

**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 Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer (JBH) and Puget Island to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Cottonwood Island. Under the proposed action, the Service would translocate up to 50 CWTD from the JBH Mainland Unit to Ridgefield NWR and up to 15 CWTD from Puget Island to Cottonwood Island. Translocations would occur between January 29 and April 15, 2013.

The Service considers the proposed action to be an emergency translocation based on the imminent failure of Steamboat Slough dike. The JBH Mainland Unit would flood as a result of the dike failure. Based on the threat to the CWTD subpopulation on the JBH Mainland Unit, the Service proposes to translocate animals that are in the potential flood zone.

According to recovery criteria developed for the Revised Columbian White-tailed Deer Recovery Plan (USFWS 1983), subpopulations are considered viable and secure if they support 50 or more animals and are not under threat of development or radical change. This viable and secure designation has become an important benchmark for recovery purposes and has been used to outline delisting criteria. Until recently, two subpopulations met the definition of viable and secure: Tenasillahe Island and the Mainland Unit—both on the JBH Refuge. The Mainland Unit supports approximately 70–90 deer and represents about 13 percent of the total Lower Columbia River population of CWTD.

**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 the JBH Mainland Unit and Puget Island subpopulations to Ridgefield NWR and Cottonwood Island. The entire Mainland Unit subpopulation would remain on the JBH Refuge and would be subjected to the effects of flooding without mitigation. The Puget Island subpopulation would remain unchanged.

Alternative A was not selected for implementation because it is believed that this scenario could lead to the elimination of all but a handful of deer on the JBH Mainland Unit. In addition, the small population in and near Cottonwood Island would continue to interbreed and be at increased risk of local extinction, inbreeding, and hybridization with black-tailed deer.

*Alternative B (Selected Plan)*

Under Alternative B, the Service would translocate up to 50 CWTD from the JBH Mainland Unit to Ridgefield NWR and up to 15 CWTD from Puget Island to Cottonwood Island. Capture and translocation would occur three to five times per week. 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 2-4 times per month for the remainder of the first year. Monitoring will continue once per month for the next 2-5 years post release, funding permitted.

The Service would employ several capture methods. Most of the deer would be moved by ground capture and 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. The Service would also conduct helicopter capture after March 1 if ground capture methods have not achieved half of the intended goal by February 22. In addition to the translocation effort, 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. This plan will include a strategy for advice, hazing, or capture and relocation of problem animals, and will clarify the role of U.S. Department of Agriculture-Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service – Wildlife Services (APHIS-WS) in assisting landowners in both Washington and Oregon.

Alternative B was selected because the Service believes that this emergency action is the best viable alternative to protect CWTD from the threat of inundation caused by the failure of Steamboat Slough Dike. A dike failure at JBH Mainland Unit could represent a considerable setback in recovery efforts for the CWTD. Prior week-long flood events in February 1996, November 2007, and December 2009 in this unit have reduced deer numbers by up to 50% from existing levels. It is expected that daily flooding from a breach at this location could substantially reduce or eliminate this subpopulation to where it might not recover. If the Service can relocate at least half of the deer from the JBH Mainland Unit, there is high probability that the relocated CWTD will establish a new viable subpopulation in this secure location, thus maintaining the recovery trajectory for the species.

The proposed action would also stabilize a small population of CWTD in the Cottonwood Island area that was introduced to the island in 2010 by the Cowlitz Indian Tribe. Cottonwood Island is considered secure habitat, and is considered part of Upper Estuary Islands subpopulation. Together as a unit, these islands make up a subpopulation that the Service is working towards increasing to a viable level of 50 animals.

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

- By relocating at least half of the CWTD from the JBH Mainland Unit to Ridgefield NWR, there is high probability that the relocated deer will establish a new secure subpopulation that over time could also become viable.
- The translocation of 15 deer will increase the chances of maintaining a self-sustaining herd on Cottonwood Island and would serve to increase the genetic variability of the deer in that area.
- The effect on Puget Island deer would be negligible. The removal of 15 deer represents less than 10 percent of the population.
- There would be no significant negative affect to resident wildlife or threatened or endangered species on Ridgefield NWR and Cottonwood Island.
- 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, economic, and social setting are expected.
- There would be minor changes to public recreation resulting from translocation of CWTD on Ridgefield NWR and no changes to Cottonwood Island.
- 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 3, 2012 through January 2, 2013. 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 14 comment letters/emails from Tribal, Federal and State agencies, organizations and individuals. The Final EA has been modified 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 Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer and Puget Island, Washington to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge and Cottonwood Island, 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. 2013. 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.*

*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2013. Memo from Washington Fish and Wildlife Office regarding Section 7 concurrence for the Draft 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.*

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



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Regional Chief,  
National Wildlife Refuge System  
Region 1

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Date