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Final Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge

Fishing Plan

I. Introduction

Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is located in south western Wyoming in Lincoln County, near the Utah and Idaho boundary. The refuge is within the Bear River Watershed, which has a drainage area of about 4.8 million acres in three states, Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho. The Bear River that flows through the length of the refuge originates in the Uinta Mountains of Utah, moving north through western Wyoming, then west into Idaho, and back south into Utah to its terminus at Great Salt Lake for a total length of over 500 miles. The refuge elevation is around 6,300 feet above mean sea level. Temperatures are often below 0 degrees Fahrenheit in winter and can exceed 90 degrees in midsummer. Annual mean temperature is 38 degrees Fahrenheit.

The valley south of the town of Cokeville, Wyoming, has been described as the largest wetland complex in Wyoming. The unique wetland value and importance to migratory birds of the Bear River floodplain near Cokeville was recognized for many years. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Fish and Wildlife Service and Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) reviewed the area with the idea of protecting the habitat. In July 1987, the Service gained conditional support for a refuge proposal from the WGFD.

The refuge was established in 1993 to preserve and protect wetland habitat for migratory, summer breeding, and resident birds. Examples include canvasbacks, redhead, and other dabbling ducks, white-faced ibis, long-billed curlew, sandhill crane, greater sage-grouse, and numerous conservation-priority non-game species (Nicholoff 2003; USFWS 1992; WGFD 2005). The refuge now consists of 6,134 acres fee-title and 320 acres State leased land. Total authorized acquisition boundary consists of 26,657 acres in Lincoln County, Wyoming. The refuge is administered by the United States (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), which is part of the Department of the Interior. The purpose of the refuge is to preserve and protect wetland habitat for migratory waterfowl and other migratory species values; resident big game, small game, furbearers, and upland game birds; public education and interpretation values, and public recreation values (USFWS 1992).

The refuge will provide a fishing program that is compatible with refuge management objectives. The public and the WGFD have asked about fishing opportunities for many years. Bowfishing for common carp has had the most interest from the public. During spring runoff and when the refuge's shallow wetlands are being flooded, common carp will leave the main channel of the Bear River to forage and spawn in the shallow water, making the carp more available for bowfishing.

Habitats are narrow riparian/riverfront-type forest corridors, robust emergent wetland plants, wet meadow sedge and grass communities, riverine, and upland sagebrush/grassland communities. Early succession riparian species such as cottonwood and willow are present on newly deposited and scoured sand-silt and gravelly soils near the active channel of the Bear River. There is a

diversity of wildlife; game and furbearer species are ducks, geese, coots, mergansers, snipe, Virginia rail, sora rail, sandhill crane, mourning dove, elk, pronghorn, mule deer, moose, and cottontail rabbit. Many other species of migratory birds can be found on the refuge.

The main channel of the Bear River, or riverine habitats, has been significantly altered over the last 100 years. Many diversions on the refuge, and up and down river, move water from the main channel and distribute the water across the valley through ditches and earthen dikes. This shallow water is held into July each year, until diversions stop and water flows back to the river. This allows the shallow wetlands to dry enough to support haying equipment and aftermath grazing. The river channel can be nearly dry when water is diverted. This historical and ongoing management limits the fisheries resource. Limited information on the fishery resource is available; however, two electroshocking efforts by the WGFD in recent years have detected the following species:

The following species were detected through 2009 and 2018 electroshock surveys in the Bear River through the refuge. Game fish species include Bonneville cutthroat trout, brown trout, snake river cutthroat trout, yellow perch, and mountain whitefish. Common carp was the only non-game fish species. Other species include redbelt shiner, speckled dace, Utah chub, Utah sucker, mountain sucker, longnose dace, mottled sculpin, boreal chorus frog, northern leopard frog, western pearlshell mussel, and California floater mussel.

