

**Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge
Transcripts of Formal Public Hearing on Draft CCP/EIS
St. Johnsbury, VT; November 2, 2015**

*[Transcript of Comments Recorded from R09_0015.mp3]
[A total of 24 speakers provided comments]*

Speaker # 1, Eric Stohl

[8:40 start]

Andy, first of all, I want to thank you and your staff for coming up here and listening to us and certainly appreciate it. My name is Eric Stohl. I live in Columbia, New Hampshire. I am one of the Selectmen. We have another Selectman right here, and another Selectman right here. We're the full Select Board of the Town of Columbia. This happens to be where the Blueberry Swamp Division is located.

Because of your hearings and these public information sessions, our Town Clerk as well as our Selectmen have received numerous phone calls with regard to the expansion as well as the possibility of losing their property and homes through eminent domain. Your eminent domain policy is stated in numerous publications that have been distributed over the last few years. A couple of these are as follows: "The Service policy is to acquire land through eminent domain as a last recourse and only to determine the legal owner which is a clear title, to settle a difference of opinion of value, or prevent uses which would cause irreparable damage to the resource that the unit was established to protect." The second one is "The Service recognizes the possible social and economic impact acquiring private property by exercising the right of eminent domain and does its utmost to avoid using this approach." And upon talking with Andy earlier this evening, he reiterated that. We have tried to calm our citizens down and saying "Look, this is not what they do."

The Mohawk Division is what the Blueberry Swamp Division used to be called. Now for some reason, it is called the Blueberry Swamp Division. And that is possibly due to the fact that the Mohawk River does flow into the Connecticut River, but the drainage from Blueberry Swamp area does not drain into the Mohawk River, so I am assuming that's why the name was changed - I don't know.

A map that was created by you folks in November of 2007 shows a proposed focus area that includes Blueberry Swamp area as well as actually extending up into the town of Colebrook and almost all the way to the Connecticut River. By looking at your most recent map of the Blueberry Swamp area, that shows the different options that you have considered before settling on option C. There was also option D. Option D included land that was east of where option C stops. This leads us to believe that your intention is to, eventually, attempt to take all of the land to the Connecticut River that is shown in your 2007 map. The Town of Columbia has approximately 33,315 in taxable acres of land. 30,600 of these acres are already enrolled in New Hampshire's current use program. The Conte refuge's "wanted list" has 92 properties on it; 42 of these properties have primary or secondary homes on 'em - that is - 47 percent of these

properties that are on the refuge's "wanted list." The total taxable valuation of all these 92 properties is \$3,366,569. If these properties were acquired by the refuge, the rest of the taxpayers of Columbia would need to make up \$67,026, which would raise the rate in New Hampshire \$0.83/\$1,000 on every 1,000 a taxpayer pays. There are currently 6,502 acres in Columbia that are tax exempt already. The total valuation for this acreage is \$3,315,200. That also has to be made up by the taxpayers of Columbia. Columbia, as well as most of Coös County, is an economically deprived area with an aging population. We have the highest unemployment rate, as well as the highest Medicaid and Medicare rates, in the State of New Hampshire.

The Silvio O. Conte wildlife refuge was granted permission by Congress to acquire lands in the Blueberry Swamp area with defined boundary. There have been some conservation groups that wish to sell their holdings to the refuge that were outside of the boundary. The Selectmen were advised by refuge personnel that, in order for the sale to take place, the Selectmen would need to approve the sale. At the March 9, 2010 town meeting, the Selectmen asked the citizens of Columbia if they wished for lands outside of the boundary to become part of the refuge. A show of the hands demonstrated that a strong majority - and I checked with the other Selectmen that were there at the day - it was unanimous in favor of not allowing the refuge to grow any larger than the existing boundary. The entire Board of Selectmen for the Town of Columbia is here tonight in opposition to any expansion of the refuge in Columbia. Thank you very much.
[13:30 end]

Speaker # 2, Don Campbell

[13:41 start]

Don Campbell, Selectman, Town of Columbia. I'm not as eloquent as Mr. Stohl here, as he stated he gave you all the statistics – very important statistics – for the Town of Columbia.

