

COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Expanded Environmental Education and Interpretation at Rapids Lake Unit

Refuge Name: Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authority (ies):

Refuge: Date Established: October 8, 1976, Public Law 94-466

Refuge Purpose(s):

Refuge - The Secretary shall develop and administer ... the refuge, in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Act ... The Secretary may also exercise any other authority available to him for the conservation and management of wildlife and natural resources, the development of wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, wildlife interpretation, and environmental education, to the extent deemed by him to be appropriate ... The Secretary shall construct, administer and maintain, ... a wildlife interpretation and education center ... to promote environmental education and to provide an opportunity for the study and enjoyment of wildlife in its natural habitat.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

“The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

Description of Use:

To allow an expanded environmental education and wildlife interpretation program to be conducted on the Rapids Lake Unit. Formal programs include activities prepared, scheduled, and organized for school-aged children and organized groups by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff. In most cases, curriculums and program schedules are prepared in advance. These curriculums address a number of wildlife conservation issues including wetland and grassland conservation, migratory bird management, and the conservation of endangered species. Informal programs include self-guided trail routes and nature trails, impromptu presentations and discussions of wildlife conservation issues with interested citizens, casual visitors, and unscheduled groups. The visitation and use of the Rapids Lake Unit by local educators and their classes on their own for the purposes of furthering their understanding of natural resource management issues would also be classified as an informal program.

As part of the Refuge Mitigation Plan for the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, several projects were identified to offset the impacts of commercial over flights on Refuge lands. First of all, the Gehl-Mittelsted house was identified for conversion into a visitor contact station. This project would have entailed the relocation of the structure out of the flood plain. Upon further research, the cost to move this structure was prohibitive to the project since the house consists of brick stacked upon brick with no framework. A new alternative was identified which consists of the construction of a visitor and environmental education center inclusive of administrative office space. The center would contain approximately 1,000 square feet of space featuring static and interactive interpretive exhibits focusing on habitat and wildlife population management in the Lower Minnesota River Valley. Mitigation funding would also be used to develop and/or construct outdoor environmental education and interpretive facilities such as nature trails, accessible boardwalks and observation platforms, parking lots, kiosks, signs, and habitat management demonstration sites. Both formal and informal programs, as previously described, would occur at the new visitor and environmental education center, and at the outdoor environmental education and interpretive facilities. These newly constructed facilities would also focus on wildlife conservation issues in addition to habitat and wildlife population management in the Lower Minnesota River Valley.

Another component of the Refuge Mitigation Plan includes the construction of an intern bunkhouse at a suitable Refuge location, capable of hosting sixteen individuals (both interns and volunteers). This facility would support

the Refuge's expanded environmental education and wildlife interpretive program. A site on the Rapids Lake Unit has been selected for the construction of an intern bunkhouse.

This use is a high priority public use of the Refuge.

Availability of Resources:

Up to four additional Refuge staff may be funded using Refuge mitigation funds. These staff members would initially be hired to plan for mitigation projects. As these projects (e.g., visitor and education facilities) are completed, these staff members would assume environmental education and interpretive programming responsibilities at the newly constructed facilities and within adjacent rural communities.

A new 3,200 square foot maintenance shop was constructed on the Rapids Lake Unit during FY04. This facility will assist the public uses program on the Refuge.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Selection of sites to construct the proposed visitor and environmental education center, outdoor environmental education/interpretive facilities, and intern housing would consider previously disturbed sites and/or sites currently being used for administrative purposes, as high priority development sites so as to minimize disturbance to vegetation and wildlife use of those areas. If necessary, construction activities would be limited to those time periods outside of the critical breeding and nesting season.

The overall impacts to the Refuge and its associated wildlife populations from public use of these new facilities would be minimal. There would be some disturbance to waterfowl and other wildlife, but at levels that would not likely interfere with production or the population maintenance. School buses and personal vehicles would utilize developed parking areas. The nature trails that would be developed in undisturbed areas would be built so as to minimize disturbance to vegetation and wildlife use of these areas.

Public Review and Comment:

Open houses were held in preparation for the Comprehensive Conservation Plans for the Refuge and Wetland District. Public comments were also solicited and received concerning Service operations including public use programs such as interpretation and environmental education.

Determination:

Use is Not Compatible

Use is Compatible with Following Stipulation

Stipulation Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. Use of motorized vehicles, horses and water craft is prohibited except by permit or in designated parking areas, access trails, or public roads/tour routes.
2. Managers will monitor use patterns and densities and make adjustments in timing, location and duration as needed to limit disturbance.

Justification:

This use has been determined to be compatible provided the above stipulations are implemented. This use is being permitted as a priority public use and will not diminish the primary purposes of the Refuge. This use will meet the mission of the NWRS by furthering the understanding and knowledge of this Nation's wildlife conservation needs.

Signature: Refuge Manager: _____
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief: _____
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 15-year Re-evaluation Date: _____