

Fish & Wildlife Department

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Agency Of Natural Resources

January 8, 2015

Ms. Nancy L. McGarigal
Refuge Planner, Region 5
USFWS Refuge Division
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035

Dear Ms. McGarigal,

This letter is in response to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge, September 2014 version.

Foremost, we commend USFWS on this draft CCP, which is thorough, science-based, and thoughtful in charting a course for achieving the mission of the refuge. The scope and scale of this planning effort is remarkable, and USFWS has produced an excellent draft CCP. As the USFWS has identified to us, they should strive for consistency with state regulations where possible, which will enable cooperative law enforcement. We acknowledges this will not always be possible given the constraints of Federal law and the differences in regulations across the states within the Refuge.

The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (VANR) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft plan and offers the following items for your consideration.

Items of key concern to VANR:

1. USFWS should recommend the collaborative development of a comprehensive management, monitoring, and implementation plan for lynx. Specific issues related to lynx conservation and management should be addressed with input from partners through the comprehensive planning process.
2. Requiring special use permits for dog training and for hunting with bear, bobcat, and coyote pursuit hounds places an undue burden on hunters participating in these activities, of which some (i.e. bear hunters) are already regulated through VDFW. If the Conte Refuge has an interest in collecting more information on training and hunting activities on Refuge lands, VDFW can work with them to collect this information. Some of it may be simply accomplished by adding a question on our current bear-dog permit.
3. Restricting shooting from, along, and across Refuge roads will create an inconsistency with state law, which only restricts shooting across, on and near public highways shown on Vermont AOT maps. State law enforcement would be unable to enforce such a policy.



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4. USFWS should consider policies allowing lands to stay open to public access during a federal government shutdown. Facilities may be closed, but continuing public access to lands will prevent future confusion and frustration of users as has happened in the past.
5. The plan should include specific ecological justification for the location of CFAs and CPAs. At a minimum, the decision process used by USFWS in determining these boundaries should be clearly presented and transparent. This transparency is expected to be very important in how the plan is received when it is presented to the public. In addition, the CCP needs to discuss the nearly-complete Connecticut River Watershed Landscape Conservation Design Pilot, noting how and why any differences in priority conservation areas will be reconciled.
6. The CCP should emphasize the critical importance of the Quonotuck CFA, which covers the Connecticut River main-stem, given that the Conte NWR was conceived to conserve the important ecological values of the Connecticut River. Focus on the main-stem river and riparian areas should not be lost to the other more consolidated units. The CCP should map the actual river area and also those areas that are described as conservation targets in the plan. In addition, the Quonotuck CFA should be expanded beyond hard surface roads that parallel the river to include active river areas or riparian areas that have ecological significance, such as floodplain forests, wetlands, alluvial soils, upland forests that provide buffers and wildlife corridor functions to the river. At a minimum, the plan should describe the flexibility that USFWS plans to apply for acquiring ecologically significant riparian areas along the Connecticut River and its tributaries, including in what situations acquisitions may be expanded beyond hard road surfaces and what justification is needed for categorical exclusions.
7. The West River CFA and CPA should be altered to include more known populations of the federally and Vermont state endangered Barbed-bristle Bulrush (*Scirpus ancistrochaetus*), a conservation target species in the draft CCP. Several known populations of this plant are not captured in either the CFA or CPA, but could be included with the addition of the Grassy Brook HUC-12 watershed to the eastern side of the West River CPA (see Figure 1, which includes known populations of Barbed-bristle Bulrush).
8. USFWS should continue and enhance its efforts to ensure a successful public CCP rollout by involving partners and key stakeholder groups early and often in the process.

Other suggestions from ANR staff, organized by theme, are:General

- It might prove helpful to include a breakdown within the executive summary of recommended actions by state, making it easier for each state to understand the implications.
- The executive summary should speak more specifically to how decisions were made to select CPAs and CFAs – not in great detail, but to provide a summary of those justifications, since that's one of the most critical elements of the plan.



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- The Refuge is in a unique position to provide for a number of other issues that cross state lines such as invasive plants
- This is a place for the most creative Fish and Wildlife managers to work across political boundaries. Much like Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP is an “outside the box” National Park. Conte National Wildlife Refuge is an opportunity for “out of the USFWS box” thinking and actions focused on the watershed [i.e. building the capacity of partner organizations to implement conservation].
- Narratives in Appendix A are difficult to follow and need significant work to clarify the flow and intent. Consider using topic sentences, adding headings, and reorganizing paragraphs as needed.
- Appendix A includes Objectives for each unit that are much too vague. Objectives should be Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-oriented.
- Page 4-57 uses the term “ecological reserves”. The meaning is unclear, and given the charged nature of the term, it should be clarified.

