

APPENDIX B

CONCEPTUAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

Grasslands Wildlife Management Area

Proposed Expansion

Merced County, California

United States Department of the Interior

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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CONCEPTUAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

GRASSLANDS WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA PROPOSED EXPANSION Merced County, California

INTRODUCTION

This management plan for the proposed Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (WMA) expansion presents a general outline on how the WMA would be managed by private landowners and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). The Service proposes to obtain interest and management rights to the expanded Grasslands WMA through negotiation with and acquisition of conservation easement from private landowners. As a conceptual plan, this plan does not provide extensive detail or pinpoint exactly where habitat improvements could be made. Those details would be part of other programs such as Partners for Wildlife, administered by the Service. However, this plan is based on the type of conservation easement terms that the Service has employed in the existing Grasslands WMA and should answer general questions about continued land management by the private property owners and the role the Service would play in carrying out the terms of the conservation easements within the WMA.

The approximately 48,480 acre proposed Grasslands WMA expansion is located in the center of the San Joaquin Valley, in central Merced County (Figure 1). The purpose of the proposed WMA is to restore and perpetuate a native diversity of wildlife, plants and their habitats representative of the San Joaquin Valley native grasslands. The Service would protect and possibly restore primarily native grasslands, vernal pools, slough and riparian woodlands, irrigated pasture, and agricultural crop land that historically has supported both a diversity of native wildlife, cattle grazing operations, and agriculture. The Service plans to protect and improve management of native habitats under the assumption that these habitats are essential to the life history of species dependent on the San Joaquin Valley's native grasslands ecosystem.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

While the proposed expanded Grasslands WMA would remain primarily in private ownership, lands under a Service easement would be part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) and would be managed to fulfill the Refuge System's mission and the specific purpose for which the WMA was established as well as managed to meet the objectives of the landowner. "The mission of the Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future

generations of Americans” (National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997). The Refuge System is a network of protected lands and waters dedicated for fish and wildlife. Since the Refuge System’s inception in 1903, with the establishment of the Pelican Island NWR in Florida, the System has grown to more than 500 refuges, with at least one refuge in every state. California has 37 national wildlife refuges covering more than 400,000 acres.

The goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System are to:

- Preserve, restore, and enhance in their natural ecosystems, (when practicable), species of animals and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered;
- Perpetuate the migratory bird resource;
- Preserve a natural diversity and abundance of native fauna and flora on refuge lands;
- Provide an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology and man’s role in the environment; and;
- Provide refuge visitors with high quality, safe, wholesome, and enjoyable recreational experiences oriented toward wildlife to the extent these activities are compatible with the purposes for which the WMA was established.

Purpose and Goals of the Grasslands WMA

The purpose of the Grasslands WMA is to preserve and perpetuate, and when necessary, restore a native diversity of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats representative of the San Joaquin Valley/Grasslands ecosystem. A WMA’s purpose serves as a vision or mission statement for refuge managers and the public. It provides a broad, long-term statement of management direction and priorities.

The goals of the WMA reflect the core mission of the Service to protect fish, wildlife, and plant resources of national importance while providing opportunities for continued ranching operations compatible with the natural resources of the region and consistent with the Service’s existing Grassland WMA conservation easement program. The goals of the Grasslands WMA expansion area are to:

- Restore and protect a native diversity of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats representative of the San Joaquin Valley’s native grasslands ecosystem, with an emphasis on migratory birds and waterfowl, shorebirds, endangered species and the habitats they depend on.

- ❑ Restore and protect habitats to promote the recovery of endangered and threatened species and species of special concern;
- ❑ Restore and protect riparian corridors and preserve a migratory corridor utilizing both natural and agricultural lands.
- ❑ Foster public awareness and appreciation of the WMA's unique natural heritage by providing environmental education opportunities through the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA ADMINISTRATION

The WMA would be administered by San Luis NWR Complex staff in Los Banos, California. The staffing pattern and base funding for the proposed expanded WMA are dependent on the refuge size and boundary alternative (Environmental Assessment). Although, currently, there is no approved staffing plan for the proposed Grasslands WMA expansion, staff at the NWR Complex would not be expected to change significantly. The WMA is also anticipated to enjoy the support of volunteers from the local community and outside researchers with an interest in long-term management of the WMA.

The WMA may operate certain programs under an interim management plan. Public use opportunities would be nonexistent because the properties would remain in private ownership and would not be open to the general public.

ECOLOGICAL PROCESSES AND HABITAT MANAGEMENT

The management focus of the proposed expanded WMA would be to promote natural biological processes that benefit the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants, to the extent that land use practices necessary to sustain the conservation value and ranching/farming operations of the current landowners are not compromised. The primary historic uses that shaped the current ecological condition of the study area were cattle grazing and agriculture. Subsequent to acquisition of the conservation easements, the Service would maintain and possibly restore native habitats essential to the survival of species dependent on the WMA in cooperation with the private landowners. Management direction for the easement properties would be guided by the terms of the conservation easements developed and negotiated with the landowners. Following are the types of activities which presently occur on WMA lands and would likely occur on lands within the proposed WMA expansion.

Vegetation Management

The WMA supports plant communities that include native grasslands, vernal pools, sloughs and riparian habitat, irrigated pasture, and low intensity crop land. Some of these communities have

been altered to such a degree that ecological processes may not now function as they once did without active management. For example, protecting riparian habitat may require the construction of fences or modified grazing practices. Manipulation of vegetation is permitted to either promote or suppress desirable or undesirable plants.

