



PROPOSED NORTH DELTA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Planning Update

PLANNING UPDATE #3

OCTOBER 1998

GREETINGS !

This is the third in a series of updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the planning status for the proposed North Delta National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in the northern Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Update 3 is being sent to landowners in the planning area, government agencies, public organizations, and other interested individuals.

This update summarizes the issues, concerns, and questions that were recorded during the March 4th and July 28th public open houses and written comments received during the extended comment periods. Based upon the comments received, the Service is presently evaluating the scope of the proposed project area.

WHERE WE'VE BEEN

We would like to thank those who took the time to attend the March 4th and July 28th public open houses. We have a better understanding of your concerns and desires, and we hope you have a better understanding of our proposal and the planning process. The questions, comments, and issues identified varied from full support for the proposed refuge to concern for the effect the refuge would have on landowners and agricultural operations in this part of the Delta. There were also several comments concerning the proposed refuge and its connection with the CALFED program. For more detailed information, see the CALFED Issues section of this Update. We also provided a summary of some of the more common questions and answers regarding conservation planning and wildlife habitat protection through the land acquisition process at the July 28th open house.

WHERE ARE WE ?

As a result of the open houses and written comments received during the comment periods, the following issues and concerns have been identified: impacts to agriculture, levee maintenance, and floodwater conveyance; protection and restoration of wetlands; increased fisheries habitat in the Delta; compatible public use; and landowner property rights. Several adjoining landowners also expressed an interest in being included within the study area for the proposed refuge. During our July 28th open house, we presented a new map showing an expanded study area. We are presently evaluating this study area and determining the wildlife values.

Through the public comment process, you have helped us identify four preliminary alternatives. These four alternatives, in addition to the required "No Action" alternative, represent the public desires and concerns for the establishment of this refuge as well as providing a reasonable approach for the Service in assessing this proposed refuge. Our preliminary alternatives are briefly described below. We would appreciate your feedback for consideration in preparing our environmental assessment.

PRELIMINARY ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1 - Establish 47,000 - acre North Delta NWR Boundary

Alternative 1 is approximately 47,000 acres in size and is the largest of the refuge boundary proposals. Alternative 1 would protect a large contiguous block of habitat stretching from the southern boundary of the Yolo Basin Wildlife Area. to the southern end of the Yolo Bypass

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where it meets the confluences of Cache Slough, Sacramento River and Steamboat Slough (see figure 1). Alternative 1 would provide the Service with the greatest opportunity for habitat protection in both fee title and conservation easement. It would further combine the goals of other resource management programs within this area into one effort. Approximately 39,000 acres of this area is agriculturally developed. The area also includes approximately 4,500 acres of seasonally flooded and tidally influenced wetlands, 500 acres of shaded riverine aquatic habitat, and 500 acres of riparian habitat. There is an additional 1,500 acres of levees, dikes, and roads throughout this area.

Alternative 2 - Establish 7,800 - acre North Delta NWR Boundary

Alternative 2 is approximately 7,800 acres in size. This alternative includes the initial three parcels of Prospect, Little Holland and Liberty Island, that the Service originally proposed for the refuge (see figure 2). It will also allow for the completion of presently proposed restoration and acquisition needs by the Service and other Federal and State agencies in this part of the Delta. Approximately 5,000 acres of Liberty Island is presently in agricultural development. The remaining acreage is tidally influenced wetlands with associated riparian habitat. There is approximately 300 acres in levees and roads within this proposed refuge boundary.

Alternative 3 - Establish 33,000 - acre North Delta NWR Boundary

Alternative 3 is approximately 33,000 acres in size. The proposed area incorporates existing easements within the present North Central Valley Wildlife Management Area (see figure 3). Approximately 26,000 acres of this area is agriculturally developed. There is approximately 3,500 acres of seasonally flooded, tidally influenced wetlands. The Service, in cooperation with California Department of Fish and Game, the Natural Resources Conservation

Service, and other Federal and State agencies, is also actively acquiring easements within this area. Habitat protection in both fee and easement acquisitions within this cooperative area will also assist in meeting the long-term objectives of the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture Program.

