U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Recovery Plan for the Giant Garter Snake

(*Thamnophis gigas*)

Photo by David Kelly, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Recovery Plan for the Giant Garter Snake

(*Thamnophis gigas*)

(2017)

Region 8
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Sacramento, California

Approved: _____
Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Pacific Southwest Region, Region 8.

Date: 9-28-17

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An electronic copy of this recovery plan will be made available at:
http://www.fws.gov/endangered/species/recovery-plans.html

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The giant garter snake (*Thamnophis gigas*) was federally listed as a threatened species on October 20, 1993. Historical records suggest that the giant garter snake inhabited fresh water marshes, streams, and wetlands throughout the length of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys in Central California. Today only about 5 percent of its historical wetland habitat acreage remains. The 13 populations identified at listing were isolated from one another with no protected dispersal corridors. Nine populations are recognized in this recovery plan following an update of the thirteen populations described in the original listing. This change is based on recent surveys, which indicate that two populations were extirpated, and on genetic research, which lead to the grouping together of some of the populations.

The giant garter snake has specific habitat needs that include summer aquatic habitat for foraging, bankside basking areas with nearby emergent vegetation for cover and thermal regulation, and upland refugia for extended periods of inactivity. Perennial wetlands provide the highest quality habitat for the giant garter snake, and ricelands, with the interconnected water conveyance structures, serve as an alternative habitat in the absence of higher-quality wetlands. The loss and subsequent fragmentation of habitat is the primary threat to the giant garter snake throughout the Central Valley of California. Habitat loss has occurred from urban expansion, agricultural conversion, and flood control. Habitat fragmentation restricts dispersal and isolates populations of the giant garter snake increasing the likelihood of inbreeding, decreasing fitness, and reducing genetic diversity. These factors have ultimately resulted in the snake being extirpated from the southern one-third of its range in former wetlands associated with the historical Buena Vista, Tulare, and Kern lakebeds. In addition to habitat loss, the remaining Central Valley populations of the giant garter snake are subject to the cumulative effects of a number of other existing and potential threats, including: roads and vehicular traffic, climate change, and predation by non-native species.

Recovery Strategy: The strategy used to recover the giant garter snake is focused on protecting existing, occupied habitat and identifying and protecting areas for habitat restoration, enhancement, or creation including areas that are needed to provide connectivity between populations. Appropriate management is needed for all giant garter snake conservation lands to ensure that stable and viable populations can be maintained in occupied areas, and that colonization will be promoted in restored and enhanced unoccupied habitat. We defined nine recovery units that correspond directly to the nine geographically and genetically distinct populations, to aid in our recovery planning: Butte Basin, Colusa Basin, Sutter Basin, American Basin, Yolo Basin, Delta Basin, Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin, San Joaquin Basin, and Tulare Basin.

Recovery Goal and Objective: The objective of this recovery plan is to reduce threats to and improve the population status of the giant garter snake sufficiently to warrant delisting. To achieve this goal we have defined the following objectives:

1. Establish and protect self-sustaining populations of the giant garter snake throughout the full ecological, geographical, and genetic range of the species.
2. Restore and conserve healthy Central Valley wetland ecosystems that function to support the giant garter snake and associated species and communities of conservation concern such as Central Valley waterfowl and shorebird populations.
3. Ameliorate or eliminate, to the extent possible, the threats that caused the species to be listed or are otherwise of concern, and any foreseeable future threats.

Recovery Criteria:

Factor A Criteria:

- Sufficient habitat is protected to support populations of giant garter snakes.
- Populations are connected with corridors of suitable habitat.
- Management plans and best management practices oriented to giant garter snake conservation are developed and implemented (and adaptively updated based on current research).
- Protected habitat is supplied with a reliable source of clean water during the critical active summer months.

Factor C Criteria:

- Threats due to disease are reduced or removed.

Factor E Criteria:

- Monitoring in recovery units demonstrates stable or increasing populations and evidence that the identified populations and their habitats are viable over a 20-year period including at least one 3-year drought.

Actions Needed:

1. Protect existing habitat, areas identified for restoration or creation, and areas that will provide connectivity between preserved areas of habitat.
2. Develop and implement appropriate management of habitat on public and private wetlands and conservation lands.
3. Improve water quality in areas occupied by the giant garter snake and affected by poor water quality conditions.
4. Ensure summer water is available for wetland habitats used by the snake.
5. Establish an incentive or easement program(s) to encourage private landowners and local agencies to provide or maintain giant garter snake habitat.
6. Monitor populations and habitat to assess the success or failure of management activities and habitat protection efforts.
7. Conduct surveys and research to identify areas requiring protection and management.
8. Conduct research focused on the management needs of the species, and on identifying and removing threats.
9. Establish and implement outreach and education, which includes the participation of landowners; interested public and stakeholders; and other Federal, State, and local agencies.
10. Reestablish populations within the giant garter snake's historical range.

Total Estimated Cost of Recovery: The estimated cost to implement all measures described in this recovery plan is between $17,313,138 and $116,470,200 plus additional costs to be determined. Those recovery actions for which no cost estimate is included consist primarily of habitat protection including purchase of land or easements in core areas and corridors linking such habitat, restoration, and for development and implementation of deliberately experimental adaptive management plans that include mathematical modeling to pinpoint uncertainties and generate alternative hypotheses, statistical analysis to determine how uncertainties are likely to propagate over time in relation to policy choices, and formal optimization to seek better choices (Walters, 1986). These recovery actions place an emphasis on multiple species protection and management by developing and implementing conservation measures to restore and protect the processes that maintain healthy ecosystems. Such actions contribute not only to conservation of giant garter snakes, but also to the conservation of wetland ecosystems which support the giant garter snake and associated species and communities of conservation concern such as Central Valley waterfowl and shorebird populations,

along with important ecosystem functions such as groundwater recharge. Therefore, actions to protect and manage wetland ecosystems are likely to be implemented through other authorities for these multiple species or other conservation goals, yet are included in the recovery actions here because they are compatible with and contribute to recovery efforts for the giant garter snake. Although we include the actions, it is not practicable to determine the proportion of the costs of these actions that would be attributable solely to giant garter snake recovery. In addition, widely fluctuating land cost in the recovery area, and flexibility in the specific locations and methods of habitat protection, restoration and management make estimates of such costs unreliable. As such, the cost of these actions will be determined as implementation progresses.

In order to best provide for the conservation and recovery of the species and minimize realized costs, we will maximize partnerships with federal, State, and non-governmental partners. The Service will monitor the success of early implementation efforts and, depending on the giant garter snake's progress toward recovery, determine if all of the measures outlined in this plan are necessary. Therefore, we believe that the recovery measures outlined is this plan are a comprehensive approach for recovery of the giant garter snake; however, recovery may be achieved without all measures in this plan being implemented, resulting in a decrease in cost.

Date of Recovery: Delisting could be initiated by 2047 if recovery criteria have been met including: protection of habitat and creation of population corridors. These criteria are likely to take at least 10 years to achieve. Additionally, recovery requires that giant garter snake populations be self-sustaining over the long-term. Therefore, a 20-year monitoring period is recommended to cover multiple generations (four to five generations) to provide a reliable estimate of population change. This monitoring period must also include one 3-year drought to ensure that giant garter snakes are no longer threatened by an insufficient water supply.

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I. BACKGROUND

A. OVERVIEW

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the giant garter snake (*Thamnophis gigas)* as a threatened species on October 20, 1993 (Service 1993) under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (Act), as amended. Critical habitat has not been designated for the giant garter snake. Since the 1993 listing rule, a threats assessment and review of the biological status were conducted in 5-year status reviews for the species in 2006 and 2012 (Service 2006a, 2012).

Recovery plans focus on restoring the ecosystems on which a species is dependent, reducing threats to the species, or both. A recovery plan constitutes an important Service document that presents a logical path to recovery of the species based on what we know about the species' biology and life history, and how threats impact the species. Recovery plans help to provide guidance to the Service, States, and other partners on ways to eliminate or reduce threats to listed species and measurable objectives against which to measure progress towards recovery. Recovery plans are advisory documents, not regulatory documents, and do not substitute for the determinations and promulgation of regulations required under section 4(a)(1) of the Act. A decision to revise the listing status of a species or to remove it from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife (50 CFR 17.11) or Plants (50 CFR 17.12) is ultimately based on an analysis of the best scientific and commercial data available to determine whether a species is no longer an endangered species or a threatened species.

The following discussion summarizes characteristics of giant garter snake biology, demography, distribution, population status, and threats that are relevant to recovery. Additional information is available in the 2012 5-year status review (http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile?spcode=C057) and associated literature.

B. TAXONOMY AND DESCRIPTION

The giant garter snake was first described and named by Henry S. Fitch (1940) as *Thamnophis ordinoides gigas*. A study based on biochemical data (Lawson and Dessauer 1979) pointed toward the species-level distinctness of *T. gigas*. Rossman and Stewart (1987) used morphological characters to further examine and reevaluate the taxon and formally recognized the giant garter snake, *T. gigas*, as a full species. This recognition remains today.

The giant garter snake can be distinguished from the common garter snake (*T. sirtalis*) and the western terrestrial garter snake (*T. elegans*) by color pattern, scale numbers and/or size, and head shape. Dorsal (back or topside) background color of giant garter snakes varies from brown to olive with a cream, yellow, or orange dorsal stripe and two light-colored lateral stripes. Some individuals have a checkered pattern of black spots between the dorsal and lateral stripes. Background coloration, prominence of the checkered pattern, and the three yellow stripes are individually and geographically variable (R. Hansen 1980). The average body length for a male giant garter snake is 60 to 70 centimeters (23.6 to 27.5 inches) and 70 to 80 centimeters (27.5 to 31.5 inches) for a female (Wylie *et al.* 2010). A complete discussion of the taxonomy and appearance for this species can be found in the most recent 5-Year Status Review (Service 2012).

C. HABITAT DESCRIPTION

The giant garter snake is endemic to the wetlands of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys of California, inhabiting the tule marshes and seasonal wetlands created by overbank flooding of the rivers and streams of the Central Valley (Fitch 1940; Central Valley Joint Venture 2006). Currently, less than 5 percent of the historical 1.8 million hectares (4.5 million acres) of wetlands, or approximately 90,000 hectares (222,394 acres) remain (Central Valley Joint Venture 2006). The giant garter snake now inhabits the remaining high-quality fragmented wetlands that include marshes, ponds, small lakes, low-gradient streams with silt substrates, and managed waterways. The loss of wetland ecosystems and suitable habitat has also resulted in the giant garter snake using highly modified and degraded habitats. Located among cultivated farm lands, these areas include irrigation ditches, drainage canals, rice fields, and their adjacent uplands. Since giant garter snake surveys were first conducted in the 1970s, results have demonstrated that active rice fields and the supporting water conveyance infrastructure consisting of a matrix of canals, levees, and ditches have served as alternative habitat that is commonly used by the giant garter snakes in the absence of suitable natural marsh habitat (G. Hansen 1988; G. Hansen and Brode 1980, 1993; Brode and G. Hansen 1992; Wylie 1998a; Wylie *et al.* 1997a; Wylie and Cassaza 2000; Halstead *et al.* 2010). The giant garter snake is primarily an aquatic species, but it also occupies upland terrestrial habitat, particularly during the winter inactive season. Although usually found in or adjacent to aquatic habitats, giant garter snakes have been observed in associated uplands up to hundreds of meters (hundreds of yards) distant from any water body (Wylie *et al.* 1997a; P. Coates, U.S. Geological Survey [USGS], pers. comm. 2011).

1. Habitat Components

There are three habitat components that appear to be most important to the giant garter snake (G. Hansen 1982, 1986, 1988, 1996a; Wylie *et al.* 1995, 1997a; Halstead *et al.* 2010):

1. A fresh-water aquatic component with protective emergent vegetative cover that will allow foraging (Figure 1),
2. An upland component near the aquatic habitat that can be used for thermoregulation and for summer shelter in burrows, and,
3. An upland refugia component that will serve as winter hibernacula.

Figure 1. Typical giant garter snake habitat in the Sacramento Valley. (Photo: USGS**)**

Aquatic Component. The giant garter snake has been recognized as requiring aquatic habitat since it was first described, and has been consistently observed and captured in association with aquatic habitats since accounts of the snake were first published (Fitch 1940; G. Hansen and Brode 1980). The aquatic component of the giant garter snake habitat has been regarded as a steadfast requirement for the survival of the snake, and researchers acknowledge the following qualitative requirements of ideal aquatic habitat for the giant garter snake (G. Hansen 1986; G. Hansen and Brode 1980; Wylie *et al.* 1995; Dickert 2002; E. Hansen 2002):

1. Water present from March through November.
2. Slow moving or static water flow with mud substrate.
3. Presence of emergent and bankside vegetation that provides cover from predators and may serve in thermoregulation.
4. The absence of a continuous canopy of riparian vegetation.
5. Available prey in the form of small amphibians and small fish.
6. Thermoregulation (basking) sites with supportive vegetation such as folded tule clumps immediately adjacent to escape cover.
7. The absence of large predatory fish.
8. Absence of recurrent flooding, or where flooding is probable the presence of upland refugia.

Upland Component. Although the giant garter snake is predominately an aquatic species, incidental observations and radio telemetry studies have shown that the snake can be found in upland areas near the aquatic habitat component during the active spring and summer seasons (G. Hansen 1986, 1988; Brode and G. Hansen 1992; E. Hansen 2002; Dickert 2003; Wylie and Cassaza 2000, 2001; Wylie *et al.* 1995, 1997a, 2002a, 2003a, 2004, 2005). Upland habitat (land that is not typically inundated during the active season and is adjacent to the aquatic habitat of the giant garter snake) is used for basking to regulate body temperature, for cover, and as a retreat into mammal burrows and crevices in the soil during ecdysis (shedding of skin) or to avoid predation (G. Hansen and Brode 1993; Wylie *et al.* 2003a). Giant garter snakes have been observed using burrows for refuge in the summer as much as 50 meters (164 feet) away from the marsh edge (Wylie *et al.* 1997a). Important qualities of upland habitat have been found by researchers (E. Hansen 2003a; Wylie *et al.* 2003a) to include:

1. Availability of bankside vegetative cover, typically tule (*Scirpus* sp.) or cattail (*Typha* sp.), for screening from predators.
2. Availability of more permanent shelter, such as bankside cracks or crevices, holes, or small mammal burrows.
3. Free of poor grazing management practices (i.e., grazing to the point at which giant garter snake refugia has been reduced or eliminated).

Upland Winter Refugia Component. During the colder winter months, giant garter snakes spend their time in a lethargic state. During this period, giant garter snakes over-winter in locations such as mammal burrows along canal banks and marsh locations, or riprap along a railroad grade near a marsh or roads (Wylie *et al.* 1997a; Wylie *et al.* 2002a). Giant garter snakes typically do not over-winter where flooding occurs in channels with rapidly moving water, such as the Sutter Bypass (B. Halstead, USGS, pers. comm. 2011). Over-wintering snakes use burrows as far as 200 to 250 meters (656 to 820 feet) from the edge of summer aquatic habitat (G. Hansen 1988; Wylie *et al.* 1997a; P. Coates, pers. comm. 2010).

2. Habitat types and quality

Table 1 shows four locations representing three different levels of habitat quality where trapping surveys were conducted and population estimates were completed. The habitat quality was rated as marginal for the seasonal wetland habitat at Colusa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) (which was being managed for wintering waterfowl at the time), moderate for both the Natomas Basin and Gilsizer Slough (both have predominate rice agriculture), and high quality for Badger Creek (natural, perennial marsh). Of all known populated sites, the 240-hectare (593 acre) Badger Creek area is believed to best represent historical giant garter snake habitat, and was found to have the highest density of snakes of the four sites (Wylie *et al.* 2010). Wylie *et al.* (2010) found from their data analysis that giant garter snakes will persist in areas dominated by rice, by foraging in flooded rice fields after the rice plants have grown sufficiently to provide cover from predators. It appears that giant garter snakes do not tolerate seasonal wetlands managed for waterfowl if there is no aquatic habitat available during the active summer season. The Body Condition Index of snakes, a measure of the energy reserves of a snake (measured as a ratio of length to mass) was analyzed for the same four sites (Wylie *et al.* 2010). It was found that the snakes at Badger Creek had the highest Body Condition Index, indicating the best health, and that the snakes at the Colusa NWR had the lowest Body Condition Index.

Table 1. Comparative studies giving population estimates and densities for sites with varying giant garter snake habitat quality. (Wylie *et al.* 2010)

Location / Year	Trap-Days[A]	Captures Hand/trap	Captures Trap only	Abundance[B] N (95% CI)	Density[C] Snakes/Ha (95% CI)
Badger Creek 1997	18,376	103	103	118 (111-132)	8.0 (7.6 – 9.0)
Colusa NWR 1997	12,198	53	22	29 (22-53)	0.83 (0.63-1.5)
Gilsizer Slough 1996	17,136	88	67	177 (124-280)	3.1 (2.2 – 4.9)
Natomas Basin 1999	19,170	164	141	229 (199-276)	1.7 (1.5 – 2.1)

[A] Trap-Days = number of traps used at a site X the days they were used for trapping
[B] For abundance N = number of individual snakes, CI = Confidence Interval
[C] Snakes/Ha = Snakes per Hectare

Wylie *et al.* (2000a) reported that in wetlands managed specifically to benefit giant garter snakes, home range estimates were smaller than for those areas lacking comparable management, while Wylie (1998b) found that giant garter snakes may concentrate in the best available habitat when all other surrounding habitat has been eliminated or highly degraded.

D. ECOLOGY AND DEMOGRAPHY

1. Ecology

Reproduction. Male giant garter snakes are believed to reach sexual maturity in an average of 3 years and females in an average of 5 years (USFWS 1993); therefore, we estimate that a generation is 5 years for the giant garter snake. The mating season is believed to extend from March, soon after emergence, into May (Coates *et al.* 2009). The giant garter snake usually gives birth in summer to early fall after a gestation period of 2 -3 months. R. Hansen and G. Hansen (1990) found that parturition (giving birth) for female giant garter snakes taken into captivity occurred from late July through early September, and neonates (newly born young) emerge from the female fully developed. Litter size is variable with the giant garter snake, and averages between 17 and 23 young (R. Hansen and G. Hansen 1990; Halstead et al. 2011).

Thermal Ecology. Snakes are ectothermic animals, relying on external sources of heat to warm their bodies. Ectothermic animals regulate their body temperatures by daily behavioral activities such as basking in the sun or resting on a warm rock to heat their bodies, or by resting under vegetation or in the water to cool their bodies (Lincoln *et al.* 2001; Pough *et al.* 2001). A snake's ability to thermoregulate its body within narrow limits using external sources of heating and cooling are believed to play an important role in feeding and digestion, growth, reproduction, and in their vulnerability to predation, such as when basking without cover (Pough *et al.* 2001). Wylie *et al.* (2009a) found that giant garter snakes remain cool during hot days by remaining in underground burrows and warm themselves in cool weather by basking on canal banks.

Chemical Ecology. Chemical cues are detected by olfactory organs and the vomeronasal system in snakes, which involves oral and nasal sensory inputs from the flicking action of the forked tongue (Pough *et al.* 2001). The ability of garter snakes to detect chemicals is important in reproduction, orientation and navigation, locating prey, and predator avoidance (Costanzo 1989a).

Daily Activity. The daily activity of giant garter snakes was described by G. Hansen and Brode (1993) as follows: (1) emergence from burrows after sunrise; (2) basking in order to warm bodies to activity temperatures, particularly during cool weather; and (3) foraging or courting activity for the remainder of the day. During radio-telemetry studies, giant garter snakes typically traveled little from day to day; however, total activity varied widely among individuals (Wylie *et al.* 1997a). Giant garter snakes usually remain in close proximity to wetland habitats but G. Hansen and Brode (1993) documented movements within the Natomas Basin, observing that giant garter snakes moved at least 400 meters (1,312 feet) between small lateral ditches and larger canals, and some giant garter snakes moved distances of greater than 800 meters (2,625 feet). Wylie *et al.* (2008) found that giant garter snakes at the Colusa Drain site in Yolo County traveled on average 100 meters (328 feet) per day during the 2006 active season and 45 meters (148 feet) per day during the 2007 active season, but decreased activity significantly during the fall and winter when daily travel was about 7 meters (23 feet).

Although Fitch (1940) and Van Denburgh and Slevin (1918) both described a strictly diurnal behavior (active during daylight only) for the giant garter snake, R. Hansen (1980) recorded a more flexible daily activity period in which he observed nocturnal activity of the giant garter snake.

Seasonal Activity. Depending on annual weather conditions, snakes move underground into mammal burrows, crevices, or other voids in the earth around October 1 to avoid potentially lethal

cool autumn and winter temperatures (G. Hansen 1988). Foraging, basking, and other activities are sporadic at this time and dependent upon weather conditions (G. Hansen and Brode 1993; Wylie *et al.* 1995). Giant garter snakes begin emerging from winter retreats around April 1 and are most active from early spring through mid-fall. Seasonal activity may begin earlier than April 1 (as early as March 1) in some years and in some locations (R. Hansen 1980; G. Hansen and Brode 1993; Wylie *et al.* 1997a). Giant garter snakes are typically active by April 15, having emerged from hibernacula, and are actively foraging (G. Hansen and Brode 1993). Giant garter snake activity peaks during April and May, and then activity is reduced during the mid- to late summer months (G. Hansen and Brode 1993).

