

SAN LUIS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX

NARRATIVE REPORT

JULY 1, 1974 thru JUNE 30, 1975

REFUGE PERSONNEL

Leon A. Littlefield	Refuge Manager
Gene A. Sipe (Transferred to Desert NWR, Sept. 30, 1974)	Assistant Refuge Manager
Joel S. Miller (E.O.D. from Desert NWR, Oct. 10, 1974)	Assistant Refuge Manager
Clifford L. Himmell (Transferred to Desert NWR, June 6, 1975)	Assistant Refuge Manager
Christine E. Strength (E.O.D. July 2, 1975)	Clerk-Steno
James R. Mayle (Resigned June 13, 1975)	Maintenance Foreman
Melvin Ford	Engineering Equipment Opr.
Raymond R. Fuller	Engineering Equipment Opr.
Michael L. Stevenson	Maintenanceman
Edgar M. Derrick (Retired June 7, 1975)	Maintenanceman

TEMPORARY PERSONNEL

Katherine Basinger (Resigned July 3, 1974)	Clerk/Typist
Eugene Dudley (E.O.D. 8/9/74) - Intermittent	Laborer
Joe B. Aguirre (700-hr Appointment)	Laborer
David A. Nelson (700-hr Appointment)	Laborer
Michael H. Philips (700-hr Appointment)	Laborer
Greg Vaughn (700-hr Appointment)	Laborer
William Kitchen (E.O.D. 7/1/74) Intermittent	Laborer

I. GENERAL

- A. Weather Conditions: Weather during the fiscal year was normal during the first half of the year. The remainder of the year saw abnormal precipitation and slightly below normal temperatures prevail. Weather data collected by the California Department of Water Resources at the San Luis Dam located 12 miles west of Los Banos indicated that 9.62 inches of precipitation was recorded. Normal rainfall is 8.56 inches. In normal years, the majority of rainfall occurs in the area in December, January and March. However, this fiscal year saw rainfall continuing through the month of April.
- B. Habitat Conditions: Habitat conditions at all three refuges within the complex were comparable to past years during the first half of the fiscal year. Abnormal rains during the second half resulted in excellent growth of grass and forbes in all upland units on all three refuges. This should provide excellent food and cover for all forms of wildlife well into fiscal year 1976. Water quality monitoring on San Luis Refuge continued on a monthly basis throughout the fiscal year. Water quality compared with past years. The water we utilize at San Luis is irrigation return flow and monthly analysis indicates water quality as good for marsh purposes and meets the criteria of the Grasslands Water District. A total of 15,187.88 acre feet of water was pumped from wells at the Merced Refuge during the fiscal year at a cost of \$43,960.51. A total of 11,875.12 feet of water was lifted from Salt Slough for San Luis Refuge marsh maintenance purposes. Costs for pumping at San Luis totaled \$12,687.45 for the year.

A total of 645 acres of millet was produced on the complex; 470 acres at Merced and 175 acres at San Luis. No food crops are raised at Kesterson. Due to the excellent water situation at the end of the report period, all indications point to being able to maintain adequate water levels in 6 of the 12 cells at Kesterson. These areas should produce good stands of aquatic plant growth for wintering waterfowl feed in the fall of 1975.

II. WILDLIFE

A. Migratory Birds:

1. Waterfowl:

Whistling swan use increased during the fiscal year on the complex compared to the previous year. Populations using San Luis and Kesterson were comparable with past years. Swan use at Merced increased as birds moved into chopped corn fields during February. As a result, use was the highest at Merced than for the previous four years.