In talking with you Mr. French this evening, I asked you if logging was going to be permitted and you said yes but only in designated areas for projects. So, the amount of land that you're taking out of the Town of Columbia, which is the livelihood of people that live there, is a lot. You're talking 3,600 acres of Blueberry Swamp area. We, as a town – 50 percent if not more of our town - will be in permanent easements by the State of New Hampshire, The Nature Conservancy, or by the Federal government. It's got to end somewhere. I don't know how you can manage what you have already, and we don't need more of our property taken out of our tax base. I understand the conservation needs; however, we're talking livelihoods - as Mr. Stohl said - we have an aging population, and the tax rates keep going up and up. We, as a Select Board, continue on a regular basis to try to keep our taxes down. This is no help. Thank you.
[15:23 end]

Speaker # 3, Stacey Campbell

[15:32 start]

Hello, my name is Stacey Campbell. I'm just a resident of the Town of Columbia.

I can't follow these guys of course and tell you all that stuff, but I just want to let you folks know a lot of this land that is proposed to join the Blueberry Swamp is already protected land – most of

it falls under the Shoreland Protection Act. It's the Simms Stream watershed area – it's already protected. And you know what? The amount of easements that our town people have is huge - it's huge. We do a fantastic job tending property on the private sector. I'm not really sure that the Federal government can do any better. That's really all I have to say.
[16:20 end]

Speaker # 4, Ron Rhodes

[16:29 start]

Good evening. I'm Ron Rhodes. I work for the Connecticut River Watershed Council, and my job is to work with towns, farmers, landowners along the Connecticut River and all of the tributaries. My territory is from White River Junction north to Pittsburg.

I'm here for several reasons. One is, of course, on behalf of the Watershed Council – the work that we do for fish and wildlife habitat is obviously in line with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the purposes of the Conte refuge. I could talk for a lot more than five minutes about that, but really why I wanted to come tonight was for the landowners that can't be here tonight. The farmers and other landowners that I work with – as soon as this proposal was put out, I had calls and emails from folks in Bradford, Bridgewater, all over – asking how they could get in on this, how they could be part of this, how could I sell my property to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service so that it becomes part of the wildlife refuge. Unfortunately for some of those folks, their property is outside of the proposed boundaries which they found out at the informational sessions that Andy and his folks came and did. But some of the others are within the boundaries; they were disappointed to learn that this was only a proposal, that they couldn't move forward, and they are eager to have that opportunity to sell their land if this proposal is approved. So, I wanted to get that word out there for those folks that can't be here tonight.

Personally - as a hunter, a fisherman, and a kayaker - I support the project because I'm always looking for places where I can take my dogs and where I can go fishing and paddling. So, we have the Green Mountains and White Mountains, which are great to Conte refuge now. Any additional acreage that we can put into that, that is accessible to all of us outdoor lovers, is something I would support. Thank you.

[18:34 end]

Speaker # (spoke out of turn; no number assigned), Bruce Baroffio

[18:46 start]

Bruce Baroffio, from Northfield. I'm the President of Vermont Trappers Association.

I would just like to say that the Association is in favor of the continuation of the refuge the way it is. We would like to make sure that we are still allowed the chance to trap for furbearers on the reservation in accordance with the rules that are already in place. Everything seems to be working. The process doesn't seem to be broke, and I don't see any reason to change any of that. I've hunted, trapped, fished the reservation and adjoining areas and you guys are doing a good job and we'd like to see you keep it up.

As far as acquiring more lands, that I'm not as well versed on that as these gentlemen are - but if more lands are acquired, we would like to see that everybody still has equal opportunity to use them. Thank you.

[19:45 end]

Speaker # 5, Walt Procopio

[20:01 start]

I'm Walter Procopio from north Vermont. I'm a snowmobiler, and I have a question for you fellas from the Federal land – Conte land there.

You want to put a trail up to your beautiful new facility up there on Route 105 towards Bloomfield, and it would be 1.5 miles, but you want us to give up 2.5 miles of trail to give up somewhere else, which possibly could shut down a whole trail system because of the 1.5-mile trail to your facility. Is that - I believe it is because you have a stipulation of how much trail we can have out there. That doesn't sound fair for us to lose mileage, a trail, and possibly shut down a whole system for that 1.5 miles, which I can understand you wanting to have out there. I wish you'd think about that before you eliminate other trail from us. And thank you very much.

[21:06 end]

Speaker # 6, Mike O'Hara

[21:15 start]

Thank you. My name is Mike O'Hara, and I'm from St. Johnsbury, Vermont.

For the record, I would go with alternative A, which is no further expansion of the Silvio O. Conte. I've been involved with this project since '90s, when it started out. I proposed at that time through written comments that it should not begin to begin with because I could see that this was a land grab. Quite honestly, this looks to be science in search of a cause.