II. Conformance with Statutory Authorities

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), as outlined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (NWRSA), as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) (16 U.S. Code 668dd et seq.) 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. ”

The administration, management, and growth of the Refuge System is guided by the following goals:

- to preserve, restore, and enhance in their natural ecosystems all species of animals and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered;
- to perpetuate the migratory bird resource;
- to preserve a natural diversity and abundance of fauna and flora on refuge lands; and
- to provide an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology and man’s role in his environment and provide visitors with high-quality, safe, wholesome, and enjoyable recreation experiences oriented toward wildlife to the extent these activities are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

The statutory authority for Service management and associated habitat and wildlife management planning on units of the Refuge System is derived from the NWRSA, as amended by the Improvement Act (16 U.S. Code 668dd-668ee). The Improvement Act provided a mission for the Refuge System and clear standards for its management, use, planning, and growth. The Improvement Act (P.L. 105–57) recognizes that wildlife-dependent recreational uses including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation, when determined to be compatible with the mission of the Refuge System and the purposes of the refuge are legitimate and appropriate public uses of national wildlife refuges. Sections 5(c) and (d) of the Improvement Act states “compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are the priority general public uses of the NWRS and shall receive priority consideration in planning and management; and when the Secretary [of the Interior] determines that a proposed wildlife-dependent recreational use is a compatible use within a refuge, that activity should be facilitated, subject to such restrictions or regulations as may be necessary, reasonable, and appropriate.”

The Improvement Act further states, “In providing priority public uses, refuges shall emphasize opportunities for families to experience compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, particularly opportunities for parents and their children to safely engage in traditional outdoor activities, such as fishing and hunting.” “Compatible use” is defined as a wildlife-dependent recreational use or any other use of a refuge that, in the sound professional judgment of the director, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the Refuge System or the purposes of the refuge. The Service’s Final Compatibility Policy (603 FW 2) pursuant to the act, delegates the responsibility of determining compatibility to the refuge manager with concurrence by the regional chief of the Refuge System.

The Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, 16 U.S. Code 460k (Recreation Act), authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to “. . . administer such areas [of the System] or parts thereof for public recreation when in his judgment public recreation can be an appropriate incidental or secondary use.” Although the Recreation Act authorizes us to allow public recreation in areas of the Refuge System when the use is an “appropriate incidental or secondary use,” the Improvement Act provides the Refuge System mission and includes specific directives and a clear hierarchy of public uses on the Refuge System.

In the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 50 , Chapter I, Subchapter C, Section 31.15 states that the privilege of hunting and fishing may be extended to the general public. Section 31.2(e) lists fishing as a method of surplus wildlife population control. Section 32.1 states that wildlife refuge areas may be opened to sport fishing only after a determination is made that this activity is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. In addition, the sport fishing program must be consistent with principles of sound fishery management and otherwise be in the public interest. The opening or closing of wildlife refuge areas to fishing is subject to the rulemaking requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act (5 U.S. Code 551 et seq.). Provided, that fishing or entry on all or any part of individual areas may be temporarily suspended by posting upon occasions of unusual or critical conditions of, or affecting, land, water, vegetation, or fish and wildlife populations.

III. Statement of Objectives

A. Refuge Purpose

Cokeville Meadows NWR was officially established in 1993 “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.”

B. Goals of the Refuge System

1. Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats, including species that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
2. Develop and maintain a network of habitats for migratory birds, anadromous and interjurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations that is strategically distributed and carefully managed to meet important life history needs of these species across their ranges.
3. Conserve those ecosystems, plant communities, wetlands of national or international significance, and landscapes and seascapes that are unique, rare, declining, or underrepresented in existing protection efforts.
4. Provide and enhance opportunities to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation).
5. Foster understanding and instill appreciation of the diversity and interconnectedness of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

C. Objectives of Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge

The following are objectives of the refuge:

- Riparian and Riverine Habitats: Maintain, and where appropriate, restore the processes necessary to sustain the biological diversity and integrity of riparian vegetation and aquatic habitats for breeding birds, native fishes, reptiles, and amphibians.
- Wet Meadows Habitat: For wet meadows habitat, Using the best scientific practices to manage and preserve critical wet meadow habitat, the refuge will provide quality feeding, loafing, and breeding opportunities for a diversity of migratory birds and resident wildlife.
- Upland Habitats: Manage and restore the diversity and composition of grassland and shrub-steppe habitats within the range of historic conditions for sagebrush-dependent species, upland nesting migratory birds, and other resident species.
- Visitor Services & Cultural Resources: Provide appropriate public access to refuge lands where visitors can safely enjoy compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, such as

hunting, fishing, environmental education and interpretation, and wildlife observation and photography. The refuge will seek partnerships to help protect on-site cultural resources.

