

Planning for Conservation in the Conte Refuge

The Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge ("Refuge") is more than 10 years old, and is reaching out for public advice to develop a new comprehensive conservation plan.

Attendees at the Refuge's New Hampshire and Vermont meetings held in December 2007 discussed four alternatives presented by Refuge staff and described on the website (www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/Conte/ccphome.html).

Some of us have developed a fifth alternative described below. This proposed alternative is informed by highlights from Conte's *Fall 2007 Planning Update*:

"A large majority of respondents (to the Comprehensive Conservation Plan workbooks) identified over development as the most important problem facing the watershed, followed by pollution and the loss or degradation of habitats."

The *Fall 2007 Planning Update* asks:

**"What role should partnerships play in fulfilling the Refuge purposes?
Which issues are most suitable for partnership efforts?"**

We reply: ALL of them.

- **A partnership-strengthened alternative:**

We are circulating proposed Alternative E to colleagues. Now is the time when your support can influence the future of the Refuge. If you agree with this proposal, please **sign and send the attached form before January 30, 2008** with any comments to:

Andrew French, Project Leader
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge
103 East Plumtree Road
Sunderland, MA 01375

- **Please share your voice:**

Making the Refuge Real: Planning for Conservation in the Conte Refuge

We **can** build a partnership linking federal and local conservation programs – and this strategy will be most effective at protecting Refuge resources. Please encourage the Refuge staff and CCP director to look to the vision that inspired the creation of this truly unique Refuge and reconnect that vision to the Plan they are developing.

This alternative is supported by:

The Connecticut River Joint Commissions <http://www.crjc.org/bulletins.htm>

The Connecticut River Watershed Council <http://www.criver.org/>

The Upper Valley Land Trust <http://www.uvlt.org/>

To:

Andrew French, Project Leader
Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge
103 East Plumtree Road
Sunderland, MA 01375

I support Alternative E attached:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Comments: _____

Proposed New Alternative E:

This alternative combines important goals of Alternatives C & D, but strengthens and leverages these proposals with the integration of a strong partnership component. Alternative E will significantly increase the visibility of the Refuge and connect it to the communities within its boundaries. Alternative E fully incorporates the original vision and Congressional mandate for the Refuge (see *Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Act*, Title 1, Sec. 104.

Purposes) by seeing the Refuge as the entire complex of natural and human communities, and a growing built environment within the designated Refuge area (the 7.2 million acre Connecticut River Watershed).

This alternative expresses a Refuge identity and promotes a set of values for the whole watershed that is inclusive of, but also broader than a limited number of discrete divisions or preserves. This alternative is necessarily centered on partnerships because there are so many able partners already at work furthering the purposes of the Refuge within its boundaries, and because a partnership-centered strategy offers the best promise for widespread civic engagement and maximum leverage of federal efforts to protect the fish and wildlife and their habitats within the Refuge in the face of increasing development, habitat fragmentation, and pollution pressures.

In Alternative E, partnerships are not a separately managed program of the Refuge, but a central strategy which informs and enhances all land acquisition/protection, management, outreach/education and recreation activities. The goals and objectives of the Refuge would be advocated and implemented by Refuge staff in cooperation with a diverse array of partners including state and local agencies, non profit organizations, schools, businesses and landowners. Conte staff would work with partner organizations to develop and execute conservation and acquisition strategies that protect habitat and species at risk; would focus attention on fish habitat as well as that of other wildlife and birds; would sponsor and advise research concerning watershed health; would educate policymakers and citizen groups about watershed trends and

encourage strategies to combat pollution and degradation of watershed resources; would support landowners in improving management practices; and would work cooperatively to maximize the positive impacts of investment by other federal agencies. These strategies will deliver encourage high quality, highly leveraged projects understood and supported by a broad constituency:

Land acquisition/protection – This alternative aims at protecting 5 -8% of the Refuge land base. It accomplishes three to four times as much land conservation as proposed in Alternatives C and D because it incorporates the ongoing work of private organizations and state and local agencies. (Alternative D would protect about only 1.4% of the land in the Refuge.) The broader approach outlined here is required to effectively fulfill the Congressional call for the conservation of priority species and biodiversity in the watershed, the restoration of the ecological integrity of the watershed, and the accessibility of the Refuge for research, education and wildlife-oriented recreation.