Alternative A right now, caps the acreage at 35,989. The Service proposes Alternative C, which is 197,000 acres of land. Quite frankly, taking productive land out doesn't pass the test of history or reality. The history of this land is that it has been productive, it has been logged, and yet species thrive, species survive. They didn't thrive and survive simply because we enacted a plan in 1991. The Alternative D is positively scary – 235,000 acres. We don't have the economic resources to turn this land in to non-taxpaying roles and to take it away from the use of the people that have to pay for it and that would be I, John. Q. Taxpayer.

So, alternative A is – well basically, these four alternatives are like picking which finger I want broken. Which hurts less? Alternative A hurts less. I'll go on record as going for alternative A.

Thank you.

[22:58 end]

Speaker # 7, Mike Bard

[23:06 start]

Good evening. First of all, thank you for all of the Fish and Wildlife people who came today. My name is Michael Bard from Waterbury, Vermont. I have been, for a number of years, a very active user of all the land in the Nulhegan Basin, and my comments mostly reflect activity in the Nulhegan Basin.

I do believe the refuge has a purpose, but Federal lands have – we can't keep on purchasing more and more Federal lands. We have seen lots of Federal lands that we can't already manage. And what I'm proposing is that you concentrate any additional activities on maintaining and managing the lands that you already have. It's a very valued piece of land which needs, to be quite honest, some more. If there is some additional lands, such as like snowmobile access trails or things like that – that's where I - my proposal is looking at alternative C, very modified. If there are very critical access points that the public needs to access a particular point, I'm very much in favor of that.

I know, as a former, and I'm a retired Federal manager, so I see your dilemmas. I don't see that it's the Federal government's response to continually buy more and more Federal lands just because the opportunity is there. Just like my household - if I don't have the money, I don't purchase it. And I think the Federal government's in that space. We don't have the money, so we can't afford to purchase it - we need to manage what we have. So, that would be my response to you is...

Do good management. Don't prohibit traditional uses that are already being occurring on the refuge. Don't prohibit shooting. Don't prohibit trapping. We want to recreate in those lands, and I think the folks in this room will represent that fact. Thank you much.

[25:34 end]

Speaker # 8, declined to speak

Speaker # 9, declined to speak

Speaker # 10, Steve Patten *(only 2/3rds of presentation captured by recording)*

[26:01 start]

My name is Steve Patten. I'm from Bradford, New Hampshire. I represent the - I am the Program Director for the New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association. The New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association - we represent about 3,000 loggers, truckers, saw millers, and land owners who are sustainably managing roughly 1 million acres for timber production and wildlife habitat.

The New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association is opposed to any expansion of the Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge for the following reasons. All of the alternatives, A through D - The level of forest management is minimal to non-existent. The *status quo*, which is alternative A - The Fish and Wildlife Service is managing about 225 acres for woodcock across their total of 35,989 acres of forestland ownership over 15 years. The more aggressive

management in alternative B would manage 7,660 acres for forest structure diversity over the next 15 years, which is about 510.6 acres a year, and create 775 acres of shrubland across 96,703 acres forestland ownership. Alternative C would be managing 11,550 acres for forest structure diversity over the next 15 years, roughly 770 acres a year across 197,296 acre forestland ownership. The fourth alternative D, really is a wilderness alternative with no habitat management at all. This would occur over 735,782 acres of forestland ownership.

Now in 2014, Plymouth State University conducted a economic study on our behalf - the contribution of the logging industry in New Hampshire. Using the formulas generated in that study, we have calculated the economic loss activity related to each of these four alternatives – alternative A: the economic loss is \$73,032, and it ranges all the way up to alternative D: \$3,054,492. Although it could be argued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service makes payment in lieu of taxes – pilot payments - to local communities that will overcome any economic losses they realize with Federal ownership, in an attempt to see if this is true at NHTOA, we used the 2014 Plymouth State study - their economic model - on the current New Hampshire acreage owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 2013, there were three New Hampshire towns that received...

[28:53 recording ended]

[***Recording equipment malfunction occurred at this point in the hearing, and no further recordings happened after this time. However, all speakers that followed were contacted to provide them an opportunity to document their statements for the public record.***]

(Steve Patten cont'd: text below was submitted via email to Nancy McGarigal on 12/7/2015)

...In 2013, there were three New Hampshire towns that received pilot payments totaling \$23,364 to compensate for 7,571 acres of USFWS land ownership. Assuming that only half of that land base is productive timberland, and assuming an annual growth rate of 0.5 cords per acre/per year, and that a cord weighs 2.5 tons, these lands produce 4,732 tons of timber per year. This represents an estimated annual loss of \$194,012 in direct wages alone, and a negative impact on the States total economic output equaling \$482,664 annually.

