

U.S. Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
California/Nevada Refuge Planning Office

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

**Environmental Assessment for Management of
Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge
Monterey County, California**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The CCP will guide Refuge management for the next 15 years. The CCP and EA (herein incorporated by reference) describe the Service's proposals for managing the Refuge and their associated effects on the human environment under four alternatives, including the no action alternative.

Decision

Following comprehensive review and analysis, the Service selected Alternative 3 as its proposed action for the Refuge because it is the alternative that the Service believes best meets the following criteria:

- Achieves the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Is consistent with the Service's draft ecoregion goals.
- Achieves the purpose of the Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge.
- Will be able to achieve the 15-year vision and goals for the Refuge.
- Maintains and restores the ecological integrity of the habitats and populations on the Refuge.
- Addresses the important issues identified during the scoping process.
- Addresses the legal mandates of the Service and the Refuge.
- Is consistent with the scientific principles of sound fish and wildlife management and endangered species recovery.
- Facilitates priority public uses which are compatible with the Refuge purpose and the Refuge System mission.

Alternatives Considered

Under the No Action Alternative, the Refuge would continue to be managed as it has been in the recent past (approximately the last ten years). The Refuge currently has no comprehensive management plan. Existing recreational uses would continue under the No Action Alternative. For example, the Refuge would continue to provide limited hunting opportunities and surf fishing access. Similarly, wildlife observation and photography would occur on the Refuge. However, there would be no guided tours, docent program, interpretive signs, or materials and no facilities would be built or improved. Recreational use would likely increase due to population growth in the area and a greater awareness of the existence of the Refuge. The Refuge is currently fenced along its southern boundary only. No new fencing would be added under the No Action Alternative. Resource management would include: invasive plant removal and control; mammalian predator management to reduce predation on western snowy plovers; snowy plover monitoring and management; limited species inventories; grassland mowing; planting of native riparian trees and shrubs (mostly along the Salinas River); and mosquito management. The Service would rely primarily on partnerships with local and State agencies, organizations, universities, and adjacent landowners to accomplish many of its resource protection and monitoring goals. The level of staffing and funding currently devoted to the Refuge would remain the same under this alternative. This alternative was not selected because it would provide less protection for the Refuge's listed species (western snowy plover and

California brown pelican) and other sensitive resources than other alternatives and would not improve the quality of visitor services offered by the Refuge.

Under Alternative 2, the Refuge would focus exclusively on protecting, enhancing, and restoring natural resources. The rationale for this alternative is that there are few other public lands in the Monterey Bay area whose primary mission is to protect endangered species and other wildlife. The Refuge supports a regionally important population of the western snowy plover, which is federally listed as threatened. More intensive management of this population and restrictions on public use may be required to increase the size of the population and maintain its long-term viability on the Refuge. Under this alternative, the Refuge would be closed to all public use except guided tours offered by Service staff for wildlife observation, photography, and environmental interpretation and education. The Refuge would be fenced along most of its borders to prevent unauthorized access. The beach below mean high water would remain open for public use, including surf fishing, because the Refuge does not own lands below mean high water. However, beach access through the Refuge would be discontinued; users would be permitted to access the beach only from the public beaches adjacent to the Refuge. In addition, the Service would pursue a long-term lease with the State Lands Commission so it can manage the beach and tidelands below mean high water. Alternative 2 would redirect most of the limited resources currently devoted to public use management to support increasing the intensity of natural resources management. All of the current resource management activities would continue under this alternative. New management tools and techniques would include: use of prescribed fire to augment mowing and herbicide use in the grassland/shrubland habitat; comprehensive inventories of all special status and other species on the Refuge; management of problem avian predators of the western snowy plover; and creation of a Geographic Information System (GIS) database to track vegetation and population trends. Full implementation of this alternative would require increased staffing and funding. This alternative was not selected because it would be difficult and impractical to enforce closure of the Refuge due to funding and personnel constraints. In addition, this alternative would reduce the quantity and quality of compatible visitor services offered by the Refuge.

Alternative 3 is the Service's selected management scenario/proposed action. Under Alternative 3, public use of the Refuge will be improved but not substantially expanded. For example, informational signs and interpretive panels will be installed on the Refuge and a wheelchair-accessible trail to the river will be constructed. In addition, the existing parking lot will be improved (e.g., graded and covered with gravel). The area in which seasonal waterfowl hunting is permitted will be reduced by approximately 15% to protect roosting California brown pelicans. Symbolic fencing will be installed along the beach trail and around some plover nesting areas to protect them from disturbance. All of the current management activities will continue under this alternative. Some activities, such as special-status species inventories, will be substantially expanded. New management tools and techniques will include: use of prescribed fire to augment mowing and herbicide use in the grassland/shrubland habitat; inventories of all habitats on the Refuge; management of problem avian predators of the western snowy plover; and creation of a GIS database to track vegetation and population trends. In addition, the Service will pursue a long-term lease with the State Lands Commission so it could manage the beach and tidelands below mean high water. Full implementation of this alternative will require increased staffing and funding. This alternative was selected because it provides a high level of protection for the Refuge's sensitive resources and improves the quality of visitor services offered by the Refuge.

