

Notice of Record of Decision on the Final Environmental Impact Statement on the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: Pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR part 1505) for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) issues this Record of Decision upon the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge. The Service evaluated and considered a range of alternatives on how to implement the Silvio O. Conte National Refuge Act, as presented in the FEIS. The Service also reviewed and considered public and agency comments. Based on that evaluation and review the Service has selected for implementation the Revised Proposed Action described in the FEIS. This determination was based on a thorough analysis of the environmental, social, economic, and other essential considerations.

ADDRESSES: Copies of this Record of Decision and supporting documentation are available for public inspection upon request at the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, 38 Avenue A, Turners Falls, Massachusetts, 01376.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Larry Bandolin, Project Leader of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge at the address given above, telephone 413/863-0209.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The proposed action is designed to provide guidance for the establishment and operation of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge for a period of fifteen years. Shortly before his death, Silvio O. Conte, a 30 plus year member of Congress and conservationist, introduced legislation authorizing a national fish and wildlife refuge within the four state Connecticut River watershed. The watershed is contained within the states of New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. After his death the Congress renamed the Act in his honor, the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Act.

The purposes of the Conte Refuge as stated in the Conte Refuge Act are:

(1) To conserve, protect and enhance the Connecticut River populations of Atlantic salmon, American shad, river

herring, shortnose sturgeon, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, osprey, black ducks, and other native species of plants, fish and wildlife;

(2) To conserve, protect and enhance the natural diversity and abundance of plant, fish and wildlife species and the ecosystem upon which these species depend within the refuge;

(3) To protect species listed as endangered or threatened, or identified as candidates for listing, pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973 as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.);

(4) To restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of wetland and other waters within the refuge;

(5) To fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States relating to fish and wildlife and wetlands; and

(6) To provide opportunities for scientific research, environmental education, and fish and wildlife-oriented recreation and access to the extent compatible with the other purposes stated in this section.

The Service identified 434 species rare enough to be considered in need for protection on a watershed basis. In addition 125 plant communities were considered rare or exemplary. The Service identified about 180,000 acres of lands and waters that contributed in a substantial way to protecting these species and fulfilling the other purposes listed in the Conte Refuge Act. These areas have been named Special Focus Areas. An additional 500 small and scattered sites that contain some of the 434 rare species have been identified. The Special Focus Areas and small scattered sites will be the focus of the majority of Conte Refuge efforts.

A notice of intent to prepare an EIS was published in the Federal Register in August, 1993. Sixty-one informal information meetings with organizations and agencies were held prior to that time, and another 82 such meetings were held through the end of July, 1994. A series of 27 more formal evening public scoping meetings were held at locations throughout the watershed during the last 4 months of 1993 and January of 1994. In April, 1994, a 3-day workshop was held in each of the four affected states. Each workshop involved 35 citizens of varied background and opinions in developing consensus recommendations for the Service. Over this entire time period, three informational mailings were made to the large mailing list. In addition, 3,500 copies of an issues workbook, soliciting input, were distributed and 500 completed workbooks were returned and analyzed.

The notice of availability of the Draft EIS appeared in the Federal Register on May 19, 1995. One-thousand nine hundred documents and 2,000 summaries were distributed. Sixteen afternoon walk-in sessions and subsequent evening public meetings were held throughout the watershed area during June, 1995 (four of which were formal public hearings). Over 990 people attended. Written comments were accepted through the end of July, 1995.

The notice of availability of the FEIS appeared in the Federal Register on November 10, 1995. A Revised Proposed Action, modified in response to public comment, was presented and the FEIS also responded to all comments received. Copies of the document or a summary were distributed to all interested parties.

The Selected Alternative

The selected alternative is Alternative D, the Revised Proposed Action as described in the FEIS. The activities to be undertaken include working with private landowners, state or local agencies and private organizations through the existing Partners for Wildlife and Challenge Cost Share Programs. The Service's major thrust through the year 2010 would focus on the use of voluntary efforts, developing partnerships, providing technical assistance, and administering a cost-sharing grants program to help other conservation interests carry out their land protection programs. The Service would also initiate its own land protection program. The Service would use a combination of easements, cooperative management agreements and fee title acquisition—with emphasis on lands hosting endangered, threatened, rare and uncommon species and communities. Educational efforts would be carried out in cooperation with the watershed's many environmental education providers. This alternative would result in the establishment of watershed-wide cooperative management and education programs.

This alternative would provide a high level of protection to federally listed species, rare species, migratory birds, area-sensitive species, and wetland habitats. Over 60% of the watershed's unprotected Special Focus Areas would receive some degree of protection under this alternative, a greater percentage than Alternatives A (7%), B (7%), or C (15%). Although Alternative E would offer some protection to 100% of the Special Focus Areas, Alternative D provides essentially the same protection to the listed and rare species and