The NHTOA also believes that the low level of current and proposed forest management will adversely affect wildlife population within the species which are dependent on early successional habitat, as we are already witnessing on Federal land holdings within New Hampshire. Also, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has exceeded their target volume for land acquisition by almost 300 percent, despite objections by many local communities.

NHTOA believes that private landowners do a much better job of sustainable timber and wildlife management than Federal Agencies, therefor opposes any expansion of the Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge. Thank you.

Speaker #11, Kevin Lawrence (follow-up conversation with Mark Maghini on 11/8/15)

- USFWS should respect traditional uses of the land
- Trapping has been occurring for hundreds of years and I want it to continue

- A significant portion of the Nulhegan Basin Division lands should be kept in management via logging, as well as those new land acquisitions

Speaker #12, Matt Tetreault (email follow-up to Mark Maghini)

I am Matt Tetreault, and I am here representing the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers. VAST has maintained a very good working relationship with the Silvio O Conte Nulhegan Basin Division staff for a number of years. We wish to maintain this relationship as we move forward. I will speak to Alternative C as this is the preferred alternative. As part of this alternative there is a proposal to construct a new 1.4 mile section of trail to the Refuge Welcome Center on Route 105. We are supportive of this trail, however another part of Alternative C has us potentially closing 2.2 miles of trail as a sort of “trade off” for the new trail to the welcome center. A mile long section of the 2.2 miles of trail to be closed is between VAST trail intersections EX 27 and EX 271 along corridor trail 114. This is a critical section of trail that allows the Brighton Snowmobile Club and our members access to the higher elevations and snow early and late in the season when the lower portion of the Refuge is closed due to low snow conditions. This section of trail allows us to begin the season a bit sooner and end it a bit later which is very important to the local economy. Accessing this mile of trail also helps to protect the resources in the lower part of the refuge by providing the riders a trail that leads to areas where there is adequate snow. We would like to see this section of trail left open if possible as it provides many benefits to the local club, local economy and our membership.

In regards to the land acquisitions that are part of Alternative C, we have some concerns about the continuity of our trail system located on these parcels as well.

Thank you.

Speaker #13 Butch Spear (follow-up conversation with Mark Maghini on November 4, 2015)

- Any and all federal lands in VT should mirror VFWD hunting regulations – no further restrictions
- If you keep VFWD happy, you keep Bear Hounds Assoc. happy
- Restrictions applied to hounds should be applied equally to all dogs

Speaker #14 Bill Pickens (follow-up conversation with Mark Maghini on November 4, 2015)

- Wants to maintain trapping
- Supplemented oral statement with written submission on regulations.gov

Speaker #15 Phil Huffman (email follow-up to Nancy McGarigal on December 14, 2015)

My spoken comments are expressed by the consolidated letter submitted by The Nature Conservancy on regulations.gov. Please use that as a reference. In summary, my presentation at the hearing detailed TNC’s strong support for the Refuge and Alternative C.

Speaker #16 Craig Goulet (follow-up conversation with Mark Maghini on November 4, 2015)

- Acquisition of McConnell Pond a positive for local area if access enhanced
- Keep those roads currently open to vehicles open in the future

Speaker #17 Paul Lefebvre (email follow-up to Mark Maghini on November 12, 2015)

Mark — In my oral comments at the November 2 public hearing I raised the point that we in the Northeast Kingdom are land rich and cash poor. If the federal government proceeds with acquiring more land in Essex County, please keep that in mind that federal ownership will take more land off the tax rolls and place an even greater burden on property tax payers who live in the towns affected by more public purchases. Has the federal government explored the practice of instead of acquiring more land, buy conservation and public access easements, thereby keeping the land in productivity and in the hands of owners who will pay their taxes? I suspect we are fast approaching a reality where traditional recreational pursuits will only occur on land held in public hands. Traditional rural values are being increasingly challenged by a migration pattern consisting of people who don't share those values and are more likely to post every acre they own. Rather than added land acquisitions, I would like to see the feds come up with a more comprehensive plan on how it might work with rural communities to support the service economy, which is pretty much all we have left in the Northeast Kingdom. In other words, please consider first the people who live next to and recreate on the land the government already owns. Thank you.