- Refuge Development and Operations: The refuge will effectively utilize all available resources to develop, enhance, and maintain refuge facilities and operations that support wildlife, habitat, and public use programs. The Service will pursue easements and other land protection opportunities, with willing sellers, within the approved refuge acquisition boundary.
- Partnerships: Engage in mutually beneficial partnerships to promote wildlife and habitat conservation, and public enjoyment of wildlife resources in the upper Bear River watershed that are consistent with historic land uses, refuge purposes, and goals.

D. Fishing Program Objectives

The Service policy on fishing as stated in the Refuge Manual (605 FW 3.3):

“The overarching goal of our wildlife-dependent recreation policy is to enhance opportunities and access to quality visitor experiences on refuges and to manage the refuge to conserve fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. We recognize fishing as a traditional outdoor pastime that is deeply rooted in America's natural heritage.”

Fishing is an appropriate use of the Refuge System when it is compatible. It is also considered a priority general public use of the Refuge System and should receive enhanced consideration over nonpriority uses. We strongly encourage refuge managers to provide visitors with quality fishing opportunities when these opportunities are compatible. Refuge managers follow the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health policy when addressing fish stocking. Fishing programs promote understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management on all lands and waters in the Refuge System. We rely on close cooperation and coordination with state fish and wildlife management agencies to develop and manage fishing opportunities on refuges, and to set refuge fish population management goals and objectives. Regulations permitting fishing within the Refuge System must be, to the extent practicable, consistent with state fish and wildlife laws, regulations, and management plans.”

Fishing on the refuge will be in accordance with state, federal, and refuge regulations. Regulations established by the WGFD for recreational fishing, including bowfishing, will be adopted. No additional special regulations will apply. The entire refuge will be open to recreational fishing (Figure 1). Maps designating parking and access will be available to the public.



