Final Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge Migratory Game Bird, Upland Game, and Big Game Hunting Plan

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction 2
II. Statement of Objectives 3
III. Description of Hunting Program 3
A. Areas to Be Opened to Hunting 3
B. Species to Be Taken, Hunting Periods, Hunting Access 4
C. Hunter Permit Requirements 4
D. Consultation and Coordination with the State 4
E. Law Enforcement 5
F. Funding and Staffing Requirements 5
IV. Conduct of the Hunting Program 5
A. Hunter Permit Application, Selection, and Registration Procedures 5
B. Refuge-Specific Hunting Regulations 6
C. Relevant State Regulations 6
D. Other Refuge Rules and Regulations for Hunting 6
V. Public Engagement 8
A. Outreach for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunting Program 8
B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunting Program 8
C. How Hunters Will Be Informed of Relevant Rules and Regulations 8
VI. Compatibility Determination 8
VII. References 9

List of Figures

Figure 1. Refuge Location and Land Ownership Map. 10
Figure 2. Refuge Hunt Unit Map. 11
Figure 3. Refuge Impoundment System Unit Map. 12

Appendices

Appendix A Refuge Maps 10
Appendix B Description of Refuge Management Units 13

Final Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge

Migratory Game Bird, Upland Game, and Big Game Hunting Plan

I. Introduction

National wildlife refuges are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), the purposes of an individual refuge, United States (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) policy, and laws and international treaties. Relevant guidance includes the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (NWRSAA), as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act), Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, and selected portions of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.

Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in 1959 under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act with the stated purpose ". . . for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds" (16 U.S. Code 715d). The refuge consists of 17,992 acres of fee title land. Located along the southern fringe of the Great Salt Lake Desert within the footprint of ancient Lake Bonneville, the refuge encompasses the largest spring complex in the Great Basin Province (greater than 73 km^2; Ayala et al. 2007). As one of the more substantial and isolated wetlands in an otherwise arid environment, the refuge plays a regionally important role for migratory birds by providing stopover habitat in fall and spring, breeding habitat in summer, and an overwintering area. Over the life of the refuge, 291 species of birds have been observed, 72 of which are known to breed on the refuge. Open water habitats maintained by thermal waters within spring basins and managed sites within the impoundment system provide for more than 40 species of birds that overwinter on the refuge.

The mission of the refuge, as outlined by the NWRSAA, as amended by the Improvement Act (16 U.S. Code 668dd et seq.), is to:

". . . 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 NWRSAA mandates the Secretary of the Interior in administering the System to (16 U.S. Code 668dd[a][4]):

- provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats within the Refuge System;
- ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans;
- ensure that the mission of the Refuge System described at 16 U.S. Code 668dd(a)(2) and the purposes of each refuge are carried out;

- ensure effective coordination, interaction, and cooperation with owners of land adjoining refuges and the fish and wildlife agency of the States in which the units of the Refuge System are located;
- assist in the maintenance of adequate water quantity and water quality to fulfill the mission of the Refuge System and the purposes of each refuge;
- recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority general public uses of the Refuge System through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife;
- ensure that opportunities are provided within the Refuge System for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses; and
- monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

Therefore, it is a priority of the Service to provide for wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities, including hunting and fishing, when those opportunities are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established and the mission of the Refuge System.

The refuge consists of nine major impoundment units that are controlled and maintained by a system of constructed ditches, earthen dams, and water control structures that allow manipulation of water levels in any one unit at any given time, based upon management objectives and the time of year.

Since 2008, the refuge has averaged 643 waterfowl hunter visits per year. All hunting activities are planned and operated to compliment the guiding principles with the refuge's primary goals and objectives. This plan provides public hunting on previously closed areas and revises regulations to be consistent with state seasons and regulations by allowing hunting of mourning dove, snipe, chukar partridge, cottontail rabbit (desert and mountain), mule deer, and pronghorn.

II. Statement of Objectives

The objectives of a migratory game bird, upland game, and big game hunting program on the refuge are to provide:

- diverse and safe hunting opportunities on refuge lands that reduce conflict with other wildlife-dependent public recreation activities and are compatible with the refuge's purpose and Service policy; and
- public understanding of, and increase public appreciation for, the refuge's and surrounding areas' natural resources.