State Representative Paul Lefebvre
Newark, Vermont

Speaker #18, Steve McLeod (email follow-up to Mark Maghini on November 5, 2015)

Verbal Statement of Steve McLeod At Conte Refuge Draft Plan
Public Hearing On November 4, 2015

(This statement is transcribed below based on notes and memory due to the malfunction of the tape recording at the Public Hearing)

I am making this statement in behalf of Vermont Traditions Coalition (VTC) and the Champion Lands Leaseholders & Traditional Interests Association (CLLTIA). VTC is a statewide coalition of over 20 organizations together with a broad variety of partner organizations that share our mission, work with the coalition, and financially support the coalition. CLLTIA is one of CLLTIA's member organizations with a particular focus on the former Champion Lands and surrounding lands in the Northeast Kingdom. CLLTIA has operated ever since 2000 and VTC has operated continuously since 2001. CLLTIA's mission is to preserve and protect all of the traditional uses that have persisted through many generations in and around the former Champion Lands. VTC is comprised of the traditional rural communities of sportsmen, snowmobilers, the forest products community, the agriculture community, outdoor guides, and lake associations. VTC's mission is to preserve and protect these hallmarks of rural Vermont on a statewide basis.

(The views in this statement are shared by VTC's member organizations and CLLTIA members but, in the interest of brevity, just VTC is used in much of this text).

VTC (and CLLTIA) like some things about Alternatives A and C, but believe that all of the alternatives need significant amendments. VTC vehemently disfavors Alternative D which will lock off Conte Refuge to the vast majority of public access, traditional uses, and will deplete wildlife populations due to banning most habitat management and timber cutting. VTC has gotten word that the group known as Protect Our Wildlife is seeking a ban on trapping in the Conte Refuge due to alleged endangerment of the lynx. VTC disputes this assertion and maintains that trapping is a valuable tradition on the Conte Refuge, an important tradition for Vermont's trapping community, and is good for wildlife overall.

The massive land acquisition authority contained in all four Alternatives is a highly controversial subject within the VTC community. There is a general distrust of the Refuge Service buying more land, because of the prohibitions that are part of current Refuge operations and the Draft Plan. Both VTC and CLLTIA have passed similar Resolutions that will be made part of the Draft Plan Written Record. VTC delegates have voted for language that Vermont forest land is better left in the private sector. At CLLTIA's Annual Meeting October 3d, over 100 members, in a closely divided vote, passed a Resolution supporting the 6000 acre McConnell Pond purchase provided the currently gated road system is opened up and the snowmobile trails on this tract are retained. The Board of Governors of the United Towns & Gores was represented at the Annual Meeting and opposed this Resolution due to adverse tax impacts. Indeed, another section in CLLTIA's Resolution calls for purchases conditioned on host community support. So, as I said, land purchase, given current and proposed Refuge prohibitions and reductions and inadequate payment in lieu of taxes, is very controversial.

VTC and CLLTIA are opposed to following prohibitions and reductions.

- **Shooting From The Road:** This is an important part of hunting the Conte terrain, especially for older and physically compromised hunters. These are not normally traveled roads. They see only an occasional vehicle here and there. There has never been an accident shooting from the roads, and the practice has taken place for generations. The state allows shooting from the roads on the West Mt. Wildlife Management Area and state law does not prohibit it on the Conte Refuge. The Department of Fish & Wildlife reports no known accidents due to shooting from the road. Hunting, fishing, and trapping should be regulated as per Vermont law.
- **Target Shooting:** Again, nobody has ever got hurt on the former Champion Lands as a result of target shooting. Target shooting is an important part of hunter development and maintaining hunting skills and gun handling ability.
- **ATVs:** How can ATVers support the expansion of the Refuge when ATVs will be banned on all new acquisitions. ATVing is legitimate recreation enjoyed by Vermont families and guests and there needs to be some reasonable access available to this community.

- **The Snowmobile Trail Reduction:** We support the VAST position opposed to the proposed conditional closure of 2.0 miles of current trail and further opposed to any termination of any VAST trails on newly acquired lands. Snowmobilers can't understand why perfectly good trails need to be closed just because of a possible short spur to Refuge Headquarters.
- **Dog Hunting & Training Registry:** (This was addressed on my second opportunity to speak). This is not a prohibition but it adds needless red tape to the dog training and hunting process and creates a tempting slippery slope for Refuge Managers where more and more prohibitions can easily be imposed upon these sporting practices. Dog training has been going on for generations, and yet, Refuge wildlife seems to be doing just fine. Forgetting or not knowing about this unique Conte Refuge requirement that is not required elsewhere in Vermont will still one more way for dog owners to get a ticket.