Prey. Adult giant garter snakes feed primarily on a wide variety of native and non-native aquatic prey such as fish and amphibians, capturing all their food in the water (R. Hansen 1980). Research on several species of garter snakes suggests that diet varies with age and size, and prey availability varies seasonally and geographically (Rossman *et al.* 1996). Brode (1988) and G. Hansen (1988) suggest the giant garter snake specializes in ambushing small fish underwater and giant garter snakes have been observed actively hunting for and capturing small fish in the wild (Fitch 1941; R. Hansen 1980; B. Halstead, pers. comm. 2011). They appear to take advantage of conditions that trap and concentrate prey items in small pools or near road culverts (Rossman *et al.* 1996) and have been observed on multiple occasions feeding on mosquito fish (*Gambusia affinis*) confined to small pools of water (R. Hansen 1980; G. Hansen and Brode 1993; G. Wylie, *in litt.* 2009).

Predators. A number of native mammals and birds are known, or are likely, predators of giant garter snakes, including raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*), otters (*Lontra canadensis*), hawks and harriers (*Buteo* species, *Accipiter* species, *Circus cyaneus*), and great blue herons (*Ardea herodias*). Many areas supporting giant garter snakes have been documented to have abundant predators (R. Hansen 1980; G. Hansen and Brode 1993; Wylie *et al.* 1997a). However, predation is not believed to be a limiting factor in areas that provide abundant cover, high concentrations of prey items, and connectivity to a permanent water source (Wylie *et al.* 1997a).

2. Demographics

Demography, the quantitative description of a population (Krohne 2001), includes such parameters as population size, density, distribution, age structure, home range, and sex ratios. Demography provides insight into a population's age structure, growth rates and overall health, and is therefore important to wildlife management (Klemens 2000) and in measuring success in restoration of habitat and reintroductions of rare species. As a conservation tool, demographic parameters can be used to gauge the recovery of a species.

Population Size Estimates. The most fundamental of parameters used to define the demography of a population is the number of individuals in the population; these estimates are useful to wildlife managers in providing a means to determine the density of individuals in a population and to estimate the size of a self-sustaining population. Unfortunately, population counts for many animals cannot adequately estimate a population size because of the imperfect detectability of the animals (Mazerolle *et al.* 2007), such as individuals being inconspicuous, having extended periods of inactivity, having low densities, or exhibiting extensive and irregular movement (Parker and Plummer 1987; Wylie *et al.* 2010).

Table 2 displays some of the population estimates that have been published for the giant garter snake. Estimates are notably lacking for the San Joaquin Valley, and this is primarily due to low capture numbers that are insufficient for mark-recapture derived estimates (E. Hansen 2008b). Although estimates exist for some populations, inconsistent methods across years do not allow us to estimate a range-wide population size for the species. USGS is working to develop a range-wide population size estimate.

Population Density. Density is a measure of the number of individuals occupying a specific area. The measure of "ecological density" is important to species managers because it is the measure of the number of individuals per unit of appropriate habitat (Krohne 2001). Surveys from 16 different sites, trapped with varying frequency from 1999 to 2005, have shown a range of linear densities of giant garter snakes from 8 snakes per kilometer at Natomas Basin (Wylie and Cassazza 2000) to 126 snakes per kilometer at the Colusa NWR site T24 (Wylie *et al.* 2005).

Table 2. Some population estimates of giant garter snakes.

Location	Year	Trap-Days	Captures (Hand & trap)	Captures (Trap only)	Abundance N (95% CI)[A]	Author
Badger Creek	1997	18,376	103	103	**118** (111-132)	Wylie *et al.* 2010
Badger Creek	2002	14,973	63	63	**216** (137–383)	E. Hansen 2003a
Colusa NWR	1997	12,198	53	22	**29** (22-53)	Wylie *et al.* 2010
Colusa NWR	2002	Not Listed	128	128	**163** (42-186)	Wylie *et al.* 2002c
Gilsizer Slough	1996	17,136	88	67	**177** (124-280)	Wylie *et al.* 2010
Natomas Basin	1999	19,170	164	141	**229** (199-276)	Wylie *et al.* 2010
Volta WA	2003	15,900	28	28	**45** (31-59)	Dickert 2003
Volta WA	2006	5,131	7	7	Insufficient numbers caught for estimate	Sousa and Sloan 2007
Yolo WA	2005	13,700	41	41	**57** (45-84)	E. Hansen 2008a

[A] CI = Confidence Interval

In a later study, Wylie *et al.* (2010) used data acquired from previous studies to determine snake densities in four separate areas that represent a range of habitat from rice agriculture (Natomas Basin) to managed seasonal marsh (Colusa NWR and Gilsizer Slough) to managed natural perennial marsh (Badger Creek). The density estimates in this study were presented as number of snakes per unit area, such as a wetland or rice field instead of a linear value. Wylie *et al.* (2010) found that the highest densities of giant garter snakes were located in the natural marsh at Badger Creek (see Table 1), which is believed to represent the historical giant garter snake perennial marsh habitat (Wylie *et al.* 2010).

Home Range. Many animals confine their routine daily activities, such as foraging and mating, to a limited area which biologists call the home range (Pough *et al.* 2001; Lincoln *et al.* 2001). Researchers who have conducted years of surveys for the giant garter snake, including monitoring snakes by implanting Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags (small electronic devices the size of a rice kernel that produce a unique number for each implanted snake when scanned by a hand-held

device) have found that giant garter snakes demonstrate site fidelity, especially the females (E. Hansen, pers. comm. 2011; B. Halstead, pers. comm. 2011; P. Valcarcel, USGS, *in litt.* 2010).

Researchers with the USGS estimated the home range size of giant garter snakes at several study sites using telemetry data (Worten 1989; Seaman and Powell 1996). Table 3 shows the home range figures from those studies. Home range estimates from the studies averaged from 17 to 44 hectares (42 to 109 acres) for a sample of 105 individual snakes (Wylie and Casazza 2000; Wylie *et al.* 2002a, 2008). In localities where surrounding land use provides or complements the necessary components of giant garter snake habitat, for example in areas of rice cultivation, the home ranges for snakes were shown to be smaller than for localities where the snakes must travel some distance to find those same components (E. Hansen 2008a).

Table 3. Home range estimates from various surveys of giant garter snakes

Location and Date	N[A]	Median home range Ha (min-max)[B]	Author
Colusa NWR 1997	27	42 (1.3 – 1130)	Wylie *et al.* 2002a
Colusa NWR 2000	9	17 (1 – 33)	Wylie *et al.* 2002a
Colusa NWR 2001	13	24 (3 – 173)	Wylie *et al.* 2002a
Colusa Drain Mar – Sep 2006	22	41.2 (3 – 239)	Wylie *et al.* 2008
Colusa Drain Mar – July 2007	22	22.78 (5.3 – 59.9)	Wylie *et al.* 2008
Natomas Basin 1999 (Elverta)	7	44 (13 – 80)	Wylie and Casazza 2000
Natomas Basin 1999 (Fisherman's Lake)	5	37.2 (13 – 87)	Wylie and Casazza 2000

[A] N = number of snakes in study [B] Ha = hectares

At Badger Creek, an area considered to exemplify high quality giant garter snake habitat, one telemetry study of the movements (not including a calculation of home ranges) of 12 individual snakes revealed that the giant garter snakes did not move more than 300 meters (984 feet) from their point of capture along the marsh emergent vegetation, and that males traveled further than females (E. Hansen 2003a).

E. DISTRIBUTION AND POPULATIONS

1. Distribution

Giant garter snakes are endemic to California's Central Valley (Fitch 1940; G. Hansen and Brode 1980; Rossman and Stewart 1987). Historically, giant garter snakes inhabited the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys from the vicinity of Chico, in Butte County southward to Buena Vista Lake, near Bakersfield in Kern County, California. The eastern and western boundaries of the giant garter snake range from the foothills occurring along each side of the Central Valley - the Coast Range to the west and the Sierra Nevada to the east. Observations of individual giant garter snakes range in elevation from 3 to 12 meters (10 to 40 feet) in the southern Sacramento Valley. Although the boundaries of the giant garter snake's original distribution are undetermined, occurrence records coincide with the historical distribution of the large flood-basins, freshwater wetlands, and tributary streams of the Central Valley's Sacramento and San Joaquin watersheds (Figure 2; G. Hansen and Brode 1980).

Though the abundance of giant garter snakes in the Sacramento Valley has declined, the distribution of giant garter snakes in its northern range may still reflect its historical distribution (Service 2012; Wylie *et al.* 2010). Giant garter snakes in the San Joaquin Valley, however, have suffered an extensive reduction in their abundance and distribution compared to historical times (R. Hansen 1980; Paquin *et al.* 2006; Wylie and Amarello 2007; E. Hansen 2008a). Giant garter snakes historically inhabited the extensive wetlands of the Tulare and Buena Vista lakes in the southern San Joaquin Valley and appear to have once been fairly abundant in this part of the San Joaquin Valley (G. Hansen and Brode 1980). Conversely, giant garter snakes have not been found in the northern reach of the San Joaquin Valley up to the Delta area. Here, the floodplain of the San Joaquin River and its associated wetland habitat constricts to a geologically narrow trough. The length of this 100-kilometer (62-mile) constriction is presumed to have historically separated the giant garter snake populations in Merced County from those of the eastern Sacramento/San Joaquin River Delta (Delta) in San Joaquin County (G. Hansen and Brode 1980). It is believed that the extensive historical wetlands of the Delta were suitable for giant garter snakes and that they historically occupied this area (G. Hansen 1986, 1988).

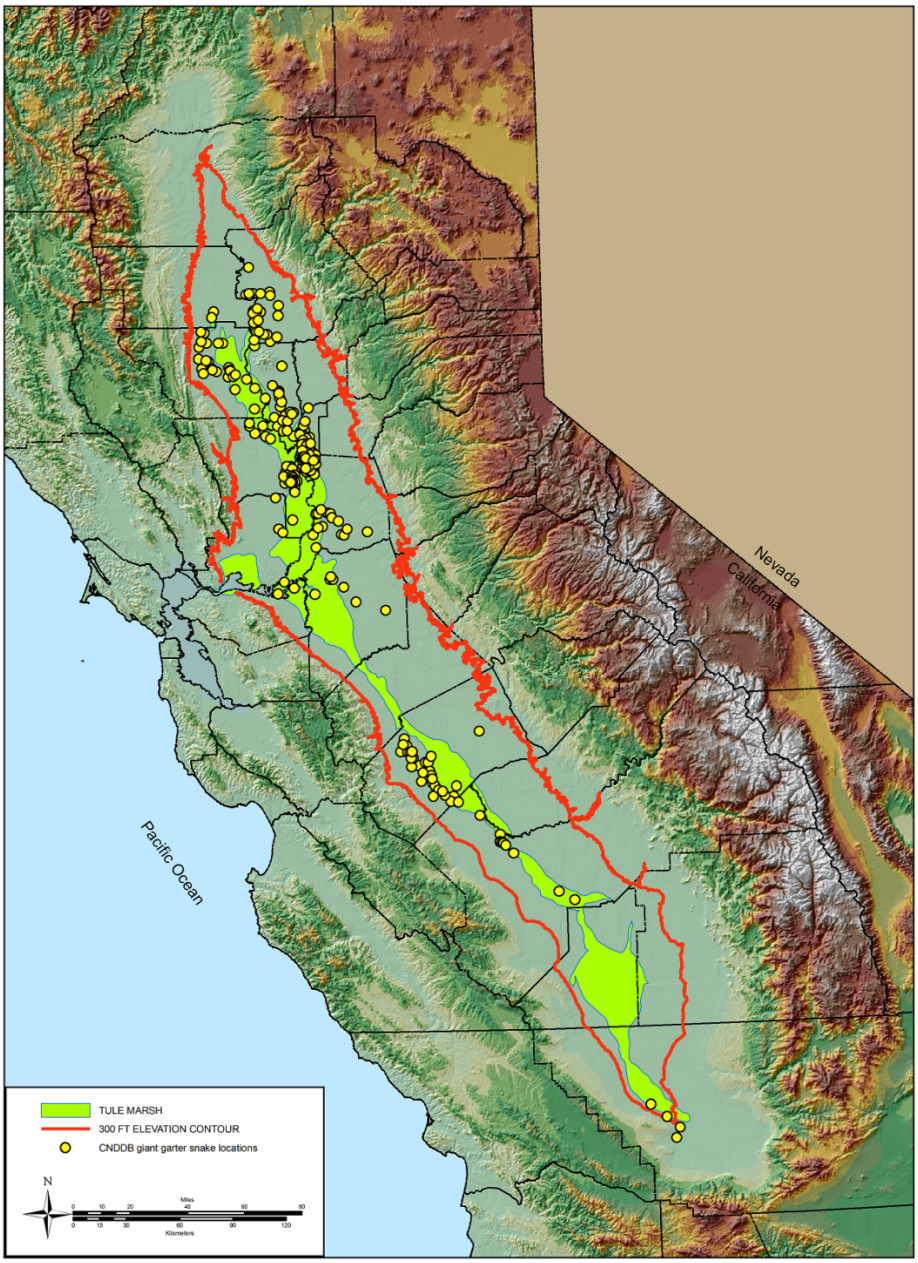

Figure 2. Distribution of historic tule marsh (lime green) and giant garter snake captures. (CNDDB, Kuchler)

2. Populations as Defined for this Recovery Plan

In this revised draft recovery plan we will continue to use, as closely as possible, the population definition from the listing rule (USFWS 1993), "a cluster of locality records in a contiguous habitat area." Locality records are distinct locations where surveys were conducted and giant garter snakes were found (USFWS 1993). These populations were associated with the major watershed basins in the Central Valley because these basins were exclusively defined by geographic features (Bryan 1923) and contained habitat that appeared to be historically interconnected by wetland features. Recent genetic studies of the giant garter snake have confirmed the validity of these population boundaries

by demonstrating that historically there was restricted gene flow between groups of individuals inhabiting these major watersheds (Paquin *et al.* 2006; Engstrom 2010). The currently recognized populations and distribution of the giant garter snake as they relate to the 13 populations described in the 1993 listing are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Populations of giant garter snakes at time of listing in 1993 and as currently assessed in 2016.

1993 POPULATIONS (At time of listing)	2017 POPULATIONS
Butte Basin	Butte Basin
Colusa Basin	Colusa Basin
Sutter Basin	Sutter Basin
American Basin	American Basin
Yolo Basin – Liberty Farms (currently presumed extirpated)	Yolo Basin
Yolo Basin – Willow Slough	
Badger Creek – Willow Creek	Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin
Sacramento Basin	Delta Basin
Caldoni Marsh (now called White Slough WA)	
East Stockton: Diverting Canal and Duck Creek	
North and South Grasslands	San Joaquin Basin
Mendota WA	Tulare Basin
Burrell and Lanare (currently presumed extirpated)	

Additional description and status information is available for each basin in the most recent 5-Year Status Review for the giant garter snake (Service 2012).

F. REASONS FOR DECLINE AND THREATS TO SURVIVAL

The following discussion of threats to the giant garter snake is presented in a format that follows the five listing factors used in status reviews as described in section 4(a)1 of the Endangered Species Act. These are:

A. The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range;
B. Overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes;
C. Disease or predation;
D. The inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; and
E. Other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

Since Federal listing in October 1993, the list of threats to the giant garter snake has changed and new threats analyses were presented in 5-year reviews for the giant garter snake completed in 2006 and 2012 (USFWS 2006a, 2012). A brief summary of the current significant threats addressed in this revised draft recovery plan follows; the 2012 5-year review should be consulted for a complete analysis.

1. Factor A: The Present or Threatened Destruction, Modification, or Curtailment of Habitat or Range

At the time of listing, habitat loss as a result of urbanization and conversion of wetlands was recognized as the primary Factor A threat to the giant garter snake. Today, habitat loss and fragmentation due to urbanization and changes in the levels and methods of rice production are the largest threat to the giant garter snake (Paquin *et al.* 2006; American Farmland Trust 2007; USDA 2010; California Rice Commission 2010; Farmland Information Center 2011; Service 2012). In addition, we consider the following to be current threats: changes in water availability; levee and canal maintenance, water management and water deliveries which do not account for the giant garter snake; water transfers (resulting from cropland idling/shifting, reservoir releases, conservation measures, or groundwater substitution); small populations; and invasive aquatic species.

2. Factor B: Overutilization for Commercial, Recreational, Scientific, or Educational Purposes

In the final listing rule, the Factor B threats included collection of specimens for private and scientific use, and harassment and collection of giant garter snakes by recreationists engaged in angling. Collection for private and scientific use is not considered to be a threat. However, threats from human encounters, primarily engaged in recreational activities is still considered a threat, but was moved to Factor E.

3. Factor C: Disease and Predation

In the final listing rule, predation by both native and non-native predators was considered a threat, and that threat continues today; however, it is not believed to be significant. Native and non-native predators both prey upon giant garter snakes and compete with giant garter snakes for prey. Parasites found on giant garter snakes were discussed in the final listing, but their level of threat was determined to be unknown; the degree of threat from parasites remains unknown today.

4. Factor D: The Inadequacy of Existing Regulatory Mechanisms

At the time of listing (USFWS 1993), the state and federal regulatory mechanisms thought to have some potential to protect the giant garter snake included the California Endangered Species Act (CESA), the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), and the Clean Water Act (CWA). In addition, this revised draft recovery plan recognizes the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as a Federal program that was designed to protect rare species of plants and animals.

5. Factor E: Other Natural or Manmade Factors Affecting its Continued Existence

At the time of listing, Factor E threats discussed included: fluctuations in the acreages of active rice fields due to changing market values and market demand (and due to changes in water availability), levee and canal maintenance, water management and water delivery during the winter for waterfowl that does not also provide summer water for the giant garter snake, water transfers, and fragmented habitat with small populations. These threats are still considered to be valid; however, these threats are now discussed in the Factor A section since they all directly relate to the loss or alteration of available habitat for the giant garter snake. Flooding and contaminants were also discussed in the listing rule and these remain valid Factor E threats; however, they are not considered significant threats. Giant garter snake mortalities from vehicular strikes on roads were discussed as a Factor A threat in the listing, but are now presented as a Factor E threat; however, it is not considered a significant threat. Encounters with humans was described as a Factor B threat in the listing, but is

now considered more relevant as a Factor E threat since threatening encounters may include those not related to recreation; however, it is not considered a significant threat. Since the final listing rule, drought and climate change, netting used in erosion control, and competition from non-native water snakes were identified as threats; however, the significance of these threats is unknown.

II. RECOVERY PROGRAM

A. RECOVERY STRATEGY

The strategy used to recover the giant garter snake is focused on protecting existing occupied habitat and identifying and protecting areas for habitat restoration, enhancement, or creation including areas that are needed to provide connectivity between populations. This approach is vital to reduce or eliminate the primary threat to the giant garter snake, which is the loss of habitat throughout the historical range of the species.

Appropriate management is needed for all giant garter snake conservation lands to ensure that stable and viable populations can be maintained in occupied areas, and that colonization will be promoted in restored and enhanced unoccupied habitat. An essential part of the management of habitat for giant garter snakes is to ensure that sufficient clean water is available to provide adequate aquatic habitat during the summer active season. Management plans must also incorporate sufficient monitoring to determine outcomes of specific actions and responses of the species to protection and management efforts. Such monitoring programs should be designed specifically to determine the success or failure of various actions, and provide for feedback such that protection and management actions can be modified in response to new data, research, and monitoring information.

Research on the ecology, behavior and life history of the giant garter snake will be needed to further define specific recovery tasks, management needs and goals, help assess threats and determine best methods to eliminate or ameliorate the threats, and to analyze aspects of population viability.

Repatriation, the introduction and augmentation of giant garter snakes into historically occupied areas, is needed in appropriate habitat in the San Joaquin Valley where recent surveys show dwindling population numbers. This will involve captive propagation hand in hand with a genetics management plan.

Implementation of recovery measures will place an emphasis on multiple species protection and management by developing and implementing conservation measures to restore and protect the processes that maintain healthy ecosystems. Species that may benefit from an ecosystem focus include the western pond turtle and Pacific flyway waterfowl and shorebirds. These species will benefit from implementation of the giant garter snake recovery plan through improvements in wetland and riparian habitats.

To assist in the achievement of the recovery of the giant garter snake, it is necessary to develop and implement incentive programs for private landowners and local agencies to conserve giant garter snake habitat. Additionally, development and distribution of informational material to interested landowners and public lands managers will enlist and encourage the participation and cooperation of private citizens and public land managers in the recovery of the giant garter snake.

Definitions

Recovery Unit: We defined nine recovery units that correspond directly to the nine geographically and genetically distinct populations to aid in our recovery planning. A recovery unit is a special unit of the listed species' range that is geographically or otherwise identifiable and is essential to the

recovery of the entire listed species. Recovery Units are individually necessary to conserve genetic distinctiveness, demographic robustness, important life history stages, or other features necessary for the long-term sustainability of the entire listed species.

Management Unit: These subdivisions of recovery units are areas that might require different management, that might be managed by different entities, or that might encompass different populations. In this revised draft recovery plan, the management units are primarily administrative in that they serve to organize the recovery units into separate and approximately equal areas that will assist in managing the implementation of the recovery actions.

Locality Record: A small geographic area of giant garter snake habitat where occupancy by giant garter snakes was documented by positive trapping survey results or by confirmed visual encounters. The size of the area can range from less than an acre to hundreds of acres.

Population: A cluster of locality records in a contiguous habitat area. In this plan individual populations are defined by the watershed basins in which they reside, which are contiguous habitat areas.

Corridor: A canal, waterway, slough, channel, or creek that connects two or more areas known to support giant garter snakes. A corridor must have the necessary habitat components to provide suitable giant garter snake habitat (see section I.C.1 and I.C.2) in order to function as a viable dispersal and movement corridor.

