

Final Compatibility Determination for Fishing on Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge

Use: Fishing

Refuge Name: Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authority(ies):

- . . . the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions” 16 United States (U.S.) Code Section 3901(b) (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986)
- “. . . for conservation purposes . . .” 7 U.S. Code Section 2002 (Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act)
- . . . for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.” 16 U.S. Code Section 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

Refuge Purpose(s):

The primary purpose of the refuge is to “preserve and protect wetland riparian habitat for its migratory waterfowl and other migratory bird values; for resident big game, small game, furbearers and upland game birds; for public educational and interpretive values; and for public recreational values.”

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (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 U.S. for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Description of Use:

What is the use?

Fishing according to all applicable federal and State of Wyoming regulations for fishing in the Bear River Drainage of Wyoming.

Where will the use be conducted?

Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

When will the use be conducted?

Within the seasons set for fishing in Wyoming.

How will the use be conducted?

According to all applicable refuge and State of Wyoming regulations regarding fishing.

Why is the use being proposed?

The purpose of this proposed action is to provide compatible wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities on Cokeville Meadows NWR. The need of the proposed action is to meet the Service's priorities and mandates as outlined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 to "recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority general uses of the NWRs" and "ensure that opportunities are provided within the Refuge System for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses" (16 U.S. Code 668dd[a][4]).

Availability of Resources:

Initial start-up funding is estimated to be \$500 to reprint the hunting and fishing brochure. Existing parking areas will be used and no new signage is needed. The refuge law enforcement officer and Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) warden will conduct periodic compliance checks. Participation is expected to be light and will not require significant time to conduct compliance checks.

Continued coordination with WGFD law enforcement and wildlife management staff will continue. Aquatic surveys will continue in coordination with the WGFD. Results from research completed on the refuge will be included and considered for any future management decisions for fishing.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Biological Conflicts:

Fishing will cause few additional biological conflicts with other wildlife species. Some disturbance of other animals is unavoidable when people are on the refuge and when they are fishing. However, most of the refuge lands are currently open to some form of hunting, and open to the public for hiking, bird watching and similar activities. Participation in fishing is expected to be light because of the abundant public fishing available in the area, the seasonal nature of fishing due to water diversions, and access is by walk-in only.

Refuge staff will make every effort to increase protection of endangered species and other non-target wildlife. High-visibility law enforcement activities and covert operations will be conducted to enforce regulations. Special refuge regulations will be in effect, if warranted, to minimize disturbance and to protect flora and fauna in the area.

Public Use Conflicts:

No conflicts of consequence are expected between sport anglers, big game, and upland or small game hunters. Overlap of hunting area usage between sport anglers, migratory bird hunters, and big game hunters may occur, but is expected to be minimal due to the dissimilar nature of these activities and the areas of the refuge where these activities may be expected to occur.

The demand for non-consumptive, wildlife-oriented use on the refuge continues to grow. Conflicts between anglers and non-consumptive users may occur. Providing non-consumptive users with access to wildlife viewing areas will reduce conflicts. Should serious conflicts arise, considerations will be given to changes in time and space scheduling and zoning. Decisions will be based on minimizing impacts on various user groups, and best management practices for fish and wildlife.

The refuge area has been a popular fishing area for many decades before refuge establishment. The fishing program on the refuge provides for the use of refuge lands and waters within a framework designed to protect wildlife populations, reduces user conflicts, and provides for public safety. The continuance of these traditional uses has been widely supported by the public since the establishment of the refuge. We expect that this support will continue.

Administrative Conflicts:

At this time, few administrative conflicts are anticipated from allowing fishing on the refuge. Existing refuge staff will administer the fishing program. The refuge manager will set station priorities to assure that required support staff is adequate. As this fishing program evolves over the years, refuge-specific regulations, systems of control to limit number of fishermen and women, and fee costs may occur or change at the refuge manager's discretion.

Maintenance activities that occur may include prescribed burns, and maintenance of fences, gates, signs, water control structures, and roads. These activities can be managed to not interfere with fishing opportunity while allowing needed work to be accomplished.

Haying and grazing practices do occur on the refuge and in the fishing areas for management purposes. Permittees will be made aware of the conflicts that may occur, such as fishermen and women leaving gates open.

Indirect and Cumulative Impacts:

Hunting and Fishing: Fishing will primarily occur during spring runoff, when common carp move from the river channel into shallowly flooded wetlands, and again in the fall, when flows increase in the Bear River until freeze up. Participation in fishing is expected to be light because abundant public fishing is available in the surrounding area; access is by walk-in only, and the seasonal nature of fishing opportunities at the refuge. Allowing fishing on the refuge is anticipated to produce negligible additional impacts because of this public use. Hunting for select species on the refuge was opened in 2014. Since opening, participation in hunting activities has remained light for several reasons. Land ownership patterns include a number of separate parcels with limited vehicle access. Waterfowl often migrate from the valley early in the waterfowl seasons with the first winter storms. The ability to reflood wetlands for fall migratory bird hunting seasons is limited by Wyoming water rights law. An abundance of public hunting opportunities are available on surrounding Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, state, and private lands in the immediate area. All of this combined has limited negative impacts

resulting from public hunting. Opening fishing on the refuge is expected to be a seasonal activity.

Other Wildlife-Dependent Recreation: Existing designated parking areas are located on the perimeter of the refuge units. No additional roads or trails are proposed to support hunting and fishing or other wildlife-dependent recreation due to land ownership patterns and a high probability of flooding within the extensive floodplain. No additional cumulative impacts will result.

Use of Lead and Tackle: Bowfishing for common carp is anticipated to comprise most of the fishing use. No lead is used or deposited for this activity. Traditional hook and line fishing participation is expected to be extremely light, resulting in a negligible amount of lead split shot being deposited from snagging of fishing line on the bottom of the wetlands and river channel. Fly fishing for common carp is increasing in popularity in the West. Many fly fishermen are self-regulating and have shifted to the use of non-toxic split shot and weight for their flies, limiting the potential for losing lead weight and flies. Federal and state waterfowl hunting regulations that include light geese, do not allow possession and/or use of other than nontoxic shot. This regulation will remain and be enforced for light goose hunting on the refuge.

Climate Change: While the impacts of climate change on refuge wildlife and habitats are not certain, allowing fishing on the refuge will not add to the cumulative impacts of climate change. The refuge will use an adaptive management approach for its fishing program. Reviewing the program annually and revising annually (if necessary), in coordination with the WGFD, the Service's fishing program could be adjusted to ensure that it will not contribute further to the cumulative impacts of climate change on the WGFD fisheries program in the Bear River Drainage of Wyoming.

Public Review and Comment:

This compatibility determination was prepared concurrently with the environmental assessment and companion fishing plan for the refuge. Public review and comment was achieved concurrently with the public review and comment period for the draft fishing plan and environmental assessment. Public review and comment was solicited through public posting of notices at the refuge and on the refuge's website.

Determination:

- Use is not compatible.
- Use is compatible with the following stipulations.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

- All applicable rules and regulations for fishing on Cokeville Meadows NWR must be followed.

