

U. S. Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
Region 1, Portland, Oregon

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Environmental Assessment for Translocation of Deer from Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer and Puget Island to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge and Cottonwood Island

Wahkiakum, Cowlitz and Clark Counties, Washington

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the Environmental Assessment (EA) for Translocation of Columbian White-tailed Deer (CWTD) from Puget Island to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer (JBH) (USFWS 2014). Under the proposed action, the Service would translocate up to 35 deer in 2014 and up to 20 in 2015 from Puget Island, WA to the Ridgefield NWR and the JBH Mainland Unit. Translocations would occur between January 20 and April 15, 2014 and December 15, 2014 to April 15, 2015.

Currently, as a result of the 2013 emergency translocation from JBH Refuge to Ridgefield NWR (USFWS 2013¹), there is a nascent subpopulation of deer on Ridgefield NWR and a significantly reduced subpopulation on the JBH Mainland Unit. The Service believes that both of these subpopulations require additional animals to reach stable or increasing populations.

The CWTD recovery (delisting) criteria require a total of at least 400 animals distributed across at least three secure subpopulations that each maintains at least 50 deer (USFWS 1983). The total population of the Columbia River Distinct Population Segment (DPS) is currently estimated at about 600 animals with two secure subpopulations (Tenasillahe and Puget Islands) of more than 50 animals each. Two additional subpopulations exist that could attain secure and viable status (Ridgefield NWR and JBH Mainland) in the near future. Translocations to both of these subpopulations would redistribute deer within current subpopulations and bring this DPS closer to reaching delisting goals.

Alternatives Considered

Following is a brief description of the two alternatives considered in the EA, including the selected plan (Alternative B). For a complete description of each alternative, see the EA.

Alternative A (No Action)

Under Alternative A, the No Action Alternative, the Service would not translocate CWTD from Puget Island to Ridgefield NWR and the JBH Mainland Unit. Puget Island wildlife populations and habitat would not be affected because no action would occur at the site.

Alternative A was not selected for implementation because it is believed that this scenario could lead to the elimination of the nascent subpopulation on Ridgefield NWR or the inability for this

subpopulation to grow. Risk of inbreeding or hybridization with Columbia black-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*) would also be higher because of the small number of CWTD present. In addition, the time needed for the JBH Mainland population to return to prior sustainable levels would be extended. This action would therefore result in the increased intensity of predator control in both areas, as this activity would have to be implemented to increase fawn recruitment until population goals were met.

Alternative B (Selected Plan)

Under Alternative B: Translocation, the Service would translocate up to 35 deer in 2014 and up to 20 deer in 2015 from Puget Island to Ridgefield NWR and the JBH Mainland Unit. For the 2014 effort, at least 20 deer would be moved to Ridgefield NWR, and the remaining 15 would go to either location, depending on the results of population surveys conducted on the JBH Mainland in February and discussions with State and Tribal partners. Translocations would occur from January 15 to April 15, 2014 and December 15, 2014 to April 15, 2015.

Capture and translocation would occur three to five times per week as described in the CWTD Capture Plan (USFWS, unpub. report). Approximately 5 to 33 percent of the deer relocated would be males and the rest would be females. The Service would employ several ground capture methods with vehicle transport. Ground capture techniques would include drop netting, drive netting, and darting. Deer would be transported in specially made crates by vehicle and boat.

Monitoring of the translocated deer would occur three times per week for the first month post release, at least once per week for the next six months, and two to four times per month for the remainder of the first year as described in the CWTD Monitoring Plan (USFWS, unpub. report). Monitoring will continue once per month for the next two to five years post release, funding permitted. Monitoring may be conducted by agents authorized by the USFWS Incidental Take Permit (Service, Cowlitz Indian Tribe, WDFW, and ODFW staff).

In addition to the translocation, the Service, in conjunction with the states of Oregon and Washington, will implement animal damage management (ADM) for landowners who may incur damage to crops or other property (USFWS 2013²). The Service has contracted with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service - Wildlife Services (APHIS -WS) to respond to questions/complaints about deer damage in both Washington and Oregon and the Cowlitz Indian Tribe for questions/complaints in Washington. The designated Point of Contact (POC) for all CWTD-related inquiries is the Project Leader for Ridgefield NWR.

