FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

2009 Environmental Assessment for an Elk and Youth Waterfowl Hunt on Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge

The U S Fish and Wildlife Service will open portions of Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge to limited-entry, permit-only, elk and youth waterfowl hunting. These hunts are designed to achieve the goals and objectives identified in the Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (USFWS 2007).

The Service will open a 2-day youth waterfowl hunt on the northern shore of Upper Turnbull Slough (on approximately 140 acres) for up to two hunters per day at up to 8 marked locations on the same weekend as the youth waterfowl hunt offered by the State. The Service will also open up to five units (7,260 acres) to up to 104 total permitted hunters (103 antlerless (cows) and 1 or more bull permits) in 9 special hunt periods (archery, early muzzleloader, disabled, early mid and late modern firearm, late muzzleloader, master hunter, and modern firearm bull) for Rocky Mountain elk to occur between September 8 and December 31. For safety reasons, only archery and muzzleloader hunt periods would be allowed in two units (NW and SE) due to the proximity to other refuge visitors or private land. In addition, in order to complete habitat management actions, some units/seasons may be closed by the Project Leader in cooperation with WDFW during some years to complete refuge habitat management actions (e.g. prescribed fire).

Two alternatives were considered and site specific effects and cumulative impacts analyzed in an Environmental Assessment (EA) for an Elk and Youth Waterfowl Step-down Hunt Plan (USFWS 2009). In addition to the preferred alternative (Alternative B) outlined above, Alternative A included the basic hunt programs outlined in the 2007 Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). The youth waterfowl hunt was the same as that described in the CCP. The elk hunt described in Alternative A proposed to open three units to hunting, totaling 5,700 acres. Alternative A would allow 63 permits as opposed to the maximum in Alternative B of 104 permits.

Alternative B was selected for implementation because it is most likely to meet the goals and objectives identified in the CCP as well as allow for management flexibility as herd and other management conditions change. It has the most potential to affect herd distribution and size which will reduce aspen browsing pressure and improve habitat conditions for other wildlife species dependent on aspen.

As described in detail in the EA, implementation of Alternative B would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects: It will reduce elk browsing impacts on aspen regeneration through reduction in the density of elk during fall and winter. The presence of hunters may cause some slight disruption to wildlife and habitats. In addition, the hunt will provide more recreational hunting opportunities for interested area hunters but may reduce refuge visitation by non hunters. There may be

increased elk viewing opportunities in the Public Use Area during the elk hunt as elk move there to avoid hunted units. It will have a minor positive impact on the local economy.

Measures to minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the proposal. These measures include:

1. Stipulations described in the waterfowl and elk hunting compatibility determinations in the CCP (attached to Hunt Plan).
2. The refuge and State law enforcement programs and closely regulated seasons will insure hunt regulation compliance and protect refuge resources.
3. Monitoring of elk and vegetation will determine if objectives are being met and provide information to be used in an adaptive management approach as a basis for future management decisions regarding refuge aspen habitat and elk populations.

As described in detail in the EA, implementing the hunting programs is not expected to have any significant effects on refuge resources or other elements of the human environment because of the low density of hunters and spatial zoning from other refuge users.

The proposal has been coordinated with interested and affected parties. A public review and comment period for the Draft Environmental Assessment for an Elk and Youth Waterfowl Hunt on Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge and Draft Hunt Plan opened on November 18, 2008 and ended on December 19, 2008. Notifications of the comment period were published in the Spokesman Review and Cheney Free Press. Letters were mailed to 600 interested parties informing them of the comment period. Copies of the hunt plan and EA were made available for public review at the Refuge office, the Cheney Public Library, the downtown Spokane Library and on the Turnbull NWR website. A copy of both documents was also sent to the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife. Federal and state legislators and Spokane County Commissioners, and other agency representatives received letters informing them about the hunt plan and how they could access it to provide comments. Refuge staff hosted an open house on December 11, 2008 with 31 people attending.

During the comment period 41 comments were received by mail, email, or verbally. No new substantive comments were received which had not been previously addressed in the CCP response to comments (Appendix L of CCP, USFWS 2007).

The proposal was thoroughly discussed and coordinated with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. No comments were received from Tribal interests or city, county, other State, or Federal agencies or officials.

Therefore, it is my determination that the proposal does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 as amended. Accordingly, preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required. Copies of supporting references are available upon request from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,

Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge, 26010 S Smith Rd., Cheney, WA 99004, telephone 509-235-4723.

Supporting documents for this decision include relevant office file material and the following references:

Environmental Assessment for an Elk and Youth Waterfowl Hunt on Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge. 2009.

Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge Hunt Plan. 2009.

Endangered Species Act Section 7 Consultation for Turnbull NWR Elk and Youth Waterfowl Hunt. 2009.

Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. 2007.

Carolyn A. Bohan

Regional Chief,
Pacific Region
National Wildlife Refuge System

1/27/09
Date