Giant Garter Snake Recovery Units

The giant garter snake's historical range encompasses the majority of the Central Valley of California, with habitat characteristics, species status, degree of threats, and needed recovery actions varying across this large geographic area. We have approached recovery planning by dividing the giant garter snake's broad geographic range into nine recovery units corresponding directly to the nine genetically and geographically defined populations previously discussed in chapter 1E (Figure 3). This grouping of recovery units is appropriate also because of the limited movement of giant garter snakes from one watershed to another, which genetically and demographically isolates the giant garter snakes within the various watershed basins. These recovery unit assignments will assist in establishing recovery criteria and guiding recovery tasks.

In defining recovery units for the giant garter snake, we have followed the usage of watershed basins that were also used to define population boundaries, and we have additionally restructured the populations from 13 (from listing rule) to 9 based on recent surveys and giant garter snake genetic data (Paquin *et al.* 2006; Engstrom 2010). The boundaries of the recovery units were defined using the giant garter snake habitat suitability model developed by Halstead *et al.* (2010). This model was derived from several raster maps that used data from Ducks Unlimited, the location and type of waterways from the National Hydrography Dataset (http://nhd.usgs.gov), and data on canopy and impervious cover from the National LandCover Dataset (http://landcover.usgs.gov). The combined recovery units, therefore, represent the potential extent of giant garter snake habitat in the Central Valley as known at the time of listing and updated with recent surveys. Each unit has a distinctive genetic composition that is essential to the recovery of the giant garter snake as a species.

The descriptions and maps of each of the recovery units below will provide greater detail on the locality and the amount of public and private conservation lands. There are no known unique threats in any of the recovery units, and all of the threats mentioned in section F can be found in all of the recovery units; however, the level that a single threat may pose to the giant garter snake differs between the recovery units.

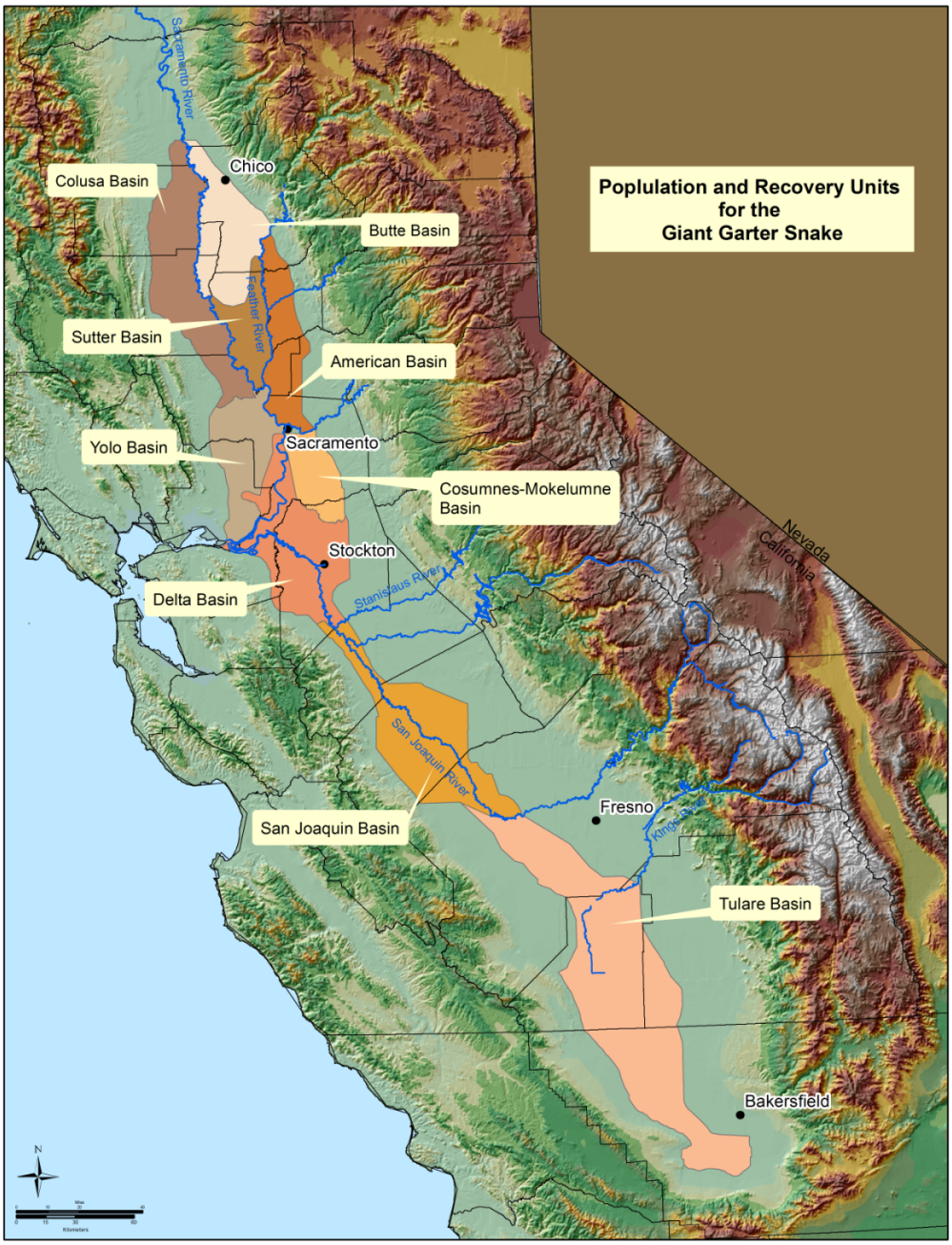

Figure 3. Populations and Recovery Units for the giant garter snake.

B. RECOVERY UNITS

1. Butte Basin Recovery Unit

The Butte Basin Recovery Unit encompasses the entire Butte Basin, extending from Red Bluff in the north to the Sutter Buttes in the south (Figure 4). The basin's watershed is dominated by the Sacramento River and includes those creeks that flow westward toward the Sacramento River. The Butte Basin consists of 193,892 hectares (479,118 acres), including portions of Tehama, Butte, Sutter, and Colusa counties. Three management units have been defined for the Butte Basin Recovery Unit: Llano Seco, Upper Butte Basin, and Gray Lodge/Butte Sink.

Within the Butte Basin, State and Federal conservation areas include: Gray Lodge Wildlife Area (WA), Upper Butte Basin WA, Butte Sink Wildlife Management Area, and several units of the Sacramento River NWR. In addition, approximately 4,047 hectares (10,000 acres) of privately owned lands are enrolled in the USFWS wetland easement program in the Butte Sink Wildlife Management Area. Currently there are no conservation banks in the Butte Basin designed for the giant garter snake.

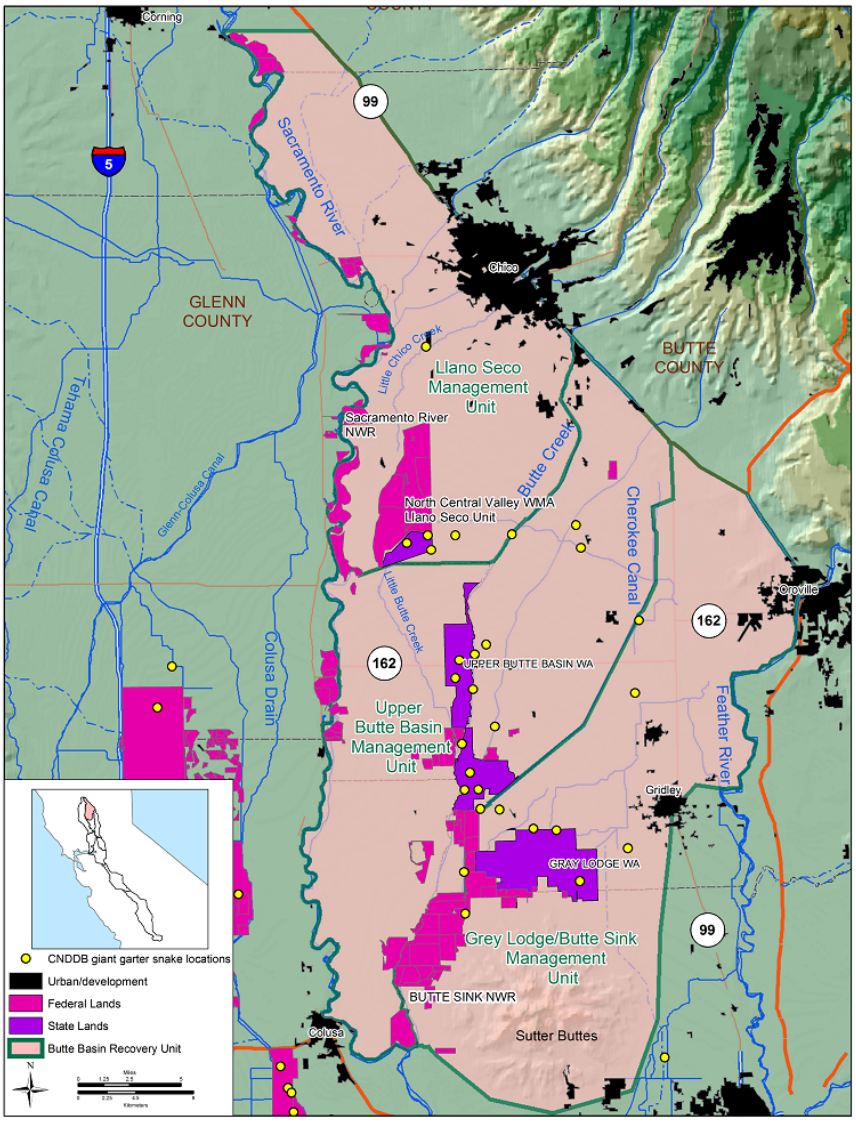

Figure 4. Butte Basin Recovery Unit

2. Colusa Basin Recovery Unit

The Colusa Basin extends from Red Bluff in the north to Cache Creek in the south (Figure 5). Its watershed is dominated by the Sacramento River. The Colusa Basin consists of 277,653 hectares (686,096 acres), including portions of the counties of Tehama, Glenn, Colusa, and Yolo. Three management units have been defined for the Colusa Basin Recovery Unit: Willows, Delevan and Colusa.

Within the Colusa Basin, Federal conservation areas include the Sacramento, Delevan and Colusa NWRs. In addition, about 2,226 hectares (5,500 acres) of private lands are enrolled in our wetland easement program in the area north and south of Delevan NWR. The Colusa Basin includes Dolan Ranch Conservation Bank (102-hectare, 252-acre) and the Ridge Cut Conservation Bank (75 hectare, 186 acre).

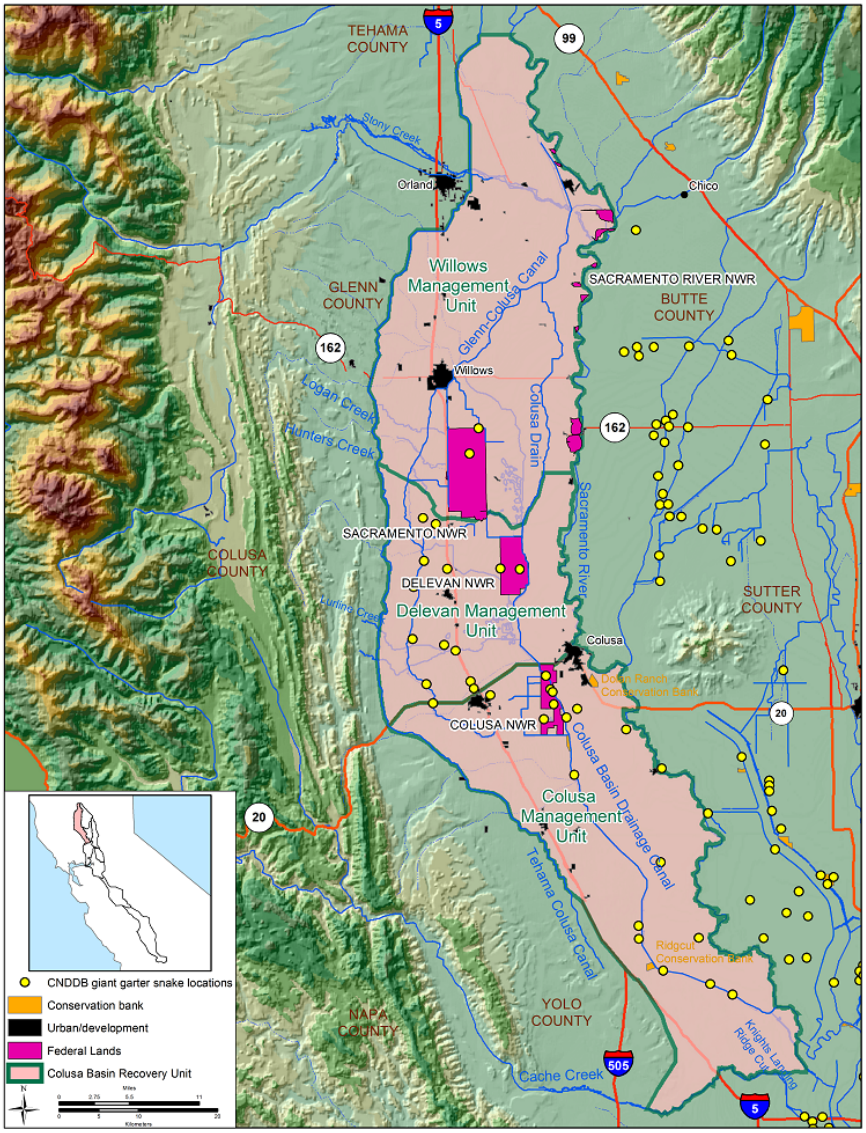

Figure 5. Colusa Basin Recovery Unit

3. Sutter Basin Recovery Unit

The Sutter Basin extends south from the Sutter Buttes to the confluence of the Feather and Sacramento rivers (Figure 6). The Sutter Basin consists of 97,048 hectares (239,810 acres), including portions of Butte and Sutter counties. Three management units have been defined for the Sutter Basin Recovery Unit: Sutter, Gilsizer Slough, and Robbins.

Within the Sutter Basin, Federal and State conservation areas include the Sutter NWR and the Sutter Bypass WA (east and west borrow channels of the Sutter Bypass, Tisdale Bypass, and Wadsworth Canal), and Feather River WAs. Also included are the Sutter Basin Conservation Bank (174-hectare, 429-acre), the Gilsizer Slough South Conservation Bank (153 hectares, 379 acres), and the Tule Basin Giant Garter Snake Preserve (60.7 hectares, 150 acres).

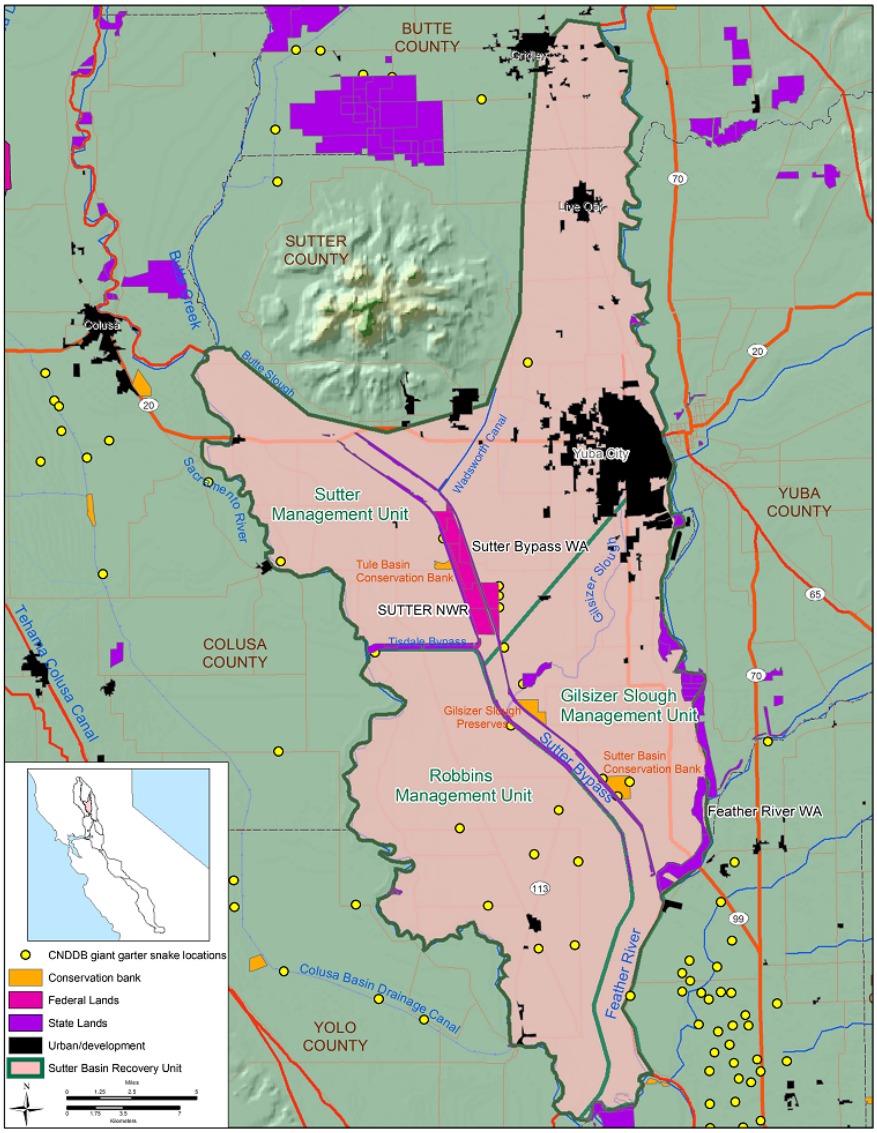

Figure 6. Sutter Basin Recovery Unit

4. American Basin Recovery Unit

The American Basin extends south from Oroville to the confluence of the Sacramento and American rivers (Figure 7). The Basin is about 152,204 hectares (376,104 acres), including portions of Butte, Yuba, Sutter, Placer, and Sacramento counties. Four management units have been defined for the American Basin Recovery Unit: District 10, Olivehurst, Nicolaus, and Natomas Basin.

Within the American Basin, the only public conservation lands are several units of the State Feather River WA along the Feather and Bear rivers. However, these conservation areas primarily provide riparian habitats that may not be suitable for the giant garter snake. There are no Federal wildlife refuges or State management areas within the American Basin. There are no conservation banks specifically for the giant garter snake in the American Basin; however, several preserves have been

established in the Natomas Basin as part of two Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) and currently amount to 1,677 hectares (4,145 acres).

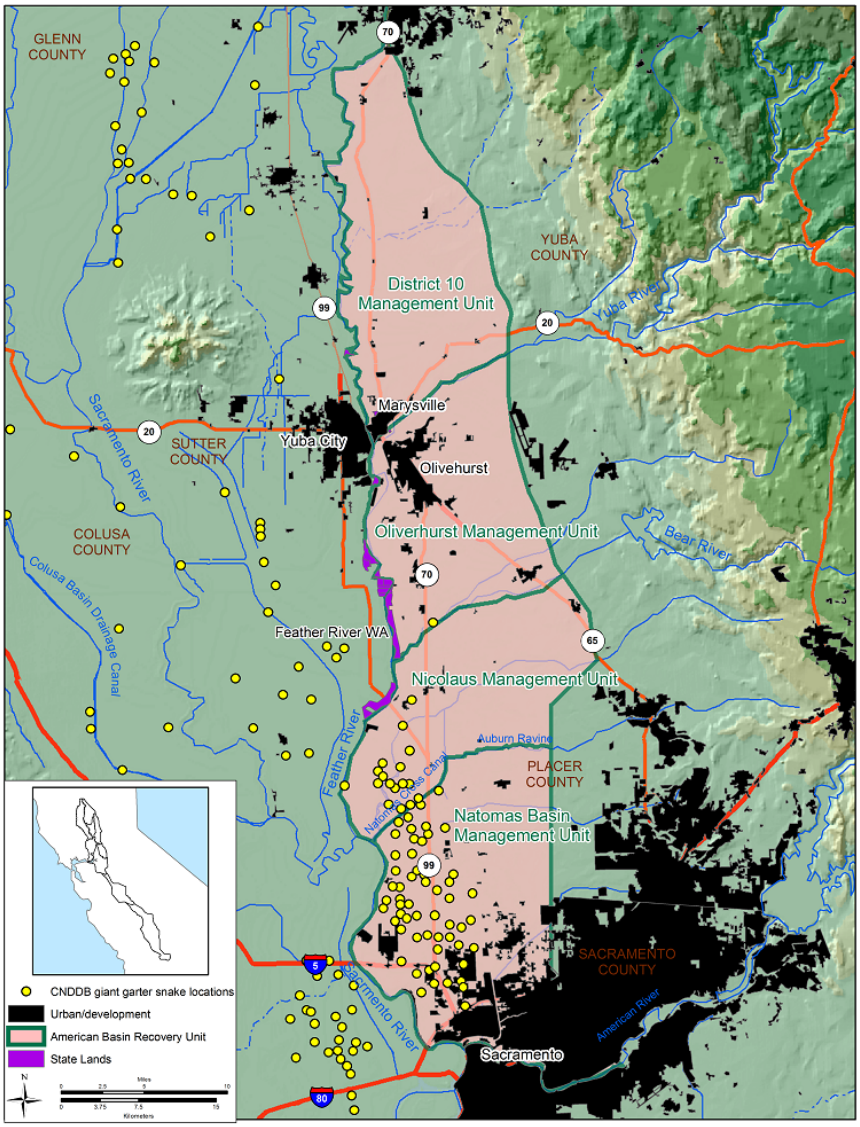

Figure 7. American Basin Recovery Unit

5. Yolo Basin Recovery Unit

The Yolo Basin extends from Cache Creek in the north to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta in the south (Figure 8). The Yolo Basin includes portions of Yolo and Solano counties and is approximately 166,291 hectares (410,914 acres). Three management units have been defined for the Yolo Basin Recovery Unit: Ridgecut Slough, Willow Slough, and Yolo Bypass.