III. Description of Hunting Program

A. Areas to Be Opened to Hunting

The total hunting area on the refuge is 12,692 acres. Migratory game bird hunting is permitted on 6,439 acres. Hunting for upland game is allowed on 12,692 acres, and big game species listed in this plan will be permitted on 6,253 acres of refuge land. See Appendix A for maps that show

refuge ownership, hunting units, and refuge management units. These units are described in Appendix B.

B. Species to Be Taken, Hunting Periods, Hunting Access

The refuge is open to the hunting of the following species in accordance with state regulations and the following refuge-specific season restrictions:

- Migratory Game Bird Hunting: Open to duck, coot, goose, snipe, and mourning dove. Hunting of waterfowl species will follow the state season. Waterfowl hunting on the refuge closes on the last day of the regular season. The refuge is not open to the extended light goose season. Hunting of mourning dove will begin with the state season and end 15 days later in advance of the Youth Waterfowl Hunt in order to prevent potential conflicts with waterfowl hunters. This is in alignment with similarly managed state waterfowl management areas.
- Upland Game Hunting: Open to chukar partridge and desert and mountain cottontail rabbit. Hunting for chukar partridge and desert and mountain cottontail rabbit will begin with the state season and end on the last day of waterfowl hunting on the refuge.
- Big Game Hunting: Open to mule deer and pronghorn for general archery season only. Hunting for mule deer and pronghorn will follow the general archery state season that ends prior to the Youth Waterfowl Hunt in order to mitigate potential conflicts with waterfowl hunters. This is in alignment with similarly managed state waterfowl management areas.

Nontoxic ammunition is required for all hunting on the refuge, with no exceptions. Possession of toxic shot while hunting other species is prohibited. Target shooting, camping, and campfires are prohibited on the refuge. Dogs may be used for hunting small game and migratory birds, but the refuge may not be used for dog training that is not associated with an actual hunt. No off-road vehicles are allowed within the refuge.

C. Hunter Permit Requirements

For general hunting activities, no special application or registration process is required.

Hunters must comply with federal and state permit requirements. State permit requirements are defined in state regulations printed in the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) guidebooks for Waterfowl, Upland Game and Turkey, and Big Game.

There are two special hunting areas with permanent hunting blinds and parking in the Avocet Unit. Priority availability of one of these special hunting areas is provided to disabled hunters, and the other area is available to all hunters through day-use registration.

D. Consultation and Coordination with the State

The refuge works collaboratively with the UDWR to provide a public hunting program on the refuge. Refuge staff have reviewed the operations and regulations of nearby similarly managed state waterfowl management areas to ensure consistency in regulations, if compatible. The refuge manager met with Jason Robinson, UDWR District Wildlife Biologist, on November 7, 2019, to

discuss ideas contained in this hunting plan. The refuge asked for a review by the UDWR Central Region office to help adjust the plan to align, where possible, with state management regulations. A formal letter also was sent to the UDWR requesting review of this document and future coordination in January 2020. The refuge will continue to coordinate with the UDWR to address annual implementation of hunting activities and ensure safe and enjoyable hunting opportunities.

E. Law Enforcement

Law enforcement of refuge and federal hunting regulations, trespass, and other public use violations associated with management of the refuge is the responsibility of commissioned federal wildlife officers. Current law enforcement coverage is provided by two federal wildlife officers assigned to the refuge by the Bear River/Fish Springs NWR Complex (Complex) in Brigham City, Utah. In order to manage the refuge hunting program, and provide notice to the public of hunting unit boundaries and regulations, the federal wildlife officers and refuge management will employ the following methods:

- Refuge and hunt area boundaries will be clearly posted.
- A refuge hunting brochure and map will be created to show hunting areas and explain applicable refuge-specific regulations. The refuge's hunting brochure will be available to the public at the refuge's office, on-site visitor information kiosk, website, and the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge Visitor Center.
- The refuge will provide a list of applicable hunting and public use regulations to the UDWR for inclusion in its waterfowl, small game, and big game guidebooks.
- Federal wildlife officers will conduct patrol and enforcement operations on the refuge throughout the year with emphasis on the hunting seasons.
- Other actual and constructive notification methods in accord with 50 CFR Section 25.31.