Conserved lands would be dispersed throughout the entire 7.2 million acre Refuge area and at least half should be easily proximate to population base, especially Connecticut and Massachusetts. (It is a goal that Refuge lands should be a part of everyday life, not a vacation destination.) Attention would be given to protecting, maintaining and restoring riparian areas to enhance fish habitat.

Much of the land protection envisioned in Alternative E would occur through private conservation agreements or management restrictions (such as USDA's WRP), or through NGO or public ownership at the local or state level. USFW acquisitions would be targeted to provide maximum habitat protection and strategic impact to counteract the threats to Refuge resources. USFW would acquire land when the property contains critical habitat which requires active management of a type not readily feasible through private ownership or ownership by a local or state agency. Such properties would be managed as to demonstrate stewardship practices and serve as teaching sites to encourage the development of management capacity in the private sector and in state and local agencies.

The Challenge Cost Share Program to help fund local and state agencies and NGOs land protection efforts would be continued and Refuge staff would work with grant recipients to ensure that protected land is managed to promote preservation of threatened and endangered species and improve and restore habitat.

Management – Alternative E recognizes that resource stewardship is a defining characteristic of the Refuge and the reason for federal designation. Thus USFW should lead a focus on habitat integrity. The stewardship of Refuge-owned properties should be exemplary. Refuge staff would conduct practices on USFW-owned land *and* advise the management and restoration of properties owned by other agencies to enhance Refuge-wide efforts. Habitat restoration and improvements would focus primarily on riparian areas on the main stem and major tributaries, on barriers to fish passage, and on invasive species. The Partners for Wildlife Program strategy of working with public and private landowners to restore wetlands, uplands and riparian habitat would be continued. (add 4 staff)

Outreach and Education – Alternative E recognizes that only a very small fraction of the property within the 7.2 million-acre Refuge area will ultimately be controlled by USFW, thus influencing the impacts of the millions of people who live in the area will be crucial to the success of the Refuge. Outreach and education would be delivered through cooperative programming with existing entities in the Refuge area, including the regional offices of state and federal agencies, and the four education centers authorized by the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Act of 1991. Conte Refuge staff would be visible and accessible to the public where they live using existing NGO and agency networks to distribute information about refuge resources and programs; foster greater public awareness of trends that threaten Refuge resources and promote strategies to mitigate these; engage and inspire people throughout the watershed to care about the health of the watershed and act to protect it. (add 7-9 staff, at least half dispersed through region)

Recreation – additional USFW resources would be devoted to expanding recreation *only to* further the habitat protection, education and partnership objectives of the CCP. Since many conserved lands will be managed locally and/or owned privately, USFW's primary role will be to monitor and evaluate the impact of recreational uses on Refuge lands, and support land managers in developing best management practices. Recreational uses on Refuge-owned lands must be appropriate and compatible to the habitat protection objectives of the sites (add ½ additional staff).

Staffing – Total staffing would be 18-22 to cover Division land management, visitor centers, outreach and education positions. A significant number of these employees should be located cooperatively with partner entities to raise the visibility of the Refuge, improve accessibility and outreach, and benefit from networks already developed by these regional, state and local groups.

Ultimately, this Alternative E:

- targets USFW funds in areas where critical habitat is urgently threatened, and maximizes the impact of federal investment;
- recognizes that broader efforts are required to address the threats of over development, fragmentation, invasive species and pollution, and that a variety of conservation strategies which minimize or mitigate these threats are key to the long term health of the Refuge;
- counts the on-going conservation and mitigation measures undertaken by all partners that address the above-mentioned threats to be “Conte Refuge successes,” and celebrates these accomplishments in a cohesive and meaningful way;
- maximizes visibility and community awareness and improves leverage for USFW and partner projects that further Refuge goals; and
- conserves significantly more acreage within the designated Refuge than any of the other alternatives proposed in CCP discussions.