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge

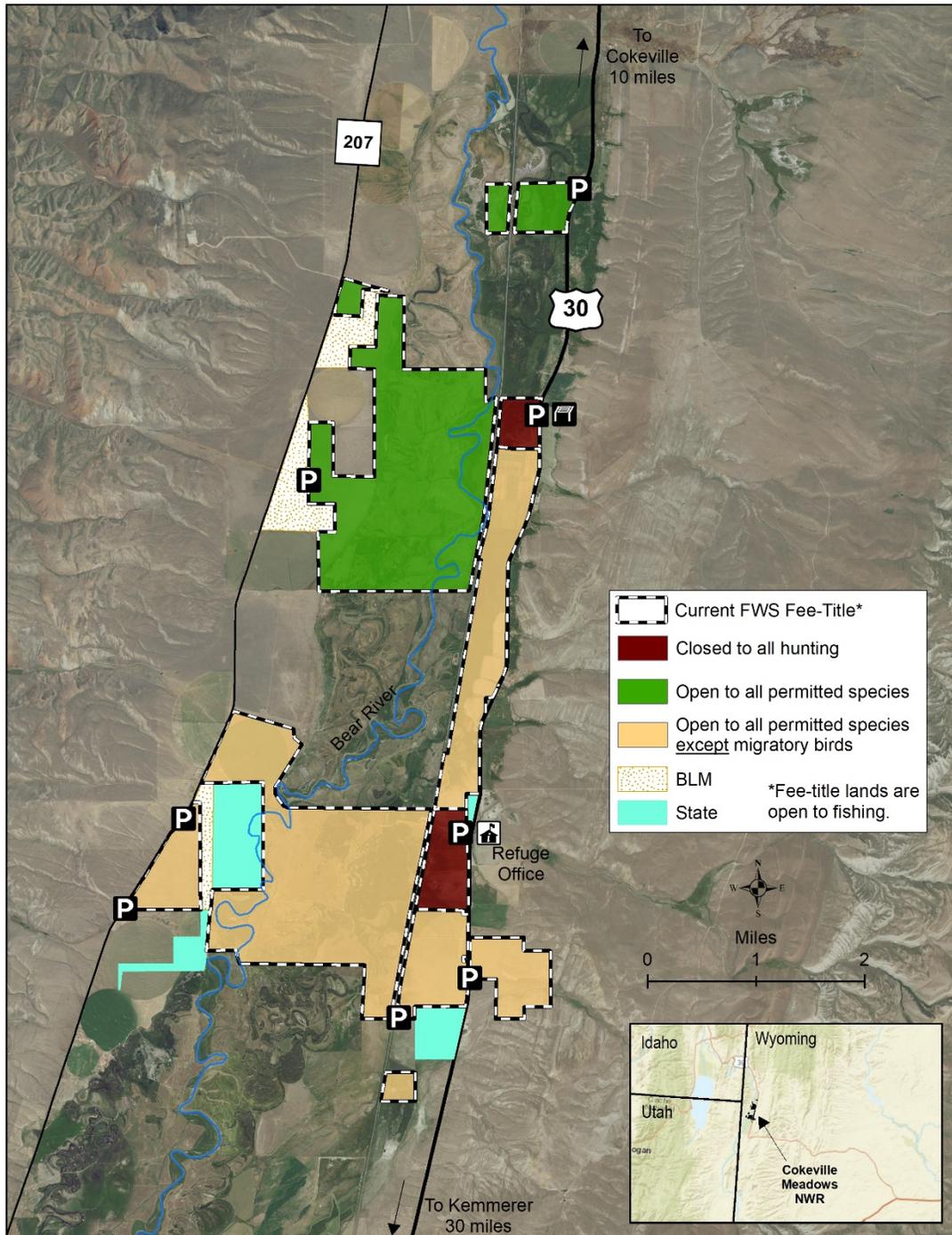


Figure 1. Hunting and Fishing Opportunities on Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge.

E. Relationship of Fishing Program to Goals and Objectives

Goals and objectives of the refuge that align with the fishing program include:

- providing appropriate public access to refuge lands where visitors can safely enjoy compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, such as hunting, fishing, environmental education and interpretation, and wildlife observation and photography (Cokeville Meadows NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan Visitor Services Goal, 2014); and
- fostering support from the general public, the WGFD, and other government and private agencies for professional management of fish, wildlife, and habitat by the Service and the refuge.

IV. Description of the Fishing Program

A. Guidelines for Fishing Program

The following administrative procedures for refuge fishing programs can be found in the Service Refuge Manual (605 FW 3.7 Recreational Fishing):

“We plan, manage, conduct, and evaluate refuge fishing programs in coordination with State fish and wildlife agencies on a consistent basis in ways that conserve habitat and fish and wildlife, ensure angler and visitor safety, comply with applicable State and Federal laws and regulations, and promote respect for the resource. In addition, our regulations need to be consistent, to the extent practicable, with State regulations.”

B. Areas Open to Fishing

The refuge currently consists of 6,134 acres of fee title land owned by the Service. The Service will continue to acquire more land over time, and as each tract is acquired, it will be considered for inclusion in the refuge fishing program. As the entire refuge is open to sport fishing and bowfishing according to WGFD regulations (Figure 1), with no additional special regulations, it is anticipated that fishing will be allowed on newly acquired fee title lands, unless special or unforeseen circumstances exist.

Access will be allowed from established parking lots that have been established.

C. Species to Be Taken

Fishing and harvest will be allowed on the refuge for all game fish, and for bowfishing non-game fish species, as defined by the WGFD.

D. Staffing and Funding

Refuge staff will prepare and update the hunting and fishing regulations brochure, make changes to the fishing management plan and regulations as needed, edit the hunting and fishing leaflet as needed, post and replace appropriate signage, respond to public inquiries about the fishing program, and conduct fishing use surveys.

Currently, the refuge complex has one full-time law enforcement officer. The refuge may occasionally request Service law enforcement staff to be brought in from other field stations.

In addition to staff expenses, the refuge will incur costs for signs, vehicle maintenance, road repair and maintenance, leaflet printing, and miscellaneous supplies.

E. Measures Taken to Avoid Conflicts with Other Management Objectives

Biological Conflicts

The proposed fishing will cause few biological conflicts with other wildlife species. Some disturbance of other animals is unavoidable when people are on the refuge. However, most of the current refuge acres are open for public hunting, and for photography, bird watching, and similar activities. Public fishing on refuge waters is anticipated to be low, because sport fishing and bowfishing are seasonal in nature, access is by foot, and significant additional opportunities exist for fishing on nearby public lands. Refuge staff will make every effort to maximize protection of endangered species and other non-target wildlife. High-visibility law enforcement activities and covert operations may be conducted to dissuade the fishing public from affecting wildlife other than the target species.