Goose use at San Luis increased dramatically for the report period as a result of improved browse conditions on the Nevada unit. This unit is historically a prime wintering area for snow, Ross' and Canada geese. After termination of grazing as of January 1973, the vegetative growth on the unit grew too rank for adequate browse. As a result, use plummeted to an all time low in fiscal year 1973. To restore the area to prime browse and use this 960 acre unit was burned in October. With the excellent winter and spring rains, vegetation growth was excellent. As a result, goose use increase more than 10 fold from the 123,750 use days of fiscal year '74. To maintain the unit in good browse conditions sheep grazing was instituted. A total of 2080 sheep

introduced from March to June and the results were adequate. However, due to abnormal rains, we feel that too few sheep were used as the vegetation grew faster than the sheep could keep it clipped. In spite of this minor drawback, the unit is in good condition for this coming winter period. Sheep will again be utilized in FY '76 to maintain the unit for goose browse conditions. It is felt that sheep grazing is the best management tool in this instance when compared to periodic burning or cattle. Periodic burning would eventually lead to dominance of fire resistant plants undesirable for goose browse and cattle grazing would require construction and maintenance of fences. Sheep are used with a herder and are kept moving over the unit, thus, assuring uniform grazing. In addition, when the vegetation has been clipped to the desired condition, the sheep can be readily removed. Having a herder eliminates the requirement of fences, thus, preserving a semblance of naturalness on the refuge.

Goose use at Merced increased for the report period primarily due to increased food availability. As a result of the cooperative farming program initiated in FY '74 in which the permittee grew 158 acres of silage corn of which 53 acres was the refuge's share, geese flocked to the refuge. As the corn fields are located within the area of the refuge closed to hunting, our share was left standing until after the close of the hunting season. Then, the corn was chopped to increase its availability to waterfowl. The results were beyond expectations. Not only did our goose use increase, but we also dramatically increased use by sandhill cranes. Plans for FY '76 call for increasing the acreage planted to corn to 329 acres. A portion of unit 11 and unit 9 will be planted to silage corn, while fields A, D, and E will be planted to seed corn. Units 11 and 9 are in the public hunting area and

the permittee will harvest all silage corn for his use. The refuge's 1/3 share of silage corn will be taken in E field. By having seed corn in fields A, D, and E, the amount of feed available will be increased for wintering birds.

Goose use at Kesterson declined in FY '74 primarily due to birds returning to their historic wintering areas on San Luis and moving onto the corn fields at Merced. Habitat at Kesterson is less desirable to geese than that on the other two refuges with uplands dominated by bursh and salt grasses and seasonally flooded ponds and cells that are void of aquatic vegetation. No development work is planned for Kesterson due to primary jurisdiction of the Bureau of Reclamation and their plans for developing the area into cells for storage of agricultural tile drain waters.

Duck use on San Luis and Merced declined for the fiscal year, while use at Kesterson more than doubled. Declines at San Luis are consistent with our present management plans of discouraging large build ups on hunting days, thus, greatly diminishing the potential for disease and avoiding criticism of hunters of holding birds in the closed area. By changing the hunting area to allow hunting in the Loaf Lake unit, we have accomplished both goals. As a result, use of the closed area has been greatly reduced. The decline in use at Merced, as well as partially at San Luis, we feel is primarily due to the abnormally wet spring that kept small ponds and potholes in the valley flooded well beyond the norm. This kept the birds widely distributed throughout the Merced County. In addition, a small outbreak of fowl cholera at Merced re-

sulted in draining the East Grasslands unit and thus dispersing birds from the refuge. The increase at Kesterson is due to excellent water conditions throughout the wintering period. This attracted and held larger numbers of birds than the previous fiscal year. Water conditions appear favorable for good carryover in the cells well into the next year.

Duck Production for the complex more than doubled that of last year. Habitat conditions were good on all three refuges and conducive to good success. Production on San Luis nearly doubled that of FY '74 to 553 birds. Kesterson also doubled with 341 birds produced. The major increase occurred at Merced where 280 birds were produced compared to 50 the previous year. This dramatic increase was the result of maintaining water in the millet fields later than usual as well as above normal water conditions in the Mariposa By-pass portion of the refuge. Management plans presently call for maintaining San Luis refuge marsh units in optimum conditions to encourage production. In the past, the refuge's marsh units have been allowed to dry back during the spring and summer and were reflooded in the fall. San Luis contains excellent marsh habitat and production should increase in the future.

