



Grasslands Wildlife Management Area Expansion Study

Greetings!

This is the third in a series of updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designed to inform and involve you in the planning process for the proposed expansion of the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Merced County, California.

These planning updates will keep you informed about opportunities for you to become directly involved in the planning process as development of the environmental compliance document, Land Protection Plan, and Conceptual Management Plan progresses. Your input is very important. It helps us gather information and identify issues affecting you, your community and the natural resources of the Grasslands.

Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System

The mission of the System is 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.

Planning Update #3, March 2002

What is Service History in the Grasslands?

The 36,550-acre eastern division of the Grasslands WMA was established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) in 1986 to complement the management of the adjoining San Luis and Merced National Wildlife Refuges and has since contributed to the recovery of migratory waterfowl populations under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Properties within the WMA remain as privately owned land protected by conservation easements. Daily management of the easement area remains under private landowner control, with the majority of the properties being managed for cattle grazing, “wildlife friendly” agriculture, and waterfowl hunting.

Overview of Planning Events

The Service, in 1998 had proposed to expand the Grasslands WMA by 15,000 acres. As a result of public outreach, the Service received comments from landowners; the general public; state, county, and local governments; and other interest groups which recommended the Service consider a more contiguous study area for expansion.

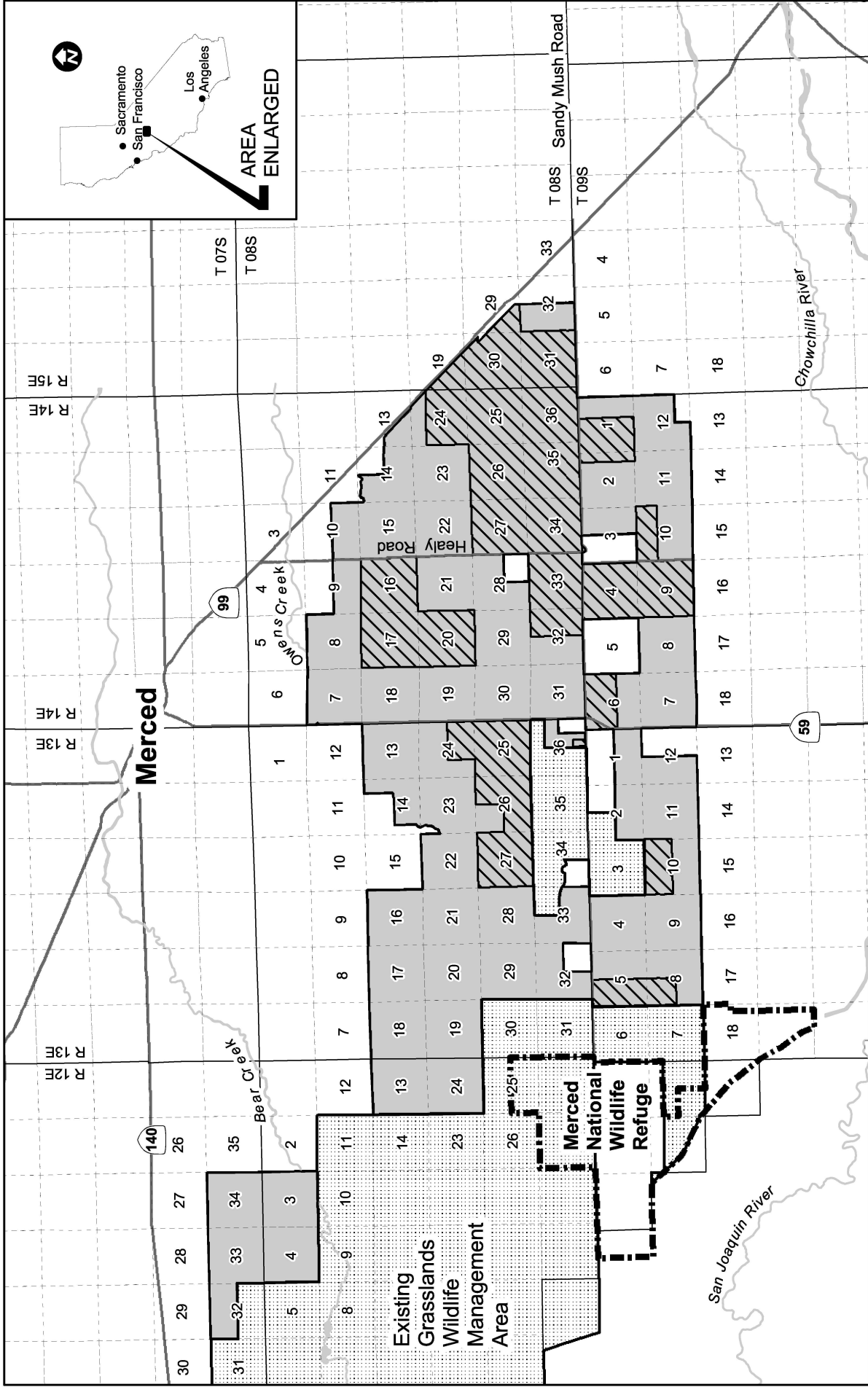
Based on this input, the Service conducted a more detailed study of the various habitats that exist in the area to determine if these lands could help achieve the Service’s wildlife management objectives for the area.