Permitted Use of the Properties

Maintenance of Improvements

Under the terms of the conservation easements, the property owners would retain the rights to maintain and repair improvements on their property including roads, fences, trails, watering areas, corrals, and structures.

Grazing

Under the terms of conservation easements, the private property owners would reserve the right to operate sustainable ranching operations on the properties. The landowners would meet annually with the Service to confer upon their annual operation plans and proposed habitat enhancements, if any. The agreed upon operating plan would take into account the terms of the conservation easements as well as the then existing physical and ecological condition of the properties. Under the terms of the conservation easements, minimum requirements for any plan are as follows:

- (1) Best Management Practices. Ranchers would agree to manage their lands consistent with the best livestock management practices in the area. These best livestock management practices shall be conducted in a manner that does not adversely impact the conservation values of the properties.
- (2) Riparian Area. Ranching operations occurring in riparian zones could be subject to the following requirements and restrictions. A defined riparian zone shall be fenced to exclude grazing. The grantor would be responsible to ensure that all fences are repaired and replaced if damaged. Any fencing within the riparian area will provide each field with reasonable livestock access through the riparian area(s) and to appropriate water.

Control of pests, predatory and problem animals

The use of agricultural chemicals, biocides and the control of predatory or problem animals by the landowners and/or ranch operators, would be subject to federal and state laws.

Hunting and fishing

Hunting and fishing of wildlife would be permitted in compliance with applicable local, state, and federal laws and regulations and in a manner that does not significantly deplete the wildlife resources, or damage the natural landscape.

Control of trespass

The landowners reserve the right to control access to the properties and to prevent trespass on the property.

Residual rights; compliance with laws and regulations

The private property owners may exercise and enjoy all rights as owners of the properties, including the right to use the property for any purpose which does not adversely impact the conservation value and which is consistent with the purposes of the conservation easements. The conservation easements do not, however, exempt the property owners from compliance with applicable laws and regulations, including the Endangered Species Act, The Clean Water Act, etc. The language presented above is general. Specific terms will be agreed to, prior to approval and finalization of the easement with the landowner.

POPULATION MONITORING

The Service plans to establish a long-term monitoring program for plant, fish and wildlife populations to evaluate the habitat restoration efforts and their effect on fish and wildlife populations. The Service also plans to document long-term population trends using established protocols. Population management would include an inventory of existing fish, wildlife and plant species. Special emphasis would be directed toward monitoring the distribution and abundance of endangered and threatened species and migratory birds.

Surveys could be completed in cooperation with conservation groups, college institutions, and other land management entities. Research scientists would also be encouraged to obtain more biological information on fish, wildlife and plants on the WMA. If permitted, the Service, in conjunction with the landowners, will clearly identify where research is needed, and how it would be performed.

WMA's are Primary-Use Areas

Refuges of the National Wildlife Refuge System, including WMA's, are managed as primary-use areas; that is, primarily for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and their habitats. The interest that the Service purchases are for the primary use. In addition, refuges are closed to other uses unless specifically and formally opened (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 [NWRSA of 1966, 16 U.S.C. 668dd]). This contrasts with units of other federal land management systems that are managed under a multiple-use mandate (e.g., national forests administered by the U.S. Forest Service and public lands administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management). In the case of the expanded Grasslands WMA, the conservation easements would allow the continued operation of ranches and farms, to the extent that operations do not jeopardize the areas' conservation values, in particular threatened or endangered species.

The Compatibility Standard

Before activities or uses are allowed on a national wildlife refuge, federal law requires that uses be formally determined to be compatible with the mission of the Refuge System and the purposes of the refuge (National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997). A compatible use is a use of a refuge that, in the sound professional judgement of the refuge manager, will not materially interfere with or detract from fulfillment of the mission of the Refuge System and the purpose of the refuge.

Compatible uses of the expanded Grasslands WMA would be dictated by the terms of the negotiated conservation easements with individual landowners. Since lands within a WMA typically remain as private property with the property owner controlling access, the Service cannot authorize public uses on WMA's.

Interim Compatibility Determination

The Service is required by Executive Order 12996 to identify, prior to acquisition of new refuges or refuge additions, existing public recreational activities that would be allowed to continue following the Service's acquisition of the land. Because the expanded Grasslands WMA would remain private property and the Service would only acquire conservation easements on the properties, for wildlife conservation purposes, public use would be limited to that which is permitted under the conservation easements (see management practices and permitted activities above).

Law Enforcement

Enforcement of laws on the WMA is important to protect private property and to conserve and protect natural resources. The primary law enforcement officers working in the area would be State and local police or California Department of Fish and Game wardens, to control trespassing, violation of wildlife laws, and other violations of law.

FACILITIES DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Boundaries of any lands acquired by the Service may be posted with WMA signs at regular intervals. Fencing or other types of barriers are often constructed to control illegal trespassing that could damage habitat and to manage domestic livestock.

INTERAGENCY AND PUBLIC COORDINATION

The Service acknowledges the strong support of the California Department of Fish and Game and Merced County. The Service will continue to work with these agencies to maximize resource protection, enhancement, and public education for the expanded Grasslands WMA. The

WMA project area encompasses or lies adjacent to private, State and federally owned or managed lands. Therefore, the opportunity for a coordinated approach to resource management exists. The Service would seek partnerships with neighboring landowners to meet mutual goals and objectives whenever possible. These may include partnerships with neighboring private landowners to encourage wildlife protection. The Service would also pursue other partnerships to benefit resource management and public use, including environmental education within the terms of the conservation easements on the properties.