Total coot use for the complex was up slightly but still within averages for the past several years.

2. Marsh and Water Birds: Common resident species that occur in this area are Great Blue Heron, Common and Snow Egrets, American Bittern, Black-Crowned Night Heron, Pied-billed Grebe and Common Gallinule. Populations normal for all these species for the fiscal year. San Luis Refuge witnessed

the return of a Great Blue Heron rookery this past year. A total of 19 nests were counted in the rookery which located itself in the lower portion of the Mallard Slough unit. This area contains several tree lined water courses and is very attractive to the Herons. This is the first rookery to occur on the refuge since 1969. At the time the refuge was established, there was a large multi-species rookery in what is now the Teal Lake management unit. Once the refuge was opened to the general public, extensive pressure from Audobon and other bird watching groups created too much disturbance and forced the birds to abandon the site in favor of an area on private property north of the refuge. The area of the present rookery has been closed to public access during the nesting season to avoid the loss and hopefully increase the size of this nesting site.

Lesser Sandhill Cranes use on the complex increased dramatically during the fiscal year. Use increased five time that of the previous year. Merced refuge had the greatest increase with an average population of 10,000 cranes using the area with peak numbers in excess of 12,000. These birds utilized the corn fields along with geese. As a result of this extensive use on the refuge, depredation complaints were greatly reduced in the adjoining agricultural lands. Use at San Luis was slightly less than the previous year. A peak of 4,000 birds used the refuge in early January. The drop in use at San Luis is probably due to the dramatic use that occurred at Merced. Small numbers of Sandhills utilized the upland and low areas at Kesterson in the early spring as they migrated north.

Populations of other birds of this category were normal for the year.

3. Shorebirds, Gulls and Terns: Common species in this group occurring on the complex at various times of the year include American Avocet, Black necked stilt, Long billed Dowicher, Killdeer, Western and Least Sandpipers, Greater Yellowlegs and Common Snipe. Total use for the fiscal year far exceeded any use for the past several years. Total use for the complex climbed to in excess of 1,200,00 use days. We feel there are two main reasons for this large increase. First, a more concerted effort to accurately census special recognition species which indicated large populations than had previously been noted. Any second, the abnormally wet spring resulted in many small mud flats and ponds that normally are dry by the end of February. These areas attracted and held such birds as Dowichers and Sandpipers for mucha longer time than normal.

4. Doves: Mourning Dove use on the complex also increased for the report period due to the abnormally wet spring and excellent production the previous year. Peak numbers occurred in mid-August as the birds migrated south. Fall populations were among the highest on record. We feel this is primarily due to the mild weather which encouraged the birds to stay. As a result of our wet spring, the outlook for fiscal year '76 is increased production and use.

C. Big Game Animals: The dream of California environmental groups to reintroduce the Tule Elk back into the San Joaquin Valley was fulfilled this year. With the signing of a cooperative agreement with the California Fish and Game Department in February 1973 and the completion of an enclosure in November 1974, these magnificent animals were reintroduced onto San Luis Refuge. The

initial introduction of 18 animals; 11 bulls and 7 cows, took place on December 6, 1973. These animals were transported from the San Diego Wild Animal park by Fish and Game biologists and released in the early morning fog. The release received considerable coverage by the local news media. A second release of two bulls and one cow calf from the Fresno Zoo took place on March 1, 1974, bringing the population to 21 animals.

The Tule Elk enclosure at San Luis comprises the 760 acre Teal Lake unit. This unit was selected because it meets all the requirements for the elk with good browse along two major drains, excellent upland and the teal lake marsh. Soon after the release, the animals dispersed into the fog to explore their new home and very quickly adjusted. Fish and Game personnel were concerned over the rapid change in diet from alfalfa hay to more natural food. Therefore, 600 pounds of alfalfa cubes were purchased and placed in several locations within the enclosure. But, the elk ignored it and immediately turned to the "native" vegetation without any complications.