F. Funding and Staffing Requirements

The hunting program is designed to be administered with minimal refuge resources. The costs of administering and enforcing the hunting program comes out of the complex's annual budget. Expenses include program management, staff resources, boundary posting, signage, brochures, parking lot construction, facility maintenance, gate installation, and other hunting-specific activities.

IV. Conduct of the Hunting Program

A. Hunter Permit Application, Selection, and Registration Procedures

For general hunting activities, no special application or registration process is required. Hunters must obtain all applicable federal and state hunting permits and licenses.

B. Refuge-Specific Hunting Regulations

Listed below are refuge-specific regulations that pertain to hunting on the refuge as of the date of this plan. These regulations may be modified as conditions change or if refuge expansion continues or occurs.

(b) Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge—

(1) Migratory game bird hunting. We, the Service, allow hunting of duck, coot, goose, snipe, and mourning dove on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

(i) We allow the use of small boats (15 feet or less) when hunting. We prohibit the use of gasoline motors and airboats.

(ii) You may enter the refuge two hours prior to legal sunrise and must exit the refuge by one and a half hours after legal sunset.

(iii) Migratory bird hunting is restricted to legal shotgun only. Crossbow, archery, and falconry hunting is prohibited.

(iv) You may possess only approved nontoxic shot while in the field.

(v) The refuge mourning dove hunting period will begin with the state season and end 15 days thereafter.

(2) Upland game hunting. We allow hunting of chukar partridge and cottontail rabbit (desert and mountain) in designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

(i) You may possess only approved nontoxic shot while in the field.

(ii) Upland game hunting is restricted to legal shotgun and archery equipment only. Crossbow, falconry, and handgun hunting is prohibited.

(3) Big Game Hunting. We allow hunting of mule deer and pronghorn on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

(i) We are only open for the mule deer and pronghorn general archery season.

(ii) We are closed for the state any-legal weapon, muzzleloader, and extended archery seasons.

C. Relevant State Regulations

All hunters must consult the UDWR rules and regulations provided in the annual guidebook publication for a complete list of regulations (https://wildlife.utah.gov/hunting/hunting-regulation.html).

D. Other Refuge Rules and Regulations for Hunting

Hunting is in accordance with state regulations subject to refuge specific regulations listed above in Section IV. B. in addition to the following activities that are not permitted on the refuge:

Vehicles and Parking

- Parking is permitted in designated parking areas and on the road shoulder next to open hunting units.
- Parked vehicles may not obstruct roads, gates, and dikes.
- Entering closed areas or roads is prohibited.
- The refuge speed limit is 25 miles per hour unless otherwise posted.
- Only vehicles registered for highway use are allowed on the refuge.
- The operation of any vehicle off of designated roads is prohibited.

Fires and Camping

- Fires and overnight camping or parking are prohibited. Camping is allowed on neighboring Bureau of Land Management lands. Consult the Bureau of Land Management for current information and regulations (www.blm.gov/ut).

Nontoxic Shot

- Use of approved nontoxic shot is required on the refuge.
- Use or possession of lead shot in the field is prohibited.

Firearms

- Persons possessing, transporting, or carrying firearms on Refuge System lands must comply with all provisions of state and local law.
- Persons may only use (discharge) firearms in accordance with refuge regulations (50 CFR 27.42 and specific refuge regulations in 50 CFR Part 32).
- Target shooting is prohibited.

Retrieval of Birds

- Reasonable attempts must be made to retrieve downed or crippled birds.
- The use of dogs to retrieve downed birds is strongly encouraged.
- Hunters and dogs may not enter closed areas to retrieve birds.

Litter

- Must pack out all trash, food, and personal items at the end of the day, including spent shot shells.

Alcoholic Beverages

- The use or consumption of alcohol while hunting is prohibited.