Habitat Management

- Declining bat populations are an enormous issue throughout the northeast. The plan should speak more specifically to how the refuge will manage and conserve lands in a way that is mindful to recovery of these species. In particular, northern long-eared bats likely occur within the Connecticut River watershed and the refuge boundaries. For example, interim guidance regarding northern long-eared bats should be included and the snag recommendation (6”-16”) does not address northern long-eared bat habitat needs.
- Vermont’s habitat guidelines should be referenced on page J-3: *A Landowner’s Guide – Wildlife Habitat Management for Lands in Vermont*.

Recreation

- The new trail proposed (A-652) to connect to Gore Mountain trail, in partnership with the Green Mountain Club (GMC) will require discussion under the GMC Corridor Management Plan for Plum Creek property.
- Snowshoeing and cross-country skiing should be allowed throughout the Nulhegan. Also, skiing on VAST trails should be considered.
- Biking should be allowed on gravel roads available to motor vehicles and on trails during the winter.
- Describe the rationale for closing Four Mile Road to snowmobiles. The trail closures seem to be based primarily on a potential land acquisition with some justification based on habitat. Yet, on page D-181, under Summary of Impacts to wildlife it is stated that “Much of the disturbances to wildlife noted in literature are from snowmobiles that are not on designated trails and re traveling across open range habitats in unpredictable ways. Restricting snowmobile traffic to designated road corridors helps to increase predictability and wildlife habitation. The existing trails have been in place for decades and predate the refuge. Snowmobile use at the division is currently at manageable levels based on monitoring studies, which supports our assessment that adverse impacts associated with this activity are expected to remain low.” This analysis needs to be clearer, and an evaluation should be



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conducted of all trails and alternative locations to minimize the impact to the natural resources of concern.

- A-651, Sub-objective 3.4b. Speaks to the NBD's desired role in trail-based recreation. This desire may conflict with closing trails, such as Four Mile Road.

Partnerships and Coordination

- This draft plan places great emphasis on Conte's role in partnerships. What has taken place since 2006 (Ch6 Pg463), however, shows a noticeable drop in any form of outreach.
- This draft should be reviewed by U.S. Forest Service State and Private Forestry staff.
- Given the general nature of most goals and objectives in this plan, partners should be consulted extensively when creating more detailed "step-down" plans and preparing for implementation of activities.

Private Lands Technical Assistance

- Vermont County Foresters would be excellent partners for Conte to engage. They have numerous connections and much experience within the watershed. Consider reflecting this in Ch4 (e.g., page 240).
- Private lands technical assistance work discussed in the plan is a great idea, but the proposal is unclear on how it will work, what it's focus will be, and how that will be coordinated with state and federal agencies.

Education and Outreach

- The CCP is vague on implementation of education and outreach. Specifically, information about staffing, visitor center usage, and site interpretation should be included.
- The Silvio O. Conte Visitor Center in the Nulhegan Basin should be showcased in the plan as a method of education and outreach.
- Considering education is one of the main goals for USFWS property, the education budget (page 1854) seems too low for the scope of this wildlife refuge.
- Hunter education/outreach goals are sound and would apply to any USFWS refuge. They, however, should emphasize the diverse hunting opportunities and acreage found on the Nulhegan Unit, as it is unique for the Refuge.
- The Nulhegan visitor center could be used as venue for hunter education and hunting-related programs, but more effort needs to be put into to marketing the location.
- Despite some awareness among conservation partners, average landowners are currently completely unaware of the existence of the Conte Refuge and its potential effect in CFAs and CPAs.

CPAs and CFAs

In particular, the plan speaks in great detail to interests and issues related to climate change, fragmentation, core forest habitat, and habitat connectivity throughout the plan, but lack such focus on CPAs and CFAs. In other words, how are how are climate change, fragmentation, etc. important in choosing and managing CFAs/CPAs?



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- USFWS should generally seek to support, build capacity, and encourage action of the most local groups (town conservation commissions, regional groups like the Linking Lands Alliance or Upper Valley Land Trust, or state organizations like VLT, TNC, Conservation Fund, and ANR). USFWS itself should choose carefully the projects and initiatives it wants to lead.
- The plan should consider providing funding to state or other conservation organizations for land acquisition and easement projects.

Quonotuck

- Lands, houses, and infrastructure along the Connecticut River and its tributaries were altered and damaged by flooding from the Irene storm and climate change predictions are that we should expect much more frequent storm events like Irene. The importance of the Connecticut River and tributary floodplains and riparian areas for maintaining resilience to climate change should be highlighted in the plan and should also be reflected by expanding the Quonotuck CFA to full valley bottoms.
- It would be helpful for the plan to specifically reference the critical connection between the Connecticut River lowlands and floodplain and the interests for maintaining and enhancing habitat connectivity within the larger watershed. This would seem to be a lynch-pin for realizing the conservation of connectivity that is expressed in great detail in the plan.
- Meaningful conservation work along the Connecticut River will require a flexible and creative approach. Important projects may have logistical challenges such as complex boundaries (e.g., the parcel now known as Johnson Farm WMA). We encourage the USFWS to rise to these situations.

