

Silvio O. Conte

National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Aug/Sept 2015 Public Information Meetings





National Wildlife Refuge System

The Mission...

“...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.”

Purpose of Today's Meeting



- Provide background on Conte Refuge and the development of a Draft CCP/EIS
- Orient you to the Draft CCP/EIS document
- Highlight some of the proposed management actions
- Explain how/where/when to provide comments
- Discuss relationship to CT River Watershed Landscape Conservation Design Project

Refuge Background

- Refuge authorized in 1995; legislative boundary is entire CT River watershed (7.2 million acres)
- 1995 Master Plan is still current plan
- Current refuge ownership is approximately 37,000 acres; 10 refuge divisions and 9 units
- Approved acquisition authority is 97,830 acres

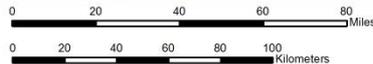




Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



This map is designed for refuge management. It is not intended for use as a land survey or as a representation of land for conveyance or tax purposes. For more information visit the USFWS Northeast Region GIS website at <http://northeast.fws.gov/gis/>
Map Print Date: 6/18/2015



Refuge Establishment Purposes

- Conserve and protect species of concern in the Watershed (Atlantic salmon, shad, river herring, shortnose sturgeon, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, osprey, black duck)
- Protect threatened and endangered species
- Conserve, protect, and enhance native species diversity and the ecosystems that support them
- Restore and maintain wetlands and other waters
- Fulfill international treaty obligations in US relating with fish, wildlife, and wetlands
- Provide opportunities for research, environmental education, and wildlife-dependent recreation and access

Purposes of a CCP

- The 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act requires that every refuge develop a CCP and revise it every 15 years, as needed.
- Provides strategic management direction (e.g. priorities) for the Refuge via a vision, goals, and objectives for all refuge programs, and identifies resources needed to achieve them.
- Describes how the Refuge is part of a larger landscape, how it supports other conservation efforts, and the important role of partnerships.



Refuge Goals

- Goal 1: Habitat and Species Conservation
- Goal 2: Education and Outreach
- Goal 3: Recreation
- Goal 4: Partnerships



Draft CCP/EIS Document Outline

Chapter 1: Purpose of, and Need for, Action

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

Chapter 3: Affected Environment

Chapter 4: Alternatives, Including the Service's Preferred Alternative

Chapter 5: Environmental Consequences

Chapter 6: Coordination and Consultation

Chapter 7: List of Preparers

Appendix A: Conservation Focus Areas Resources Overview and Management Direction

Appendix B: Process for Establishing Refuge Focal Species and Priority Habitats

Appendix C: Land Protection Plan

Appendix D: FOAs and CDs

Appendix E: Wilderness Review

Appendix F: Wild and Scenic Rivers Review

Appendix G: RONS and SAMMS

Appendix H: Staffing Charts

Appendix I: USGS Economic Analysis

Appendix J: Forest Management Guidelines

Appendix K: Conte NFWR Act

Appendix L: Fire Management Program Guidance

Appendix M: Conservation Plans and Initiatives

Appendix N: List of Partnerships



Management Alternatives Evaluated (Chapter 4 in document)

- Four alternatives:
 - ✓ Alternative A: Continuing Current Management
 - ✓ Alternative B: Consolidated Stewardship
 - ✓ Alternative C: Enhanced Conservation Connections and Partnerships (*Service-preferred Alternative*)
 - ✓ Alternative D: Reduced Management with Emphasis on Backcountry Recreation

- Focuses on watershed-wide level goals and objectives
- Introduces concept of Conservation Partnership Areas (CPAs) and Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs)
- Supported by Appendix A, which details management for individual CFAs and refuge units
- Table 4.8 summarizes a comparison between the four alternatives

Conservation Partnership Areas and Conservation Focus Areas

Conservation Partnership Areas (CPAs)

- Large areas, e.g. subwatersheds, where concentrations of Federal trust and other resources of conservation concern occur
- Areas where Refuge staff would focus our leadership, resource expenditures, and expertise, or support conservation efforts by our partners



Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs)

- Areas nested within CPAs
- Areas where the Service would focus land acquisition efforts for Conte Refuge (fee title and easement)
- Boundary includes important core or connecting habitat areas for trust resources, but delineated to insure administrative efficiency
- Other criteria: restoration potential, enhances existing refuge lands
- Quonatauck CFA is unique

Appendix A Example

Overview Fort River Conservation Focus Area (Existing Refuge Division)

Overview Fort River Conservation Focus Area (Existing Refuge Division)

Hadley and Amherst, Massachusetts

Conservation Focus Area (CFA)—Acreage Profile	Acres	Percentage of CFA
Total CFA Acres to be Conserved by Service	1,662	73.0 %
■ Existing Refuge Ownership in CFA ¹	261	
■ Additional Acres in CFA proposed for Refuge Acquisition ²	1,401	
Existing Acres in CFA Permanently Conserved by Others ^{3,4}	615	27.0%
Total Acres in CFA ^{2, 4}	2,277	100 %

¹Acres from Service's Realty program (surveyed acres); ²Acres calculated using GIS; ³The Service does not plan to acquire existing conserved lands, except under extenuating circumstances (conserved acres from TNC 2010 data); ⁴The Service would conserve up to this number of acres. The Service only acquires lands from willing sellers.

What specific criteria and/or considerations drove the selection of this CFA?