Natural and Cultural Resources

- Searching for, disturbing, or removing objects of antiquity, cultural resources, natural objects, plants or animals, rocks and minerals, or other public property is prohibited. (50 CFR 27.61, 27.62, 27.63, and 27.64)

V. Public Engagement

A. Outreach for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunting Program

Special announcements and articles may be released in conjunction with hunting seasons. Information about the hunt will be posted at the Fish Springs NWR information station and on the refuge website. This plan was available for public review for 30 days from April 1–30, 2020.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunting Program

Since the refuge was established, hunting has been an accepted and popular activity. User conflicts between hunting and non-hunting visitors have been few but may increase due to the addition of upland and big game species. Some hunters have expressed concern over allowing a mule deer hunt because the population on the refuge is small.

C. How Hunters Will Be Informed of Relevant Rules and Regulations

General information regarding hunting and other wildlife-dependent public uses can be obtained at Fish Springs NWR office, by calling (435) 693-3122, by writing P.O. Box 568, Dugway, UT 84022 or emailing fishsprings@fws.gov. Dates, forms, maps, and general requirements about the hunt will be available on the station website at: www.fws.gov/refuge/Fish_Springs/visit/rules_and_regulations.html. Regulations pertaining to hunting on all national wildlife refuges are found in 50 CFR 32.2. Copies of the CFR can be found online and in area libraries; in addition, refuge-specific regulations are available on the refuge's website. The UDWR rules and regulations are provided in the annual guidebook publication (https://wildlife.utah.gov/hunting/hunting-regulation.html).

VI. Compatibility Determination

Hunting and all associate program activities proposed in this plan are compatible with the purposes of the refuge. See the Final Compatibility Determination for Migratory Game Bird, Upland Game, and Big Game Hunting on Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge (www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/huntfish.php#).

VII. References

[UDNR] Utah Department of Natural Resources. 2019. Utah Big Game Field Regulations 2019 Guidebook. State of Utah.

———. 2019–20. Utah Upland Game and Turkey Guidebook. State of Utah.

———. 2019–20. Utah Waterfowl Guidebook. State of Utah.

[USFWS] U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2004. Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 6, Lakewood, CO.

———. 2016. Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge Draft Habitat Management Plan. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 6, Dugway, UT.