Nulhegan

- The CFA should be expanded to include Nulhegan Pond and the adjacent airport (see Figure 2).
- The text in the CCP identifies small excluded areas within the proposed CFA. Why are these excluded; why are they not included as acquisition priorities?
- Text in this section should emphasize the larger context of conserved lands in the area.

Ompompanusuc

- The CFA boundary on southern side should be revised to include the parcel north of Vershire Road (see Figure 3).

Ottawaquechee and White River

- There are several large parcels that have been conserved within the proposed CFAs, including lands now owned by the National Park Service. These should be excluded from the CFA. Nancy Bell of The Conservation Fund can provide updated conservation lands mapping.



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Given the great breadth and depth of this plan, we ask that the USFWS give the maximum amount of time possible for public input from the many constituents who will want to review it. We feel a minimum of 90 days for public comment is reasonable.

In closing, we commend the work USFWS has put into this draft CCP, appreciate the opportunity to comment, and look forward to working in partnership with USFWS to implement the final plan.

Sincerely,

Louis Porter,
Commissioner
Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department

Michael Snyder,
Commissioner
Vermont Department of
Forests, Parks, and
Recreation

CC: Mark Scott, Vermont Fish & Wildlife
Jim Horton, Vermont Forests, Parks & Recreation



Figure 1: West River CFA Proposed Addition

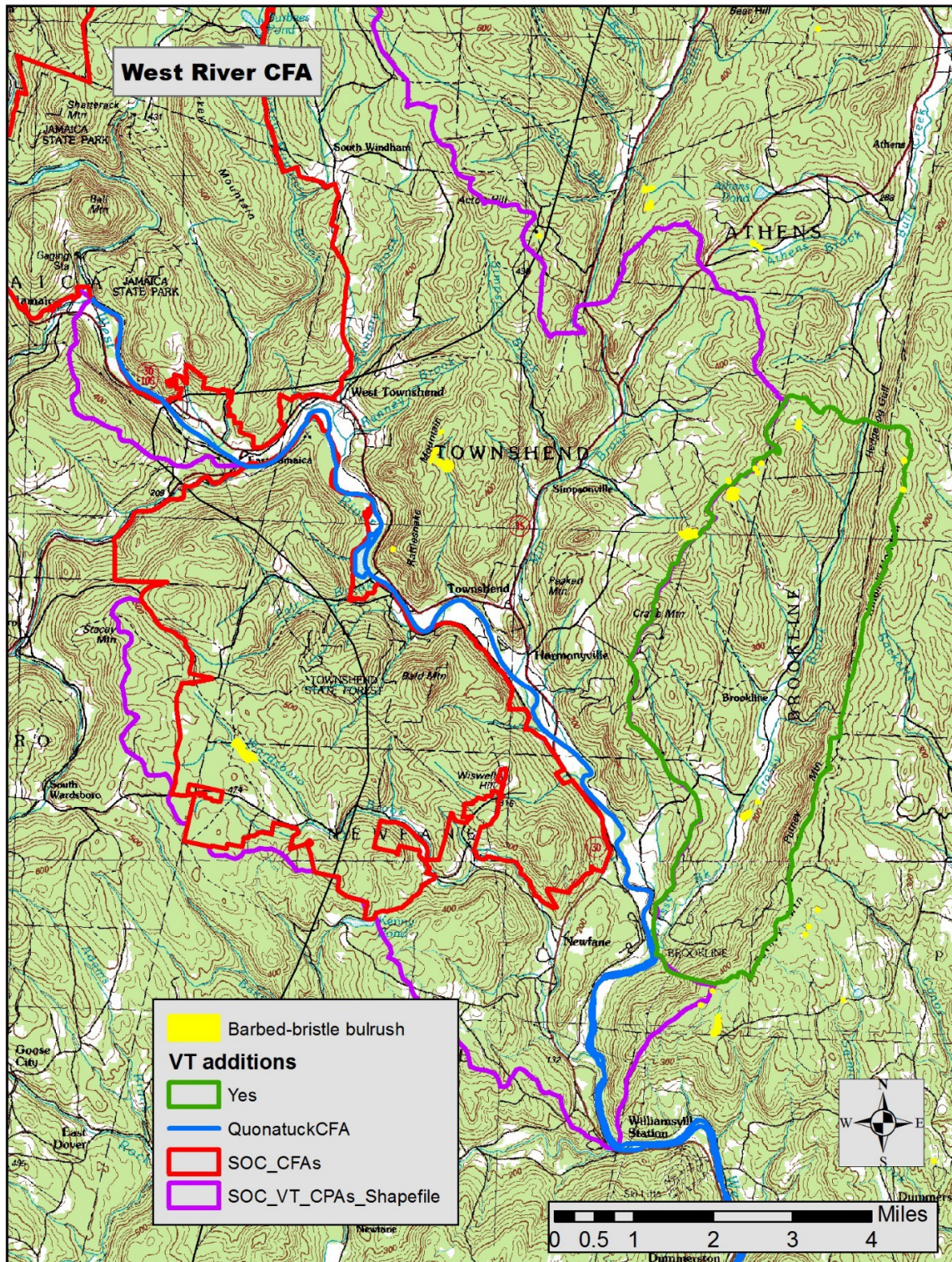


Figure 2: Nulhegan CFA Proposed Addition

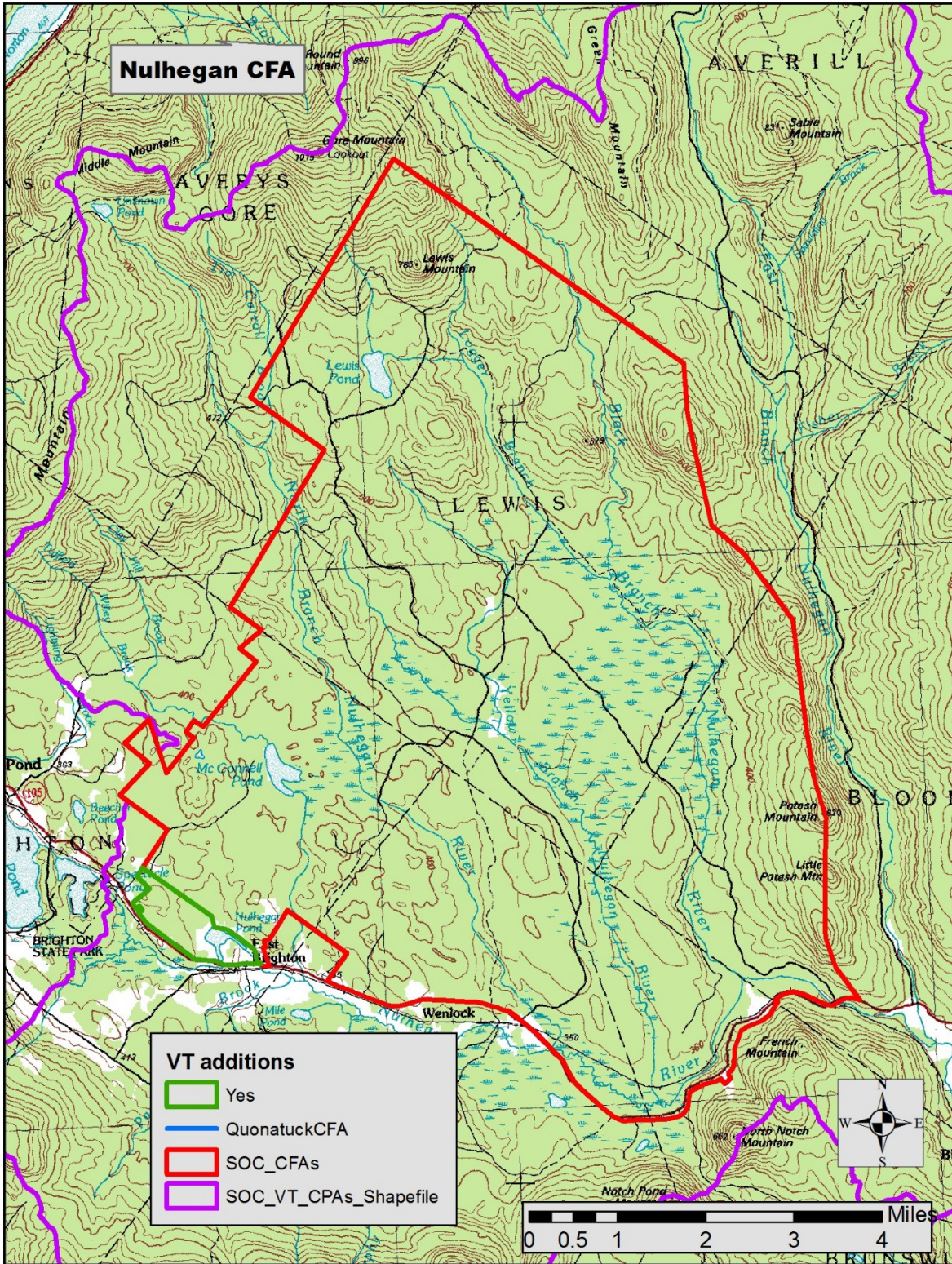


Figure 3: Ompompanusuc CFA Proposed Addition

