

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT  
AND DECISION TO OPEN RECREATIONAL HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES**

**SPRING CREEK NATIONAL FISH HATCHERY  
UNDERWOOD, WASHINGTON**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is opening recreational hunting opportunities for upland, small, and big game on approximately 50 acres of the Spring Creek National Fish Hatchery's (NFH) 89.57 acres in accordance with the Spring Creek National Fish Hatchery Hunting Plan. The purposes of the proposed action are to address Secretarial Orders 3347 (Purpose: enhance conservation stewardship, increase outdoor recreation, and improve the management of game species and their habitat), and 3356 (Purpose: continue the Department's efforts to enhance conservation stewardship; increase outdoor recreation opportunities, including opportunities to hunt and fish; and improve the management of game species and their habitats for this generation and beyond) by opening a new hunting opportunity on the NFH.

Spring Creek NFH consists of the Main Hatchery Area in Skamania County, Washington and the nearby auxiliary Big White Ponds Area in Klickitat County, Washington. Both sites are contained within the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area.

**Selected Action**

**Alternative A— Open the Big White Ponds area to upland, small, and big game hunting [Proposed Action Alternative]:**

Under Alternative A, the Big White Ponds Area of Spring Creek NFH (approximately 50 acres) will be open to hunting of bear, bobcat, crow, black-tailed deer, mule deer, elk, grouse, partridge, porcupine, and wild turkey as outlined in the State of Washington hunting regulations. Where allowed, hunting on the hatchery follows the season dates and bag limits outlined in the State of Washington regulations.

This alternative is the Service's proposed action because it offers the best opportunity for public hunting access that would result in a minimal additional impact on physical and biological resources, while meeting the Service's mandates under Secretarial Orders 3347 and 3356.

**Other Alternatives Considered and Analyzed**

**Alternative B—The Big White Ponds Area of the Spring Creek NFH would not be opened to upland, small, and big game hunting.**

This action was not selected because it would not meet the Service's mandates under Secretarial Orders 3347 and 3356.

**Summary of Effects of the Selected Action**

An Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide decision-making framework that 1) explored a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives, 2) evaluated potential issues and impacts to the hatchery, resources and values, and 3) identified mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts. The EA evaluated the effects associated with the Proposed Action (Alternative A) and Alternative B. It is incorporated as part of this finding.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects:

Opening hunting opportunities under Alternative A on the hatchery or nearby NFH facilities would not have a significant impact on regional or statewide populations of bear, bobcat, crow, black-tailed deer, mule deer, elk, grouse, partridge, porcupine, or wild turkey. The number of individuals likely to be taken on the facility or nearby NFH facilities would be a tiny fraction of the estimated statewide populations, and would no more than slightly add to the cumulative impacts from hunting at the regional or state levels.

While Alternative A would result in minor, short-term increases in wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities on the hatchery or nearby NFH facilities, none of the impacts, even when accumulated, would be significant on the human environment.

Adverse impacts related to the selected alternative are not significant. Mitigation measures are not needed to reduce impacts below the threshold of significance. Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the selected action. These measures include:

Spring Creek NFH staff and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) authorities will monitor the impacts of the action according to their responsibilities and jurisdiction. Any noticeable impact on safety, the environment (habitat or human environment), facility operations or other factors would be addressed through management actions to minimize the impacts. As there are no known substantial impacts at this time, monitoring is the main mitigation measure proposed.

The proposed action will not have a significant impact on hatchery resources and uses for several reasons:

- In the context of State hunting programs, the number of individual animals harvested on the hatchery or nearby NFH facilities, though additive to existing hunting takes, would be a tiny fraction of the estimated statewide populations. The Service works closely with the State to ensure that additional species harvested on a hatchery or nearby NFH facilities are within the limits set by the State to ensure healthy populations of the species for present and future generations of Americans.
- The action will result in beneficial impacts to the human environment, including the biodiversity and ecological integrity of the hatchery, as well as the wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities and socioeconomics of the local economy, with only negligible adverse impacts to the human environment as discussed above.
- The adverse direct and indirect effects of the proposed action on air, water, soil,

habitat, wildlife, aesthetic/visual resources, and wilderness values are expected to be minor and short-term. The benefits to long-term ecosystem health that these efforts will accomplish far outweigh any of the short-term adverse impacts discussed in this document.

- The action, along with proposed mitigation measures, will ensure that there is low danger to the health and safety of hatchery staff, visitors, and the hunters themselves.
- The action will not impact any threatened or endangered species; or any Federally-designated critical habitat;
- The action will not impact any cultural or historical resources;
- The action will not impact any wilderness areas;
- There is no scientific controversy over the impacts of this action and the impacts of the proposed action are relatively certain.
- The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988.

### **Public Review**

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted include:

The local District 5 Office of the WDFW was consulted about this action and to date that office has not provided any comments. Likewise the Yakima Nation was consulted and they also did not provide any comments.