APPENDIX A REFUGE MAPS

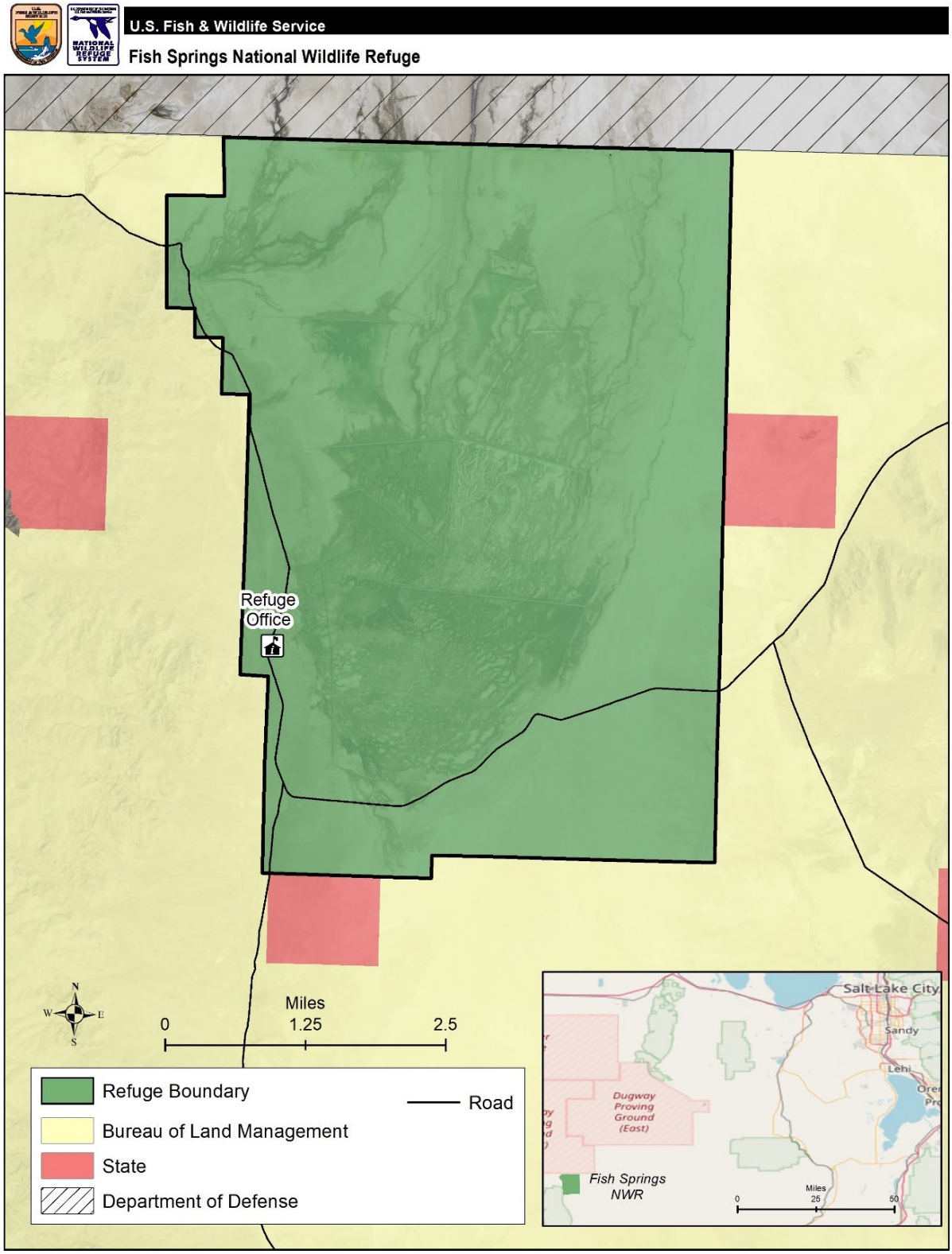

Figure 1. Refuge Location and Land Ownership Map.

