be evaluated equally to ensure full disclosure of the potential effects of implementing the final version of the preferred management alternative.



At the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge Complex headquarters, we are reducing our carbon footprint by taking advantage of our hot, sunny climate. Using funds provided through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), we have installed nine photo-voltaic arrays (eight 6.4 kilowatt arrays and one 6.8 kilowatt array) on five refuge building rooftops. Since the project's completion in September 2010, the Refuge's photo-voltaic project has produced over 81,659 kilowatt-hours of solar energy, providing a carbon dioxide emission savings of more than 69 tons. ARRA funding was also used to install new energy efficient air conditioning units within several of the complex buildings, reducing our overall annual energy consumption by about 22,300 kilowatt-hours.

Contact Information

Please send your CCP-related comments to:

Victoria Touchstone, Refuge Planner (*Please note new mailing address*)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Post Office Box 2358

Chula Vista, CA 91912-2358

619-476-9150 ex. 103 (phone), 619-476-9149 (fax)

Email: Victoria_Touchstone@fws.gov; please include "Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR CCP" in the subject line message.

Direct your inquiries about Refuge operations to:

Chris Schoneman, Project Leader

Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex

906 W. Sinclair Road, Calipatria, CA 92233-9744

760-348-5278 ex. 227 (phone)



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Planning Schedule

September 2010	Initiate Public Scoping
February 27, 2012	Suggested Deadline for Providing Comments on Draft Goals and Alternatives (this will ensure consideration of your comments in the draft CCP/EA)
April 2012	Release Draft CCP/EA for Public Comment
July 2012	Publish Final CCP

We will periodically be posting information about the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex CCP on our website. You can visit this site throughout the CCP process to keep up-to-date on our progress. Go to: <http://fws.gov/saltonsea> and scroll down to the bottom of the page.

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). Please feel free to pass this *Planning Update* along to anyone you think might be interested in the CCP process for Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR Complex. Thank you!