Alternative C, which is the best Alternative for habitat management, talks about managing 12,000 to 13,000 acres, only half of the Refuge's current acreage. Bird species and virtually all wildlife benefit from significantly more habitat/ timber management than this. Statistics contained in the 2002 Management Plan for the West Mt. Wildlife Management Area prove that managed habitat creates more wildlife abundance by comparing big game populations per square mile on managed land and unmanaged designated "wilderness." My camp mates and I are long-time avid rabbit hunters with top quality beagles. We find that rabbit populations on the Conte Refuge are much less abundant now than they were before the Refuge Service purchased the Refuge lands. We understand that Habitat Management Plans are being developed and hope that they authorize much more aggressive habitat management than the current language in the Alternative C Summary.

There are some positives in the Draft Plan. VTC and CLLTIA applaud the Refuge Service for keeping the road system open. We were told at the September 1 Island Pond Informational Hearing that there will be "no federally designated wilderness" and no so-called "Ecological Core Areas." We applaud these decisions.

In summary, the organizations associated with VTC certainly do not favor additional land purchases if they carry prohibitions above and beyond Vermont law, reduced trails, gated roads, reduced timber management, and local disfavor.

Speaker #19, Ken Gammell (follow-up conversation with Nancy McGarigal on November 4, 2015)

My concern is with the Federal deficit. I have 5 grandchildren and I considered myself a middle class home owner, although I believe there is no middle class anymore.

The national debt stands at \$18 trillion dollars now. Can anyone even understand how much money that is? \$1 trillion dollars is \$1,000 billion dollars. The taxes on that is phenomenal (*note: he cites a certain dollar interest rate/million dollars/minute*).

There is no manufacturing in the U.S. anymore. All the manufacturing is moving out of the country. The government is legislating the manufacturing businesses out of the country. The government says they are coming up with jobs but it is at the expense of the taxpayer. The President is adding to the deficit. \$56,448.36 is my share of the national debt/per person.

The Federal government is borrowing against my property to purchase more property, such as proposed in the refuge plan. The FWS buying 87,000 more acres is not a good thing. 80% of the lands west of the Mississippi River is owned by the Federal government. That is already too much.

Island Pond, VT used to thrive. There were lots of businesses there but they had to close. They cant afford to live there anymore. The Federal government, when it owns land, takes land off of the property tax rolls which impacts local communities like Island Pond. The Federal government needs to pay the bills we now owe before we buy more Federal property.

Did you know if you take \$1million dollars and drop it \$1 bill at a time through a grate that it wont last your life time?

Federal and State ownership in land is too restrictive. We used to be able to drive 4-wheelers everywhere. There were thousands of miles of trails. I love to snowmobile too. Now the trails are cut down to nothing. This area used to be the snowmobile capital of the East.

Federal land is public land which is paid for by the taxpayer. That land is owned by me as taxpayer and you (as an agent of the Federal government) are going to tell me what I can and cannot do on it. That is not right.

In summary, what bothers me most is the Federal deficit. Remember \$1,000 million dollars equals \$1 billion dollars and the Federal government is \$18 trillion dollars in debt! The government should not buy any more land until the Federal government pays down the debt. We should not be adding any more to the Federal deficit.

The Federal and State governments create jobs that don't amount to anything. The government has chased all the manufacturing out of the country and that isn't good.

The Federal and State governments keep buying more and more land, and restricting the taxpayer's use of those lands. The refuge is cutting down trail access. I know you plan to buy up the whole 7.2 million acre watershed. If you cant buy it, you are going to use eminent domain, or take it by some other means.

Lynx have been around for at least 10 years. They are not recent to the area and are not that rare. There should be no restrictions imposed just because lynx are in the area.

Speaker #20, Howard Dindo (follow-up conversation with Nancy McGarigal on November 4, 2015)

I don't support the need for lynx protection. First time that the FWS heard that a lynx was in the area was due to a photo by Mike Bancroft, who is a coworker. Mike was asked to write an article for VT Free Press, but the photo was sent to FWS. There was no permission from Mike to use the photo and the article was never written up by VT Free Press. FWS has used the photo.