Public Use Conflicts

Few conflicts are expected to occur between those participating in fishing and other refuge users. Public fishing on refuge waters is anticipated to be low because sport fishing and bowfishing are seasonal in nature, access is by foot, and significant additional opportunities exist for fishing on nearby public lands. The current trend of fly fishing for common carp in the U.S. may be an activity that sees increasing activity; however, conflicts with other users is not anticipated.

The demand for nonconsumptive wildlife-oriented use on the refuge is seeing increasing interest by the public, although it is still very light. Conflicts between those fishing and nonconsumptive users may occur; however, it is anticipated that this will be a rare occurrence. Should serious conflicts arise, considerations will be given to changes in time and space scheduling and/or zoning. Decisions will be based on reducing impacts on various user groups, and best management practices.

The refuge area has provided a limited fishery for many years prior to establishment of the refuge. The refuge fishing program is designed to provide for the use of refuge lands and waters within a framework designed to protect fish and wildlife populations and provide for public safety. The continuance of these traditional uses has been widely supported by the public since the establishment of the refuge. It is expected that this support will continue.

Administrative Conflicts

At this time, few administrative conflicts are anticipated. Existing refuge staff will be used to administer the fishing program. The refuge manager will set station priorities to assure that required support staff numbers are adequate. As this fishing program evolves over the years,

refuge-specific regulations and systems of control to limit number of users may occur or change at the refuge manager's discretion.

Support activities may include prescribed burns, maintenance of fences, gates, signs, water control structures, and roads. These activities could 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 area for management purposes. Permittees will be made aware of the conflicts that may occur.

V. Conduct of the Fishing Program

A. Federal Regulations

Fishing on the refuge will be contingent on specific regulations enacted by the federal agency for refuges in general, and the refuge in particular. These are added to state regulations, and will take precedence where they are more restrictive than the state regulations.

General stipulations for fishing on the refuge as contained in the Code of Federal Regulations (50 Code of Federal Regulations Part 32) require that each person shall secure and possess the required state license(s) while engaged in public fishing on areas of the Refuge System:

B. State Regulations

All state regulations will apply to fishing on the refuge, and all state licenses, tags, permits, and stamps will be required.

C. Refuge-Specific Fishing Regulations (Subject to Change Annually)

Cokeville Meadows NWR allows sport fishing on the refuge.

D. Anticipated Public Reaction

The refuge has not allowed fishing since it was established (1993). Public contacts and scoping completed during preparation of the comprehensive conservation plan has indicated general support for opening the refuge to sport fishing. Sport fishing will be in accordance to state regulations and, therefore, should the state determine a change is needed, then the refuge will follow that ruling unless it violates a federal regulation or refuge objective.

E. Fishing Application and Registration Procedures

All persons fishing on the refuge will be required to obtain the necessary state licenses, tags, and stamps.

F. Description of Fishing Selection Process

Refuge hunting and fishing regulations leaflets will be available at kiosks on refuge tracts, at the refuge headquarters, and upon request from the refuge manager. Fishing will be open to the

general public according to WGFD regulations, and no additional refuge specific regulations concerning sport fishing will apply.

G. Media Selection for Announcing and Publicizing Fishing

The public will be informed of refuge fishing regulations through news releases and refuge hunting and fishing regulations leaflets. An annual program update will be filed each year as required, outlining any changes in the current hunting program. Rules and regulations will be published in the Federal Register, as required.

VI. Compatibility Determination

A compatibility determination has been prepared for this fishing plan (USFWS 2020). The refuge fishing program complies with the requirements and provisions of each of the aforementioned applicable authorities. In keeping with the mission of the Refuge System and the Improvement Act, fishing on the refuge provides recreational opportunities for present and future generations of Americans, while providing a management tool to maintain population levels and sustain quality habitat. This activity will not compromise the refuge's ability to fulfill its purpose for establishment or primary objectives—providing a resting and feeding area for migratory waterfowl and habitat for other native species.

VII. References

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