Alternative 4 - Establish 14,000 - acre North Delta NWR Boundary

Alternative 4 is approximately 14,000 acres in size. This alternative would primarily focus the Service's habitat protection efforts at the southern end of the Yolo Bypass. These lands provide the easiest opportunity for conversion to tidally influenced wetlands (see figure 4). Approximately 11,000 acres of this area is presently in agricultural development. The remaining acreage supports privately owned seasonal duck clubs, tidally influenced wetlands, as well as existing levees and roads.

KEY AREAS OF MANAGEMENT FOCUS

The primary management focus for the proposed refuge is wildlife and habitat protection and management. The Service is committed to providing high-quality, safe, and accessible wildlife-dependent interpretive, recreational, and educational opportunities at the refuge within the capabilities of available staff and budget.

Your input will be considered to help develop the refuge management plan. The documents listed in the next section, is a starting point for discussing management of the proposed North Delta NWR.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The next step in the planning process is the preparation of an environmental assessment. A land protection plan is also being prepared.



A draft environmental assessment is scheduled for release in December of 1998. The Service will make copies available to those who request one. A 30-day comment period will follow the release of the draft assessment. During the comment period, a public meeting will be held to provide you with an opportunity to comment on the plan. If you cannot attend the public meeting, written comments will be accepted during the 30-day comment period.

FWS PLANNING DOCUMENTS

An *environmental assessment* is required whenever the Service proposes to establish a national wildlife refuge. The assessment will analyze alternative proposals for the protection of wildlife and habitat in the proposed refuge and the potential effects of those alternatives.

A *conceptual management plan* will present an overview of proposed management approaches to wildlife and habitats, public uses and wildlife-dependent recreational activities, and public outreach for the lands and waters within the proposed refuge.

A *land protection plan* will also be prepared and will be attached to the environmental assessment. The land protection plan will identify habitat protection priorities for each area of the proposed refuge.

PUBLIC MEETING

Prior to the completion of the environmental assessment, another public meeting will be held. The Service will prepare another planning update. We will announce the meeting date and place as soon as the draft environmental assessment is available for review.

PLANNING SCHEDULE

The planning schedule shown below identifies those actions which have already occurred as well as future activities. Those dates shown for future actions are anticipated dates and are

subject to change. We will inform you of any changes in these dates or meetings as soon as possible.

PROPOSED PLANNING SCHEDULE

<i>Planning Step</i>	<i>Completion Date</i>
1 st Public Open House	3/4/98
2 nd Public Open House	7/28/98
Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and Land Protection Plan released	12/98
Public Meeting	1/99
Comment period ends on EA/LPP	1/99
Final EA and LPP released	2/99
Public Notice of Decision	2/99

CALFED ISSUE

During the public meetings as well as through written comments, a concern was raised about our proposal to establish this refuge and any connection with the CALFED program. The Service's authority for proposing the establishment of a national wildlife refuge is provided under several laws and acts such as the Fish and Wildlife Act, Endangered Species Act, Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and the Refuge Recreation Act. Although the CALFED program and the Service's refuge program share many of the same goals and objectives, we have determined that there is no connection between the CALFED program and our authority to establish refuges. The Service, in proposing to establish a refuge, is mandated to comply with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The legislation authorizing the CALFED program also provided the Secretary of the Interior, under prescribed

circumstances, with the discretion to implement actions funded through CALFED prior to completion of the CALFED EIR/EIS, provided the Federal agencies comply with the requirements of NEPA. In our efforts to comply with these requirements, we must assess the effects that our proposed project may have on other programs or actions of a similar nature in the same area. A portion of this proposed project will be funded through the CALFED program. The completion of our environmental assessment will provide the necessary documentation required by NEPA.

DIVERSE HABITATS SUPPORT A VARIETY OF WILDLIFE

The purpose of the proposed refuge is to restore a variety of Delta habitats, including tidally-influenced wetlands, to benefit many fish and wildlife species. Because of their strategic location in the Yolo Bypass, restoration of these lands will substantially improve the conveyance of floodwaters through the North Delta. Before the regulation of flows and the channelization of rivers, the Delta was characterized by sluggish river channels, oxbow and floodplain lakes, swamps, and sloughs. The region's dense tules, willows, and cottonwoods supported more than 250 species of birds and mammals.