Within the Yolo Basin, conservation lands include the State Yolo Bypass WA, wetland easement areas within the Yolo Bypass, and the Jepson Prairie Preserve in Solano County. It also includes the Pope Ranch Conservation Bank (158 hectares, 390 acres).

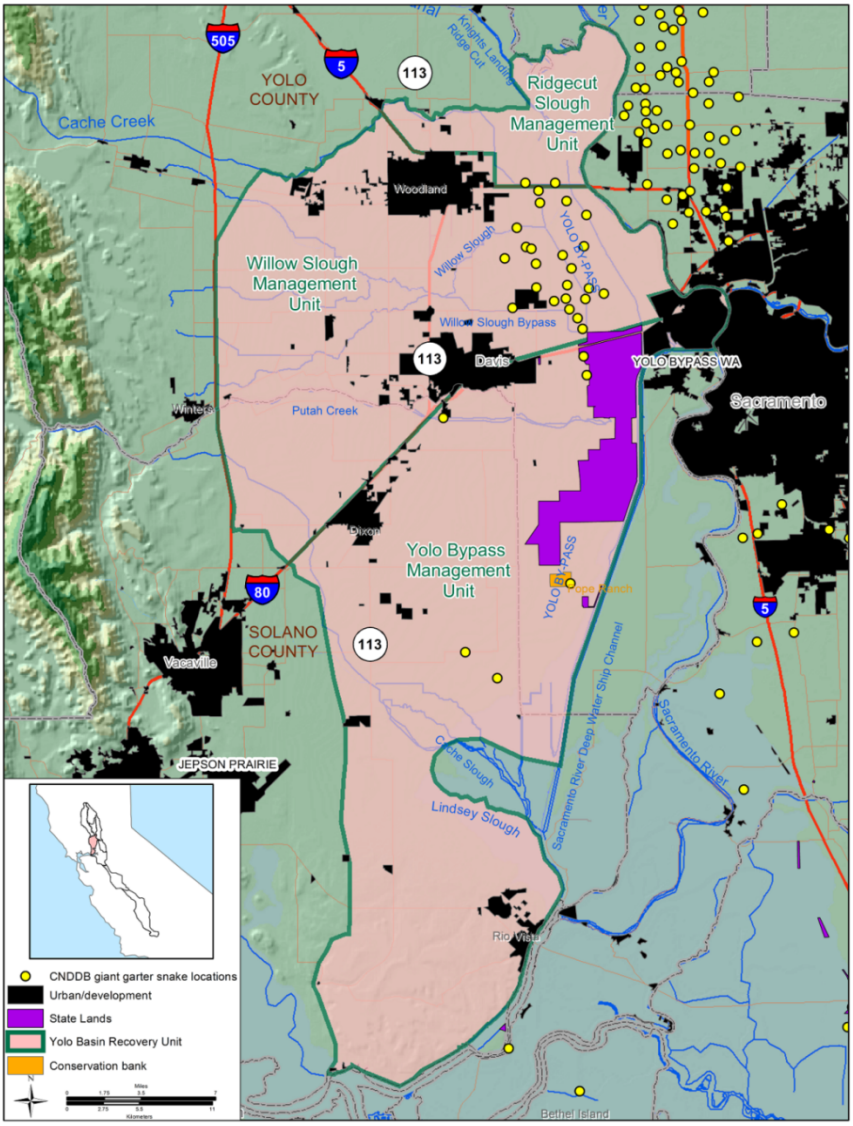

Figure 8. Yolo Basin Recovery Unit

6. Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin Recovery Unit

The Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin is bordered by the City of Sacramento and the Cosumnes River to the north, the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the east, Interstate 5 to the west, and the Mokelumne River to the south (Figure 9). The Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin consists of 95,085 hectares (234,960 acres). Noteworthy is that the locality record from Badger Creek (Snake Marsh), described as the best representative of undisturbed, historical wetlands which were once common throughout the Central Valley, is found in this watershed basin. There are no management units defined within this recovery unit because it encompasses a relatively small area and requires no geographic subdivision to assist in management.

Conservation land in the Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin is mostly within the Cosumnes River Preserve, which is managed jointly by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), The Nature Conservancy, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Ducks Unlimited. There are no conservation banks set up at this time in this recovery unit for the giant garter snake.

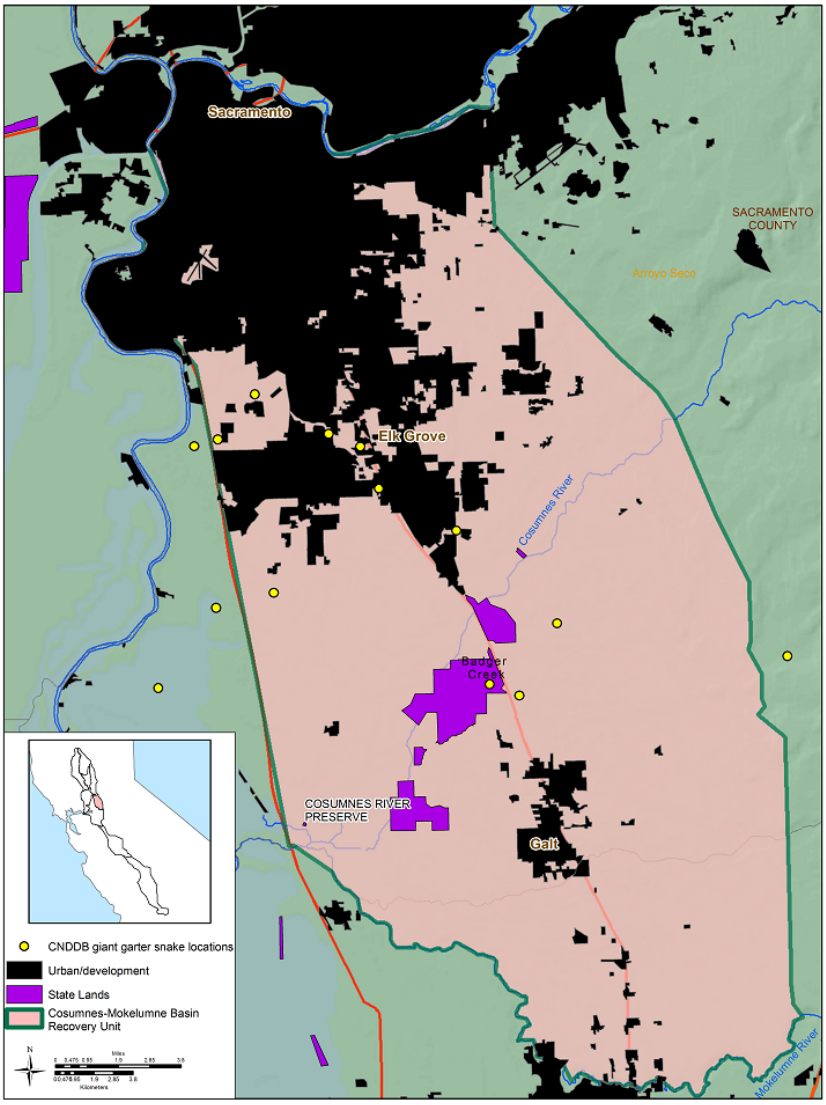

Figure 9. Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin Recovery Unit

7. Delta Basin Recovery Unit

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta (Delta Basin) extends from just south of the confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers south to the Stanislaus River (Figure 10). The Delta Basin contains about 283,078 hectares (699,502 acres) and includes portions of Sacramento, Yolo, Solano, San Joaquin, and Contra Costa counties. Four management units have been defined for the Delta Basin Recovery Unit: Stone Lakes, White Slough, Stockton, and Tracy.

Within the Delta, Federal and State conservation areas include the Federal Stone Lakes NWR, and the State's Sherman Island WA and White Slough WA. There are no conservation banks set up at this time in this recovery unit for the giant garter snake.

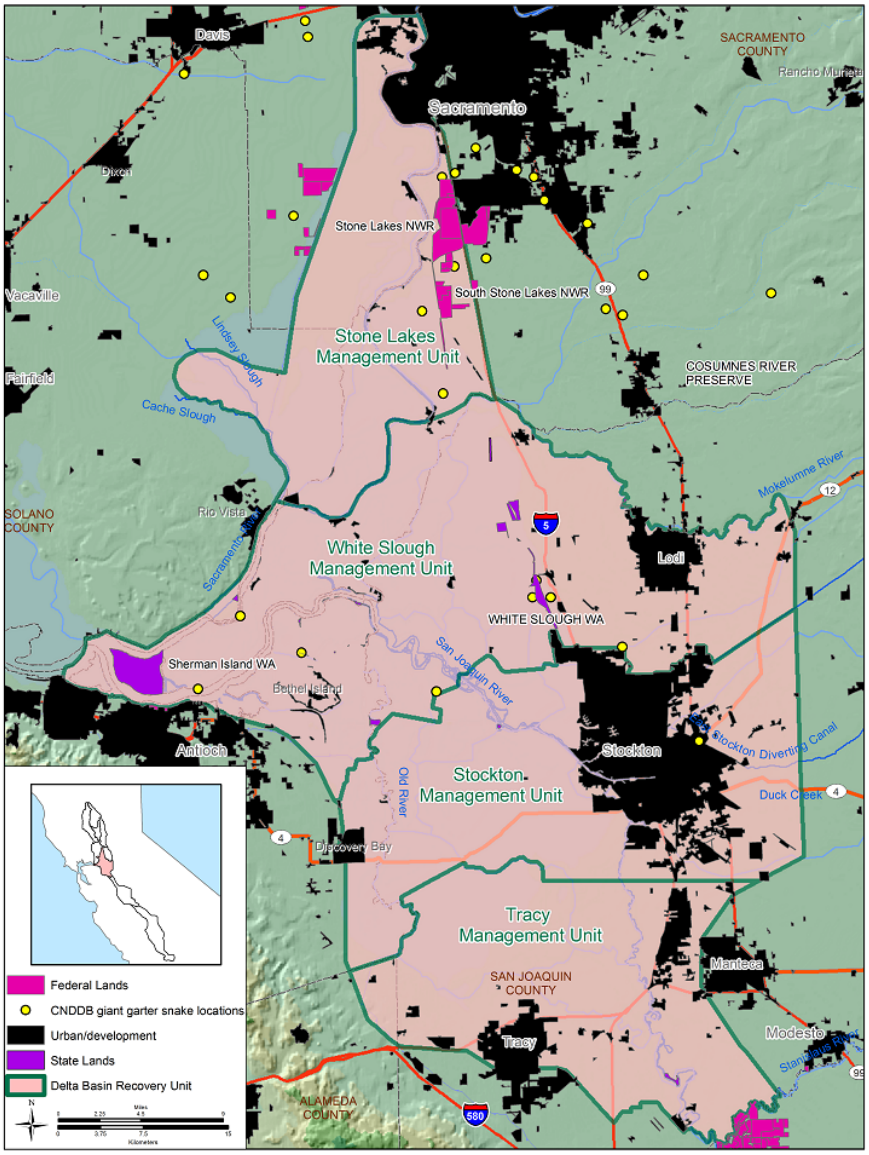

Figure 10. Delta Basin Recovery Unit

8. San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit

The San Joaquin Basin extends from the Stanislaus River in the north to the San Joaquin River in the south and is bordered by the Coast Ranges on the west and the Sierra Nevada to the east (Figure 11). The San Joaquin Basin is 323,881 hectares (800,327 acres) and includes portions of Stanislaus, Merced, Fresno, and Madera counties. Four management units have been defined for the San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit: San Joaquin River, San Luis/Volta, Brito, and Merced.

Within the San Joaquin Basin, Federal and State conservation areas include the San Joaquin River NWR, the San Luis NWR Complex, Merced NWR, and the North Grasslands WA, the Los Banos WA, and the Volta WA. Additional wetlands on private lands within the Grasslands Ecological Area are protected by conservation easements. The Grasslands Mitigation Bank (114 hectares, 281 acres)is located within the San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit.

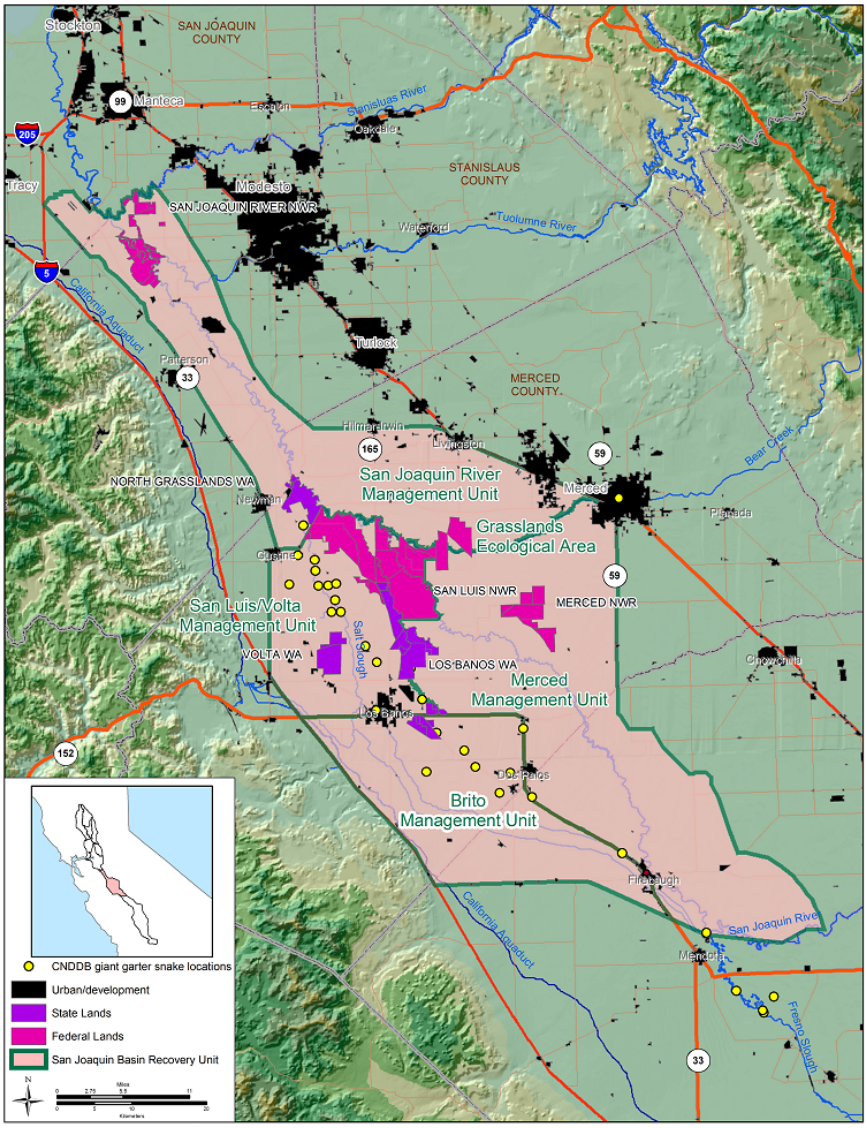

Figure 11. San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit

9. Tulare Basin Recovery Unit

The Tulare Basin is the southern-most portion of the Central Valley and extends from the southern San Joaquin River south to the Buena Vista and Kern lakebeds (Figure 12). The Tulare Basin contains about 688,710 hectares (1,701,841 acres), and includes portions of Fresno, Kings, Tulare, and Kern counties. Four management units have been defined for the Tulare Basin Recovery Unit: Mendota, Burrell Lanare, Kern, and Buena Vista Lake.

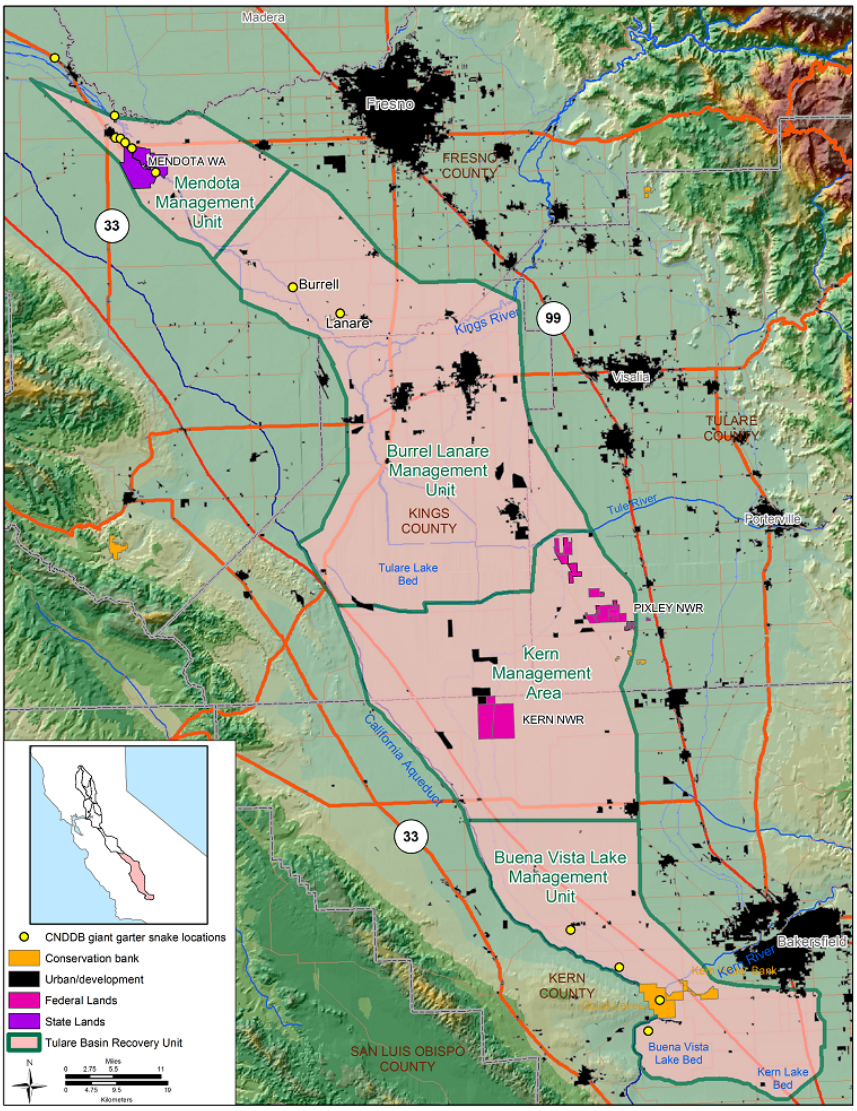

Figure 12. Tulare Basin Recovery Unit

Within the Tulare Basin, Federal and State conservation areas include the Kern and Pixley NWRs, and the Mendota WA. The Coles Levee Ecosystem Preserve and the Kern Water Bank are properties that will be preserved in perpetuity; however, these properties would require a great deal of restoration and reconfiguration to become appropriate habitat for giant garter snake populations. The 2,452-hectare (6,059-acre) Coles Levee Ecosystem Preserve was created by Aera Energy LLC and is managed by the CDFW. The Kern Water Bank HCP provided for a 1,322-hectare (3,267-acre) conservation bank. Additional wetlands on private lands occur within the Tulare Basin but will require habitat assessments and surveys to determine whether they provide potential habitat for the giant garter snake.

C. RECOVERY GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The ultimate goal of this revised draft recovery plan is to recover the giant garter snake so that it no longer needs the protection of the Endangered Species Act and can be delisted (removed from the

list of Threatened and Endangered Species.). To achieve this goal the following objectives have been developed:

1. Protect existing and establish (and protect) self-sustaining populations of the giant garter snake throughout the full ecological, geographical, and genetic range of the species.

2. Restore and conserve healthy Central Valley wetland ecosystems that function to support the giant garter snake.

3. Ameliorate or eliminate, to the extent possible, the threats that caused the species to be listed or of concern and any foreseeable future threats.

D. RECOVERY CRITERIA

An endangered species is defined in the Endangered Species Act as a species that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A threatened species is one that is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. When we evaluate whether or not a species warrants downlisting or delisting, we consider whether the species meets either of these definitions. A recovered species is one that no longer meets the Act's definitions of threatened or endangered. Determining whether a species should be downlisted or delisted requires consideration of the same five categories of threats which were considered when the species was listed and which are specified in section 4(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act.

Recovery criteria are conditions that, when met, are likely to indicate that a species may warrant downlisting or delisting. Thus, recovery criteria are mileposts that measure progress toward recovery. Because the appropriateness of downlisting or delisting is assessed by evaluating the five threat factors identified in the Endangered Species Act, the recovery criteria below pertain to and are organized by these factors. These recovery criteria are our best assessment at this time of conditions that may indicate that the giant garter snake is ready to be delisted and removed from the list entirely. Because we cannot envision the exact course that recovery may take and because our understanding of the vulnerability of a species to threats is very likely to change as more is learned about the species and its threats, it is possible that a status review may indicate that delisting is warranted although not all recovery criteria are met. Conversely, it is possible that the recovery criteria could be met and a status review may indicate that delisting is not warranted; for example, a new threat may emerge that is not addressed by the recovery criteria below and that causes the species to remain threatened.