Under Alternative 4, public use of the Refuge would be improved and expanded. For example, informational signs and interpretive exhibits would be installed on the Refuge, a wheelchair-accessible trail to the Salinas River and to the beach (on a boardwalk) would be constructed, hunting blinds would be built along the Salinas River, and a restroom would be installed near the parking lot. In addition, the existing parking lot and privately owned access road would be improved (e.g., graded and covered with gravel), greatly improving access to the Refuge, particularly during the rainy season. The seasonal hunt area would be reduced, as in Alternative 3. Symbolic fencing would be installed along the beach trail and around some plover nesting areas to protect them from disturbance. All of the current management activities would

continue under this alternative. New management tools and techniques would include: use of prescribed fire to augment mowing and herbicide use in the grassland/shrubland habitat; inventories of all habitats on the Refuge; management of problem avian predators of the western snowy plover; and creation of a GIS database to track vegetation and population trends. In addition, the Service would pursue a long-term lease with the State Lands Commission so it could manage the beach and tidelands below mean high water. Full implementation of this alternative and management of the expected increase in public use and the potential conflicts with protection of natural resources would require substantially increased staffing and funding. This alternative was not selected because it would provide a lower level of protection for the threatened western snowy plover and the Refuge's other sensitive resources than other alternatives.

Effects of management of the Refuge on the human environment

Implementing the selected alternative will have no significant impact on any of the environmental resources identified in the EA. A summary of the rationale used to conclude that the effects were not significant follows.

Implementing the selected plan will have minor impacts upon the Refuge's physical resources. Prescribed burns will increase particulate matter (PM10) emissions in the area. However, due to the small size of the burns, the increase in particulate matter is not expected to be significant. The selected plan will have no effect on the Refuge's hydrology, water quality, soils, or geology relative to existing conditions.

Management under the selected plan will have no adverse impacts on vegetation and will result in several beneficial impacts. The installation of symbolic cable fencing and new interpretive signs and the increased presence of refuge staff should help to prevent Refuge users from walking off the trails and disturbing native vegetation and special-status plants. Other positive impacts will result from the restoration of historic riparian and wetland habitat, the use of prescribed fire, and the removal of nonnative plants.

Implementation of the selected plan will result in numerous beneficial impacts and potentially some adverse impacts on wildlife. Management actions implemented under the selected plan will have a beneficial impact on wildlife including Western snowy plover, Smith's blue butterfly, and other special-status species that occur in the Refuge's dunes. Under the selected plan, problem avian predators of the snowy plover will be managed and relocated if necessary. As a result, the fledge rate of this rare species is expected to increase. In addition, interpretive signs will be installed to restrict access to snowy plover nesting habitat and to educate Refuge visitors about the species. Symbolic fencing will be installed along the beach trail and around individual nests considered vulnerable to disturbance; if this proves ineffective, symbolic fencing may be used to restrict access to the entire foredune area. This is expected to reduce the disturbance of snowy plover nests and may increase the potential for California least terns to nest on the Refuge again. Symbolic fencing and signage will also reduce disturbance of Smith's blue butterfly habitat.

Implementation of the selected plan will also reduce disturbance to the California brown pelican by eliminating the western portion of the hunt area which is closest to the area where pelicans roost. The increased presence of Service staff on the Refuge may also deter illegal activities such as dog-walking, which will benefit pelicans and other wildlife. Construction of the new 1,500-foot handicap-accessible trail to the river, and the improvement to the connecting River Trail, will have minimal direct impacts because these trails already exist. However, these trails may bring more visitors closer to the river, potentially increasing disturbance to waterfowl and other birds such as brown pelicans that use the river. Due to the relatively small number of visitors expected to use the trail and the distance between the trail and the river (200 feet), this disturbance is not expected to be significant. Prescribed burns proposed under the selected plan could have temporary, minor adverse effects on wildlife which use the grasslands. However, it will benefit most wildlife in the long term.

Implementation of the selected plan may have an adverse impact on recreational hunting but will have several beneficial impacts on other recreational uses. Under the selected plan, the hunt area will be reduced by approximately 7 acres. This reduction could adversely affect the quality of hunting activities. However, due to the small size of the reduction, this impact is considered less than significant. Implementation of the selected plan will benefit recreation by allowing visitors to park on-site during the winter months (by improving the parking surface). In addition, the new information kiosk, improved trail, and interpretive signs will improve the quality of recreation on the Refuge. The selected plan will have no significant effect on agriculture, transportation, employment, and environmental justice, and socioeconomic conditions.

Public Review

The planning process incorporated extensive public involvement in developing and reviewing the CCP which included a public meeting, mailing planning updates, and public review and comment on the planning documents. The details of the Service public involvement program are described in detail in the CCP and EA.

Conclusions

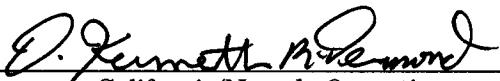
Based on review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, I have determined that implementing Alternative 3 as the CCP for management of Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Accordingly, the Service is not required to prepare an environmental impact statement.

This Finding of No Significant Impact and supporting references are on file at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex, #1 Marshlands Road, Fremont, California 94536 (telephone 510-792-0222) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California/Nevada Refuge Planning Office, 2800 Cottage Way, Sacramento, California, 95825 (telephone 916-414-6504). These documents can also be found on the Internet at <http://www.r1.fws.gov/planning/plnhome.html>. These documents are available for public inspection. Interested and affected parties are being notified of our decision.

Supporting References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2002. *Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment, Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge.*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2002. *Biological Opinion for the Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Comprehensive Conservation Plan. (1-8-01-FW-66). Ventura, California.*

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DEC 20 2002

Date