The Elk have thrived in their new habitat. Four of the six mature cows gave birth to calves in April and May. All four calves, two bulls and two cows are doing well. At the end of the reporting period, the refuge population stood at 25 animals.

The introduction of the elk created a great deal of interest from local residents as well as conservation groups statewide. Several voiced a concern that predators, primarily coyotes, should be controlled to allow for maximum

protection. We believe this is not justified, as the setting and conditions are as natural as can be expected in this heavily farmed area and coyotes are a part of this setting. Also, the elk, after close observation, seem to be able to cope with predators. One occasion was witnessed by Foreman Mayle in which the entire herd was seen chasing a coyote. It appeared that the coyote was in greater danger than any of the elk. Only one incident has occurred in which coyotes appeared to have bothered the elk. One of the bulls appeared to have had an ear damaged as a result of this run-in. All the bulls antlers had been cut off for transporting to San Luis and apparently this particular bull lowered his head to ward off an attack and ended up with a mauled ear. No other incidents are known to have taken place.

- D. Fur Animals, Predators and Other Mammals: The endangered San Joaquin Kit Fox population at San Luis is apparently holding steady at five animals. These wary nocturnal predators are difficult to locate and census. However, three sightings were reported during year. Two were made during the waterfowl season when a fox was seen by Assistant Manager Miller and California Biologist Joe Nunes in the north end of the Nevada Unit across from the parking lot #3 on two separate occasions. The other sighting was reported by Refuge Manager Littlefield in April when he saw a kit fox on the San Joaquin River levee.

No other unusual sightings or occurrences were noted during the year.

- E. Hawks, Owls, Eagles and Kites: The San Joaquin Valley is a major wintering area for several species in this category. The refuge complex use varies by area with San Luis receiving the majority. This is due to the habitat which

attracts these birds to the area. Tree lined sloughs and the river provide excellent roosting areas while the uplands and marsh areas are favorite hunting areas. California ground squirrels and crippled waterfowl are favorite prey species on all three refuges. Use on Merced and Kesterson is primarily confined to hunting and feeding activity. No unusual occurrences occurred on the area during the report period.

- F. Other Birds: No new species were observed on the complex this year. A project was undertaken this year to consolidate the bird lists for San Luis and Merced into a refuge complex list. The new lists were compiled and forwarded for review. Several revisions were requested and hopefully the list will be completed in the near future.
- G. Fish: Species occurring on the complex include carp, largemouth bass, black crappie, channel catfish, striped bass, threadfin shad and Gambusia sp. All these fish are found at San Luis while carp and Gambusia are found at Merced. Carp, catfish, striped bass and shad are found on Kesterson when the area contains water. No fishery management or stocking programs are conducted on the refuge complex.
- H. Reptiles and Amphibians: Nothing unusual to report.
- I. Disease: A fowl cholera outbreak occurred on the Merced and Kesterson refuges in January. The outbreak at Merced occurred in the East Grasslands unit where a total of 998 birds were picked up and disposed of. This total included 947 coots, 25 ducks and 26 geese. The outbreak lasted from December 31 thru February 7.

The outbreak at Kesterson luckily was short lived. It was first noted on January 8 and had run its course by January 21st. A total of 210 birds were picked up on the Sprig Lake and Teal Pond areas where the disease was confined. This total included 169 coots, 40 ducks and 1 swan. No disease outbreaks occurred at the San Luis Refuge.

Disease primarily fowl cholera, is a continuing problem in this part of the Pacific Flyway. And as habitat continues to be swallowed up by agriculture and other developments, the problem will undoubtedly increase as wintering populations of migratory birds are confined to smaller and smaller areas. By working closely with the FWS Disease Laboratory and California Department of Fish and Game, hopefully steps can be taken to alleviate the potential loss of a major portion of the Flyway population.

II. REFUGE DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

Development and Maintenance projects for the San Luis Complex revolved around construction of the Tule Elk enclosure at San Luis, road graveling and realignment and development of Merced to institute a quality hunt program model.