The Fort River area was an SFA in the 1995 Conte FEIS and the refuge's Fort River Division was established in 2005. The proposed Fort River CFA presents two major opportunities. The first is to restore grassland and early successional habitat (shrubland habitat) to benefit declining species, such as bobolinks and other grassland-nesting species. The second opportunity is to protect floodplain forest along the Fort River and create a connection between these forests and adjacent conserved upland habitat within the Holyoke Range.

What are the priority habitat types within the proposed CFA? What percentage of the total CFA acreage do they represent?

- Pasture/Hay/Grassland – 60.4%
- Hardwood Swamp – 3.4%
- Shrub Swamp and Floodplain Forest – 2.3%

See map A.26 and table A.20 for more detailed habitat information for the CFA.

What are the resources of conservation concern for the proposed CFA?

As noted in table A.21 below, there are two priority refuge resources of concern (PRRC) aquatic species that rely upon the open water habitats in this CFA. There are also habitat types that are not being managed for a particular PRRC species, but are important for their contribution to Biological Integrity Diversity and Environmental Health (BIDEH) of the landscape. This includes potential for a large tract of contiguous grasslands to benefit declining grassland dependent species, and floodplain, a habitat that has undergone significant alteration within the Connecticut River watershed. The refuge will seek to protect and restore (if necessary) these, and other PRRC habitat types. Additionally, we recognize the value of this area to State species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) and migratory landbirds. These species and habitats are discussed further below.

Topics of Particular Interest to Partners/Public (re: Appendix A by State/CFA)

- Habitat management (under Goal 1)
- Hunting and fishing (under Goal 3)
- Public access (under Goal 3)
- Snowmobiling (under Goal 3)
- Visitor facilities (under Goal 3)



Highlights of Draft Land Protection Plan (Appendix C in document)

- Consulted State agencies and conservation organizations on their priorities; intent is to complement partner efforts
- Proposing refuge expansion of 99,466 acres in 22 CFAs
 - ✓ 10 CFAs expand existing refuge divisions
 - ✓ Another 7 CFAs included in 1995 Refuge Master Plan as acquisition areas
 - ✓ Remaining 5 CFAs are new, including the Quonatauck CFA
- Propose 65% fee, 35% easement Acquisition; willing sellers only policy





Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge



- River Names**
1. Upper Ammonoosuc River
 2. Passumpsic River
 3. Ammonoosuc River
 4. White River
 5. Ottauquechee River
 6. Sugar River
 7. West River
 8. Ashuelot River
 9. Deerfield River
 10. Millers River
 11. Westfield River
 12. Chicopee River
 13. Farmington River

- Conte LPP CFA's
- Conserved Land
- Connecticut River Watershed

- Conservation Focus Areas**
- A. Nulhegan Basin
 - B. Blueberry Swamp
 - C. Pondicherry
 - D. Ompompanoosuc River
 - E. Mascoma River
 - F. White River
 - G. Ottauquechee River
 - H. West River
 - I. Ashuelot
 - J. Sprague Brook
 - K. Westfield River
 - L. Dead Branch
 - M. Mill River
 - N. Fort River
 - O. Farmington River
 - P. Salmon Brook
 - Q. Scantic River
 - R. Pyquag
 - S. Maromas
 - T. Salmon River
 - U. Whalebone Cove
- Quonotuck

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CCP/EIS Timeline

- Public draft CCP/EIS release
 - ✓ 90 day public review period ends November 16th
 - ✓ 13 public meetings across watershed
 - ✓ 4 public hearings (1 in each State in early November)

- Estimated final CCP/EIS release: Spring 2016
 - ✓ 30 day public review period
 - ✓ Will include a “Summary and Response to Public Comments”

- Final decision by Reg. Director: Late Spring/Summer 2016



Public Comments

- Comments due by November 16, 2015
- Submit electronically via www.regulations.gov. In the “Search” box, enter the docket number (FWS-R5-NWRS-2015-0036). All comments will be posted and available for public viewing.
- Mail to:
 - Public Comments Processing
 - Attn: FWS-R5-NWRS-2015-0036
 - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 - MS: BPHC; 5275 Leesburg Pike
 - Falls Church, VA 22041-3803
- Via oral public testimony at one of the four public hearings (one each in VT, NH, MA, and CT; see Website for schedule)

Public Comments (cont'd)

- Substantive comments relate to:
 - ✓ Accuracy of information
 - ✓ Adequacy of, methodology for, or assumptions used in, the analysis
 - ✓ New information relevant to the analysis
 - ✓ A new, reasonable alternative

- Tips:
 - ✓ Explain opinions using data, personal observations, expert opinions, etc. (give reasons and rationale)
 - ✓ Include pros, cons, and tradeoffs of position
 - ✓ Tie comments to statements in draft plan

- Equal weight given to written and oral comments

- Comment process is not a vote – one well supported comment is often more influential than an unsubstantiated form letter.



Relationship to CT River Watershed Landscape Conservation Design (LCD)

- Began Feb 2014 led by North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative; over 25 partners engaged, including Refuge staff
- Goal is to create a shared, strategic vision (e.g. a “design”) for conserving key species and ecosystems in the watershed for future generations; and, to develop information and tools to help support and implement the design
- One product is a map of an inter-connected network of priority lands and waters to conserve (e.g. core areas and connectors): essentially a roadmap for how partners can work together
- Proposed Refuge expansion complements final LCD
- Final LCD products/announcement expected Sept 2015