

Upper Valley Land Trust Comments on Conte Refuge CCP

Reopened Public Hearing

5/13/16

The Upper Valley Land Trust (UVLT) supports Alternative C of the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) with qualifications. UVLT agrees that all of the proposed Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) in the Upper Valley are located in places that should be permanently conserved in the long term. They are areas where past management and land use history has created a landscape that is less fragmented than much of the Upper Valley. They support healthy wildlife populations. However, the method for permanently conserving these delineated lands within the Upper Valley should be very strongly weighted toward conservation easements rather than fee acquisition. This will achieve the Conte Refuge's (Refuge) habitat conservation goals while keeping most land in private ownership.

Use of Conservation Easements

When the Conte Refuge was created, one defining element was recognition that federal wildlife objectives could be realized without full ownership of land resources, through innovative use of conservation easements, other partial interest arrangements, and partnerships.

The Conte Refuge covers the entire Connecticut River watershed, which is a huge area encompassing diverse human communities with varying attitudes toward both public land ownership and public land management. The CFAs define geographic priorities within subsets of the watershed, which will help focus time and effort. Success, though, will require working with landowners and local communities by offering approaches that meet their needs as well as provide permanent protection and enhanced stewardship to ecologically critical areas.

In the Upper Valley, public attitudes toward private ownership of forest land and unfragmented habitat are generally very favorable. Historically, management of these properties has been positive and is appreciated by the communities where they are located. In some focus areas, there will be a strong preference for land to remain in private hands as opposed to public acquisition. Conservation easements will often be the best way to meet Conte Refuge objectives.

Conservation easements allow landowners continued ownership and stewardship responsibility, while establishing clear requirements for ecological protection. They can be tailored to a specific parcel of land. In the Upper Valley, the public understands and supports conservation easements as a means of protecting habitat resources.

Roles of Land Trusts

When federal conservation priorities are congruent with local conservation needs and values, land trusts can play a key role in transaction management, community outreach and ongoing stewardship. Several federal agencies have developed strong partnerships with land trusts to deliver conservation results. USDA, NRCS, the Forest Service, National Park Service and EPA have

worked with land trusts to create and steward conservation easements, usually with co-held or contingent rights to the federal agency. We encourage a similar approach by the Conte Refuge.

As charitable organizations, land trusts are keenly aware of community needs and values. Their employees, volunteers, Trustees and donors are all engaged to create solutions that “fit” the human communities they serve. UVLT knows from long experience that co-holding easements with governmental agencies is a great way to build bridges between landowners, communities, and governmental policy. The Conte Refuge should use this tool. It has worked well with the USDA in farmland conservation, and all the New England states have a successful history with that approach to enact state land conservation goals and policy.

UVLT urges the Refuge to fully embrace both easements and land trust partnerships as the means to achieve habitat protection goals. We believe these partnerships will ultimately be the best way to create greater conservation capacity, enhance ecological stewardship and sustain Conte Refuge objectives in the long term.

Public Relations and Transparency

Given the menu of available conservation tools, the number of other conservation groups active in the Conte Refuge Area, and the potential impact of federal acquisitions (both fee ownership and easements) on small, rural communities, it is critically important that the strategy and implementation of Refuge goals should be open to and understood by the public. We encourage the Refuge to share its protocols and standards for management plans, the acceptable range of conservation easement terms, and ongoing monitoring of its real estate interests. We encourage the disclosure of appraisal and bargain sale information and public announcement (and celebration) of acquisitions. In this way, the Refuge will build up the body of knowledge available to landowners and community leaders so that they can best make informed choices about conservation activities inside and outside of the proposed focus areas.

UVLT Background

UVLT is a regional land trust serving 45 towns, wholly within the Conte Refuge boundaries. We hold conservation easements on over 450 properties (about 48,000 acres). We own ten conservation areas and manage trails and campsites on the Connecticut River. We are a community-driven group that works with state and federal agencies, local governments, and non-profit partners. The Ompompanoosuc CFA is a focus area of UVLT work. We hold nine easements within that CFA and are working on several more. Thirty years of relationships with communities and landowners builds the levels of trust needed to help the Refuge permanently protect the Upper Valley CFAs.

The Conte Refuge has already changed people’s understanding of the Connecticut River. The identified CFAs are excellent at prioritizing Conte’s real estate work. How that real estate work is implemented will be key to strengthening the Conte’s connections to communities along the river, thereby sustaining the impact of Refuge investments.