As fiscal year '73 closed, we were awaiting delivery of posts to begin construction of the elk enclosure. Considerable delay and difficulty by the contractor resulted in slow progress as the post deliveries were often late. Despite these delays and pressure from the State Fish and Game Department, the fence was completed by the end of November. The fence is 10 feet high and is constructed of pine posts and woven wire. Four large double gates were installed to allow

access inside the enclosure. The fence is 5.3 miles long and required in excess 2700 posts and 560 - 100 foot rolls on woven wire fencing. The entire enclosure was constructed by force account and many compliments have been received concerning the excellence of the workmanship. The refuge maintenance crew deserves a pat on the back for doing an excellent job under "hurry up" pressure during one of the busiest periods of the year.

A major effort was made to improve the roads at San Luis during the year. The old Dickinson Ferry road, which is one of the main roads on the area, had been slowly deteriorating for a couple of years. A project was undertaken in May and June to widen the road from a single lane to a two lane road and regravell it. This road serves as the hunter access route to three parking lots on the refuge. During periods of heavy traffic, the road was too narrow to allow vehicles to pass safely. In addition, after heavy rains the road became hazardous due to lack of adequate gravel. It was, therefore, determined that 2.37 miles of this road was in need of major repair. Widening and sloping of the road began the second week of April and was completed within two weeks. A gravel contract was issued by the Regional Office in early June and all work was completed within two weeks.

Another project was undertaken to raise, realign and gravel the road from lift pump 5 north along Salt Slough and then east along the north boundary to the San Joaquin River levee. A distance of 2 miles. This road serves as a major patrol and census road. It had never been graveled and as a result, during the rainy season, it was impassable. This created patrol problems during the waterfowl hunting season as well as conducting census work. Raising, realigning and

graveling this road would provide us with an all weather road around the perimeter of the entire refuge. Work began soon after completion or preparation of the Dickenson Ferry road. It entailed building the road up and sloping it in the low area along Salt Slough as well as realigning it to eliminate a couple of unneeded curves. After preparations were complete, graveling began. At the close of the fiscal year, all work was virtually complete.

Development at Merced consisted of three projects. The first project completed was the relocation and drilling of well number 10. This well caved in in the fall of 1973. A new location was picked for the most efficient use and the well drilled and capped. Full development was not feasible due to lack of funds. We will complete this developing of this well during the new fiscal year.

The second project dealt with the development of the "model" hunt program. During FY '74 the proposal for this quality hunt program was approved and work started and continued into this report period. A total of 30 blind sites were selected and two pit type blinds placed at each site. The blinds were placed according to flight patterns and predominant wind direction. Also, each site is located so as to give each hunting party a feeling of "being alone" in the hunting area. The closest distance between any two blinds is 250 yards. Locations vary from millet fields to marsh. Upon completion of blind installation decoys were purchased and directional signs made to enable hunters to locate their blind. By the opening of the hunting season, all was in readiness for this unique program on a public hunting area in California.

The third project at Merced was entering into an expanded cooperative farming agreement. Due to the poor production in our efforts to raise barley at the refuge, as a result of insufficient funds for proper soil amendments, we negotiated a new agreement with the permittee. Under this agreement, the permittee assumed all farming on the refuge with the exception of our millet crop. The expanded agreement calls for raising of barley or wheat in units 7, 9 and 11, followed by silage corn each year. Also, the permittee will raise seed corn in fields A, D, and E. The refuge share of the barley will be 1/3. This grain is produced and shipped to Salton Sea NWR to aid in their depredation program. The permittee will harvest all of the silage corn for his use and the refuge's share will be taken in the seed corn.