1. Recovery Criteria for Factor A: The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range.

In order to ensure the long term recovery of the giant garter snake, threats to the species habitat must be reduced or removed in order to provide sufficient high-quality habitat and connections between populations. This will have been accomplished if: a) sufficient habitat of suitable quality is protected in each recovery unit, and b) blocks of habitat within each recovery unit are connected. The following provides specific descriptions as to how habitats would be sized and connected to reduce threats associated with habitat loss:

Specified areas in all recovery units with known populations of the giant garter snake are protected in perpetuity as suitable giant garter snake habitat and supplied with sufficient clean water during the

spring and summer to maintain necessary aquatic habitat. The protected areas are buffered from all activities that preclude recovery of the species and are connected by corridors of suitable habitat.

Habitat for the giant garter snake will be preserved in multiples of two block pairings of habitat. Each block pair will consist of one 240-hectare (539-acre) block of contiguous buffered perennial wetland habitat (existing, restored or enhanced) and one 639-hectare (1,578-acre) block of contiguous active ricelands separated by no more than 5 miles (8 kilometers)[1]. Alternatively, a pair of blocks may also consist of two 240-hectare (539-acre) blocks of buffered perennial wetlands. Between five and ten habitat block pairs may be prescribed for each of the recovery units depending on the size of the recovery unit and the available suitable habitat within the recovery unit. These block pairs should be evenly distributed among the management units. In addition, the habitat pairs must not be separated by more than 5 miles. Paired habitat blocks were selected because perennial wetlands are known to support core populations of the giant garter snake throughout a wide range of hydrologic conditions, while rice fields and the supporting infrastructure can provide habitat for robust populations of the giant garter snake while the rice fields are active. During periods of crop rotation the inactive or dry crop fields may provide some level of connectivity between perennial wetlands by keeping key irrigation canals full.

These pairs of contiguous perennial wetlands and ricelands must be buffered by 0.5 kilometer (.32 mile) of compatible habitat and the two blocks must be connected by a corridor of aquatic and upland habitat with a 0.8-kilometer (0.5-mile) minimum width. Corridor width is based on the distance a giant garter snake is known to travel in one day, which is 0.8 kilometer (0.5 mile) (G. Hansen and Brode 1993). All pairs of habitat blocks must be connected with the other pairs of habitat blocks within and between the management units by corridors of suitable habitat, and recovery units should be connected to one another by similar corridors.

A1 **Butte Basin Recovery Unit**: Minimum of six habitat block pairs with no less than two block pairs per management unit in the Butte Basin Recovery Unit. Additional protection along the following watercourses in the Butte Basin will provide for connectivity between existing populations of giant garter snakes and will protect habitat immediately on either side of the main watercourse at a minimum of 0.25 miles from each bank:

a. Little Chico Creek – 1,036 hectares (2,560 acres) abutting the Llano Seco Unit of the Sacramento NWR and continuing northeastward.
b. Butte Creek – 1,295 hectares (6,400 acres) abutting the Upper Butte Basin management unit and continuing northeastward.
c. Cherokee Canal – 3,108 hectares (7,680 acres) abutting Gray Lodge/Butte Sink management unit and continuing northeastward.

A2 **Colusa Basin Recovery Unit**: Minimum of six habitat block pairs with no less than two block pairs per management unit in the Colusa Basin Recovery Unit. Additional protection along the watercourses in the Colusa Basin will provide for connectivity between existing populations of giant garter snakes and will protect habitat immediately on either side of the

[1] The 240 hectare blocks of perennial wetlands is derived from Wylie *et al.* (2010), who reported that a self-sustaining Badger Creek population of giant garter snakes is supported by 240 hectares of perennial wetlands. This acreage of perennial wetlands is also close to acreages preserved in several giant garter snake conservation banks. The 639 hectare blocks of active ricelands are also derived from Wylie *et al.* (2010) by calculating the acreage of ricelands needed to support a giant garter snake population of equivalent size to the self-sustaining population at Badger Creek. This was done by dividing the target population density from Badger Creek (Wylie *et al.* 2010) by the giant garter snake density observed in rice fields (Wylie *et al.* 2010) and using this ratio to determine the target acreage of ricelands, which is 639 hectares. These values do not represent a minimum or maximum acreage for either perennial wetlands or ricelands, but represent target values.

main watercourse at a minimum of 0.25 miles from each bank – 8,417 hectares (20,800 acres). Final protected watercourse length should extend at a minimum from the Glenn Colusa Canal in the north to the proximity of Ridge Cut Slough in the south.

A3 **Sutter Basin Recovery Unit**: Minimum of four habitat block pairs with no less than one block pair per management unit in the Sutter Basin Recovery Unit (areas with high flooding flows within the Sutter Bypass should be considered as unsuitable habitat). In order to provide connectivity between northern and southern populations additional protection should focus on the Sutter Bypass: 3,885 hectares (9,600 acres) comprising a continuous corridor along and outside of the western bank (levee) of the Sutter Bypass out to a width of 0.8 kilometers (0.5 miles) from the bank, and including the Tisdale Bypass 389 hectares (960 acres).

A4 **American Basin Recovery Unit:** Minimum of eight habitat block pairs with no less than one block pair per management unit in the American Basin Recovery Unit.

A5 **Yolo Basin Recovery Unit**: Minimum of five habitat block pairs with no less than one block pair per management unit in the Yolo Basin Recovery Unit (areas with high flooding flows within the Yolo Bypass should be considered as unsuitable habitat).

A6 **Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin Recovery Unit**: Minimum of two pairs of habitat blocks in the Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin Recovery Unit.

A7 **Delta Basin Recovery Unit**: Minimum of ten habitat block pairs with no less than two block pairs per management unit in the Delta Basin Recovery Unit.

A8 **San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit**: Minimum of ten habitat block pairs with no less than two block pairs per management unit in the San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit.

A9 **Tulare Basin Recovery Unit**: Minimum of two habitat block pairs in the Mendota management unit in the Tulare Basin Recovery Unit.

All Recovery Units

A10 Corridors of aquatic habitat with a 0.8-kilometer (0.5-mile) width hydrologically connect adjacent habitat block pairs within Recovery Units.

A11 Corridors hydrologically connect adjacent Recovery Units.

A12 Management plans are developed, implemented, and updated as needed for 20 years for all habitat blocks and corridors preserved for the giant garter snake listed in Criteria A1 through A9. Management plans will address as a minimum the following: water management to provide summer aquatic habitat, use of pesticides, best grazing regimes, fallowing of rice fields, eradication of invasive plants, operations and maintenance of canals and flood control structures, control of non-native predators, monitoring of native predators, location and use of roads within the conservation areas)

A13 Water supplied for use on all giant garter snake preserves will have annual water delivery requirements identified. Garter snake preserves are supplied with water of sufficient quantity to support the aquatic habitat component of the giant garter snake on that property in perpetuity and will be free of contaminants or will contain contaminants at levels that have been demonstrated to be harmless to giant garter snakes. Monitoring of annual water supplies and water quality standards reveals that water used to provide aquatic habitat is provided each year, and meets or exceeds quality standards over a 20-year monitoring program.

2. Recovery Criteria Factor B: Overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific or educational purposes.

Overutilization for any purpose is not known to threaten the giant garter snake at this time. Therefore, no recovery criteria have been developed for this factor.

3. Recovery Factor C: Disease or Predation.

In order to ensure the long term recovery of the giant garter snake, threats to the species from disease or predation must be reduced or removed. This will have been accomplished if the following have occurred:

C1 Introduced snakes (*Nerodia* sp.) are either eradicated or reduced in numbers throughout the historical range of the giant garter snake to the point where the transmission of disease by these non-native snakes is no longer a threat (and competitive interactions are eliminated between introduced snakes and the giant garter snake).

C2 A management plan is developed and implemented to monitor for the effects of parasites, viruses, and fungi on the giant garter snake and any discovered threats to the giant garter snake from parasites, viruses, or fungi are controlled or ameliorated to an extent they are not a threat to the populations.

C3 Introduced game fish (e.g., largemouth bass and catfish), crayfish (e.g., signal and Louisiana crayfish), and bullfrogs that eat giant garter snakes and compete with giant garter snakes for smaller forage fish and amphibians are either eradicated or reduced in numbers throughout the historical range of the giant garter snake to the point where garter snakes are no longer threatened by predation or competition by introduced fish, crayfish and bullfrogs.

4. Recovery Factor D: Inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms.

If the threats under factors A, B, C and E are ameliorated or eliminated then additional regulatory mechanisms (beyond the existing ones) are not necessary.

5. Recovery Factor E: Other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

In order to ensure the long term recovery of the giant garter snake, the species must be protected from other natural or manmade factors known to affect its continued existence. This protection will have been accomplished if all of the preserved perennial marshes and ricelands host a stable population (i.e. the age-specific fertility and mortality rates remain constant) as determined from monitoring over a 20-year period that includes at least one consecutive 3-year period of dry or critically dry weather[2], and the following have occurred:

E1 These populations are protected from predicted alterations of habitat components due to climate change through the development of contingency plans that will provide resources to ensure habitat components are maintained at all preserves during adverse climatic

[2] There are multiple determinants of population dynamics of the giant garter snake. Populations of any species typically fluctuate over time depending on density dependent factors like births, deaths, emigrations, and immigration; and also may fluctuate as determined by a number of abiotic environmental factors, the level of resources, the life cycle of the species, and the influence of predators and parasites (Townsend *et al.* 2000). Thus a single year of population surveys is not an accurate portrayal of the stability of a population. Giant garter snake populations will similarly vary among years depending on annual weather patterns, local agricultural practices, degree of predation and recruitment, and other demographic factors. In order to determine whether giant garter snake populations are stable we use 20 years of monitoring as a period of time that will include multiple generations (4 or 5 generations based on the average of 5 years for females to reach sexual maturity) and reflect long-term trends in both demographics and local habitat suitability in response to weather and land use patterns (B. Halstead pers. comm. 2015, E. Hansen pers. comm. 2015).

conditions, such as extended periods of drought, or extended periods of above average temperatures.

E2 The density found during trapping is at least an average 8 snakes per hectare for buffered perennial wetlands and 3 snakes per hectare for active ricelands.

E3 The population estimate and density are used for a trend analysis over a 20-year period that demonstrates a 90 percent probability that the population is stable or increasing.

E4 The habitat requirements described in delisting criteria A/1 – A/9 are available during all surveys.

E5 The sex ratio is not significantly different than 1:1.

E6 Age structure analysis reveals that recruitment is occurring at a level that will prevent a senescent population.

E7 Road mortalities of giant garter snakes are reduced to a level that does not cause declines to populations.

III. RECOVERY ACTION NARRATIVE AND IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE

A. Recovery Action Narrative

This chapter lays out the elements of the recovery strategy, then tiers them down to individual recovery actions for implementation. Each most-detailed or stepped-down action has been assigned a priority according to our determination of what is most important for the recovery of giant garter snake. The priority numbers are defined as follows:

Priority 1: An action that must be taken to prevent extinction or to prevent a species from declining irreversibly.

Priority 2: An action that must be taken to prevent a significant decline in the species population/habitat quality or some other significant negative impact short of extinction.

Priority 3: All other actions necessary to provide for full recovery of the species.

Because situations change over time, priority numbers must be considered in the context of past and potential future actions at all sites. Therefore, the priority numbers assigned are intended to guide, not to constrain, the allocation of limited conservation resources.

1. Protect existing habitat, areas identified for habitat restoration or creation, and areas needed to provide connectivity between populations.

Protection of giant garter snake populations includes preserving and restoring the habitat necessary to maintain existing populations, providing for population increase, and ensuring that numbers and populations of giant garter snakes are self-sustaining and sufficient to maintain genetic diversity and adaptive potential of the species.

1.1 Protect, secure, and restore habitat distributed across the historical range of the giant garter snake. All habitat with known giant garter snake populations, based on locality record data, that is currently unprotected should be protected and secured. Habitat for the giant garter snake will be preserved in pairs of contiguous blocks of land as described in the recovery criteria above. (Priority 1)

1.2 Protect and secure corridors linking habitat blocks (within and between management units) and recovery units. Corridors for the giant garter snake need to be protected with an emphasis on accommodating movement that allows genetic exchange between giant garter snakes occupying habitat blocks and between management units and recovery units. (Priority 2)

1.3 Work with city and county governments to buffer areas identified for protection as habitat for the giant garter snake to minimize the effects of urban development on giant garter snakes and their habitat. Buffers may be secured and protected through acquisition,

conservation or agricultural easements, through land use planning, or development of regional conservation plans. (Priority 2)

1.4 Establish an incentive or easement program(s) to encourage private landowners and local agencies to provide or maintain agricultural practices (e.g. rice cultivation) and wetland habitats that benefit the giant garter snake. Work with nonprofit organizations (such as land trusts) to assist private landowners in conserving and recovering the giant garter snake through economic and other incentive programs. Agricultural incentives should be developed and made available to landowners and water districts and users who conserve giant garter snakes on their property or who may provide suitable habitat. (Priority 1)

2. Develop and implement appropriate management of habitat on public and private wetlands and conservation lands, including specific practices for agricultural operations, water conveyance systems, and flood control systems that maintain either summer seasonal wetlands, perennial wetlands, or ricelands.

2.1 Service-approved management plans that incorporate adaptive management should be developed, approved, and implemented for habitat blocks and corridors. Management plans should include specific resource and habitat objectives and monitoring that ensure suitable habitat is restored and maintained, and include measures to minimize the impacts of habitat management activities on giant garter snakes and their habitat. Management plans should be developed in coordination with local landowners and water managers to ensure that they are workable and effective. (Priority 1)

2.2 Develop and periodically update best management guidelines for giant garter snake habitat occurring outside of conservation lands that: (1) minimize the risk of physical injury to giant garter snakes from ground disturbing activities, use of heavy equipment, and vehicle use; (2) minimize the amount and frequency of habitat disturbance; and (3) allow establishment and/or maintenance of habitat for giant garter snakes. Guidelines should be developed for ricelands, canals and ditches, flood control structures, water transfers, and private wetlands in coordination with local landowners and water managers to ensure that they are workable and effective. (Priority 1)

2.3 Work with California Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration to minimize effects of roadway expansion and increased use associated with urbanization by incorporating protective measures into project planning to minimize the effects of roads to giant garter snakes and giant garter snake habitat. (Priority 2)

3. Improve water quality in areas occupied by the giant garter snake and affected by poor water quality conditions.

3.1 Work with appropriate agencies to ensure the improvement of water quality within known-contaminated water bodies occupied by the giant garter snake. Review the Clean Water Act (303(d)) list of impaired water bodies in California produced by the USEPA to determine which impaired water bodies supply water to any known giant garter snake habitat and work with appropriate federal and state authorities to promote improvement of water quality in those waters. (Priority 2)

3.2 Study the effects of selenium, mercury, and other contaminants on giant garter snakes and their prey. (Priority 3)

3.3 Investigate, develop and implement a means to supply uncontaminated water to State and Federal wildlife refuges (such as Grasslands Ecological Area, Volta WA). (Priority 1)

4. When feasible, ensure summer water is available for wetland habitats used by the snake.

Explore, develop and implement methods to assure quantity and timing of water deliveries to meet habitat objectives for all conservation lands developed and protected for the giant garter snake. The USFWS, CDFW, and other species experts will work with the USBR, the Army Corps of Engineers, and local municipal water agencies to assure adequate water will be available to support the giant garter snake habitat and management needs at those locations where populations exist, acknowledging that fluctuating environmental conditions (e.g. drought) and other conflicting water uses may preclude the availability of adequate water for the giant garter snake during certain years.

4.1 Identify total water requirements to maintain and/or restore habitats according to management plans developed under recovery action 2 on all conservation lands identified in recovery action 1. (Priority 1)

4.2 Evaluate the current, existing water supply and determine whether additional water is necessary to meet habitat needs and management goals determined and identified in recovery action 4.1 for each of the conservation lands identified in recovery action 1. For areas where additional water needs have been identified, secure sufficient water to fully develop or manage habitat for the giant garter snake. (Priority 1)

5. Monitor populations and habitat to assess success or failure of management activities and habitat protection efforts.

Monitoring is needed to establish population trends, to determine if and when additional management actions should be performed, and to determine the efficacy of management actions. A standardized protocol developed under recovery action 6.1 is needed to ensure consistency of monitoring performed by different entities and at different times.

Monitoring must be based on multiple biological and physical factors, not just on number of individuals captured. Monitoring should document changes in habitat quantity and quality over time. During development of monitoring plans, the development and implementation of population viability analyses should be considered and incorporated where possible using data collected during monitoring programs (see recovery actions 7.4.1 through 7.4.4).

5.1 Develop and incorporate into management plans, monitoring programs for giant garter snake habitat and presence and abundance on all lands preserved for the giant garter snake. (Priority 1)

6. Conduct surveys and research to identify areas requiring protection and management.

6.1 Develop habitat assessment protocols to measure the suitability of giant garter snake habitat and conduct habitat assessments, habitat suitability analysis and mapping, and conduct surveys using the most recent protocols within the recovery units to assess giant garter snake populations and where the best habitat exists for potential conservation. (Priority 1)

7. Conduct research focused on the management needs of the species, and on identifying and removing threats.

7.1 Conduct research on the habitat requirements of the giant garter snake.

7.1.1 Determine habitat use and prey requirements of neonatal, juvenile, and adult giant garter snakes and examine the use of upland habitats by the giant garter snake to determine the amounts and types of upland habitats required to support giant garter snakes. (Priority 1)

7.1.2 Examine occurrence in and use of riparian habitats by the giant garter snake to determine if additional areas require management for the giant garter snake. (Priority 2)

7.1.3 Determine buffer requirements for protecting giant garter snakes and their habitat from incompatible uses, such as urban development and roadways. (Priority 2)

7.1.4 Examine use of corridors between conservation lands to determine use and effectiveness of protecting corridors. (Priority 1)

7.1.5 Examine response of giant garter snakes to managed marsh restoration to determine effectiveness of restoration efforts and to modify restoration techniques as necessary to benefit the giant garter snake. (Priority 1)

7.2 Conduct research on life history and population characteristics of giant garter snakes.

7.2.1 Determine the movement patterns of giant garter snakes, including home ranges, daily and annual movements, and dispersal abilities over a broad range of size classes, among different habitat types, across the giant garter snake's range. (Priority 2)

7.2.2 Determine demographic information on reproductive and mortality rates, clutch sizes, fecundity, age and size at sexual maturity, and population sizes and densities among different habitat types and across the giant garter snake's range. (Priority 1)

7.2.3 Determine movement of giant garter snakes in response to changes to various external conditions (such as changes in habitat conditions or management). (Priority 2)

7.3 Determine genetic relatedness among populations of giant garter snakes within and between recovery units and identify landscape features that serve as barriers to dispersal. (Priority 2)

7.4 Conduct population viability analyses.

Population viability analysis (PVA) is the use of quantitative methods to analyze the environmental and demographic factors that affect the survival of populations. Population viability analyses may be used to refine recovery criteria and tasks in a number of ways. (Priority 2)

7.5 Conduct research on threats and propose actions to ameliorate those threats. Research is needed to determine extent of threats and to develop methods to ameliorate those threats.

7.5.1 Study the effects of parasites, viruses, fungi, and introduced predators and plants (e.g. *Ludwigia hexapetala* (water primrose)) on giant garter snake populations, and develop and implement a management program to monitor affected populations. (Priority 2)

7.5.2 Determine the effects of flooding on the survival of the giant garter snake. Although giant garter snakes evolved in the Central Valley and likely are adapted to withstand some flooding of habitats, reclamation and flood control activities have altered the timing, duration, and severity of floods. (Priority 2)

7.5.3 Determine how to minimize the effects of water transfers to the giant garter snake and its habitat and develop and implement guidelines for water transfers that minimize the effects of transfers to the giant garter snake and its habitat. (Priority 1)

7.5.4 Determine the effects of erosion control netting products on snake movement, and recommend ways to ameliorate negative effects if found. Determine which products have the least chance of negatively affecting the giant garter snake and provide a list of these products for consideration during section 7 consultations. (Priority 2)

7.5.5 Collaborate with the California Climate Change Center to investigate the effects of climate change on the giant garter snake and its habitat. Information developed will, in part, inform development of adaptive management guidelines that should be implemented throughout the range of the giant garter snake. (Priority 2)

8. Establish and implement outreach and education, which includes the participation of landowners, interested public and stakeholders, and other Federal, State, and local agencies.

8.1 Distribute guidelines for land use practices compatible with giant garter snake conservation to landowners and agencies and distribute to appropriate land managers and partners (farmers, ranchers). (Priority 1)

8.2 Develop and distribute informational material on the habitat and management needs of the giant garter snake to interested and affected private landowners. (Priority 2)

8.3 Develop and distribute outreach and education materials for public and conservation land managers. (Priority 2)

8.4 Form a Recovery Implementation Team that cooperatively implements specific recovery actions necessary to recover the giant garter snake. (Priority 1)

9. Re-establish populations within the giant garter snake's historical range.

Since giant garter snakes have been extirpated over a portion of their range and several populations are now at risk of extirpation, repatriation may be necessary for recovery of the giant garter snake. Specific sites for repatriation are not currently identified; however the first sites will be in the San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit or Tulare Basin Recovery Unit since these populations are more at risk than in the Sacramento Valley.

The first step is to research the possibility of conducting translocations to either augment populations with low numbers of individuals or to reintroduce individuals into historically occupied areas. If translocation is deemed unfeasible or undesirable, then a controlled propagation program must be conducted in a manner that will, to the maximum extent possible, preserve the genetic and ecological distinctness of the listed species, and minimize risks to existing wild populations.

