

**FINAL NEPA ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
AND CEQA INITIAL STUDIES**

**REFUGE WATER SUPPLY
LONG-TERM WATER SUPPLY AGREEMENTS**

SAN JOAQUIN RIVER BASIN

JANUARY 2001

**U.S. BUREAU OF RECLAMATION,
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE,
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME, AND
GRASSLAND WATER DISTRICT**

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SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

REFUGE WATER SUPPLY - LONG-TERM AGREEMENTS

SAN JOAQUIN RIVER BASIN

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managed as part of the San Luis NWR Complex. The other state and federal refuges covered in this document (Volta WA, Mendota WA, and Merced NWR) were originally established to provide habitat for wintering waterfowl, but now serve a variety of wildlife and conservation objectives. Similarly, the private wetland areas within the Grassland RCD originally were managed primarily to attract waterfowl during the fall and winter to support recreational hunting on private duck clubs, but today are managed to meet the needs of a wide array of wetland-dependent wildlife.

2.1 National Wildlife Refuges

The San Luis NWR Complex has been reorganized since the 1989 *Report on Refuge Water Supply Investigations* and the 1989 *San Joaquin Basin Action Plan/Kesterson Mitigation Plan*. As a result of implementation of the Action Plan, acquisition of the West Bear Creek and Freitas Units of the Action Plan lands resulted in a contiguous land base among the San Luis and Kesterson NWRs and the two Action Plan units. Therefore, the Service has redesignated the two NWRs and Action Plan units as the San Luis NWR Complex, with each of the former NWRs and Action Plan units designated as management units within the San Luis NWR Complex. In addition, the San Luis NWR Complex includes the Merced Unit, which includes the East Bear Creek Unit of the Action Plan. Because all of these lands are managed collectively as the San Luis NWR Complex, they are addressed together in this section.

The management objectives for the San Luis NWR Complex are to:

- Provide feeding and resting habitat for wintering waterfowl
- Provide habitat and manage for endangered, threatened, and sensitive species of concern
- Protect and provide habitat for neotropical migratory landbirds
- Preserve a natural diversity and abundance of flora and fauna
- Provide for compatible, management-oriented research
- Alleviate crop depredation
- Provide public use activities, such as wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and hunting
- Further the goals of the NWR system

In addition to these primary objectives, the San Luis NWR Complex is managed to contribute to attaining the specific goals of the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture for the San Joaquin Valley, which are to:

- Protect 53,000 acres of existing wetlands through fee or perpetual easement acquisition
- Increase wetland area by 20,000 acres through conversion of agricultural lands to wetlands
- Enhance the 121,000 acres of existing wetlands that are under public and private ownership

To achieve these goals, the San Luis NWR complex is managed to provide seasonal wetland habitat for migratory waterfowl, as well as to maintain various wetland and riparian habitats to support a diversity of wildlife species.

In the past, the lack of firm, adequate-quality water has limited the variety of wetland habitat, species diversity, and management flexibility of the NWRs in the San Joaquin Valley. Permanent water, which is required by many Central Valley listed species and species of special concern, was usually absent on the San Luis NWR Complex. Water for riparian habitat was also absent, resulting in reduced habitat quality and availability for neotropical migratory birds and warmwater fish. Seasonal wetland quality for waterfowl was also limited by water availability, because sufficient water was not available to maximize production of moist soil food plants for wintering waterfowl.

2.1.1 San Luis Unit

The 7,430-acre San Luis Unit was established in 1966 under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. The refuge is 12 miles northwest of the city of Los Banos. It is located on an interior island in the San Joaquin River floodplain, flanked by riparian zones along Salt Slough on the west and the San Joaquin River on the east. The refuge is managed to provide nesting, migration and wintering habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds, endangered species, and resident wildlife. San Luis Unit also supports natural grasslands.

Pre-CVPIA Water Supplies

Water is used on the San Luis Unit to support permanent and seasonal wetlands. The refuge holds 19,910 acre-feet of surface water rights on Salt Slough. Salt Slough is a permanent stream that flows along the western refuge boundary and eventually into the San Joaquin River. Most of the water in Salt Slough originates from either operational spills or from return flow from the Grassland WD, San Luis Canal Company, and Central California Irrigation District. In the San Joaquin Valley, agricultural return flows typically have contained selenium concentrations above the two parts per billion objective deemed safe for wetland and wildlife management. As a result, the Service generally has not used Salt Slough water for wetland management since 1986.

Because of the unacceptable quality of Salt Slough water, the Service entered into a long-term (40-year) Grant of Easement in 1989 with San Luis Canal Company regarding water deliveries to the refuge. Under the terms of the agreement, the San Luis Canal Company delivers up to 25,125 acre-feet of CVP water to the refuge, keeping up to 25 percent to compensate for seepage losses. Accounting for the 25 percent conveyance loss, San Luis Unit typically receives approximately 19,000 acre-feet of water. Reclamation has made this water available under the 1954 Central Valley Project Reauthorization Act (1954 Act), as implemented through a 1990 Agreement, under which Reclamation provides this water for mitigation for Kesterson Reservoir. The 1954 Act also provided 40,000 acre-feet per year for a proposed 12,000-acre federal waterfowl management area from other than existing project sources.

The Service also has an agreement, through deed encumbrances, to accept surface return flows directly from agricultural lands serviced by the San Luis Canal Company. This source is not dependable and has varied between 135 and 1,700 acre-feet per year.

2 checks