The success of the corn program in attracting and holding geese and sandhill cranes also led to plans to expand this program to include all the alphabet fields. Seed corn will be raised in a rotation with barley. This program will enable the refuge to increase its grain production for Salton Sea NWR and also provide excellent feed for wintering geese and cranes. In FY '74 fields A and D were planted by the permittee and as stated in Section I, goose and crane use increased dramatically as a result of the available feed. This past spring, the permittee planted seed corn in fields A, D, and E. Fields A and D will be left in a fallow condition in FY '76 and planted to barley in early FY '77. Seed beds will be prepared in field B and C and turned over to the permittee in the spring of '76 for planting or seed corn. Field E will be replanted to seed corn at the same time. These fields will then be farmed in corn, fallow barley-corn rotation

basis according to our cooperative agreement. This program will save the refuge several thousand dollars that would otherwise be required for soil amendments, manpower, seed, etc. to conduct this program on our own. This way, everybody benefits.

No major maintenance or development took place at the Kesterson Refuge during the report period.

IV. RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

A. Grazing:

Grazing at San Luis Refuge was reinstated on the 960 acre Nevada unit to maintain optimum goose browse conditions. All grazing had been discontinued on the entire refuge on January 1, 1973. Sheep grazing is being utilized as explained in Section I. During the course of the grazing period of March 5 thru June 5, 1975 from 1600 to 2080 head of sheep were on the unit. Total revenues for this program were \$3321.00.

Grazing at Merced Refuge was again confined to fields B and C. During the grazing season of March 1973 thru November of 1974, a total of 1101 AUM's were utilized for a total receipts of \$4404 for the period. The new 1975 grazing season had produced a total of 450 AUM's at the end of the report period.

Two grazing permits were issued for the Kesterson Refuge. One permit for the grazing of cattle on 3,600 acres was issued to Mr. Frank J. Frietas for the period of November 1, 1974 to June 30, 1975. During this period, a total

of 3,006 AUM's were utilized. As the Bureau of Reclamation has primary jurisdiction of the refuge, all receipts for grazing are transferred to them. A total of \$11,272.50 was transferred to the Bureau for the grazing period.

The other permit for Kesterson was issued to the National Park Service on a non-fee basis. This permit was for the grazing of horses and mules from Yosemite National Park from November 1, 1974 to June 30, 1975. This permit provides an area of approximately 1000 acres of winter pasture for the Park Service livestock. During the grazing period, a total of 78 animals utilized a total of 536 AUM's.

B. Fur Harvest: Nothing to report.

V. FIELD INVESTIGATION & APPLIED RESEARCH

The development of the Merced Hunt Program led to a two-year study to evaluate hunter response. A questionnaire was developed by Michael Philips, a Fresno State University student working on a masters degree, to evaluate hunter reaction to this quality hunting program. A similar questionnaire was developed to be used at the San Luis Refuge. San Luis is a "free lance" area where the only restriction is hunter one time use, and was used as a control of the Merced Program.

We collected approximately equal numbers of questionnaires from both refuges on Wednesdays and Saturdays only.

This study has been setup to run for two hunting seasons. The first year's results indicated that 92% of the hunters who participated in the Merced Program enjoyed it. At Merced, 53% of the hunters felt that mandatory spacing of hunters

in blinds was the one item that improved the quality of the hunt. Of those who had hunted Merced in the past two years, 88% felt that the area was better overall to hunt. At San Luis, 49% of those completing questionnaires felt that mandatory spacing of hunters would improve the quality of the hunt. Also, 72% would pay more money for services such as those provided at Merced. Of those who had hunted an area which exercises strict hunting rules, 81.6% felt these rules should be implemented on public areas in California.

This study will be concluded following the 1975-76 hunting season. At that time, comparison of the two years data will be made to determine the success or failure of the hunt.

The San Luis complex participated in a wing and gizzard collection project in cooperation with the Wildlife Research Center in Patuxent, Maryland. We were requested to collect wings and gizzards from 500 immature mallards and pintails. A total of 241 and 255 collections were taken respectively. Preliminary results indicate that 5.0% of the mallards and 2.4% of the pintails contained lead shot in the gizzard. We anticipate continuing this cooperative effort for the next three waterfowl seasons.