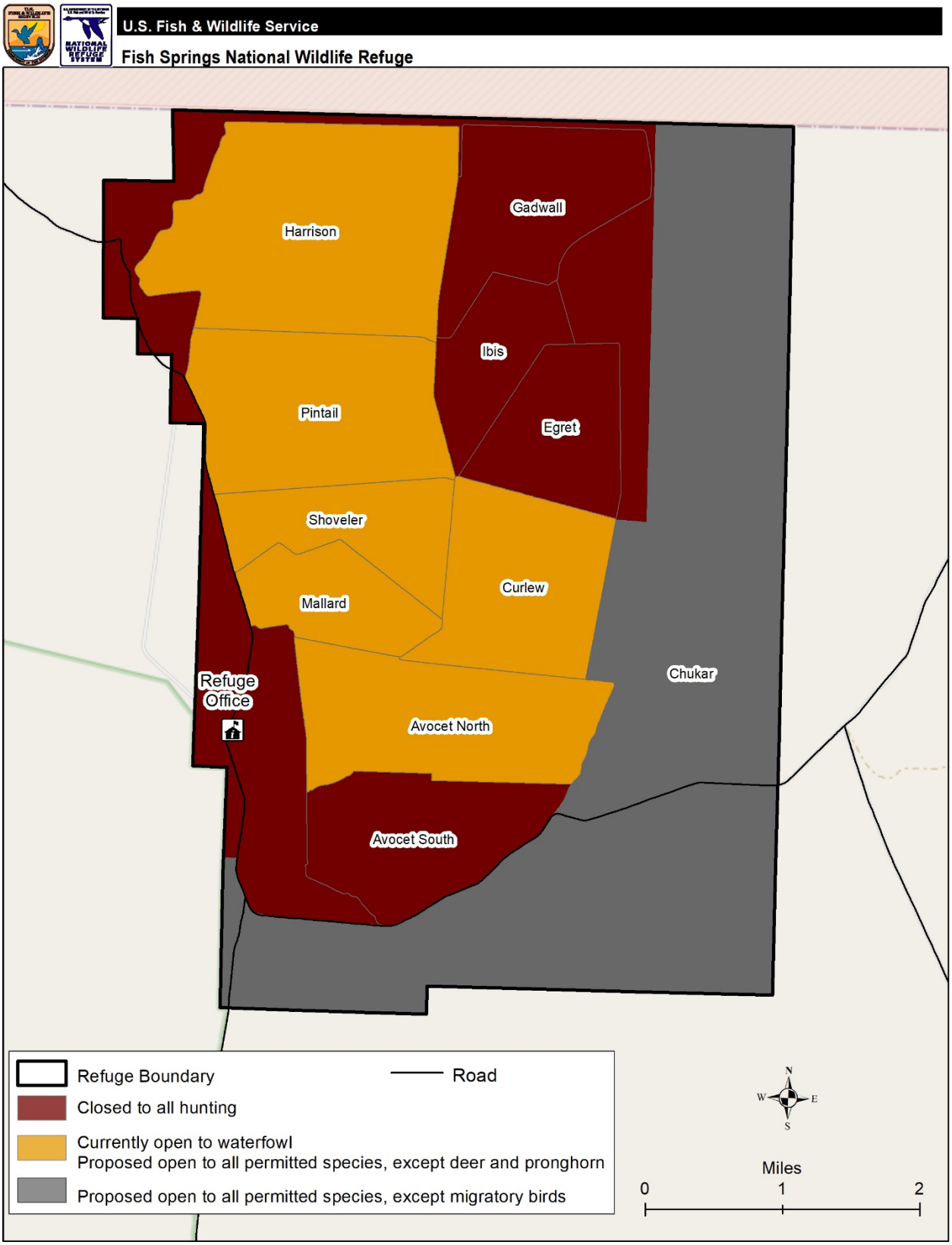

Figure 2. Refuge Hunt Unit Map.