There is no need for lynx protection since they have a 40 mile radius that they can travel in a day. Their protection is illogical; there are no facts to back it up, especially the concern with hunting dogs. I have been camping and hunting in the area since 1954, using a camp that my father built. I have not seen any problems.

The type of running dogs used in the area has not hindered any lynx activity or movement, and I have seen lynx and have not noticed they were being harassed by dogs. Rabbit dogs are slow, short legs, and could never catch a lynx. Within 4 minutes you could get a mile gap between a lynx and dogs. They simply are not harassing lynx when they are hunting rabbits. Rabbit dogs only cover a small area and hunters keep them close so they can call them back.

People on Southern New England probably have this concept that lynx are being harassed by hunting dogs because they don't know how it is done. In fact, there are wild dogs all over the woods up there, many different species. There are coy dogs, eastern coyote, feral dogs. The VT deer biologist also made the statement that timber wolves are in the area. The wild dogs up here are potentially more a threat to lynx than someone's tame hunting dogs.

Who is going to make the decision on this project? Is it 1 person in Washington, DC? Is it a small group in the Regional Office? This should not be allowed. It is not right. People do not accept this. Locals do not give that authority to others. That decision should be left to the people in the local area. I have lived in VT my entire life. Here in Chelsea, we not affect decisions up in Essex. It is none of our business how they manage their area. They know best how to manage their area. Why should opinions in Southern New England affect areas up north in VT? People in the local area should have more influence on the decisions for their own area.

You will not receive support from hunters and anglers in the area – ever. It just wont happen. People are not ignorant up there. We should listen to them and what they think is best for the area. FWS Planners need to know that there will be difficulty in getting support up in the Northeast Kingdom.

People from Southern New England, once they ride around in the Northeast Kingdom woods, don't really like it. There are lots of bugs, little water, etc. Not many enjoy hiking up there. My wife and daughter are training for a hike in Peru and they don't even want to train in the Northeast Kingdom. It is not an area that people from Southern New England are really interested in and are using. The people using it now, and will use it in the future, are the locals. They are the ones who appreciate it best. They don't need to be told how to use or appreciate this land. If locals are not involved in making decisions then they will not respect the decisions. You will see more garbage, unauthorized 4-wheeler use, and the cutting down of trees as a result. The current managers need to understand that you need the help of the locals.

If someone is not familiar with the land, then their comments should not be relevant to the planning process and decisions made about that land.

I am also concerned with the loss of tax money. The loss of property tax revenue will hurt people and affect local communities. There will be more Federal welfare and assistance needed and less economic productivity.

Speaker #21, Michael Covey (email follow-up to Nancy McGarigal on November 23, 2015)

I came to speak to the apparent attack on Vermont conservationists a group has determined that the way to start shutting down traditional conservation practices is to use the red herring of protecting Lynx to attack trapping in the Nulhegan basin because although in their own words they would like to end all trapping, they think they can leverage their Lynx hysteria to start in the Nulhegan. If they were to succeed with trapping, Hounds would be next. They don't have a biological concern, they have an emotional opposition to activities they have no real knowledge of. You're biologists, or you work with biologists, you know this is a non-issue. It's not endangered. It simply doesn't occur here in large numbers because we don't have the proper habitat to support it. We never will. It makes as much sense as listing alligators as endangered in Vermont. Lynx are nomadic and individuals have been recorded traveling as far as 450 miles. This means the animal which pops twenty miles into northeastern VT for a bite to eat will be back in Canada the next day, where it can be legally hunted and trapped. We're not protecting anything. It's a feel-good regulation with no honest biological basis.

Trapping is a biologically sound, sustainable, organic method of connecting with our natural place in the world. It provides food (raccoon, muskrat, and beaver are good; but bobcat is sublime), and materials for warm, beautiful clothing that don't require a polluting factory to create.

I have additional concerns about the hearings in Massachusetts and Connecticut. There are 7.2 million acres in the Connecticut River watershed. Only 36,000 acres of this comprise the Conti Refuge, with a paltry 2,000 scattered over several sites in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The people in those two states are completely out of touch with the traditional values of northern VT and NH. Most of them don't even understand that hunters, trappers, and fishermen pay to conserve the resources they decry us for utilizing. Not only that, they've screwed their own states up so badly they're uninhabitable. I was working down in Mass and was excited to see signs for Bear Swamp (preserved in the 80's). The signs were overgrown and badly weathered, and the swamp had been filled to make way for stores and restaurants. It was disgusting. I repeat, Massachusetts and Connecticut have NO voice in northern Vermont and New Hampshire. It is unacceptable for the USF&W service to apply ANY of their concerns or opinions to our portions of the Conte.