9.1 Identify suitable repatriation sites based on results of surveys and habitat assessments including analysis of the habitat and management requirements necessary to successfully

reintroduce giant garter snakes and current threats at potential reintroduction sites. The historical range of the giant garter snake in the San Joaquin Basin and the Tulare Basin Recovery Units should be assessed and surveyed for suitable repatriation sites or areas and to verify that no giant garter snakes already inhabit potential repatriation sites. (Priority 2)

9.2 Develop and implement a captive propagation and repatriation plan (including genetics management plan) for specific sites if repatriation is determined to be necessary to prevent local extirpations and feasible. (Priority 2)

The purpose of a genetics management plan is to provide a framework for evaluating giant garter snake conservation options from a genetics perspective. The genetics management plan would include a review and synthesis of the most recent genetic studies, along with an examination of the implications for management and recovery. The ultimate goal of the plan would be to aid in management and decision-making for the species, specifically for repatriation, captive propagation, and determination of genetically important populations.

B. Implementation Schedule

The implementation schedule that follows outlines actions for this revised draft recovery plan. It is a guide for meeting the objectives discussed in Chapter III of this revised draft recovery plan. This schedule describes and prioritizes recovery actions, provides an estimated time table for performance of recovery actions, and indicates the responsible agencies. **Because recovery plans are guidance and planning documents, they do not obligate partners to carry out actions, nor do they provide funds to carry out actions.** These actions, when accomplished, should further the recovery and conservation of the covered species.

Total Estimated Cost of Recovery and Date of Recovery: To best provide for the conservation and recovery of giant garter snake, we will maximize partnerships with federal, State, and non-governmental partners. The estimated cost of recovery actions is detailed in the Implementation Schedule below. In developing an estimate of the cost of recovery, however, there were certain recovery actions for which we were unable to develop reliable cost estimates. These actions consisted primarily of habitat protection, restoration, and management. Such actions include the purchase of easements or land in core areas and corridors linking such habitat, and the development and implementation of adaptive management plans. These recovery actions place an emphasis on multiple species protection and management by developing and implementing conservation measures to restore and protect the processes that maintain healthy ecosystems. Such actions contribute not only to conservation of giant garter snakes, but also to the conservation of wetland ecosystems which support the giant garter snake and associated species and communities of conservation concern such as Central Valley waterfowl and shorebird populations, along with important ecosystem functions such as groundwater recharge. Therefore, actions to protect and manage wetland ecosystems are likely to be implemented through other authorities for these multiple species or other conservation goals, yet are included in the recovery actions here because they are compatible with and contribute to recovery efforts for the giant garter snake. Although we include the actions, it is not practicable to determine the proportion of the costs of these actions that would be attributable solely to giant garter snake recovery. In addition, widely fluctuating land cost in the recovery area, and flexibility in the specific locations and methods of habitat protection, restoration and management make estimates of such costs unreliable. As such, the cost of these actions will be determined as implementation progresses.

Delisting could be initiated by 2047 if recovery criteria have been achieved in the next 30 years. The core of the recovery strategy, protection of habitat and corridors, is likely to take a minimum 10 years to achieve, but may take significantly longer. Following the protection of habitat, an additional 20-year monitoring period is recommended to cover multiple generations (four to five generations) to ensure that giant garter snake populations are self-sustaining.

We believe that considerable positive conservation can occur by working with agencies and landowners to conduct recovery actions and working toward acquisition of the highest priority areas. The Service will establish a Recovery Implementation Team (RIT) upon completion of a final recovery plan. The RIT will be a broad-based group of stakeholders and will help to identify the highest priority tasks for early implementation. The RIT will monitor the success of early implementation efforts and, depending on the giant garter snake's progress toward recovery, determine if all of the measures outlined in the plan are necessary. Therefore, we believe that the recovery measures outlined in this plan are a comprehensive approach for recovery of the giant garter snake; however, recovery may be achieved without all measures in this plan being implemented, resulting in a decrease in cost and time to recovery.

Key to Terms and Acronyms used in the Implementation Schedule

Definitions:
Continual - A recovery action that will be implemented on a routine basis once begun.
Ongoing - A recovery action that is currently being implemented and will continue until action is no longer necessary.
Unknown - Either recovery action duration or associated costs are not known at this time.
TBD - To be determined

Responsible parties:
BLM - U.S. Bureau of Land Management
BRD - Biological Resources Division (USGS)
CITY – Local City
CDFW - California Department of Fish and Wildlife
CDOT - California Department of Transportation
COE - U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
COUN – Local County
CDPR - California Department of Parks and Recreation
CPP - Conservation program participant (easements, incentives)
CRIA - California Rice Industry Association
DPR - California Department of Pesticide Regulations
DWR - California Department of Water Resources
FCD – Local Flood Control District
FHWA - Federal Highways Administration
MVCD - Mosquito and Vector Control District
NCWA - Northern California Water Association
NGO - Non-government Organization
NRCS - Natural Resources Conservation Service
PLO - Private landowner or party
RB/DWR - Reclamation Board/California Department of Water Resources

(includes levee and reclamation districts)
RCD - Resource Conservation District
SJCOG – San Joaquin Council of Governments
SWRCB - State Water Resources Control Board
USBR - U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
USEPA - Environmental Protection Agency
USFWS - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
WD – Local Water District

The most likely lead responsible party is listed in bold in the following Implementation Schedule.

Implementation Schedule for the Giant Garter Snake											
Recovery Action Information					**Cost estimate in $1,000 units**						
Priority	**Action Number**	**Description**	**Duration**	**Responsible Parties**	**Total Costs**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**Comments/Notes**
1	1.1	Protect, secure, and restore habitat distributed across the historical range of the giant garter snake.	Ongoing	**USFWS**, CDFW NGO, PLO, CPP, RCD, SJCOG, USBR, CDPR, RB/DWR	TBD						
2	1.2	Protect and secure corridors linking habitat blocks (within and between management units) and recovery units. Corridors for the giant garter snake need to be protected with an emphasis on accommodating movement that allows genetic exchange between giant garter snakes occupying habitat blocks and between management units and recovery units.	Ongoing	USFWS, CPP, **NGO,** CDFW	TBD						
2	1.3	Work with city and county governments to buffer areas identified for protection as habitat for the giant garter snake to minimize the effects of urban development on giant garter snakes and their habitat.	Continual	USFWS, CIT, **COUN**	0	0	0	0	0	0	
1	1.4	Establish an incentive or easement program(s) to encourage private landowners and local agencies to provide or maintain agricultural practices and wetland habitats that benefit the giant garter snake. Work with nonprofit organizations to assist private landowners in conserving and recovering the giant garter snake through economic and other incentive programs. Agricultural incentives should be developed and made available to landowners and water districts and users who conserve giant garter snakes on their property or who may provide suitable habitat.	Ongoing	USFWS, CDFW, **NRCS**, USBR, DWR, CRIA, NCWA	13,630	1,300	1,300	1,300	1,300	1,300	
2	2.1	Service-approved management plans that incorporate adaptive management should be developed, approved, and implemented for habitat blocks and corridors.	Continual	**USFWS**, **CDFW**, **NGO**, PLO, CPP. **BLM**	TBD						

Implementation Schedule for the Giant Garter Snake											
Recovery Action Information					Cost estimate in $1,000 units						
Priority	**Action Number**	**Description**	**Duration**	**Responsible Parties**	**Total Costs**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**Comments/Notes**
1	2.2	Develop and periodically update best management guidelines for giant garter snake habitat occurring outside of conservation lands that: (1) minimize the risk of physical injury to giant garter snakes from ground disturbing activities, use of heavy equipment, and vehicle use; (2) minimize the amount and frequency of habitat disturbance; and (3) allow establishment and/or maintenance of habitat for giant garter snakes. Guidelines should be developed for ricelands, canals and ditches, flood control structures, water transfers, and private wetlands.	Continual	**USFWS**, CDFW, BRD**, CRIA**, NCWA	232	60	144	0	0	0	
2	2.3	Work with California Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration to minimize effects of roadway expansion and increased use associated with urbanization by incorporating protective measures into project planning to minimize the effects of roads to giant garter snakes and giant garter snake habitat.	Ongoing, Continual	USFWS, CDFW, **CDOT**, FHWA	5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	
2	3.1	Work with appropriate agencies to ensure the improvement of water quality within known-contaminated water bodies occupied by the giant garter snake.	2 years	**USFWS**, USEPA, CDFW	9.4	4	5.4	0	0	0	
3	3.2	Study the effects of selenium, mercury, and other contaminants on giant garter snakes and their prey.	4 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	1,200	300	300	300	300	0	
1	3.3	Investigate, develop and implement a means to supply uncontaminated water to State and Federal wildlife refuges (such as Grasslands Ecological Area, Volta WA).	5 years	USFWS, CDFW, BRD, USBR, USEPA, **DWR**, **FCD**	79,000	0	1,300	16,300	16,400	15,000	
1	4.1	Identify total water requirements to maintain and/or restore habitats according to management plans developed under recovery action 2 on all conservation lands identified in recovery action 1.	Ongoing	**USFWS**, CDFW, CPP	62.3	6	6	6	6	6	
1	4.2	Evaluate the current, existing water supply and determine whether additional water is necessary to meet habitat needs and management goals.	Ongoing	**USFWS**, CDFW, CPP, USBR, WD, SWRCB	124.5	12.4	12.4	12.4	12.4	12.4	

Implementation Schedule for the Giant Garter Snake											
Recovery Action Information					Cost estimate in $1,000 units						
Priority	Action Number	Description	Duration	Responsible Parties	Total Costs	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Comments/Notes
1	5.1	Develop and incorporate into management plans, monitoring programs for giant garter snake habitat and presence and abundance on all lands preserved for the giant garter snake.	Ongoing, Continual	**USFWS**, **CDFW**, USBR, CPP, BRD, **NGO**	11,890	0	575	479	714	384	
1	6.1	Develop habitat assessment protocols to measure the suitability of giant garter snake habitat and conduct habitat assessments, habitat suitability analysis and mapping, and conduct surveys using the most recent protocols within the recovery units to assess giant garter snake populations and where the best habitat exists for potential conservation.	Ongoing	**USFWS**, CDFW, BRD	TBD						
1	7.1.1	Determine habitat use and prey requirements of neonatal, juvenile, and adult giant garter snakes and examine the use of upland habitats by the giant garter snake to determine the amounts and types of upland habitats required to support giant garter snakes.	3 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	452	1	1	150	150	150	
2	7.1.2	Examine occurrence in and use of riparian habitats by the giant garter snake to determine if additional areas require management for the giant garter snake.	5 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	200	40	40	40	40	40	
2	7.1.3	Determine buffer requirements for protecting giant garter snakes and their habitat from incompatible uses, such as urban development and roadways.	2 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	260	0	0	130	130	0	
1	7.1.4	Examine use of corridors between conservation lands to determine use and effectiveness of protecting corridors.	2 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	5	2.5	2.5	0	0	0	
1	7.1.5	Examine response of giant garter snakes to managed marsh restoration to determine effectiveness of restoration efforts and to modify restoration techniques as necessary to benefit the giant garter snake.	10 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	20	0	0	20	0	0	
2	7.2.1	Determine the movement patterns of giant garter snakes, including home ranges, daily and annual movements, and dispersal abilities over a broad range of size classes, among different habitat types, across the giant garter	Ongoing	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	500	20	20	20	20	20	

Implementation Schedule for the Giant Garter Snake											
Recovery Action Information					Cost estimate in $1,000 units						
Priority	Action Number	Description	Duration	Responsible Parties	Total Costs	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Comments/Notes
		snake's range									
1	7.2.2	Determine demographic information on reproductive and mortality rates, clutch sizes, fecundity, age and size at sexual maturity, and population sizes and densities among different habitat types and across the giant garter snake's range.	Ongoing	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	500	20	20	20	20	20	
2	7.2.3	Determine movement of giant garter snake in response to changes to various external conditions	2 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	10	5	5	0	0	0	
2	7.3	Determine genetic relatedness among populations of giant garter snakes within and between recovery units and identify landscape features that serve as barriers to dispersal.	Ongoing	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	310	27.5	37.5	37.5	37.5	37.5	
2	7.4	Conduct population viability analyses. Population viability analysis (PVA) is the use of quantitative methods to analyze the environmental and demographic factors that affect the survival of populations. Population viability analyses may be used to refine recovery criteria and tasks in a number of ways.	Ongoing	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	540	0	100	100	105	102.5	
2	7.5.1	Study the effects of parasites, viruses, fungi, and introduced predators and plants (e.g. *Ludwigia hexapetala* (water primrose)) on giant garter snake populations, and develop and implement a management program to monitor affected populations.	5 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	500	0	100	100	100	100	
2	7.5.2	Determine the effects of flooding on the survival of the giant garter snake. Although giant garter snakes evolved in the Central Valley and likely are adapted to withstand some flooding of habitats, reclamation and flood control activities have altered the timing, duration, and severity of floods.	5 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, COE, NGO	50	5	5	5	5	5	
1	7.5.3	Develop guidelines for water transfers that minimize the effects of transfers to the giant garter snake and its habitat and develop and implement guidelines for water transfers that minimize the effects of transfers to the giant	5 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO, RB/DWR.	6,000	700	700	700	700	700	.

Implementation Schedule for the Giant Garter Snake											
Recovery Action Information					Cost estimate in $1,000 units						
Priority	Action Number	Description	Duration	Responsible Parties	Total Costs	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Comments/Notes
		garter snake and its habitat.									
2	75.4	Determine the effects of erosion control netting products on snake movement, and recommend ways to ameliorate negative effects if found. Determine which products have the least chance of negatively affecting the giant garter snake and provide a list of these products for consideration during section 7 consultations.	2 years	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO, COE, CDOT	5	2.5	2.5	0	0	0	
2	7.5.5	Collaborate with the California Climate Change Center to investigate the effects of climate change on the giant garter snake and its habitat. Information developed will, in part, inform development of adaptive management guidelines that should be implemented throughout the range of the giant garter snake.	Ongoing	USFWS, CDFW, **BRD**, USBR, NGO	20	10	5	5	0	0	
1	8.1	Distribute guidelines for land use practices compatible with giant garter snake conservation to landowners and agencies and distribute to appropriate land managers and partners (farmers, ranchers)	Continual	**USFWS**, CDFW, BRD, USBR, COE, NRCS, RB/DWR, CRIA, NCWA	15	5	5	1	1	0.5	
2	8.2	Develop and distribute informational material on the habitat and management needs of the giant garter snake to interested and affected private landowners.	Continual	**USFWS**, CDFW	5	0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	
2	8.3	Develop and distribute outreach and education materials for public and conservation land managers.	Continual	**USFWS**, CDFW	400	20	20	20	20	20	
1	8.4	Form a Recovery Implementation Team that cooperatively implements specific recovery actions necessary to recover the giant garter snake.	Continual	**USFWS**, BRD, NGO, CDFW	5	5	0	0	0	0	
2	9.1	Identify suitable repatriation sites based on results of surveys and habitat assessments including analysis of the habitat and management requirements necessary to successfully reintroduce giant garter snakes and current threats at potential reintroduction sites. The historical range of the giant garter	unknown	USFWS, **BRD**, NGO, CDFW	190	0	0	0	0	10	

Implementation Schedule for the Giant Garter Snake											
Recovery Action Information					**Cost estimate in $1,000 units**						
Priority	**Action Number**	**Description**	**Duration**	**Responsible Parties**	**Total Costs**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**Comments/Notes**
		snake in the San Joaquin Basin and the Tulare Basin Recovery Units should be assessed and surveyed for suitable repatriation sites or areas and to verify that no giant garter snakes already inhabit potential repatriation sites.									
2	9.2	Develop and implement a captive propagation and repatriation plan (including genetics management plan) for specific sites if repatriation is determined to be necessary to prevent local extirpations and feasible.	unknown	**USFWS**, BRD, CDFW, NGO	330	0	5	10	10	10	
Total Estimated Cost[3]: $17,313,138 – $116,470,200											

[3] Because we cannot envision the exact course that recovery may take and because our understanding of the vulnerability of a species to threats is very likely to change as more is learned about the species and its threats, it is possible that a status review may indicate that delisting is warranted without the necessity of implementing all of the actions described in the implementation schedule. A review of the recovery plans for domestic vertebrate species that have been delisted due to recovery indicates that between 15% and 100%, with an average of 60%, of recovery actions are initiated in the process of accomplishing species recovery. Applying this range to the actions described in this recovery plan suggests that the potential cost range for achieving recovery is between $17,313,318 and $116,470,200 plus additional cost that cannot be determined at this time (see page III-6).

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V. APPENDIX

Public Comment and Peer Review on the Revised Draft Recovery Plan for the Giant Garter Snake (*Thamnophis gigas*)

Responses to Public Comments:

Comment: *One commenter objected to the western boundary for the Yolo Basin Recovery Unit (YBRU) in Solano and Yolo Counties for the following reasons: 1) The YBRU boundaries cover a much broader area of Solano County than the Conservation Area boundaries that were developed for the Solano County Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) in cooperation with the Service, CDFW, local stakeholders, and other agencies over the last 16 years; 2) the YBRU doesn't conform to any boundaries of an identified watershed basin as identified by the cited sources in the Recovery Plan, and it actually splits across multiple official watershed designations that are regularly employed by the Service and other agencies to define watersheds. Historically, the drainages in the western portion of the YBRU likely contained flowing water only during the rainy season (Kuchler, 1977) and were likely dry most of the March through November time frame identified in the Recovery Plan as a "steadfast" requirement for giant garter snake habitat; 3) based on the habitat conditions in Solano County within the proposed YBRU and trapping studies conducted by USGS in 2004 and 2005 (Wylie), it appears that the waterways within the majority of the YBRU do not currently support giant garter snakes. The commenter expressed concern that inconsistencies between the YBRU and the Solano County HCP Conservation Area for the giant garter snake will increase regulatory compliance costs for the public and fail to provide movement corridors or any other benefit for giant garter snake recovery. The commenter recommends close coordination with the Solano County Water Agency and the Yolo Habitat Conservancy to make the YBRU more consistent with the giant garter snake Conservation Area in the Solano County HCP, which is smaller and corresponds to the perennial waterways and lower tributaries of the western Delta, Yolo Bypass, and lower portions of Putah Creek.*

Response: The Recovery Unit boundaries are not intended to match perfectly with Conservation Area boundaries for the Solano County HCP because the goals of the Recovery Plan and the HCP are different. The goal of the Recovery Plan is to "establish and protect self-sustaining populations of the giant garter snake throughout the full ecological, geographical, and genetic range of the species," whereas the goals of the Solano County HCP are "to promote the conservation of biological diversity and the preservation of endangered species and their habitats consistent with the recognition of private property rights; provide for a healthy economic environment for the citizens, agriculture, and industries; and allow for ongoing maintenance and operation of public and private facilities in Solano County". Incorrect citations were listed in the description of giant garter snake recovery units in the Recovery Plan (page II-2). The Recovery Unit boundaries were developed primarily using the habitat suitability model discussed in Halstead et al. (2010). We have updated the language in this section of the recovery plan accordingly. Although the western boundary of the YBRU is considered to be of "low suitability" for the giant garter snake according to the model, it is still considered suitable habitat which may be useful for connectivity and ultimately, recovery. The absence of recent giant garter snake occurrences from a specific area a) does not mean that giant garter snakes do not exist in that area or use it as a corridor and b) does not preclude future habitat restoration and repatriation of giant garter snakes at that location. Regardless of the existence of a Recovery Plan, Federal and non-Federal actions that may affect or take giant garter snakes and their habitat will be reviewed by the USFWS under ESA Section 7 and Section 10 processes, including the measures outlined in the HCP. We believe that the currently designated YBRU encompasses an area of land that is appropriate for recovery actions for giant garter snake. The Service intends to work

closely with all agencies and individuals involved in the development of HCPs when establishing a Recovery Implementation Team for the giant garter snake.

Comment: *One commenter stated that the Service's view toward flood infrastructure maintenance activities in the 2015 Revised Recovery Plan has changed significantly since the publication of the 1993 Federal Register Final Rule (58 FR 54064) listing of the giant garter snake, the 1999 Draft Recovery Plan, and the 2006 and 2012 5-Year Reviews for this species. Clarification is sought as to the rationale used to reach the conclusion that flood maintenance activities are now considered by the Service to be current threats to the giant garter snake.*

Response: The Service's standpoint on the impact of flood maintenance activities on the giant garter snake and its habitat have not changed significantly since the listing of the snake. The 1993 Listing Rule states, "… intensive control of vegetation along water delivery and drainage facilities eliminates remaining habitat and prevents reestablishment of former habitat (Hansen 1983; Brode and Hansen 1992; G. Hansen, pers. comm., 1902; Brode, pers. comm., 1992). Such activities can kill or injure snakes, remove critical escape cover, eliminate prey populations, and destroy small mammal burrows and other soil fissures needed as winter retreat habitat." Both the 2006 and the 2012 Giant Garter Snake 5-Year Reviews echo these sentiments, adding that, "Much of the remaining giant garter snake habitat is subject to flood control and canal maintenance activities, subjecting the snake to on-going risks of mortality and injury and the effects of habitat degradation. Since the last status review it appears that flood control and canal maintenance remain potential threats to the giant garter snake." Both 5-Year Reviews discuss the various flood control maintenance activities, including weed and rodent eradication, de-silting, excavation and re-sloping of ditches and channels, deposition of ditch and canal spoils materials on adjacent property, placement of fill material within the canal, and control of vegetation in and around canals, ditches, and drains by mowing and other measures. All of these activities are noted to have deleterious impacts to giant garter snakes and their habitat. The stance set forth by the Service regarding levee and canal maintenance activities in the Revised Recovery Plan closely aligns with that of the 1993 Listing Rule and the 5-Year Reviews published in 2006 and 2012.