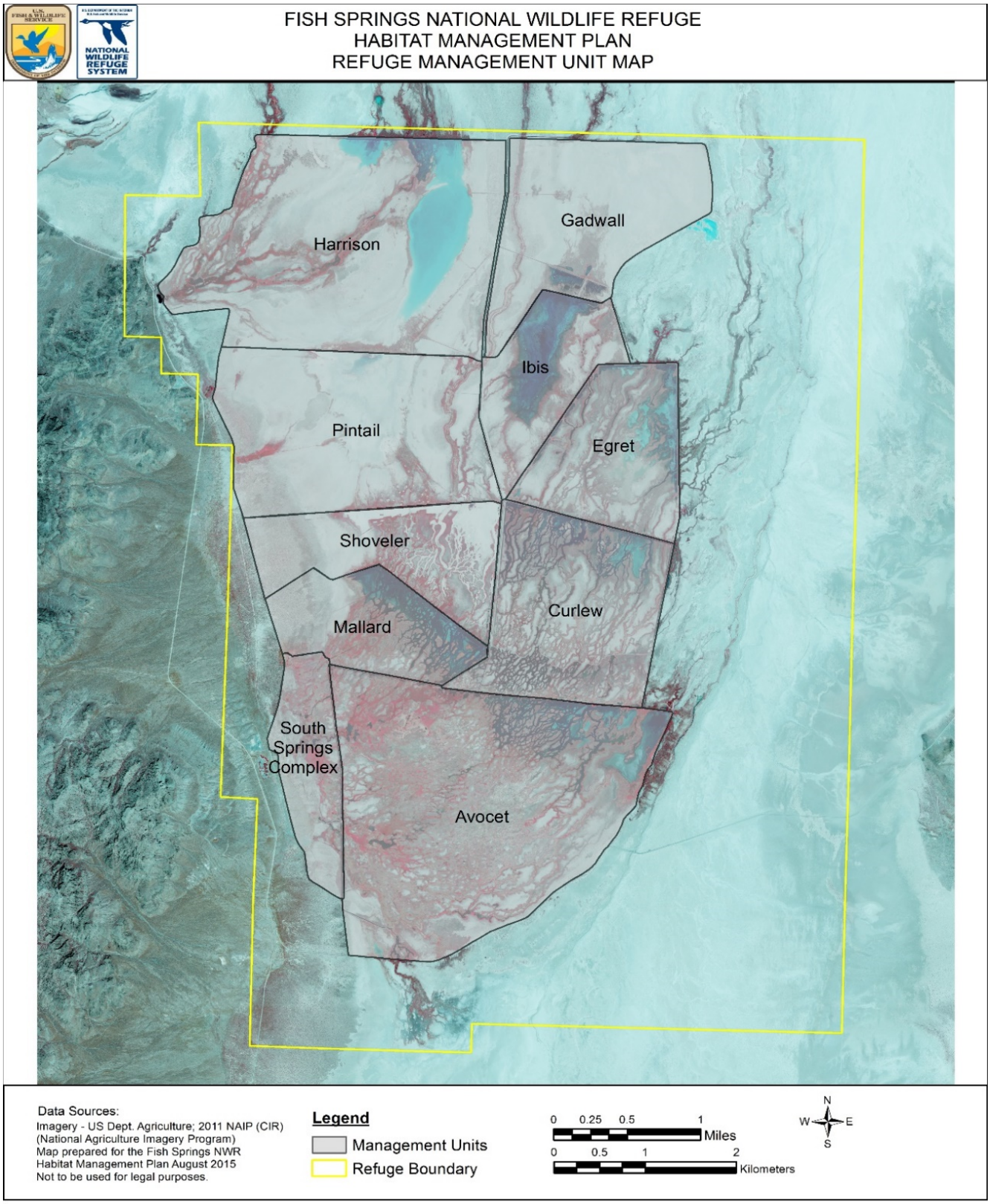

Figure 3. Refuge Impoundment System Unit Map.

APPENDIX B DESCRIPTION OF REFUGE MANAGEMENT UNITS

Fish Springs NWR is divided into 13 management units (see Appendix A) that differ in land use, water regime, and vegetative cover, and have distinct boundaries. These individual units are briefly described below, beginning with the impoundment units at the northern end; acreages are all fee title land.

Harrison Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit in the northwestern corner of the impoundment system. The unit contains a seasonally flooded area that is open to the hunting of all permitted species. Water flows into the unit from North Spring on the west side and overflows from the Pintail Unit. The unit drains onto the U.S. Army Garrison Dugway Proving Ground to the north. The unit contains approximately 1,895 acres of land, including 508 acres of marsh or open water, 557 acres of wet meadow, 819 acres of wet shrubland, and 0.2 acres of dry mesic shrubland.

Gadwall Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit in the northeastern corner of the impoundment system. The unit contains a seasonally flooded area that is closed to all hunting and public access. Water primarily overflows into this unit from the Ibis Unit. The unit drains onto the U.S. Army Garrison Dugway Proving Ground to the north. The unit contains approximately 905 acres of land, including 564 acres of marsh or open water, 74 acres of wet meadow, and 264 acres of wet shrubland.

Pintail Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit on the western side of the impoundment system. The unit contains a seasonally flooded area that is open to the hunting of all permitted species. There are wetlands on the western portion of this unit that are maintained with spring flows from Dead Man Spring and Walter Spring. Water primarily overflows into this unit from the Shoveler Unit and drains into the Harrison Unit. The unit contains approximately 1,268 acres of land, including 341 acres of marsh or open water, 548 acres of wet meadow, 374 acres of wet shrubland, and 0.8 acres of dry-mesic shrubland.

Ibis Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit in the eastern side of the impoundment system. The unit contains a seasonally flooded area that is closed to all hunting and public access. Water primarily overflows into this unit from the Egret Unit and drains onto the Gadwall Unit. The unit contains approximately 496 acres of land including 207 acres of marsh/open water, 183 acres of wet meadow, and 101 acres of wet shrubland.

Egret Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit located in the eastern side of the impoundment system. The unit contains a seasonally flooded area that is closed to all hunting and public access. Water primarily overflows into this unit from the Curlew Unit and drains onto the Ibis Unit. There is seasonal drainage of this unit onto the Chukar Unit outside the eastern boundary of the impoundment system. The unit contains approximately 652 acres of land, including 371 acres of marsh or open water, 191 acres of wet meadow, and 86 acres of wet shrubland.

Shoveler Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit on the western side of the impoundment system. The unit contains a semi-permanently flooded area that is open to the hunting of all permitted species. Water primarily overflows into this unit from the Mallard Unit and drains into

the Pintail Unit. The unit contains approximately 625 acres of land including 231 acres of marsh or open water, 191 acres of wet meadow, 198 acres of wet shrubland, and 1.2 acres of infrastructure (dikes and dams).