Speaker #22, Rocky Bunnell (follow-up conversation with Nancy McGarigal on November 4, 2015)

Key Issues:

- Federal ownership takes away from the local tax base; how will towns compensate for this loss in revenue? They probably can't.
- Federal government owns a lot of land already, and agencies can't manage what they have.
- Federal agencies do not follow through on current plans. For example, Mr. Bunnell has a lot of experience with his logging company working with the Forest Service and other Federal agencies and there is a lot of red tape. The National Forest in NH is only following through on harvesting timber on 40% of what they had planned in their Forest Plan.
- Federal ownership results in lots of new rules and regulations being imposed that people don't anticipate or appreciate what the impact will be.
- The Conte Refuge plan is only proposing a minimal amount of logging for habitat; more should be proposed.
- The planning process allows for a lot of people to weigh in and comment on forest practices that don't know anything about logging and forestry. They don't know what they are talking about, don't have the education, expertise, or experience, yet they can affect what forest management gets done. They have the potential to impact good forest management practices.
- The Conte Refuge plan does not offer a healthy balance with protecting some lands, and not managing them, with allowing forest management to occur.

Speaker #23, Bob Bancroft (follow-up conversation with Nancy McGarigal on November 4, 2015; plans to submit written comments too)

- Perhaps the plan should provide flexibility because “one size might not fit all” with management direction for areas in CT vs. MA vs. VT vs. NH. Perhaps there could be flexibility in the options of A, B, C and D by geographic area.
- People at the meeting were complaining that residents of CT should not be able to comment on plans for VT. I had the impression they did not understand that the plan covered the entire watershed and thus, included plans for CT, MA and NH, and not just VT. It was helpful finally to get the clarification from Andy French that the plan covers refuge lands in all four states.

Speaker #24, Stan Swain (follow-up conversation with Nancy McGarigal on November 4, 2015; plans to submit written comments too)

- I recommend that people look around them and see how quickly development is happening and threatening rural areas.
- I live on a dirt road that previously had 4 to 5 cars per hour travel by. Now there are 4 to 5 cars per minute.
- The only way to save and protect the lands is to set it aside and out of reach of development, like in a Federal refuge. There is way too much pressure to develop lands in our area, and it is not going to be saved or protected in private ownership.

Speaker #25, Tom Berriman (email follow-up to Mark Maghini November 4, 2015)

I want to thank all the staff of the Conte Refuge, Nulhegen division for all the hard work they do working to manage this incredible 'jewel' in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. As an avid birder and president of a local Audubon chapter, I have spent many hours leading field trips,

conducting citizen science surveys and just enjoying the wildlife and habitat I find there on my own personal visits.

I have often worried about if we as a nation are preserving enough wilderness areas to insure the population and variety of mammal and bird species we have in North America. As our country passes the 320 million mark in population it is increasing important that we preserve those areas now managed as refuges and if given the opportunity to increase the areas of refuge if land becomes available Especially lands that are connected to existing refuges or close by. The importance of having large refuge areas for species other than humans is important because we are only now learning about how interrupting or destroying existing corridors of undeveloped lands is harming survival rates of mammals and birds.

Many people forget that the word refuge is a place of safety, a safe retreat and is the one place those mammals and bird species can escape man's modern development Those species can feed, breed and rest! A refuge is not an amusement park! A refuge should be about preserving that habitat and those species other than humans.

While some activities such as hunting, during specific periods of the year and wildlife viewing, photography and limited hiking trails may not impact the refuge overall, I believe other activities such as camping and the use of motorized ATV's will have a detrimental effect on the habitat and wildlife. Since this is Vermont and there is a history of a VAST system (snowmobile trail) in the Northeast Kingdom, I understand and accept that a route of a limited number of miles may exist on the refuge and probably should remain.

I think of our refuges as banks. These are places where every single American owns a piece of the land. And we should be happy that we are 'saving' for future generations what would be quickly lost if we didn't put the habitat and the species first and our human needs second. And every single American has a say as to how we should manage and preserve these places. While it is true that there are often times local residents that have used these lands for years and in some cases a few generations, we need to appreciate their concerns and desires but we must still look at the long term goal of how these refuges should be managed for the good of the species first and for all Americans not just the local residents. These are all our lands. Increase these lands at any cost!!