Traditionally, these lands were converted from marshlands to farmlands, which has left most of the loamy peat soils below sea level. In recent years, the levees surrounding the islands have either been breached or overtopped by water.

Today, a diverse array of habitats lie within the proposed study area: open water, tidal emergent marsh, riparian forest, seasonal wetlands, uplands, and agricultural lands. The Delta supports over 45 species of fish and its tidally-influenced wetlands provide rearing and resting habitat for winter-run Chinook salmon, Delta smelt, and Sacramento splittail. The uplands and

agricultural lands provide nesting, resting, and feeding areas for ducks, geese, swans, cranes, other waterbirds, and neotropical songbirds. The proposed refuge would also provide important habitat for seven special status species that occur in the Delta.

WHO TO CONTACT

If you have questions or would like information, please feel free to call or write us:

Information on Proposed North Delta NWR Planning Process

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(916) 979-2085

Information on Proposed North Delta NWR Management

Tom Harvey, Refuge Manager
Beatrix Treiterer, Asst. Refuge Manager
Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge
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Information on Proposed North Delta NWR Land Acquisition

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***Please call to be placed on our mailing list or to report a change in your mailing address.*

Alternative 1 - (47,000 Acres)

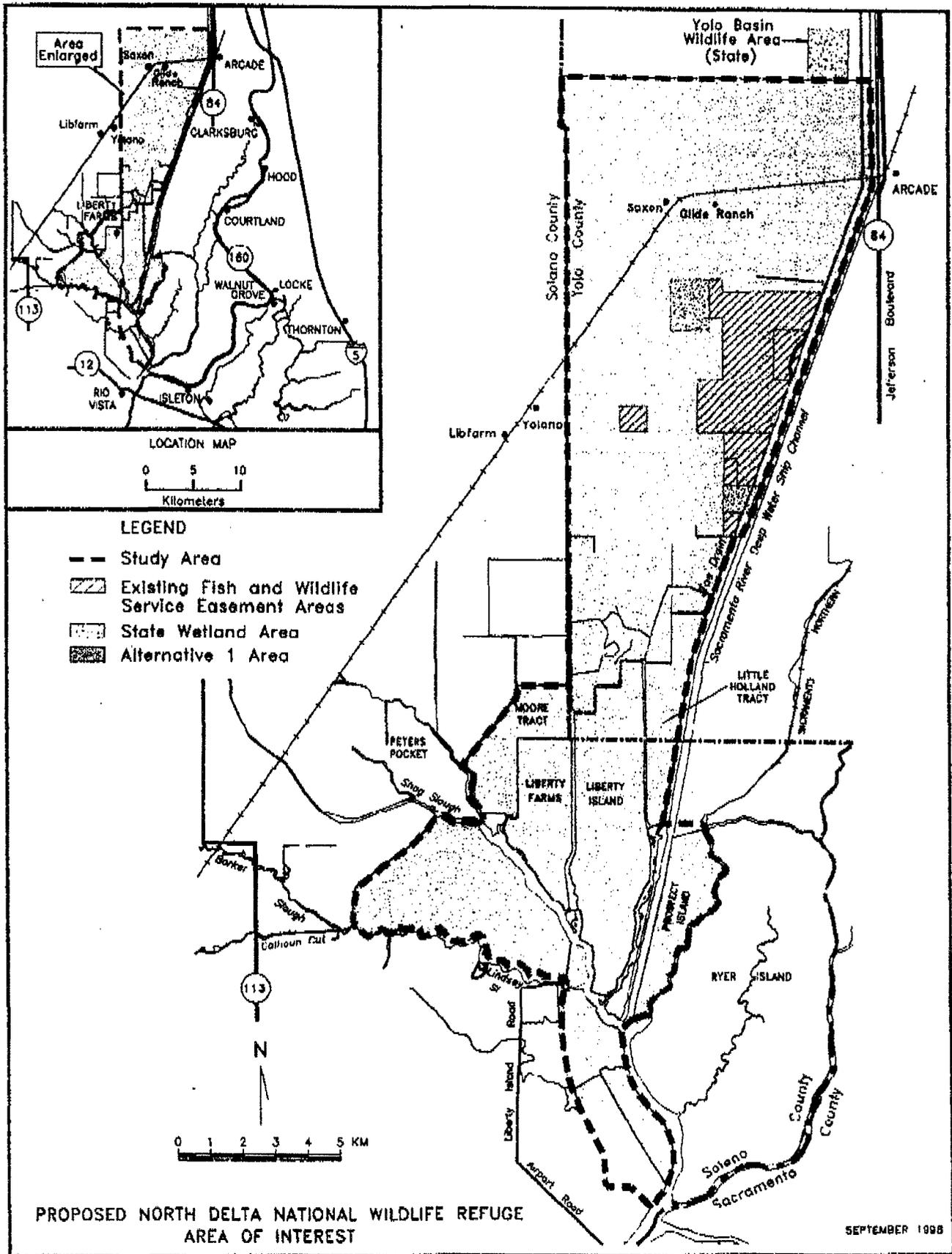


Figure 1

Alternative 2 - (7,800 Acres)

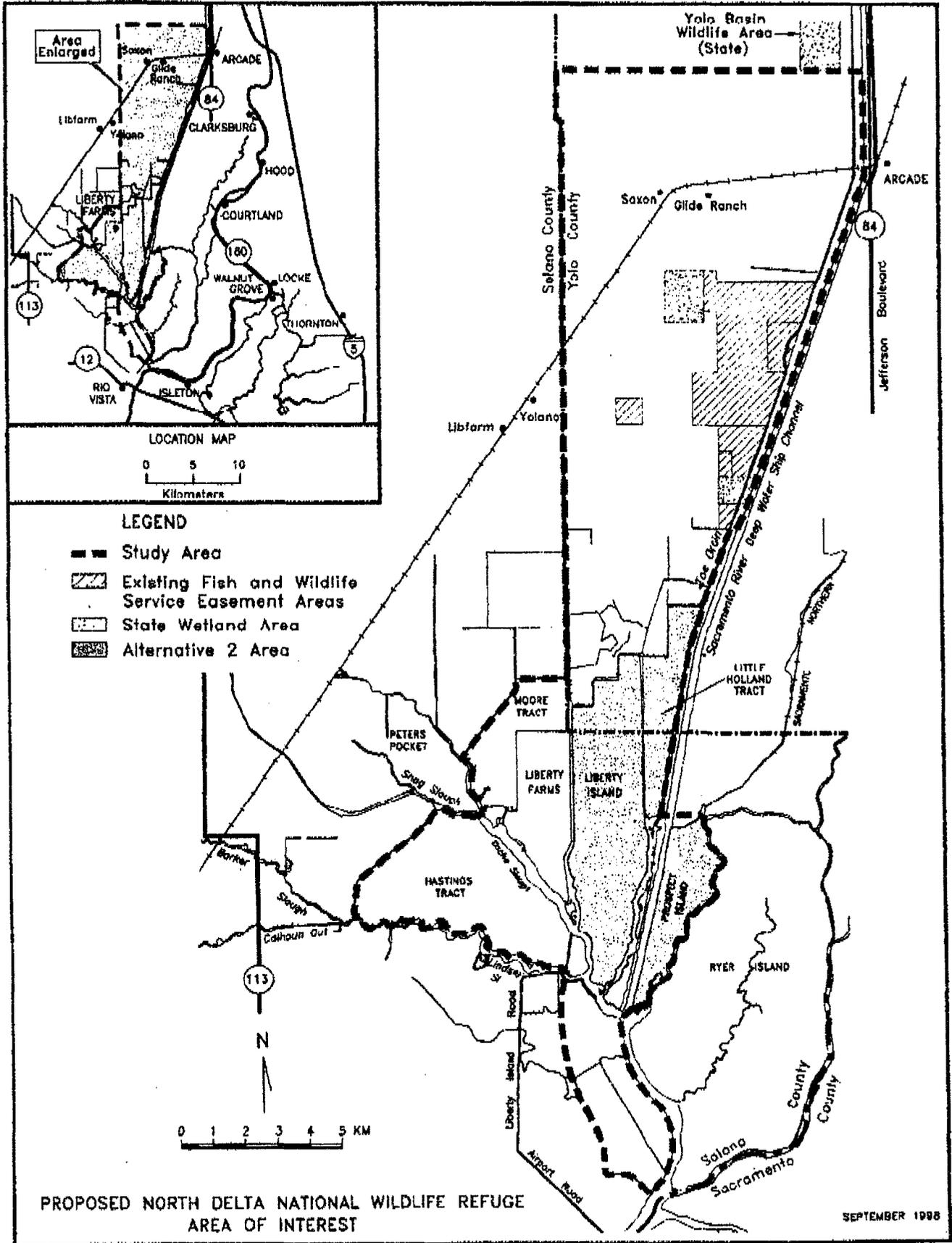


Figure 2

Alternative 3 - (33,000 Acres)