VI. PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public Use for the San Luis Complex increased by 58% from fiscal year '74. Hunting and fishing have been the major activities on the complex for several years. However, this year saw a dramatic increase in non-consumption wildlife oriented use. By and far the greatest increase can be attributed to the reintroduction of tule elk at San Luis. Visitors coming to the refuge to view the elk steadily increased from December through to the end of the fiscal year. IN

addition, we had more requests for tours of the San Luis area than any year since the refuge was established. Increasing interest in the National Wildlife Refuges in the San Jo quin Valley and the opportunities they offer for wildlife oriented public use will no doubt see a steady increase in use in the future. These areas offer excellent opportunities for viewing large flocks of migratory birds during the winter season and now the chance to view the tule elk in as near their native habitat as possible.

Waterfowl hunting on San Luis and Kesterson refuges was comparable with past years. The change in the hunting area at San Luis made in December of last year was continued this year with excellent results. This change, opening the Loaf Lake unit and closing west big lake, has alleviated a major problem of concentrating large numbers of birds in the closed area. In the past, the Loaf Lake area had held in excess of 800,000 birds. By opening the area, we have dispersed the birds and at the same time provided some excellent hunting. This has hushed the uproar of hunters concerning "harboring the ducks" and helped alleviate a potentially dangerous disease problem. The only minor problem that resulted was too many hunters wanting to hunt the Loaf Lake area.

The only other complaint heard from hunters was the increasing amount of dense cover on San Luis. The complaint has some validity. We realize that there is an increasing invasion of cattail and hardstem bullrush in all units of the refuge. Plans are to control this growth either through use of cattle grazing on a five year rest rotation per unit basis or mechanical control. The latter will require funds and manpower and even livestock control will initially require added funds. We hope this control will begin in fiscal year '76.

The Merced Refuge had an overall reduction in visits of 30% below FY '74. This reduction is due to the quality hunting program introduced this year. This program was briefly mentioned in last year's report. This year after considerable planning and sweat, this "model" program provided a new and unique public hunting area for California.

This new program introduced some restrictions and services similar to those of private hunting clubs in the local area. For the program we selected 30 blind sites and installed a pair of pit type blinds at each site. In addition, six dozen decoys, 3 dozen pintail, 2 dozen mallard and 1 dozen green-winged teal, were set out at each site. Hunting was permitted on Saturdays and Wednesdays only and only 60 hunters were allowed on the area. Hunting hours were from legal starting time until noon. Hunters were allowed only 50 shells per shoot day. Hunters were not allowed to shoot away from their assigned blinds unless they were after a cripple. In order to decrease disturbance of others, hunters were asked to leave the area only on the hour. These regulations when published created some confusion and mis-understanding of the program. Much of this was clarified thru news releases and answering hunter questions. The program started off rather slowly with few hunters willing try it out. One of the major drawbacks in the beginning was the fee set by the California Fish and Game Commission. The State Fish and Game Department manages hunting on the refuges through a cooperative agreement. The fee charged on all other state operated hunt areas is \$3.50 per adult per visit. The fee set for the new Merced program was \$10.00 per adult. Juvenile hunters are admitted free as long as they are accompanied by an adult. This increased fee prevented many hunters from initially trying Merced. However, as the season progressed and hunter success remained one

of the highest in the State more and more hunters started coming to the area. By the end of the season we had to turn away crowds. The end result was that this program was more successful than we had hoped it would be. With exceptionally high hunter acceptance and very beneficial publicity, many skeptics became converted to improving the quality of waterfowl hunting in California.

The only upland game hunting permitted on the complex is for ring-necked pheasants at Merced. Pheasant hunting is permitted on Saturdays and Wednesdays only and from 12 o'clock noon until sunset. This eliminated conflicts with waterfowl hunters and also provides a good quality hunt. No major complaints were heard about this program and the pheasant hunt was comparable with past years.

