

communities evaluated in the FEIS. Since Alternative D also has provisions to offer widespread environmental education, technical assistance and habitat management assistance, up to 25% of the land throughout the watershed, owned by conservation organizations and private owners, would provide improved habitat. The flexibility of programs and broad land base to be affected will benefit many aquatic, and/or wide-ranging species as well as species which require active habitat management; Alternative E cannot provide the same benefits to these species. For this reason, Alternative D is the environmentally preferable alternative.

In addition to being environmentally preferable, Alternative D provides its high level of protection to targeted resources more cost effectively and in a socially preferred format. The cost of Alternative D is estimated to be \$4 million a year less than that of Alternative E. Public input throughout the NEPA process consistently recommended partnerships with local organizations as the way to implement this refuge. Such partnerships offer the Service a practical alternative to the traditional way to administer a refuge with many scattered parcels, as well as a way to implement broad landscape-scale solutions to emerging habitat issues. A majority of written and verbal comments received on the Draft EIS supported the project and almost half specifically endorsed Alternative D. In addition, Alternative D was slightly modified in response to comments received to form the Revised Proposed Action described in the FEIS.

#### Other Alternatives Considered

Besides the proposed action, the major alternatives under consideration that were analyzed and evaluated during the planning process include the following:

##### *A. The No Action Alternative*

In this alternative, the Service would take no actions to implement the Conte Refuge Act. The existing programs for protection of threatened and endangered species would continue, as would the restoration programs to restore anadromous fish such as Atlantic salmon and American shad. The activities of the Service, such as commenting on Federally licensed, permitted or funded programs would also continue. State and local agencies and private organizations would continue their ongoing programs without additional Service assistance. This alternative describes the status quo.

Based on current trends, minimal protection of aquatic habitats and plants and animal populations within the identified Special Focus Areas would result. Many species would continue to decline and some would be extirpated from the watershed. This alternative would not provide any additional Service efforts and is therefore not responsive to the Conte Refuge Act.

##### *B. The Private Lands Work and Education Alternative*

In this alternative, the Service would work exclusively with private landowners through the existing Partners for Wildlife Program. The Service's major thrust through the year 2010 would focus on the voluntary restoration and enhancement of habitats on private lands to benefit plants and animals. A limited educational effort would be undertaken, targeting the watershed's private landowners.

If this alternative were chosen, many species in the watershed would continue to decline. Minimal protection of aquatic habitats and plant and animal populations within the identified Special Focus Areas would result. Habitat improvement would occur randomly depending on landowner participation and would benefit certain species, primarily those who inhabit small wetlands and perhaps some early-successional species, but not substantially benefit many of the rare, area-sensitive or migratory species. This Alternative would not accomplish the purposes of the Act.

##### *C. The Private Lands Work, Education and Partnerships Alternative*

In this alternative, the Service would work 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. Educational efforts would be carried out in cooperation with the watershed's many environmental education providers.

If this alternative were chosen, small amounts of additional protection would be provided to federally-listed species, rare species, fish, migratory birds, area-sensitive species and wetland habitats. The protection and management provided by others with the support of the Service would be beneficial, but limited in scope. Species and sites not of interest to existing organizations

would receive no protection. This Alternative would not fully accomplish the purposes of the Act.

##### *E. The Private Lands Work, Education and Land Protection Alternative*

In this alternative, the Service would work with private landowners, state or local agencies and private organizations through the existing Partners for Wildlife Program. The Service would also initiate an extensive land protection effort through the year 2010, using a combination of conservation easements, cooperative management agreements and fee title acquisition, to ensure natural diversity. Educational efforts would focus on developing new programs and facilities on Service lands. This alternative would result in the establishment of a more traditional national fish and wildlife refuge in the watershed.

If this alternative were chosen, all the acreage within the Special Focus Areas would receive some degree of protection by the Service. This Alternative provides essentially the same level of protection to the listed and rare species and communities as does Alternative D, with slight additional protection for grassland and boreal species. Since habitat improvement efforts would largely be limited to Service lands, a smaller amount of the entire watershed would become improved habitat. Many aquatic, and/or wide-ranging species as well as species which require active habitat management would not be broadly benefitted.

#### Minimization of Impacts

Possible project impacts, public concerns and methods used to mitigate those impacts and concerns are addressed in the FEIS. A major public concern was that the programs undertaken would be forced on the people. The Partners for Wildlife and the Challenge Cost Share programs require the participant to apply to the Service, and therefore are totally voluntary. The Service's land acquisition policy is to work with willing sellers. The loss of tax revenue due to Service purchase of land is a negative impact. The loss of tax revenue to the towns will be partially mitigated by payment-in-lieu taxes.

#### Findings and Decision

Having reviewed and considered the FEIS for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge and the public comments thereon, the Service finds as follows:

(1) The requirements of NEPA and their implementing regulations have been satisfied;