The Service released the Hunting Plan and its Environmental Assessment for public comment and review during the period March 25, 2020 until April 26, 2020. The Service received, via email, a letter from the Friends of the Columbia Gorge on April 16, 2020, that provided a number of comments on the Proposed Action. Each of these comments is addressed below:

- 1) Cumulative adverse impacts were not adequately covered. The Service's 2020-2021 Cumulative Impacts Report considered NFH-specific (and National Wildlife Refuge) EA/EISs collectively to determine the national cumulative impacts of the proposed rule on fish, wildlife, and plant populations. Several of the hatcheries being opened to hunting are in close proximity and most likely there is some overlap in their game populations. Given the expected extremely small increase in combined harvest from these areas, the population impacts should be negligible. As a result of this comment, we have provided greater clarification in the EA; however, no changes were made to the proposed rule or to the hunt plan in response to this comment.
- 2) Comprehensive Hatchery Plans do not contemplate hunting and do not discuss opening them to hunting as a goal or objective. Years ago when the Comprehensive Hatchery Management Plans were developed, hunting on NFHs was not a Program goal or objective. Hunting is allowed on hatcheries when such activity is determined not to be detrimental to the propagation and distribution of fish or other aquatic wildlife under the provisions in 50 CFR Part 71. Hunting has been evaluated on these Service lands through initial screening using the Service's Hunt/Fish Opportunity Tool (SHOT) analysis and individual hatchery hunting plans. These documents and analyses have determined that hunting is not detrimental as outlined in 50 CFR Part 71 and with Spring Creek NFH's goals and objections. No changes were made to the proposed rule or to the hunt plan in response to this comment.

- 3) Analysis of how hunting might interfere with hatchery primary purposes was not performed. Before even considering opening NFHs to hunting and fishing, each hatchery manager went through the Service's SHOT process to evaluate the hatchery's potential to support hunting and fishing. It was at this stage that an analysis was conducted to determine if hunting would interfere with the hatchery's primary purposes. Hatcheries were excluded from further consideration at this point if hunting was not feasible or detrimental to the hatchery's purpose. No changes were made to the proposed rule or to the hunt plan in response to this comment.
- 4) Hunting poses an unnecessary risk to public health and safety. The health and safety of its employees and the public is always the Service's highest priority and concern. At the SHOT evaluation stage, hatchery managers took all safety aspects into consideration before stating that their facility would be suitable for recreational hunting. No changes were made to the proposed rule or to the hunt plan in response to this comment.
- 5) Recommend completing an EIS for this and other related actions. The Service disagrees with the assertion that we should prepare an EIS before proposing expanded hunting opportunities at NFHS facilities. The Service's analysis of the impacts of the proposed rule demonstrated that the rule would not have significant impacts at the local, regional, or national level, and the commenter has provided no additional information that would change our analysis. We annually conduct management activities on NFHs that minimize or offset impacts on physical and cultural resources, including establishing designated access areas; restricting levels of use; confining access and travel to designated locations; providing education programs and materials to users; and conducting law enforcement activities.

The Service completed individual EAs for 97 National Wildlife Refuges and nine units of the National Fish Hatchery System in compliance with NEPA to evaluate the impacts of opening or expanding hunting opportunities on Service lands in connection with this rulemaking. These EAs underwent regional and national review to address and consider these actions from a multi-State or flyway perspective, and to discuss the cumulative impacts from this larger geographical context. The 2020-2021 Cumulative Impacts Report supports this finding, concluding that, after analyzing the impacts of these 106 EAs collectively with the refuges and NFHs that already allow hunting, the proposed rule would not result in significant adverse impacts to the human environment. A court found that this approach was an appropriate way for the Service to analyze the impacts of the rule in compliance with NEPA (see *Fund for Animals v. Hall*, 777 F. Supp. 2d 92, 105 (D.D.C., 2011)).

### **Finding of No Significant Impact**

Based upon a review and evaluation of the information contained in the EA, as well as other documents and actions of record affiliated with this proposal, the Service has determined that the proposal to open recreational hunting on the Spring Creek NFH does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102 (2) (c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required.

### **Decision**

The Service has decided to officially open recreational hunting opportunities on the Big White Ponds Area (approximately 50 acres) of the Spring Creek National Fish Hatchery, Underwood, Washington on September 1, 2020. Hatchery-specific regulations promulgated in conjunction with

this action (2020–2021 Hatchery-Specific Hunting and Sport Fishing Regulations) are in the process of being finalized. This action will not be implemented until the regulations are finalized.

The action is consistent with applicable laws and policies.

**THOMAS  
SINCLAIR**

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THOMAS SINCLAIR  
Date: 2020.06.25 15:06:21  
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Westside Line Supervisor  
Fish and Aquatic Conservation Program  
Columbia Pacific-Northwest Region