

FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

for the

STILLWATER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX

COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION PLAN

and

BOUNDARY REVISION

Churchill and Washoe Counties, Nevada

Type of Action: Administrative

Lead Agency: U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service

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Abstract: This Final Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS) describes and evaluates five Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCP) and boundary revision alternatives for the Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex, which is comprised of Stillwater NWR, Fallon NWR, Stillwater Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Anaho Island NWR. The No Action Alternative (Alternative A) would retain the existing boundaries and baseline management as outlined in the 1987 Management Plan for Stillwater WMA and modified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service's) water-rights acquisition program. Alternative B would result in the lands within Stillwater WMA reverting back to U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) or public land status, and would focus on providing fall and winter habitat for waterfowl and opportunities for waterfowl hunting on Stillwater NWR and breeding habitat for waterbirds on Fallon NWR. Under Alternative C, the Service would seek legislation to expand Stillwater NWR to include much of Stillwater WMA and Fallon NWR to conserve additional riparian and dune habitat. This alternative would emphasize the approximation of natural biological diversity, with adjustments to enhance breeding habitat for waterbirds and fall and winter habitat for waterfowl, and would provide enhanced opportunities for wildlife observation and environmental education. Similar to Alternative C, legislation would be sought to expand Stillwater NWR's boundary to include

much of Stillwater WMA and Fallon NWR to conserve additional riparian and sand dune habitat under Alternative D and would focus on restoring natural hydrologic patterns and other ecological processes. Visitor services management would focus on providing opportunities for wildlife observation and environmental education. Alternative E (the Service's preferred Alternative) would closely follow the structure of Draft Alternative C (Option 2) as modified by comments received on the Draft CCP EIS. Alternative E incorporates elements of all Alternatives presented in the Draft CCP EIS, but remains within the range of options analyzed in the Draft CCP EIS. In all alternatives, Anaho Island NWR would be managed much as it has in the past, with a continued emphasis on protecting the nesting colony of American white pelicans and other colony-nesting birds that use the island.

The issues addressed in this Final EIS include the potential effects of the alternatives on populations of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitat; priority public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge (System); other public uses; cultural resources; Newlands Irrigation Project Operations; Naval Air Station-Fallon training; and the local economy. An insufficient volume of water inflow, nonnative species (including livestock), and contaminants are the major factors limiting achievement of refuge purposes of Stillwater NWR and Fallon NWR. Compatibility of public uses is also a major issue addressed in this Final EIS.

Reader's Guide

Management of all national wildlife refuges, which are administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, consists of a repeating process of planning, implementation, and monitoring and adjusting. The planning process generally involves three levels: (1) the development of a broad comprehensive conservation plan, (2) the formulation of detailed step-down management plans, and (3) annual work plans and site-specific projects. The planning process addressed in this document focused on the first of these, but also involved the development of step down management plans. In addition, the boundary of Stillwater NWR was assessed for possible revision as part of this planning effort.

This Final EIS provides National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance for all management programs described in the CCP and program specific compliance for several key management programs (e.g., water delivery). For those management programs that are covered in less detail on a conceptual basis (e.g., Integrated Pest Management), additional tiered NEPA compliance may be required.

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (Volume I)

[Chapter 1](#), *Introduction*, has four main parts: (1) purpose and need for action, (2) background information on the Stillwater NWR Complex and related actions, (3) major issues identified during scoping and a summary of the public involvement process, and (4) incorporation of public comments into Service's preferred Alternative E.

[Chapter 2](#), *Summary of the Affected Environment*, provides an introduction to the EIS study area. This chapter only provides a summary of resource conditions, with more detailed descriptions of existing and baseline conditions being covered in Chapter 4. Chapter 2 describes (1) the international, national, regional, and landscape context of planning and management; (2) geographic and socioeconomic setting of the EIS Study area; and (3) a brief summary of Stillwater NWR Complex resources. Because of the importance of natural habitat conditions to the decision to be made, a description of these conditions is provided at the end of Chapter 2.

[Chapter 3](#), *Alternatives*, starts out with a description of the laws, Federal policy, international treaties and agreements, Service plans, and issues that guided the development of the alternatives. Each alternative in this Final EIS consists of a boundary-revision option for Stillwater NWR, goals for managing each refuge in the complex, objectives to achieve these goals, strategies to accomplish objectives, and a monitoring program to track progress in implementing strategies and achieving objectives and goals. Alternative E was created based on Draft CCP EIS preferred Alternative C (Option 2) as modified to reflect public desires expressed in comments received during the public comment period, and consultation and meetings following the public comment period.

[Chapter 4](#), *Environmental Consequences*, describes the existing and baseline environmental resources of the EIS study area, and identifies and provides an evaluation of the potential environmental effects, including cumulative effects, of the alternatives, described in Chapter 3, on these resources.

