

**Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge**  
**Established 1924**  
**Compatibility Determination**

**Use:** Cooperative Farming for Habitat Management

**Refuge Name:** Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Refuge)

**Establishing and Acquisition Authority(ies):**

The Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge was established by Public Law No. 268, 68<sup>th</sup> Congress on June 7, 1924. This act authorized acquisition of lands for Refuge purposes. Additional lands acquired in fee title by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are managed as part of the Refuge under a 1963 Cooperative Agreement between the Department of the Army and the Department of the Interior.

**Refuge Purpose(s):**

“The Refuge shall be established and maintained (a) as a refuge and breeding place for migratory birds included in the terms of the convention between the United States and Great Britain for the protection of migratory birds, concluded August 16, 1916, and (b) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior by regulations, prescribe, as a refuge and breeding place for other wild birds, game animals, fur-bearing animals, and for the conservation of wild flowers and aquatic plants, and (c) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior may, by regulations, prescribe a refuge and breeding place for fish and other aquatic animal life.”

**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:**

The Refuge will allow farming by private individuals for the purpose of habitat management.

Cooperative farming is the term used for cropping activities (growing agricultural products) conducted by a third party on land that is owned by or managed as part of the Refuge by jurisdictional agreement. Farming of any single field or area is usually done on a short-term basis (5 years or less) to: remove undesirable vegetation; reduce unacceptable chemical concentrations in the soil; prepare optimum site conditions for establishment of native vegetation, including forest, prairie or wetland communities. In some circumstances, cooperative farming may occur for longer time periods to maintain

suitable conditions for future habitat management actions that require completion of complex planning and coordination. For example, maintaining an area free of woody vegetation for future development of moist soil units is typically less harmful and more efficient and cost effective compared to removing such vegetation at a later time. In most circumstances where farming is permitted, the use agreement will require a portion of the crop be left unharvested in the field (typically 25-33%) for the benefit of wildlife. Cash rent, in lieu of crop share, may be considered by the District Manager, and implemented with justification.

Very little of the Refuge's approximately 240,000 acres is suitable for farming. Most areas are wetlands, or within the frequently inundated river flood plain. Most relatively higher land within the Refuge suitable for farming has been converted to permanent native habitat. Many of the relatively higher elevation areas of the Refuge are sandy soil benches not suitable for long term tillage. Areas that are currently farmed, or may be farmed in the future, are lands recently acquired, or areas being prepared for habitat restoration/enhancement projects. Approximately 200 acres, involving four permittees, are currently farmed on the Refuge. We estimate that up to 250 acres Refuge-wide may be cooperatively farmed at any one period during the next decade. The total area farmed may exceed this amount for short periods if parcels containing currently farmed land are purchased as additions to the Refuge. However, over the long term we expect the amount of farmed Refuge lands will decrease as permanent native habitat is established on these areas.

Cooperative farming is conducted under the terms and conditions of a Cooperative Farming Agreement or Special Use Permit issued by the Refuge Manager. The terms of the Agreement or Permit ensure compliance with Service policy and area-specific stipulations to meet management objectives and safeguard resources.

#### **Availability of Resources:**

The needed staff time for development and administration of a cooperative farming program is available. Most of the needed work to prepare for this use would be done as part of routine management duties. The decision to use cooperative farming as a management tool would occur as part of strategies developed under specific program or unit habitat management planning. The additional time needed to coordinate issuance and oversight of the needed Special Use Permit or Agreements is relatively minor and within existing Refuge resources.

#### **Anticipated Impacts of the Use:**

Cooperative farming to prepare suitable site conditions for habitat management purposes will result in short-term disturbances and long-term benefits to both resident and migratory wildlife using the Refuge. Short-term impacts will include disturbance and displacement typical of any noisy heavy equipment operation. Farming activities will also result in short-term loss of habitat for any species using those areas for nesting, feeding, or resting. Long-term benefits are positive due to establishment of diverse

native habitat. The resulting habitat will improve conditions for most of the same species adversely affected by the short-term negative impacts. The relative small size of the areas being farmed, and the control of timing and duration of farming practices will limit anticipated impacts.

**Public Review and Comment:**

A draft of this Compatibility Determination was included in the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released May 1, 2005 for a 120-day comment period. It was also available during a subsequent 90-day review period on a supplement to the EIS released December 3, 2005. Public notification included notices in the Federal Register, media announcements, and 31 public meetings and workshops attended by more than 3,700 persons. No comments specific to this use or determination were received.

**Determination:**

\_\_\_ Use is Not Compatible

xx Use is Compatible With Following Stipulations

**Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:**

1. Cooperative Farming Agreements will be limited to five years or less, unless otherwise approved by the Refuge Manager.
2. Cooperating farmers will be subject to Service policy and regulation regarding use of chemicals.
3. Special conditions of Cooperative Farming Agreements will address unique local conditions as applicable.
4. Farming must meet specific habitat and related wildlife objectives and contribute to the purposes of the Refuge.

**Justification:**

Farming on the Refuge to prepare lands for restoration or enhancement will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the Refuge because:

1. Cooperative farming activities will be conducted where it provides the fastest, most cost effective way to establish native prairie, forest, or managed wetlands on areas that have unacceptable chemical residue, noxious weeds, or other undesirable plant species or ecotypes.