Alternative B was selected for implementation because the Service believes that this action is the best viable alternative to protect CWTD. Implementing Alternative B is expected to quickly return the JBH Mainland subpopulation back to viable and secure status, and position the Ridgefield subpopulation to reach viable and secure status within a few years. The DPS would reach delisting criteria sooner under Alternative B than under Alternative A and would be in a more robust position for delisting. This action would also relieve stressors on the Ridgefield subpopulation, such as increased risk of inbreeding and hybridization, and the threat of a declining subpopulation. Shortening the time to reach population goals would decrease the number of years that predator control is needed at both JBH Mainland Unit and Ridgefield NWR.

and would shorten the period of regulatory restrictions on animal damage management and hunting.

As described in the EA, the Service has determined that no significant impacts are likely to result from the proposed action of implementing Alternative B for the following reasons:

- By relocating additional CWTD from Puget Island to Ridgefield and JBH NWRs, the Ridgefield population would be in a position to reach viable and secure status within a few years and JBH Mainland population would probably immediately recover to viable status under the criteria of the CWTD Recovery Plan.
- The Puget Island subpopulation would be reduced by up to 55 deer over two years. This represents a loss of about 20 percent of the subpopulation the first year and another 9 to 17 percent the following year. This population reduction is about equal to the expected annual mortality rate in the first year and less than the expected mortality rate the following year. However the net loss to the subpopulation is expected to be lower because removing animals from a robust population can often lower annual mortality rates and increase fecundity because of a release of competition.
- There would be no significant negative affect to resident wildlife or threatened or endangered species on Puget Island, Ridgefield or JBH NWRs.
- All sites involved in the proposed translocation are in the Columbia River floodplain and share similar habitats and wildlife species.
- No cultural sites would be affected by either action.
- No significant effects to the demographic or economic, setting are expected.
- Changes to the social setting include the associated changes pertaining to the potential delisting of the DPS. These include a lowering of regulatory oversight of the species and the potential lowering of barriers to distribution expansion. Delisting is expected to occur under either alternative but could occur sooner under Alternative B.
- There would be minor changes to public recreation resulting from translocation of CWTD on Ridgefield NWR.
- The action would contribute to the goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System by strengthening the Service's ability to provide wildlife conservation, contribute to protecting endangered species in the Refuge System, and provide additional opportunities for wildlife viewing.

Public Review

The Draft EA was available for public review and comment for a 30-day period from December 12, 2013 through January 12, 2014. The document was distributed to Federal, State, and local agencies, potentially affected landowners, private groups, and individuals. The Draft EA was posted on the Refuge's website and press releases were sent to area newspapers. The Refuge received a total of 11 comment letters/emails from Tribal, Federal and State agencies, organizations and individuals. The Final EA has been modified, where appropriate, to meet and address the concerns that were raised and all substantive comments were addressed in the response to comments. The details of the Service's public involvement efforts or opportunities are described in the EA.

Conclusions

Based on review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, I have determined that implementing Alternative B of the EA for translocation of Deer from Puget Island, Washington to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge and Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer, Washington is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect 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, the Service is not required to prepare an environmental impact statement.

This Finding of No Significant Impact and supporting references are on file at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Willapa National Wildlife Refuge Complex, 3888 SR 101 Ilwaco, WA 98224 (telephone 360-484-3482). These documents are available to the public and can be found on the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/jbh/Planning/Planning.html>. Public notices will be placed in newspapers and we are sending a final planning update to interested and affected parties notifying them of this decision.

Supporting References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014¹. Final Environmental Assessment for Translocation of Deer from Puget Island to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge and Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2014². Memo from Washington Fish and Wildlife Office regarding Section 7 concurrence for the Draft Environmental Assessment for Translocation of Deer from Puget Island to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge and Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2013¹. Final Environmental Assessment for Translocation of Deer from Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer and Puget Island to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge and Cottonwood Island.

USFWS. 2013². *Animal Damage Management Plan for Columbian White-tailed deer in the Columbia River Distinct Population Segment of Washington and Oregon. Willapa National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Ilwaco, WA. 33pp.*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1983. *Revised Columbian White-tailed Deer Recovery Plan. Olympia, WA*

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Date

Acting