Comment: *A similar comment was made regarding the apparent use of contradictory statements in the Recovery Plan about the effects of levee and canal maintenance on giant garter snake. Specifically, the commenter addressed one of the qualitative requirements for ideal aquatic habitat in the Recovery Plan: "absence of recurrent flooding, or where flooding is probable, the presence of upland refugia". The commenter indicates that this statement is contrary to the Service's designation of levee and canal maintenance as significant threats and flooding as a non-significant threat. The commenter also noted that many levee and canal maintenance activities can be beneficial to the giant garter snake and its habitat, including invasive species removal, vegetation trimming and limbing up, gravelling roadways, and sediment removal from canals.*

Response: It is important to note that although the Service did not find flooding to be a significant threat, it is still identified as a threat to giant garter snakes. As the Recovery Plan discusses, the giant garter snake evolved in the Central Valley, and therefore probably adapted to withstand some natural flooding events. However, the timing, duration, and severity of floods have changed over time as a result of anthropogenic activities, and it is these human-caused activities (reclamation and flood control) that the Service has deemed a threat to the giant garter snake. The Service agrees that not all levee and canal maintenance activities are detrimental to giant garter snakes and their habitat, and in fact, some maintenance activities likely provide some benefit to the giant garter snake. Recovery Criterion A12 discusses the development/implementation of management plans for the

designated giant garter snake habitat blocks and corridors to ensure that canals and flood control structures are operated and maintained with the giant garter snake in mind.

Comment: *One commenter expressed concerns that flood control and maintenance activities will be restricted or significantly modified in the designated Recovery Units because of language in the Recovery Criteria and Actions sections of the Draft Recovery Plan. They believe this language conflicts with statutory obligations of certain agencies to provide for flood protection.*

Response: The intent of the recovery plan is not to restrict flood control and water delivery agencies from carrying out their missions. As a guidance document, the recovery plan does not place restrictions on flood control, reclamation, or water districts. The recovery plan recommends several recovery actions to minimize the effects of canal and water conveyance management activities on giant garter snakes. These include developing and updating guidelines for canal maintenance, incentive programs to assist water agencies and users in developing and implementing conservation measures, and outreach and education programs. Regardless of the existence of a Recovery Plan, Federal and non-Federal actions that may affect or take giant garter snakes and their habitat will be reviewed by the USFWS under ESA Section 7 and Section 10 processes, including maintenance and improvements of water conveyance facilities.

Comment: *One commenter also stated that the 2015 Revised Recovery Plan does not explain the Service's change in its view regarding the threat of flooding to the species since the 1993 Listing Rule, 1999 Draft Recovery Plan, and 2006 and 2012 5-Year Reviews. This commenter also recommended that additional research efforts on the impact of flooding to the survival of the giant garter snake be incorporated into the Recovery Plan.*

Response: The Service's opinion on flooding impacts to giant garter snakes has not changed significantly since the 1993 Listing Rule. The Listing Rule and the 2006 and 2012 5-Year Reviews all acknowledge that flooding is a threat to the giant garter snake, but none of them made the claim that flooding is a "significant" threat to the snake. All of these documents, including the Recovery Plan, express the need for hydrologic links to suitable habitat and preserved upland refugia so that giant garter snakes have a mode of escape during flooding events. The Recovery Plan includes the following Recovery Action (8.5.2 (p. III-4)): "Determine the effects of flooding on the survival of the giant garter snake. Although giant garter snakes evolved in the Central Valley and likely are adapted to withstand some flooding of habitats, reclamation and flood control activities have altered the timing, duration, and severity of floods. (Priority 2)"

Comment: *One commenter mentioned that additional research on the impacts and benefits of water primrose removal should be included in the Recovery Plan.*

Response: The Service agrees. We have updated Recovery Action 7.5.1 on page III-5 and in the Implementation Table to address this suggestion.

Comment: *One commenter requested detailed descriptions of the current status and threats for 3 Recovery Units (Butte, Colusa, and Sutter Basins). They state that the Recovery Plan directs readers to the most recent 5-year review for the giant garter snake for additional description and status info. However, they claim that the 2012 review offers no synthesis of the information or assessment of the species status in specific areas.*

Response: The requested information (description and status assessment) is provided for each Recovery Unit, including Butte, Colusa, and Sutter Basins in the 2012 5-Year Review (see pages 3-12).

Comment: *Multiple commenters requested citations and substantiation for the following statement on page I-8 of the Draft Recovery Plan: "Though the abundance of giant garter snakes in the Sacramento Valley has declined, the distribution of the giant garter snake in its northern range may still reflect its historical distribution."*

Response: Citations for this statement have been added to the Recovery Plan. This statement does not imply that the numbers and distribution of giant garter snakes have been reduced at uniform rates across its historical range, as one commenter asserted. We are simply saying that although the distribution of the giant garter snake in its northern range has not changed significantly over time, the abundance of giant garter snakes in the Sacramento Valley has declined from historical levels.

Comment: *One commenter requested a citation for the following statement on page II-1 in the Draft Recovery Plan: "…changes in the levels of rice production are the largest threat to the giant garter snake."*

Response: This statement is made on page I-11 of the Draft Recovery Plan, not on page II-1. We have updated this statement in the Draft Recovery Plan to read: "Today, habitat loss and fragmentation due to urbanization and changes in the levels and methods of rice production are the largest threat to the giant garter snake." We have also provided supporting citations, as requested.

Comment: *One commenter referred to Page 1-5 of the Draft Recovery Plan (Upland Winter Refugia Component), which states that over-wintering snakes use burrows as far as 200 to 250 meters from the edge of summer aquatic habitat. The commenter asked if the frequently recommended 200 foot buffer from aquatic habitat would be based on studies referenced in the Recovery Plan or information that may come from future recovery actions.*

Response: This statement is made on page I-3 (not 1-5) of the Draft Recovery Plan. Recovery Plans are used as guidance documents and may be used to inform other regulatory documents under the Endangered Species Act such as Section 7 Biological Opinions and Section 10 Habitat Conservation Plans.

Comment: *One commenter asked what is meant by "clean water" on p. II-1 of the Draft Recovery Plan and throughout.*

Response: "Clean water" is defined in Recovery Criteria A13 on page II-16 as water that is "…free of contaminants or will contain contaminants at levels that have been demonstrated to be harmless to giant garter snakes."

Comment: *Multiple commenters mentioned that only California Natural Diversity Database data are included in the Recovery Unit Figures (Figures 4-12) on pages II-5 - II-13, but that there is more recent occurrence data that should be included. Specifically, commenters mentioned that Figure 10 (Delta Basin Recovery Unit; p. II-11) is missing information about Jersey Island occurrences, and Figure 4 (Butte Basin Recovery Unit; p. II-5) is missing data from the Biggs-West Gridley Water District and Gray Lodge Canal projects. One commenter also mentioned that Table 2 on page I-7 fails to disclose more recent population estimates for the giant garter snake.*

Response: Only CNDDB occurrence data were included in the Recovery Unit maps on pages II-5 – II-13 in the Recovery Plan because all data collected during giant garter snake occupancy surveys

in the state of California should be submitted to CNDDB. The population estimates included in Table 2 on page 1-7 are the most recent published estimates that were available to the Service at the time the draft was released. There may be more recent published data that we have not yet received. The Recovery Plan is a living document, and therefore, as new information comes to light, the Recovery Plan may be revised accordingly.

Comment: *One commenter requested that Factor C on page II-17 address predation by introduced species.*

Response: We agree that predation by introduced species should be addressed as a Factor C threat. We have added this threat to Factor C on page II-17.

Comment: *One commenter mentioned that Grasslands Mitigation Bank overlaps a portion of the Delta Basin Recovery Unit but is not included in the description of the Delta Basin RU. They also requested that the Recovery Plan mention that mitigation credits are approved and available at the Grasslands Mitigation Bank in the San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit.*

Response: The Grasslands Mitigation Bank does not overlap the Delta Basin Recovery Unit. It occurs entirely within the boundaries of the San Joaquin Basin Recovery Unit (SJBRU). We have updated the description of the SJBRU to include the Grasslands Mitigation Bank as an approved Bank.

Comment: *One commenter asked when the clock starts for Recovery Factor E: "all preserved perennial marshes and ricelands host a stable population as determined from monitoring over a 20-year period that includes at least one consecutive 3-year period of dry or critically dry weather…". They also asked how minimum density is measured under Recovery Factor E, E2.*

Response: The 20-year monitoring period will begin at different times for different populations. We consider 'year 1' to equal the first year each population reaches the desired density as described in Recovery Factor E2: "at least an average of 8 snakes per hectare for buffered perennial wetlands and 3 snakes per hectare for active ricelands." Under Recovery Factor E2, the density is measured per giant garter snake population following the cited methodology under Factor A1. As results of new research become available alternate survey methods may be recommended by the Recovery Implementation Team.

Comment: *One commenter asked where to find best management guidelines for giant garter snake habitat outside of conservation lands, as referenced in Recovery Action 2.2 on page III-2.*

Response: As stated in 2.2 of the Recovery Action Narrative on page III-2, best management guidelines for recovery actions still need to be developed. Best management guidelines will likely vary among populations and regions depending on local circumstances.

Comment: *Multiple commenters addressed Recovery Action 4 on pages III-2 and III-3, which provides the following guidance: "Ensure summer water is available for wetland habitats used by the snake". One commenter requested that the Service address potentially conflicting water uses (agriculture in particular) and the effects of drought on achieving this action. Similarly, another commenter requested that the plan recognize the challenges in ensuring that summer water is available during drought years.*

Response: The Service agrees that it is important to recognize that summer water availability for the giant garter snake is highly dependent on other potentially conflicting water uses as well as fluctuating environmental conditions. We have updated Recovery Action 4 on page III-2 to acknowledge these uncertainties.

Comment: *One commenter mentioned that Recovery Action 5.1 on page III-3 should also recommend the provision of regulatory assurances for neighboring landowners which provide incidental take coverage for ongoing maintenance activities.*

Response: Recovery Plans are not regulatory documents, and therefore, it is not appropriate to recommend the provision of regulatory assurances for neighboring landowners in the form of incidental take coverage. The Service will work with neighboring landowners to ensure compatible land uses for any recovery actions we undertake.

Comment: *One commenter requested a statement which clarifies the obligations (or lack thereof) of partners to carry out actions at the beginning of the Implementation Schedule.*

Response: The following sentence was previously included in the Total Estimated Cost of Recovery and Date of Recovery section, and has been bolded and moved to the introductory paragraph of the Implementation Schedule section for greater emphasis: *"Because recovery plans are guidance and planning documents, they do not obligate partners to carry out actions, nor do they provide funds to carry out actions."*

Comment: *Multiple commenters stated that the Recovery Plan overstates the negative impact of water transfers on giant garter snakes, and that this claim requires substantiation. One commenter also requested clarification on the "effects" of water transfers on giant garter snakes that need to be minimized (as discussed on p. III-4), as well as what measures need to be taken beyond the conservation measures that are already included in the most recent consultation with the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) on water transfers. Finally, it has been requested that the Service define the word "transfer" in the Recovery plan. Specifically, does it include groundwater substitution transfers, land fallowing transfers, and transfers being made to another Region?*

Response: In the Draft Recovery Plan, "water transfers" refer to any transfer of water from one location to another as a result of cropland idling/shifting, reservoir releases, conservation measures, or groundwater substitution. We have included this definition in the Recovery Plan as requested. Depending on the type of water transfer that occurs, if transfers are away from giant garter snake habitat, the following effects to giant garter snakes and their habitat can reasonably be anticipated: increased stress on snakes that must disperse further to find suitable habitat (including summer water) and prey items, increased predation on snakes due to the loss of refugia, increased competition for food and shelter resources between displaced and resident snakes, and ultimately, reduced reproduction and recruitment as females are displaced from familiar retreats and basking sites and neonates and juveniles are deprived of essential nutrients to facilitate growth and sexual maturation. These detrimental impacts to individuals have the potential to become population-level effects as the quality of habitat and food resources is reduced persistently, over time, or undergoes annual fluctuations of high magnitude. Because the Recovery Plan is not a regulatory document, it is not the appropriate document to describe conservation measures for specific projects.

Comment: *One commenter asked that the Recovery Plan acknowledge conflicting intra-agency guidance regarding the use of water for imperiled species, and present the trade-offs of the various water uses. Specifically, the Recovery*

Plan should mention the tendency of USFWS/NMFS fisheries divisions to pressure water management agencies to provide additional water in-stream instead of diverting it for use by ricelands and wildlife refuges, which can harm species like the giant garter snake.

Response: This Recovery Plan was developed specifically to facilitate the recovery of the giant garter snake, and therefore, the Recovery Criteria and Actions were focused only on the giant garter snake. The Service and NMFS will continue to coordinate closely regarding the best possible uses for available water for all protected species.

Comment: *One commenter asked that "stable population" be defined in the Recovery Plan.*

Response: We have included language in Recovery Factor E on page II-17, which further defines a "stable population."

Comment: *One commenter asked that a cost estimate be developed and anticipated funding sources be identified in the Recovery Plan.*

Response: Cost estimates and responsible parties have been added to the Recovery Implementation Schedule as requested. Once finalized, the Service will work with all interested partners to identify appropriate sources of funding for implementation of recovery actions.

Comment: *One commenter wanted to know the anticipated means of acquiring additional giant garter snake habitat (purchase, easement, etc.) and the length of time the habitat blocks are expected to provide the benefit (in the Recovery Criteria for Factor A on pages II-14-II-16).*

Response: The anticipated means of acquiring additional giant garter snake habitat is described in Recovery Actions 1.1-1.3 on page III-1 and in the Implementation Schedule on page III-8. The habitat blocks are expected to protect giant garter snakes in perpetuity.

Comment: *One commenter requested that the Service define "the following watercourses" and "main watercourses" on page II-15 (A2. Colusa Basin Recovery Unit). Also, regarding the "final protected canal length" in this section, the commenter asked what canal this refers to.*

Response: No specific canal is the focus of this section. Therefore, we have removed the word "following" and changed "final protected canal" to "final protected watercourse" in Recovery Criteria A2: Colusa Basin Recovery Unit.

Comment: *One commenter asked how the lands described in Recovery Action 1 on page III-1 will be protected and secured.*

Response: The Service has not determined the mechanism by which these particular lands will be protected and secured. This will depend greatly on the interests of existing landowners and the location and current ownership/management of the land. These lands could be secured through a number of means such as purchase, easement, mitigation or conservation bank, etc. The Service will work with interested parties, on a voluntary basis, to determine the method of protection most appropriate for each location.

Comment: *One commenter recommended that the Service collaborate with local landowners and water managers to develop management plans and best management guidelines (as discussed in Recovery Actions 2.1 and 2.2 on page III-2) that are practical, best for the local areas, and able to be implemented.*

Response: The Service agrees and has added language to Recovery Actions 2.1 and 2.2 on page III-2 that reflects this suggestion.

Comment: *One commenter asked what areas within the Sacramento Valley have been identified as having harmful water quality, and another commenter asked where to find guidance regarding harmless contaminants for giant garter snakes.*

Response: The 2012 5-Year Review (p. 37-40) discusses the threat of impaired water quality and references recent studies that analyze specific contaminants and their impacts to giant garter snakes. Please refer to the 2012 5-Year-Review for the most up-to-date information on the impacts of water quality and contaminants on giant garter snakes.

Comment: *One commenter asked how Recovery Action 5 on page III-3 differs from Recovery Action 1 on page III-1.*

Response: While Recovery Action (RA) 1 differs from Recovery Action (RA) 5, it would make sense to include RA 5 under the umbrella of RA 1, since the establishment of incentive/easement programs is one method that can be used to protect, restore, or create habitat and habitat corridors. We have updated the Recovery Action Narrative and Implementation Schedule in the Recovery Plan to reflect this suggestion.

Comment: *One commenter expressed the concern that, as a result of the Recovery Plan, airports could be required to ensure that their managed waterways contain sufficient water throughout the summer to provide aquatic habitat for the giant garter snake. This would directly conflict with FAA requirements to minimize the amount of open water within 10,000 feet of airports to reduce attractants to hazardous wildlife. They requested that the Service acknowledge the priority of the airports to protect the safety of the travelling public and to discourage the restoration or creation of aquatic habitat near any Sacramento County Airport in accordance with FAA regulations, especially when reviewing locations to protect or preserve block pairs in the Natomas Basin Management Unit.*

Response: The Recovery Plan is not a regulatory document, but rather, a guidance document to facilitate the recovery and conservation of the giant garter snake. The Recovery Plan is not obligatory in nature, and therefore the Recovery Actions laid out in the plan are not requirements, but recommendations for our partners to assist in recovery efforts. The Service does not yet have a specific plan for where the habitat block pairs will be located, and we will work closely with the appropriate land managers and/or landowners during the designation of habitat block pairs. The Service recognizes that health and human safety are of the utmost importance and support the airport achieving that mission. Any restoration or creation of aquatic habitat near Sacramento County Airports will comply with FAA requirements to minimize open water and reduce wildlife attractants.

Comment: *One commenter requested that the Recovery Plan include explanations regarding the history of the development of the Recovery Plan, including delays, failure to designate critical habitat, and why a condensed Recovery Plan was released by the Regional Office instead of the more comprehensive plan developed by the Sacramento Field Office.*

Response: The purpose of a Recovery Plan is to facilitate the recovery of Federally-listed species through a) development of objective, measurable criteria, which, when met, would result in delisting, b) a description of site-specific management actions which will move the species toward recovery, and c) estimates of the time and cost required to carry out the management actions. Although we do not typically describe the history of a plan's development, the Service as a whole, including Region 8, is currently working to make recovery plans more streamlined and flexible, while still accomplishing the purpose listed above thoroughly and effectively.

Comment: *One commenter asked that we address how the Service facilitates threats to the giant garter snake through multiple water transfer Biological Opinions that don't require mitigation.*

Response: The Recovery Plan addresses water transfers as a threat to the giant garter snake and includes two Priority 1 Recovery Actions specifically stating that guidelines should be developed and implemented for water transfers (Recovery Action 2.2) and that more research needs to be conducted to determine how to minimize the effects of water transfers to the giant garter snake and its habitat (Recovery Action 8.5.3)..

Comment: *One commenter requested a discussion about the impact of a long drought on the 20-year timeline to recover the species.*

Response: The date of recovery listed in the 2015 Draft Recovery Plan is 2045 (30 years from the release of the Draft Plan). This 30-year period includes a 10-year period in which the Recovery Criteria are achieved and a 20-year monitoring period to provide a reliable estimate of population change. The plan also states that the 20-year monitoring period must also include one 3-year drought to ensure that giant garter snakes are no longer threatened by an insufficient water supply.

Comment: *One commenter asked that the Service explain how the significance of certain threats, especially climate change and drought, which are well-known and studied, is still unknown.*

Response: Although some research has addressed climate change and drought-related impacts to imperiled species, focused research on the impacts of climate change and drought on the giant garter snake is still lacking. Recovery Action 8.5. addresses the need for additional research on threats to the giant garter snake to determine their extent and to develop methods to ameliorate them. Recovery Action 8.5.5. specifically addresses the need for climate-change research as it relates to the giant garter snake and its habitat.

Comment: *One commenter stated that the Recovery Plan failed to mention the development of management plans with other agencies.*

Response: Achieving recovery of the giant garter snake will be an inherently collaborative process and the Service will coordinate with agencies and other partners in implementation of the recovery actions. The Recovery Implementation Table includes a column which specifies the potential parties responsible (and other likely partners) for each Recovery Action, including development of management plans. Management plans are mentioned in four separate Recovery Actions: 1) Recovery Action 2.1, which will involve the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), non-government organizations (NGOs), private landowners, conservation program participants (CPPs), and the Bureau of Land Management, 2) Recovery Action 4.1, which will involve the

CDFW and CPPs, 3) Recovery Action 6.1, which will involve the CDFW, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, CPPs, the Biological Resources Division of the U.S. Geological Survey (BRD), and NGOs, and 4) Recovery Action 10.2, which will involve the BRD, CDFW, and NGOs. The Service will work with each of these agencies, as appropriate, in development of management plans for the giant garter snake.

Comment: *One commenter asked how an easement program will encourage local agencies to provide/maintain habitat, and what constitutes an easement program (p. iv.)? Additionally, they mentioned that the incentive program addressed on page iv includes local agencies, but when it is addressed again on page II-1, local agencies are not included.*

Response: Action 5 on page iv. of the Recovery Plan states, "Establish an incentive or easement program(s) to encourage private landowners and local agencies to provide or maintain giant garter snake habitat." In this statement, the easement program does not apply to local agencies. Only the incentive program(s) are intended to encourage local agencies to provide/maintain habitat for the giant garter snake. The easement programs are intended specifically for private landowners. This is discussed in further detail in Recovery Action 5.1. An easement program is a voluntary program where willing landowners are paid a percentage of their wetland or agricultural property's fair market value for purchase of the farming and development rights in perpetuity. When purchasing easements on agricultural land the Service works directly with landowners to develop, fund and implement a wetland restoration plan. Landowners are not required to follow a management plan, but technical assistance is provided by the Service and landowners are encouraged to participate in various programs for habitat restoration, enhancement and management. Local agencies have been included in the discussion about incentive programs on page II-1 as requested.

Comment: *One commenter mentioned that the Draft Recovery Plan fails to provide the most recent description and status for the giant garter snake and punts to the 2012 5-year review.*

Response: The species description has not changed since the 2012 5-Year Review was released, and therefore, we determined that an in-depth discussion of the description was not necessary in the Recovery Plan. The 2012 5-Year Review provides the most up-to-date, comprehensive status information that we currently have for the giant garter snake. It is important to note that the state of the science is constantly changing, and as we receive new information, it will be incorporated into subsequent 5-Year Reviews and Species Status Assessments for the giant garter snake, which will be released to the public upon completion.