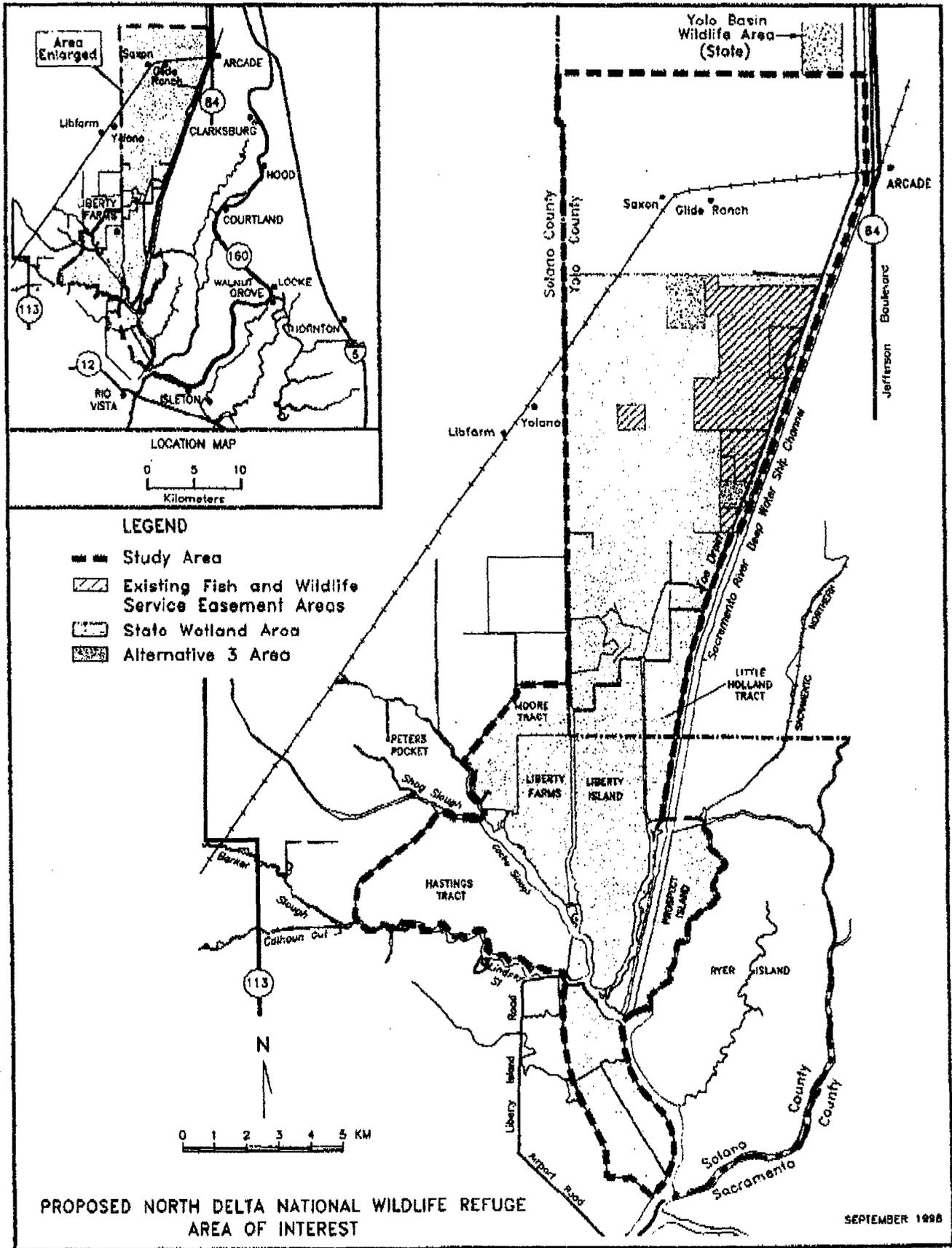


Figure 3

Alternative 4 - (14,000 Acres)