As a result of this analysis, the Service revised the study area for expansion of the WMA boundary from 15,000 acres to approximately 45,000 acres (see map). Now the public scoping process is continuing.

What Would Expansion Mean to Landowners?

For landowners whose property is within the proposed expansion study area, expansion of the Grasslands WMA would provide an opportunity to sell a conservation easement on their property to the Service on a willing seller basis at fair market value while preserving important wildlife habitat, and California’s open space and agricultural, and rural life style. Landowners whose property may eventually be

Grasslands Wildlife Management Area - Proposed Expansion Study Area



CANV Refuge Planning Office - March 2002

-  Expansion Study Area
-  1999 Proposed Expansion
-  Existing WMA
-  Approved Refuge Boundary

Purpose of the Proposed Expansion

The purpose of the proposed action is to:

- Expand protection and management of the existing East Grasslands WMA to include key habitats for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, migratory birds, sandhill cranes, and several endangered, threatened, and rare species.
- Maintain the high biological diversity of Merced County's native grasslands and vernal pools.
- Establish a protected wildlife corridor across a portion of California's Central Valley.

Notice of Website and Email Disconnection

On December 6, 2001, as a result of a court order, the Department of the Interior was instructed to disconnect all bureau computer systems from the internet. This court case involves Indian Trust assets in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Service is in the process of obtaining permission to reconnect to the internet. We hope to be reconnected soon, but have no way to estimate when that will occur. Therefore, our website address and email addresses are not included in this update.

within the WMA conservation easement area, but who do not wish to participate in the program, are under no obligation to participate.

What Happens Next?

A schedule of key planning steps is included below. The Service will develop several planning documents including:

- A Land Protection Plan, which will describe resource protection needs, the proposed WMA boundary, and identify tracts of land on which the Service would be interested in acquiring easements from willing participants, and describe land type protection priorities.
- A Conceptual Management Plan, which will describe the habitat goals being considered for the proposed WMA.
- An Environmental Assessment, which will evaluate the potential effects that each land protection alternative would have on the physical, biological, social and economic environment.

You will have an opportunity to review and comment on these planning documents. Their availability will be announced in a future planning update. The Service will review public comments on these documents and recommend a course of action. Final approval of the selected alternative will be made by the Service directorate. If the expansion is approved, the Service will begin implementation of the selected alternative, based on available funding and willing participants.



Join us in Welcoming New Personnel

Key positions for this project, the San Luis NWR complex Refuge Manager and the Refuge Planner in the Sacramento planning office, are now filled. Their names and addresses are enclosed. With these positions filled, planning for the WMA expansion will continue.

Please pass this planning update along to anyone you think might be interested in the planning process. Please call or write to us to be placed on our mailing list or to report a change in your mailing address.

How Do I Contact the Service or Provide Comments?

We are available to answer your questions and provide additional information regarding the Service's proposal and the planning process. If you have questions, concerns, or would like more information, please feel free to write or call us.

For Information on:

The Proposed Grasslands WMA Expansion

Kim Forrest, Refuge Manager, or
Loren Ruport, Wildlife Biologist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
San Luis NWR Complex
P.O. Box 2176
Los Banos, CA 93635
(209) 826-3508
Fax (209) 826-1445

Refuge Planning and Compliance

Richard Smith,
Natural Resource Specialist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
CA/NV Refuge Planning Office
2800 Cottage Way, Room W-1916
Sacramento, CA 95825
(916) 414-6502
Fax (916) 414-6512



For Information on:

Land Acquisition and Conservation Easements

Steve Lay, Realty Specialist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
2800 Cottage Way, Room W-2610
Sacramento, CA 95825
(916) 414-6446
Fax (916) 414-4462

San Joaquin Endangered Species Issues

Karen Harvey, Fish and Wildlife Biologist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office
2800 Cottage Way, Room W-2605
Sacramento, CA 95825
(916) 414-6600
Fax (916) 414-6712



PLANNING SCHEDULE

Planning Update #1.....	Completed.....	Nov. 1998
Public Scoping Workshop.....	Completed.....	Dec. 1998
Planning Update #2.....	Completed.....	Aug. 2000
Public Scoping Workshop.....	Completed.....	Sep. 2000
Planning Update #3.....	Completed.....	Mar. 2002
Prepare Planning Documents.....	Projected.....	April 2002
Public Review of Draft Planning Documents.....	Projected.....	May-Jun. 2002
Final Planning Documents and Notice of Decision.....	Projected.....	Aug. 2002