[Volume II](#) of the Final EIS contains technical appendices and other supportive material.

- [Appendix A - Management Authorities](#)
- [Appendix B - Species lists for Stillwater NWR](#)
- [Appendix C - Species lists for Anaho Island NWR](#)
- [Appendix D - Summary of Step Down Monitoring Plan](#)
- [Appendix E - Waterfowl Population Analysis](#)
- [Appendix F - Land Protection Plan](#)
- [Appendix G - Analysis of monthly water inflow volumes](#)
- [Appendix H - Scoping Report](#)
- [Appendix I - Mailing List](#)
- [Appendix J - Integrated Saltcedar Pest Management Plan](#)
- [Appendix K - Stillwater NWR Fire Management Plan](#)
- [Appendix L - Literature Review: Human Activity Impacts](#)
- [Appendix M - Literature Review: Livestock Grazing](#)
- [Appendix N - Cause and Effect Analysis](#)
- [Appendix O - Compatibility Determinations](#)

[Volume III](#) presents the comments received during the public comment period for the Draft CCP EIS (April 14 - August 14, 2000) and the Service's response to those comments.

Contents of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Upon reaching a Record of Decision on the Final EIS, the management elements of the selected Alternative will be extracted from this Final EIS and will serve as the Stillwater NWR Complex Comprehensive Conservation Plan. A Comprehensive Conservation Plan is a document that describes the desired future conditions of the refuge and provides long-range guidance and management direction to accomplish the purposes of the refuge, contribute to the mission of the System, and meet other relevant mandates. It outlines the management approach that will guide management of the refuge. In large part, a Comprehensive Conservation Plan provides direction and guidance on how wildlife and their habitat will be managed, and how compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses will be promoted and facilitated. It identifies the appropriate uses that can occur on the refuge and how these uses will be managed to ensure that they are compatible with wildlife conservation as outlined in refuge purposes and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The five different alternatives outlined in this Final EIS represent different comprehensive conservation plans. The alternative that will be selected for implementation will provide the framework of the refuge complex's Comprehensive Conservation Plans and it will provide the goals, objectives, and strategies for each refuge, which are the heart of a comprehensive conservation plan. The plan will contain goals, objectives, and strategies from only one of the five alternatives considered in this Final EIS. Another large section of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan will be a description of existing and natural ecological conditions, and the existing status of the visitor services program. Discussions on existing and natural conditions that will be incorporated into the final plan are summarized in Chapter 2 of this Final EIS and detailed in Chapter 4 under each resource heading. Background information will also be presented in the plan, including a discussion of the significant problems affecting populations of wildlife and their habitat (presented in Chapter 1 of this Final EIS), a summary of the refuge's history and legal mandates (presented in Chapters 1 and 3), and of the planning process (presented in Chapter 1). Additional information will include a list and brief description of action items to be carried out in first few years of implementation. Alternatives not selected (remainder of Chapter 3) and the evaluation of impacts (Chapter 4) will not be repeated in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Rather than providing detailed management direction, the Stillwater NWR Complex's CCP will provide broad-level management direction and guidance for the refuges within the Complex. More detailed step down management plans (e.g., habitat and fire management plans), that are consistent with the CCP, will be written, and as provided for under the National Environmental Policy Act, appropriate "tiered" compliance documentation will be prepared for each step down management plan.

Step-down Management Plans

This Final EIS contains the Environmental Analysis (NEPA documentation) not only for the Comprehensive Conservation Plans, but also the following step down plans that will accompany the comprehensive conservation plans:

- biological and visitor services monitoring plan
- habitat management plan
- water management plan
- fire management plan
- saltcedar control plan
- visitor services plan

Adaptive Management

A high level of interest was expressed during scoping and following release of the Draft CCP EIS, that the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Stillwater NWR Complex be flexible and that it allow for changes to be made based on information obtained through monitoring. This will be an important part of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan. A comprehensive monitoring program and mechanisms for making adjustments to the management actions, strategies, and objectives will be integrated into the plan. Each alternative described in this Final EIS includes the framework of such a program. For each alternative, the objectives and strategies that could be adjusted over time with additional information are identified, as well as the features of the alternative that will remain unchanged through the life of the plan. Successful implementation of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan requires that managers be permitted to make adjustments to objectives and strategies. It also requires that the target of management, as expressed in refuge purposes, goals, and subgoals, remain the same through the life of the plan.

The goals, subgoals, and guiding principles selected for implementation for the Stillwater NWR Complex will be adopted for the life of the plan (15 years or more). They can be revisited, but alterations to the goals and subgoals, beyond editorial changes, would require the Service to go through the comprehensive conservation planning process to make these changes. To successfully attain the goals and subgoals identified in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan, adjustments may be needed in specific objectives and strategies.