Questions/Responses Concerning the Gibbs Lake Firing Line and Components of the Preliminary Draft of the Gibbs Lake Waterfowl Hunting Management Plan
February 2007

Q: After nearly 50 years of existence, why the interest now in addressing firing line issues in this location?

A: From all reports, the firing line situated at the north end of the Lake Onalaska Closed Area, particularly the Barrel Blinds has been a prime hunting location since establishment of the closed area in 1957. The illegal take of canvasbacks along the firing line, from 1989 and continuing into the early 1990s, drew a significant law enforcement response. As part of the law enforcement effort, hunter compliance monitoring also was conducted. Hunter behavior on the firing line has been an issue. Behavior observed or reported along the line included people claiming preferred sites (spending the night, leaving illuminated lights in unattended sites, handing-off sites to friends or co-workers after a party's hunt is over), engaging in verbal confrontations, late arriving hunters disrupting those set-up, flaring birds, failure to retrieve birds, and increased littering. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service policy also directs managers to promote responsible behavior, minimize conflicts, and address hunting on boundary areas. Waterfowlers responding to the La Crosse County Conservation Alliance's questionnaire at the 2002-2004 June meetings also identified firing line problems and possible solutions. Modifying boundaries and hunting regulations to solve firing line issues was identified as an issue during the 2003 "Manager for a Day" Workshop. Given the issues surrounding this area, it became an objective within the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).

Q: What is the reaction to firing lines in the popular hunting literature?

A: In the National Rifle Association's Hunter Skills Series (National Rifle Association. 1988. Waterfowl Hunting), firing lines are addressed under the section on pass shooting. "Too often, refuge line pass shooting results in the practice of skybusting, which is the reckless, long distance shooting at birds out of shotgun range. It does nothing but illustrate the poor judgment and lack of knowledge about shotshell performance of many hunters. Moreover, the crowded conditions along refuge lines often spark unsportsmanlike incidents that we could do without. But approached with knowledge and responsibility, pass shooting from well-located blinds can be productive, enjoyable, and legitimate sport."

Q: Did Refuge staff use the comments received during the September 2006 workshop?

A: All comments received from the 75 people who attended the September 5, 2006 workshop were reviewed during the preparation of the draft plan. Comments that addressed the six goals identified for the area were discussed and some were used in preparing the draft. Those comments that called for "no action" were noted but not consistent with the approved CCP (prepare a Gibbs Lake Plan).

Q: How will implementing components of the preliminary draft Gibbs Lake Plan improve the quality of the hunting experience?

A: In the Barrels Staked Area, hunting at or near stakes should eliminate the practice of late arriving hunters trying to crowd between hunting parties already set-up. Moreover, limiting the number of shotshells could result in less shooting at high flying birds. Both of these practices are examples of behavior that detract from the experience of neighboring hunters.

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Q: Will any components of the preliminary draft of the plan help reduce crippling loss of waterfowl?

A: The combination of reducing skybusting and the new immediate retrieval regulation should reduce the number of crippled birds. In an evaluation of crippling losses in waterfowl, Bellrose concluded that the range at which ducks are shot affects the rate of crippling (1953, Trans. N. Am. Wildl. Conf. 18:337-360). In a study of waterfowl management in Wisconsin, Jahn and Hunt (1964, Duck and Coot Ecology and Management in Wisconsin) found that "pass shooting, when ducks are probably shot at the greatest heights, resulted in the largest crippling loss of the three main types of duck hunting."

Q: Will implementation of any components of the preliminary draft plan result in hunter displacement to other areas?

A: Implementing the Gibbs Lake Special Hunt Area and smaller Barrels Staked Area should not result in much hunter displacement. In the Gibbs Lake Special Hunt Area, the shotshell limit and immediate retrieval regulation should not discourage most hunters. Implementing the smaller Barrels Staked Area, with the stipulation that hunters can only hunt at or near stakes, may result in hunter displacement on certain days. This occurs now in this area on opening days and some weekend days. Conversely, a shotshell restriction may result in more hunter turnover as hunters expend their ammunition and leave the special hunt area. Implementation may also be enough incentive for some hunters, who quit hunting the firing line after a negative experience(s), to return.

Q: Rather than impose new restrictions, why not enforce the "skybusting" regulation?

A: There is no regulation prohibiting skybusting. Implementing a shotshell restriction will not eliminate skybusting either. By limiting the number of shotshells to 25 daily, once a hunter fires 25, he/she is finished hunting for the day in the Gibbs Lake Special Hunt Area.

Q: Were there fewer conflicts between waterfowlers hunting along the firing line in 2006?

A: The general feeling among hunters and law enforcement personnel is that there were fewer conflicts. Reasons for the reduction vary and range from less hunter interest due to fewer birds to increased awareness because of the recent attention focused on the area.

Q: After the workshop, what are the next steps?

A: Comments received during the second workshop will be reviewed. Based in part on the input received, a draft plan will be written and made available to the public in spring 2007. After a 60-day public comment period, comments will be reviewed and a final plan completed and approved. The public also will have the opportunity to comment on any regulation changes developed for the Gibbs Lake area during the 30-day comment period that is part of the rulemaking process. This rulemaking will take place in mid-2008.