



*Sea &
Sage Audubon*

Conservation Action Alert!!

June 5, 2009

Comments Needed to USFWS for the Proposed “El Toro National Wildlife Refuge”

Background:

Recently, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) issued an update on the status of the proposed El Toro National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) on 890 acres at the northeast end of the former El Toro Marine Corps Base. This property was a very important component to the development of the Central/Coastal - Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP) and has been languishing for more than a decade while federal resource agencies have dealt with a near moratorium on dedicating new National Wildlife Refuges.

We are pleased to hear that the status of this critical property, which includes prime coastal sage scrub, grassland, and vernal pool habitats, is finally getting renewed attention; however we are very concerned that there are issues pending that could severely hamper the ability of the USFWS to manage the property appropriately as a refuge, and we need your comments.

When the Marines abandoned the base, the FAA, who retained aviation communication facilities on the site, took control of the 890 acre reserve. The FAA subsequently subleased the property to the FBI, for use as a training center and weapons firing facility. This was done without any input from the public or other entities that manage and care about the NCCP properties, such as the Nature Reserve of Orange County (NROC), Endangered Habitats League (EHL), Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), or Audubon. It was also done without any regard for promises made by the USFWS to manage the site as a critical wildlife reserve.

Unfortunately, the FBI is planning on expanding an existing small arms firing range, and installing several long range, high usage, rifle ranges, as well as expanding a new tactical event training center, with lots of vehicle traffic and activity. This a woefully inappropriate use of NCCP properties that were meant to protect sensitive species, such as CA Gnatcatchers, provide important corridors for wildlife movement, and provide opportunities for habitat restoration.

While many wildlife refuges are overlays on military bases and enjoy shared uses of the reserves, the El Toro Refuge's primary function must be wildlife protection because it was allocated as a key feature of the Central/Coastal NCCP to mitigate massive development in the central portions of the county.

The USFWS made promises to the public and the environmental community that the El Toro site would become a national wildlife refuge and be protected in accordance to the NCCP guidelines. These promises were key to gaining the support of Sea and Sage Audubon for the development of the Central /Coastal NCCP. The promises made by the USFWS were also critically important for EHL, Laguna Canyon Foundation, National Audubon, NRDC and others who were considering a program that was suffering from pretty serious opposition.

Currently, because of the lack of concern about wildlife management from the FBI, biologists with NROC and interested environmental representatives cannot even access the property to monitor wildlife, let alone contribute to the management of the critical wildlife features.

Furthermore, there are alternative locations available nearby for law enforcement training facilities, especially long range outdoor firing ranges that are better. These alternative sites do not conflict with sensitive wildlife management or pose wildfire threats, and would be safer than placing long range, outdoor rifle ranges, near Lake Forest and Irvine.

We need your help getting comments and letters to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, demanding that they meet the commitments they made to establish the El Toro National Wildlife Refuge under NCCP guidelines and provide for its proper wildlife management. They need to hear that we support the NCCP and its goals and we demand a refuge that protects sensitive wildlife.

Please send your comments by June 30, 2009

Write to:

Andy Yuen, Project Leader
San Diego NWR Complex
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
6010 Hidden Valley Road, Suite 101
Carlsbad, CA 92101

Richard Smith, Natural Resource Specialist
Region 8 Refuge Planning
2800 Cottage Way, W-1832
Sacramento, CA 95825

Or email:

Fw8plancomments@fws.gov

(Please type "El Toro NWR" in the subject box)

Talking Points

- A National Wildlife Refuge is long overdue at El Toro
- Firearms and tactical training at the El Toro site will impact wildlife that the NCCP and NWR is supposed to protect, would increase the risk of wildfire, is incompatible with the NCCP, and restricts proper management of the site.
- Protections of species such as CA Gnatcatchers, Coastal Cactus Wrens, raptors, and other birds, sensitive plant communities, and sensitive wildlife must be the primary focus of the refuge.
- The goals and agreements of the Central/Coastal NCCP must be met and must take priority over any other use of the El Toro property, whether it becomes a Wildlife Refuge, or remains in any other form under the management of the USFWS
- The USFWS and the Nature Reserve of Orange County (NROC) must be the primary managers of the natural resources at the El Toto site, and they must have priority over other uses.
- Despite the obvious need for adequate law enforcement training facilities, the FBI needs to find a more suitable location to perform these activities, somewhere other than on an NCCP wildlife reserve. Other locations in southern California are available.
- In wildfire prone southern California, indoor firing ranges are a superior alternative.
- Emphasize, that your continued support for the NCCP process, is reliant upon the proper management of NCCP properties and the program's ability to protect sensitive habitats and species, especially at the El Toro site.
- The USFWS made promises about this property and it needs to keep them in full!!

See the Sea and Sage Website for the USFWS Planning Update Flyer
www.seaandsageaudubon.org