Curlew Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit on the eastern side of the impoundment system and is open to the hunting of all permitted species. The unit contains more than one water management regime that contributes to seasonally flooded, semi-permanently flooded, and transitional areas. Water primarily overflows into this unit from the Avocet Unit and drains into the Egret Unit. There is seasonal drainage of this unit onto the Chukar Unit outside the eastern boundary of the impoundment system. The unit contains approximately 968 acres of land. Depending on the water management regime, this unit contains a maximum of 468 acres of marsh or open water, 348 acres of wet meadow, and 140 acres of wet shrubland.

Mallard Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit on the western side of the impoundment system. The unit contains a semi-permanently flooded area that is open to the hunting of all permitted species. Water primarily flows into this unit using ditch-delivery canals from the South Springs Complex. There is overflow into this unit from the Avocet Unit, and water drains into the Shoveler Unit and occasionally into the Curlew Unit. The unit contains approximately 517 acres of land, including 238 acres of marsh or open water, 138 acres of wet meadow, 136 acres of wet shrubland, and 0.4 acres of dry-mesic shrubland.

Avocet North Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit on the south side of the impoundment system and is open to the hunting of all permitted species. The unit has two special blind areas that are available through day-use registration. The unit contains more than one water management regime that contributes to seasonally and semi-permanently flooded areas. Water primarily flows into this unit using ditch-delivery canals from the South Springs Complex. The unit drains into the Mallard and Curlew Units, and seasonally, into the Chukar Unit outside the eastern boundary of the impoundment system. The unit contains approximately 1,168 acres of land. Habitat types in this unit are a combined total of Avocet North and South, which contains a maximum of 1,128 acres of marsh or open water, 634 acres of wet meadow, and 368 acres of wet shrubland.

Avocet South Unit: This is a wetland impoundment unit on the south side of the impoundment system and is closed to all hunting and public access. The unit contains more than one water management regime that contributes to seasonally and semi-permanently flooded areas. Water flows into this unit using ditch-delivery canals from the South Springs Complex. The unit drains into the Avocet North Unit, and seasonally, into the Chukar Unit outside of the southern boundary of the impoundment system. The unit contains approximately 908 acres of land.

South Springs Complex: This is a management unit within the Western Closed Unit of the refuge and is closed to all hunting and public access. The unit is west of the Avocet Unit, south of the Mallard Unit, and east of the refuge office. Water flows out of the deep carbonate aquifer into eight spring basins within this unit. The water from this unit provides approximately two-thirds of the refuge's water resources within the impoundment system. Water drains through ditch-delivery canals into the Avocet, Mallard Units, and occasionally into other canals that

provide water to the impoundments. The Thomas Ranch Watchable Wildlife Area is located in the northwestern corner of this unit. The unit contains permanently flooded areas, as well as approximately 381 acres of land, including 37 acres of marsh or open water, 178 acres of wet meadow, 160 acres of wet shrubland, 2.3 acres of dry-mesic shrubland, 0.8 acres of disturbed area, and 3 acres of infrastructure (dikes, dams, roads, and canals).

Chukar Unit: This is a new unit created as part of this hunting opening, and it is open to all permitted species except for migratory birds. This unit is outside to the east and south of the impoundment system and is the eastern and southern boundary and part of the northern and western boundary of the refuge. The primary access to the refuge via the Pony Express Road enters this unit on the eastern boundary, and this road is the boundary between this unit and the Avocet South Unit. This unit collects seasonal drainage water from the impoundment system to the west, and from the Avocet South Unit. Water either drains into the ground or is lost through evapotranspiration. The unit contains approximately 6,253 acres of land that is mostly wet shrubland and playa.

Western Closed Unit: This unit is closed to all hunting and contains the refuge headquarters, office, maintenance shop, equipment and material storage buildings, residences, and other infrastructure. The unit is most of the western boundary and part of the northern boundary of the refuge. The unit contains approximately 1,936 acres that is mostly dry-mesic shrubland, wet shrubland, and barren rockface.