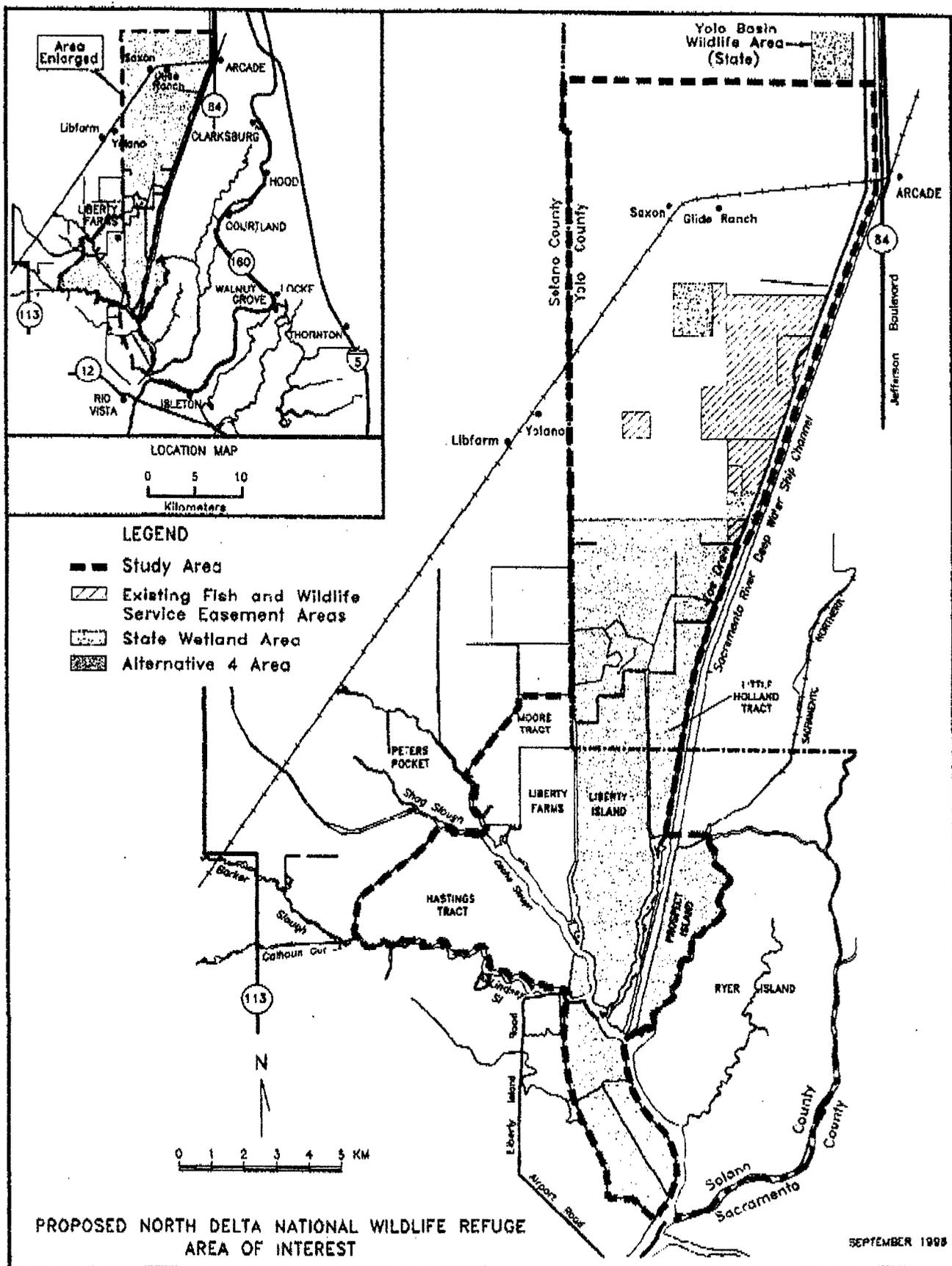


Figure 4