

## **Draft Compatibility Determination for Hunting on Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge**

**Use:** Hunting Plan for Light Geese (Ross's and snow geese)

**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 § 3901(b) (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986).
- “. . . for conservation purposes . . .” 7 U.S. Code § 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 § 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?*

Hunting of light geese (Ross's and snow geese) according to all applicable federal and State of Wyoming regulations for hunting light geese.

*Where will the use be conducted?*

Within the portions of Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) currently opened to migratory bird hunting.

*When will the use be conducted?*

Within the seasons set for hunting light geese in the Wyoming portion of the Pacific Flyway.

*How will the use be conducted?*

According to all applicable refuge and State of Wyoming regulations regarding hunting of light geese in the Pacific Flyway of Wyoming.

*Why is the use being proposed?*

To provide compatible wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities on Cokeville Meadows NWR. The need of the 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 NWRS for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses" (16 U.S. Code 668dd[a][4]).

**Availability of Resources:**

Initial startup funding is estimated to be \$500 to reprint the hunting and fishing brochure. Existing parking areas will be used, and no new signage will be needed. The refuge law enforcement officer and Wyoming Game and Fish Department Game (WGFD) warden will conduct periodic compliance checks. Participation is expected to occur concurrent with other waterfowl hunting and will not add additional time to conduct compliance checks.

Continued coordination with the WGFD law enforcement and wildlife management personnel will continue. Waterfowl surveys will continue in coordination with the WGFD. Results from research completed on Cokeville Meadows NWR, Wyoming, and throughout the Pacific Flyway will be included and considered for any future management decisions for hunting of light geese.

**Anticipated Impacts of the Use:**

*Biological Conflicts:*

The proposed hunting of light geese 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 using firearms. However, most of the current refuge lands are currently open to some form of hunting, and are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, and similar activities. Public hunting of light geese on refuge lands will not increase the number of hunters or impacts on other species of wildlife because the use will occur concurrently with other waterfowl hunting. If hunting pressure increased markedly due to including light geese in the hunting program, the refuge will take measures—such as developing a permit system or allowing hunting only on certain days of the week—to reduce the number of hunters.

Refuge staff will make every effort to increase protection of endangered species and other non-target wildlife. These efforts will include high-visibility law enforcement activities and covert operations to dissuade hunters from affecting wildlife other than the target species. Special refuge regulations will be in effect to reduce disturbance and to protect flora and fauna in the area.

### *Public Use Conflicts:*

The refuge expects minimal conflicts among sport anglers, big game, and upland and small game hunters due to allowing light geese hunting. Overlap of hunting area use 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 nonconsumptive, wildlife-oriented use on the refuge continues to grow. Conflicts between hunters and nonconsumptive users may occur. Providing nonconsumptive users with access to wildlife viewing areas, and notifications of when users are entering a hunting area and even closing a hunting area to nonconsumptive users, if appropriate, will reduce conflicts. In addition, restrictions on hunting methods and restrictions on hunting near designated public-use facilities and trails aid in reducing potential conflicts between hunters and nonconsumptive users. 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 for wildlife.

The refuge area was a popular hunting area for many decades even before its establishment. Since the refuge opened to hunting of select species of wildlife in 2014, we have seen relatively light hunting participation. An abundance of nearby public hunting available on Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service Lands, and the willingness of private landowners to grant permission for hunting, distributes hunting pressure. The refuge's hunting program is designed to provide for the use of refuge lands within a framework designed to protect wildlife populations and provide for public safety. The continuance of these traditional uses has been widely supported by the public since before the establishment of the refuge, and we expect that this support will continue.

### *Administrative Conflicts:*

At this time, no administrative conflicts are anticipated from adding light geese to the hunting program. Existing refuge staff will continue to administer the hunting program. The refuge manager will set station priorities to assure that required support staff is adequate and available. As this hunting program evolves over the years, refuge-specific regulations, systems of control to limit number of hunters, and fee costs may occur or change at the refuge manager's discretion following additional opportunities for public involvement.

Some research activities may extend into the fall and will be separated from hunting areas when possible. Fall maintenance activities that occur during hunting seasons may include prescribed burns, and maintenance of fences, gates, signs, water control structures, and roads. These activities will be managed to reduce interference with hunting opportunity while allowing needed work to be accomplished. Waterfowl surveys, water-level monitoring, and other habitat surveys may occur during hunting seasons.

Safety briefings prior to the hunting season for staff and researchers working in hunting areas will make them aware of hunting times and locations. Approved hunter safety vests will be worn by all non-law enforcement operation persons working in areas open to hunting season activities.

Haying and grazing practices do occur on the refuge and in the hunting area for management purposes. Permittees will be made aware of the conflicts that may occur during the hunting season.

*Indirect and Cumulative Impacts:*

<b>Other Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Activity Impacting Affected Environment</b>	<b>Descriptions of Anticipated Cumulative Impacts</b>
<i>Hunting</i>	
	Hunting for select species on the refuge was opened in 2014. Since opening, participation in hunting activities has remained light for a number of 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 is 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. Adding light geese to the species that can be hunted on the refuge is anticipated to produce negligible additional impacts.
<i>Other Wildlife-Dependent Recreation</i>	
	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.
<i>Use of Lead Shot</i>	
	Federal and state waterfowl hunting regulations, which include light geese, do not allow possession or use of other than nontoxic shot. This regulation will remain and will be enforced for light goose hunting on the refuge.
<i>Climate Change</i>	
Warming, whether it results from anthropogenic or natural sources, is expected to affect a variety of natural processes and associated resources.	While the impacts of climate change on refuge wildlife and habitats are not certain, allowing hunting on the refuge will not add to the cumulative impacts of climate change.

Other Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Activity Impacting Affected Environment	Descriptions of Anticipated Cumulative Impacts
<p>However, the complexity of ecological systems means that there is a tremendous amount of uncertainty about the impact climate change will actually have. In particular, the localized effects of climate change are still a matter of much debate. That said, the combination of increased frequency and severity of drought in the basin could dramatically reduce the amount water and therefore quality of fisheries habitat in the drainage. As a result, available fisheries habitat may decline.</p>	<p>The refuge uses an adaptive management approach for its hunting program, annually checking (through direct feedback from state and local user groups) and reviewing the hunting program annually and revising it necessary). The Service will adjust the hunting program, as necessary, to ensure that it does not contribute to the cumulative impacts of climate change on resident wildlife and migratory birds.</p>

**Public Review and Comment:**

This compatibility determination was prepared concurrently with the draft Environmental Assessment and companion hunting plan for the refuge. Public review and comment were achieved concurrently with the public review and comment period for the draft hunting plan and Environmental Assessment. Public review and comment was solicited through public posting of notices at the refuge, notices in local newspapers 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 hunting of light geese on Cokeville Meadows NWR must be followed.

**Justification:**

Hunting is a traditional and legislated wildlife-dependent, priority public use. Use will be managed in cooperation with the WGFD. Hunting at the refuge is a legitimate and necessary wildlife management tool that can be used to keep wild animal populations at healthy levels.

Allowing hunting of light geese on the refuge will be consistent with established refuge goals. Hunting is one of the six wildlife-dependent public uses that are to be supported within units of the National Wildlife Refuge System when compatible. This use is not expected to conflict with any habitat management, reclamation projects, or existing public uses on the refuge.

**Signatures:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tom Koerner, Project Leader

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Review:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Lisa Talcott, Refuge Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Approval:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Will Meeks, Refuge Chief  
Region 6

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-Evaluation Date:** 2035