Comment: *One commenter mentioned that the Recovery Plan does not include a discussion on page I-11 about how serious the threat from contaminants is to giant garter snake recovery.*

Response: Under the Factor E threats on page I-11 of the Recovery Plan, contaminants are listed as a threat to the giant garter snake, but not considered significant. At the top of page I-11, the Recovery Plan also mentions that the 2012 5-Year Review should be consulted for a complete analysis of each threat. The 2012 5-Year Review provides the most recent, comprehensive information about the impacts of contaminants on giant garter snakes that is currently available (p. 37-40).

Comment: *One commenter asked that "incompatible uses" be defined on page II-15 of the Draft Recovery Plan.*

Response: "Incompatible uses" refers to all activities that preclude the local recovery of the species. We have updated the text on page II-15 to include this definition.

Comment: *One commenter asked if the following Recovery Action on page II-16 is included in the Implementation Schedule: "Management plans are developed, implemented, and updated as needed for 20 years for all habitat blocks and corridors preserved for the giant garter snake listed in Criteria A1 through A9". Multiple commenters also mentioned that the development of a management plan for giant garter snake parasites and viruses (p. II-17) is not included in the Recovery Action Narrative or the Implementation Schedule.*

Response: The statement from page II-16 of the Recovery Plan (*"Management plans are developed, implemented, and updated as needed for 20 years for all habitat blocks and corridors preserved for the giant garter snake listed in Criteria A1 through A9"*) is not a Recovery Action, but a Recovery Criterion; therefore it does not need to be included in the Implementation Schedule. However, Recovery Action 2.1 addresses this Recovery Criterion, and is included in the Implementation Schedule on page III-8. Regarding Recovery Criterion C2 (development/implementation of a parasite, virus, and fungi management plan) on page II-17, we have noted that a corresponding Recovery Action is missing from the Recovery Action Narrative and Implementation Schedule. We have updated the Narrative and Implementation Schedule to include an analogous action.

Comment: *One commenter pointed out that the Implementation Schedule mentions developing a genetics plan, but doesn't provide details on the purpose, goals, or contents of this plan.*

Response: The purpose of a genetics management plan is to provide a framework for evaluating giant garter snake conservation options from a genetics perspective. The genetics management plan would include a review and synthesis of the most recent genetic studies, along with an examination of the implications for management and recovery. The ultimate goal of the plan would be to aid in management and decision-making for the species, specifically for repatriation, captive propagation, and determination of genetically important populations. This explanation has been added to page III-6 of the Recovery Plan.

Comment: *One commenter requested that the Recovery Plan disclose how the Service has allowed impacts to giant garter snake that are not consistent with recovery of the species. Specifically, the commenter mentioned the allowance of twice as many fallowed acres during water transfers, despite the failure to complete the Conservation Strategy required by the 2004 Biological Opinion on Central Valley water transfers and the deletion of the Environmental Water Account mitigation measure excluding Yolo County east of Hwy 113 from the areas where rice fields may be left fallow rather than flooded.*

Response: The purpose of a Recovery Plan is to facilitate the recovery of Federally-listed species through a) development of objective, measurable criteria, which, when met, would result in delisting, b) a description of site-specific management actions which will move the species toward recovery, and c) estimates of the time and cost required to carry out the management actions. Biological opinions are provided to federal agencies that conduct activities that may affect listed species. Although they do relate, regulatory processes such as Section 7 consultations are separate from recovery planning, and are generally not included in Recovery Plans.

Comment: *One commenter stated that the scientific foundation for the ecology and conservation of the giant garter snake presented in the Draft Recovery Plan is weak and lacks transparency. Specifically, it was noted that most of the source documents cited in the Draft Recovery Plan are unpublished and therefore, not readily available to the public. In*

addition, multiple conclusions appear to be based on speculation (e.g. the plan dismisses predation and disease as threats to giant garter snake persistence). However, these threats may actually be significant when the giant garter snake is constrained to small habitat areas (which it is).

Response: We acknowledge that many of the citations used in the Draft Recovery Plan are unpublished. This is primarily due to the fact that rigorous, peer-reviewed studies on many aspects of giant garter snake ecology are currently lacking. As a result, reports from partner agencies and expert judgement represented the best available science and were used to develop portions of the Draft Recovery Plan as appropriate. Although some of the source documents are not readily available to the public via internet searches, all source documents are available to the public as part of the Service's file record. Regarding the assertion that many conclusions in the plan appear to be based on speculation, we contend that the Plan openly addresses uncertainty and that conclusions were drawn using the best available science. Additionally, predation and disease were not dismissed as threats to the persistence of giant garter snakes. We simply concluded that they were not as significant as other threats to giant garter snakes, such as habitat loss and fragmentation. We include Recovery Actions which address the threat of predation and disease at the end of the Recovery Plan (Recovery Actions 7.5.1 and 7.5.6). It is also important to note that Recovery Plans are living documents, and therefore, as new information comes to light, certain portions of the Recovery Plan may be revised accordingly.

Comment: *One commenter requested that certain terms in the Recovery Plan be more clearly defined or eliminated altogether:*

1. *Overgrazed (p. I-3): unclear what qualifies*
2. *Habitat: this is a vague term in ecology and should be used cautiously*
3. *Habitat quality: the Recovery Plan doesn't base any of its habitat assessments on "habitat quality" metrics, and therefore, this term should be clearly defined or eliminated*
4. *Habitat fragmentation: poses a greater threat to the giant garter snake than habitat loss, so it should be given greater consideration in the assessment of current conditions and in formulating a recovery strategy.*
5. *Corridor (p. II-2): definition is missing the upland habitat elements necessary for giant garter snake survival*
6. *Habitat restoration and habitat enhancement: should only be pursued if we know a) the requirements of the giant garter snake, b) the conditions prior to habitat degradation/destruction, and c) consequences to the giant garter snake and other species*
7. *Adaptive management: define what this means*

Response: We have addressed each term in the order in which it was listed:

1. Overgrazed: we have updated this language on page I-3 to read, "3. Free of poor grazing management practices (i.e., grazing to the point at which giant garter snake refugia has been reduced or eliminated)."
2. Habitat: we acknowledge that the term "habitat" remains fairly vague in ecological studies and should be used cautiously. For the purposes of this Recovery Plan, "habitat" refers to any location that supports giant garter snakes.
3. Habitat quality: Although habitat quality is not specifically defined in the Recovery Plan, Section C.2*: "Habitat types and quality*" provides a general overview of what comprises high quality versus low-quality habitat by referencing Wylie *et al.* (2010). This publication delves

more deeply into the definition of "habitat quality", and provides evidence to support the hypothesis that natural emergent wetlands are high quality giant garter snake habitat. In this paper, the authors state that although population vital rates, such as survival and recruitment, are required to definitively assess habitat quality for a species (Van Horne, 1983), observing both greater densities and greater body condition in giant garter snakes at the same sites suggests that these sites are of greater quality.

4. Habitat fragmentation: Habitat fragmentation and habitat loss are not mutually exclusive processes. Habitat fragmentation is the direct result of habitat loss, and therefore, it is incorrect to say that habitat fragmentation poses a greater threat to the giant garter snake than does habitat loss. Page III of the Recovery Plan states, "The loss and subsequent fragmentation of habitat is the primary threat to the giant garter snake throughout the Central Valley of California". Both processes are given due consideration in the assessment of current conditions and the recovery strategy.
8. Corridor: As is noted in the comment, the definition of corridor on page II-2 refers to sections I.C.1. and I.C.2. of the Recovery Plan. Section I.C.1. provides a detailed definition of upland habitat, including vegetation cover, mammal burrows and protection from flooding, and therefore, it is redundant to include the upland habitat elements in the definition of corridor.
9. Habitat restoration and habitat enhancement: The Service agrees with this comment, which is why additional research on restoration techniques has been included as a Priority 1 Recovery Action (8.1.5, p. III-4).
10. Adaptive management: Adaptive management is a systematic, iterative process with very clear targets that must be met along the way. Therefore, we have included a brief description of the adaptive management process as explained in Walters (1986) on page iv of the Recovery Plan.

Comment: *One commenter objected to the definition of a giant garter snake population in the Recovery Plan as "a cluster of locality records in a contiguous habitat area". The commenter argues that this definition can't be used for establishing thresholds of success, nor can it be used as a monitoring metric. In addition, the commenter states that Tables 1 and 2 on pages I-4 and I-7 summarize population and population density estimates, but do not provide interpretations of the estimates relative to the spatial scales over which they were made. This is important for establishing recovery criteria, minimum habitat areas, and suitable monitoring protocols. The commenter asks that an estimate be provided for the number of giant garter snakes that represents a population and an explanation be provided for the determination of the habitat blocks, so that the area needed to support this number can be targeted as part of the Recovery Strategy.*

Response: The definition of "populations" in the Recovery Plan is not intended to be used to establish thresholds of success. The Recovery Criteria establish these thresholds. Recovery Criteria for Factor E (p. II-17 – II-18) elaborates on the requirements that must be met to ensure the long term recovery of the giant garter snake. Specifically, Recovery Criteria E2 states that "The density found during trapping is at least an average of 8 snakes per hectare for buffered perennial wetlands and 3 snakes per hectare for active ricelands". Therefore, we are not monitoring "locality records", but rather, we are monitoring densities. The population and density estimates in Tables 1 and 2 are taken from numerous publically available studies (cited directly in the tables), and these densities are

associated with specific spatial limits. Please also refer to the footnote located on page II-15 for the derivation of the acreage for habitat block pairs in the Recovery Criteria for Factor A. This footnote clarifies not only the determination of habitat block pair acreage, but also the minimum densities required by Recovery Criteria E2. Our uncertainty about population size estimates is made clear on Page I-7 (Population Size Estimates), where we state, "Although estimates exist for some populations, inconsistent methods across years do not allow us to estimate a range-wide population size for the species. USGS is working to develop a range-wide population size estimate."

Comment: *One commenter expressed concerns with targeting rice cultivation as a primary means of recovering the giant garter snake. The commenter argued that just because animals are seen in a particular environment does not mean that that environment qualifies as suitable habitat. Further, they claim that the majority of giant garter snake occurrences are not located in rice fields, and in the Natomas Basin, rice cultivation has likely adversely affected the giant garter snake by destroying or degrading habitat. The Recovery Plan refers to the importance of tules, cattails and/or tule "mats" for basking, yet these do not occur in rice fields nor do they often occur in ditches and drains associated with rice fields. The fact that giant garter snakes have been found in relatively large numbers on habitat patches within landscapes dominated by rice cultivation likely reflects remnant clusters of snakes more than it does an attraction to rice cultivation. Snakes entering rice field are exposed to pesticides, machinery, predators due to lack of cover and refuge, and vehicle traffic. The Recovery Plan dismisses these threats, but provides no data to support the dismissal. In addition, the commenter argues that rice cultivation does not achieve the ponding schedule needed by giant garter snakes as described on page I-3 of the Recovery Plan, and is overall unsuitable for preservation because it is subject to market forces, diseases, and fluctuating soil conditions and water availability.*

Response: In the Recovery Plan, rice cultivation is not called out as a primary means of recovering the giant garter snake. Preservation of contiguous perennial wetland blocks is the primary means of recovering the snake. Page III of the Recovery Plan states, "Perennial wetlands provide the highest quality habitat for the giant garter snake, and rice lands, with the interconnected water conveyance structures, serve as an alternative habitat in the absence of higher-quality wetlands." Rice lands are only utilized in cases where the protection of sufficient perennial wetlands is not possible. In order to conform to the guidance in the Recovery Criteria, habitat block pairs must contain at least one 240-hectare block of buffered perennial wetlands. Peer-reviewed research has guided the development of Recovery Criteria for Factor A, including the protection of rice lands for giant garter snake habitat. We know that giant garter snakes persist in rice fields because of published research that addresses this question (e.g., Wylie et al., 2010). The commenter brings up the correlation that as rice cultivation proliferated in the Natomas Basin from 1929 until its peak acreage in 1995, giant garter snakes declined in distribution and abundance, and states that the most likely cause is that rice cultivation adversely affected giant garter snakes by degrading their habitat. It is important not to equate correlation to causation, and we are not aware of any studies that provide evidence to support this claim. The Recovery Plan does not dismiss threats to giant garter snakes associated with rice fields, and in fact, Recovery Criteria A1 directly addresses these threats by recommending the development and implementation of management plans for each habitat block which addresses water management to provide summer aquatic habitat, pesticides, best grazing regimes, fallowing of rice fields, eradication of invasive plants, operations and maintenance of canals and flood control structures, control of non-native predators, monitoring of native predators, and location and use of roads. Tules, cattails, and/or tule "mats" are important components of natural giant garter snake habitat, but they are not the only feature needed by giant garter snakes. Regarding the ponding schedule needed by giant garter snakes, according to Wylie et al. (2010), rice fields in California are flooded in late April or May and maintain water for most of the giant garter snake active season (until September). When rice becomes emergent in June, the rice fields become

shallow marsh habitat suitable for the giant garter snake, and canals associated with rice agriculture typically provide a reliable source of aquatic habitat throughout the year.

Comment: *One commenter mentioned that the Recovery Criteria for Factor A is missing the protection of adjoining upland habitat needed for hibernacula and daily refuge.*

Response: Under the Recovery Criteria for Factor A, we state, "These pairs of contiguous perennial wetlands and ricelands must be buffered by 0.5 kilometer (0.32 mile) of compatible habitat and the two blocks *must be connected by a corridor of aquatic and upland habitat* with a 0.8 kilometer (0.5 mile) minimum width.

Comment: *One commenter expressed concerns about using reintroduction as a recovery strategy until more is learned about the ecology and conservation needs of the species. Reintroductions should wait until they can be performed confidently.*

Response: We agree that reintroductions should only be used as a recovery tool once we have a better understanding of giant garter snake ecology and we have conducted pilot studies to evaluate its effectiveness in various field settings. This is addressed in Recovery Action 9.

Comment: *One commenter stated that Safe Harbor Agreements (SHAs) are unnecessary, since the Service has discretion over enforcement of take and can exercise discretion as it does routinely. Additionally, the Recovery Plan shouldn't include SHAs or any other assurances that would impinge on future regulatory actions, since Recovery Plans are guidance, not regulatory, documents. Finally, the commenter asserted that SHAs are probably only intended for incentivizing rice cultivation in perpetuity, and therefore shouldn't be included in the Recovery Plan at all.*

Response: Safe Harbor Agreements are not mentioned in the body of the Recovery Plan.

Comment: *One commenter recommended implementing limited test-case habitat restoration and habitat enhancement using experimental designs at meaningful spatial and temporal scales and measuring success using well-accepted biological metrics.*

Response: We agree. This falls under Recovery Action 8.1.5., which provides the directive to examine the response of giant garter snakes to managed marsh restoration to determine the effectiveness of restoration efforts and to modify restoration techniques as necessary to benefit the giant garter snake.

Comment: *One commenter recommended broadening the expertise of ecologists, conservation biologists, and agricultural experts contributing to the Recovery Plan.*

Response: The Recovery Plan was developed with input from a variety of experts, and an Implementation Team composed of scientists, land managers, and regulatory professionals will be appointed to guide implementation of the Recovery Actions listed in the Plan.

Comment: *One commenter requested that the Recovery Plan summarize the impacts and (net) benefits of the proposed mitigation measures in the Natomas Basin Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) on the giant garter snake, and whether and to what degree the numbers and distribution of giant garter snakes changed in the Natomas Basin since the HCP was certified.*

Response: Pages 7 and 11 of the 2012 5-Year Review provides a status update for the giant garter snake in the Natomas Basin. At this time we cannot conclusively state that the current status of the giant garter snake in the Natomas Basin has been significantly impacted by the implementation of the Natomas Basin HCP. Although such HCPs may be identified and referenced, the Recovery Plan is not the appropriate forum for critical analysis of HCPs.

Comment: *One commenter expressed concerns that by relying on minnow traps as the exclusive or near-exclusive means of giant garter snake capture and counting, there may be a bias favoring smaller snakes. They requested that the Service examine this uncertainty by comparing results from studies that utilize hand-capture techniques.*

Response: We will take this suggestion into consideration when implementing Recovery Actions 5 and 6.1 in the Recovery Plan.

Comment: *Multiple commenters expressed concerns with Recovery Criterion A4 on page II-16, which recommends the preservation of a "minimum of eight habitat block pairs with no less than one block pair per management unit in the American Basin Recovery Unit (ABRU)". As the footnote explains at the bottom of page II-16, "This is in addition to the existing 3,541 hectares (8,750 acres) preserved in minimum blocks of 162 hectares (400 acres) with one 1,012 hectare (2,500 acre) reserve provided as compensation through the Natomas Basin HCP and the Metro Park HCP." The Natomas Basin HCP and the Metro Park HCP both operate within the Natomas Basin Management Unit (NBMU) in the ABRU. Specifically, commenters were concerned about the current lack of adequate mitigation land necessary to carry out and fully implement the HCPs and the burden of preserving an additional block pair in the NBMU, as recommended by the Recovery Plan. The commenters requested that the Service make a detailed calculation as to whether or not there is sufficient acreage remaining in the Natomas Basin to add this habitat block without further challenging the implementation of the HCPs. One commenter also called out the lack of support in the Recovery Plan for the notion that acquisitions in the NBMU should be doubled down while acquisitions in the other management units consist of only a single block pair. One commenter requested that the Service consider shifting the acquisition target to "Area B" outside the Natomas Basin.*

Response: We have removed footnote 2 at the bottom of page II-16. We believe that Recovery Criterion A4 provides sufficient recovery benefits to the giant garter snake in the American Basin Recovery Unit without specifically targeting the preservation of lands in addition to the 8,750 acres that are already provided as compensation through the Natomas Basin HCP and the Metro Park HCP. Lands preserved pursuant to the Natomas Basin and Metro Park HCPs may or may not count toward Recovery Criterion A4 depending on whether or not they also meet the criteria for preserved habitat blocks as outlined on page II-15 of the Recovery Plan.

Comment: *One commenter objected to the development of a Recovery Plan for the giant garter snake, stating that taxpayer money should have gone directly toward protecting the snake rather than writing a Recovery Plan.*

Response: The development of the giant garter snake Recovery Plan is a necessary step to bring all of the species experts and stakeholders to the table and create a workable plan to protect the giant garter snake and its habitat in perpetuity. Protections for the snake have not ceased during the development of the plan.

Responses to Peer Review Comments:

Comment: One reviewer suggested that in addition to potential for inbreeding depression and loss of genetic diversity associated with small populations that the Recovery Plan should also address demographic stochasticity which is a more insidious threat.

Response: We have addressed the need for demographically stable populations in the recovery criteria and recovery actions. Additional discussion of the effects of demographic stochasticity can be found in the 2012 5-Year Review (Service 2012).

Comment: One reviewer suggested that additional research is warranted to determine how winter flooding affects the behavior of giant garter snakes.

Response: The Recovery Plan calls for additional research into the effects of flooding on giant garter snake survival in action 7.5.2 on page III-5.

Comment: One reviewer suggested that because rice is already providing habitat for giant garter snakes that restoration to perennial marsh focus on crops other than rice in order to provide greater benefit to giant garter snake.

Response: The actions in the Recovery Plan recovery do not specify or prioritize particular types of land for restoration to permanent wetlands to support recovery of the giant garter snake. Working with interested partners and landowners, restoration of agricultural land planted in any crop type within the historical range of the giant garter snake will equally be considered during the implementation phase of the recovery plan in the context of potential benefit to the giant garter snake.

Comment: One reviewer stated that in addition to vomeronasal organs snakes also use olfactory organs that are commonly used by other tetrapod animals to detect airborne chemical cues.

Response: The Recovery Plan was updated to include the use of olfactory organs by snakes to detect airborne chemical cues (page I-5).

Comment: One reviewer stated that under certain circumstances snakes will show fidelity to hibernacula, parturition, and ecdysis sites.

Response: We have incorporated additional findings from movement research and revised the section discussing giant garter snake home range on page I-7 to reflect that giant garter snakes exhibit site fidelity.

Comment: One reviewer confirmed that they have also observed giant garter snakes feeding on mosquito fish confined to small pools of water.

Response: We acknowledge the comment and have not altered the text on page I-6 that discusses this foraging behavior.

Comment: One reviewer noted that they have never observed giant garter snakes feeding on crayfish, even in areas where crayfish are extremely abundant.

Response: The Recovery Plan does not include crayfish as a potential prey item for giant garter snakes. However, the potential threat of introduced species is addressed by recovery criterion C3 and includes signal and Louisiana crayfish as potential threats to the giant garter snake.

Comment: *One reviewer commented that the initiation of the winter inactive season for giant garter snakes is dependent on the prevailing weather conditions and may not always be October 1.*

Response: We updated the discussion of seasonal activity of page I-5 to reflect that the inactive season for the giant garter snake begins around October 1, but the timing is dependent on prevailing weather conditions.

Comment: *One reviewer noted that in 15 years of working with the giant garter snake they have not acquired any evidence that fall mating occurs with this species.*

Response: The Recovery Plan's discussion of giant garter snake reproduction on page I-5 states that the mating season extends from March into May.

Comment: *One reviewer indicated that in addition to the list of possible giant garter snake predators listed in the draft recovery plan that otters have been observed eating giant garter snakes.*

Response: We have revised the discussion of predators on page I-6 of the Recovery Plan to indicate that otters are one of the possible predators of giant garter snakes.

Comment: *One reviewer confirmed that their giant garter snake surveys in Kings, Tulare, and Kern Counties in 2006 indicated that the giant garter snakes were no longer present in that area.*

Response: The distribution section of the Recovery Plan beginning on page I-8 reflects this finding.