One public use activity change at San Luis resulted in a controversy that eventually led to several congressional inquiries. This change resulted from the decisions to reintroduce tule elk and bring wintering goose use back to historic levels. The change was a decision not to permit field dog trials at San Luis during the month of March. In 1968, the Service entered into an agreement with the San Luis Field Trial and Conservation Association allowing them to conduct up to eight field trials a year during August and September on San Luis Refuge. In 1971 the agreement was amended, on an experimental basis, to permit four trials in March and four in September. If this arrangement was determined not to be in the best interest of the Refuge, the Association agreed to return to the original arrangements. The special conditions of the agreement also stipulate that a permit would be issued on a year to year basis and "is subject to changes in management plans."

During 1973 it was definitely decided that Tule Elk herd would be established on the Refuge. A survey of the area established teal lake unit as the most suitable for this introduction. This was the one used by the Field Trial Association since 1968. The Association was notified that their trial area would have to be relocated to the Nevada unit for the 1974 trials due to planned construction of the elk enclosure.

The spring of 1974 culminated in an all-time low in numbers of geese using the refuge. Use-days dropped from 1,582,000 in 1968 to 48,000 in 1974. As stated earlier, the majority of this use occurs on the Nevada Unit. Due to vegetation being too dense and rank for good goose browse, the decision to control burn the unit in the fall of 1974 and introduce sheep grazing in the spring of 1975 was made to return the unit to optimum conditions for geese. During this decision making process, it was determined the use of the unit during a period of high goose use, by the Field Trial people was in conflict and would have to be discontinued. This would necessitate returning to the original agreement of holding trials in August and September. Refuge Manager Littlefield met with the representative of the Association in May 1974 to explain and inform him of this decision and assure him that the other trials would continue.

The result of this decision was a letter writing campaign by the Field Trial Association to the members of the California Congressional delegation. After several months, this conflict was resolved by a compromise in March in which the Service agreed to permit Field Trials the last two weekends in March, provided the majority of the geese had departed the refuge. In addition, trials would be permitted the first two weekends in October prior to the waterfowl hunting season.

Refuge personnel attended and/or participated in a variety of meetings, tours, presentations and Civil Service organizational activities throughout the year. Official visitors to the refuge complex included a wide range of people from the Regional Office Personnel to members of major conservation groups throughout California.

VII. OTHER ITEMS

Gene A. Sipe, Assistant Refuge Manager, transferred to the Desert National Wildlife Range in September 1974. Gene's abilities and experience will enhance the crew in Las Vegas.

Joel S. Miller transferred from Desert on October 10, 1974 to replace Gene as Assistant Manager for the complex. Joel is glad to be at a waterfowl area and is enjoying his new assignment.

Clifford Himmell, Assistant Refuge Manager, transferred to Desert National Wildlife Range in June 1975. Cliff's abilities, sense of humor and reliability will be our loss and an asset to Desert.

Christine E. Strength received an appointment as clerk-stenographer in August 1974. Finally, having a permanent clerk for the office has resulted in considerably less headaches and indigestion for the entire crew.

Edgar Derrick, Maintenance man, retired June 7, 1975 after 22 years with the Service. Ed's skills and knowledge of the Merced Refuge will be missed, but we wish him every success and just hope he doesn't get tired of catching fish.

James Mayle resigned his position as Maintenance Foreman for the complex on June 13, 1975 to enter business with his brother in Michigan. We wish him every success in his new career.

Assistant Manager Miller was assigned as the ground crew leader for the May Breeding Ground Survey team in the Western Dakotas and Eastern Montana for the 1975 survey. The assignment lasted the month of May and Joel reports that in spite of putting a couple of thousand miles on a 4x4 pickup, it was enjoyable and rewarding experince.

The proposal made in FY '74 to purchase the old Los Banos Duck Club was re-jected in the past year. Primarily due to the fact that it is not a production area. By not acquiring this club, an area of prime wintering habitat could be lost to that tool of progress known as the plow.

PREPARED BY:

Joel S. Miller
Joel S. Miller, Ass't Refuge Manager

DATE:

7/9/76

SUBMITTED BY:

Leon A. Littlefield
Leon A. Littlefield, Refuge Manager

DATE:

7-15-76

APPROVED BY:

Edward J. Smith

DATE:

July 22, 1976