

Draft Flint Hills National Wildlife Refuge Hunting Plan

March 2020

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**Flint Hills National Wildlife Refuge
530 West Maple, Hartford, KS 66854**

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Draft Flint Hills National Wildlife Refuge

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 (NWRSA), 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 Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.

Flint Hills National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) (Figure 1) was established pursuant to the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (1958): “Flint Hills NWR was established in 1966 and ‘. . . shall be administered by the Secretary of the Interior directly or in accordance with cooperative agreements . . . and in accordance with such rules and regulations for the conservation, maintenance, and management of wildlife, resources thereof, and its habitat thereon, . . .’” (16 U.S. Code § 644. Comprehensive Conservation Plan [CCP], p. 6).

In addition, the Refuge Recreation Act (16 U.S. Code § 460-1) states that each refuge is “. . . suitable for incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, the protection of natural resources, and the conservation of endangered or threatened species . . .” (CCP p. 6).

The combination of floodplain topography, fertile hydric soils, and abundant seed banks create excellent conditions for wetland vegetation. Refuge management emphasizes migratory waterbird habitat during fall, winter, and spring. The Neosho River comprises the major north–south flyway in the eastern third of Kansas. The refuge serves an important role in the late-fall and early-winter life cycle of mallards by providing the nutrition necessary to restore depleted fat reserves, complete the prebasic molt, and establish pair bonds.

The mission of the Refuge System, as outlined by the NWRSA, as amended by the 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 NWRSA 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;
- monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

Kansas National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex

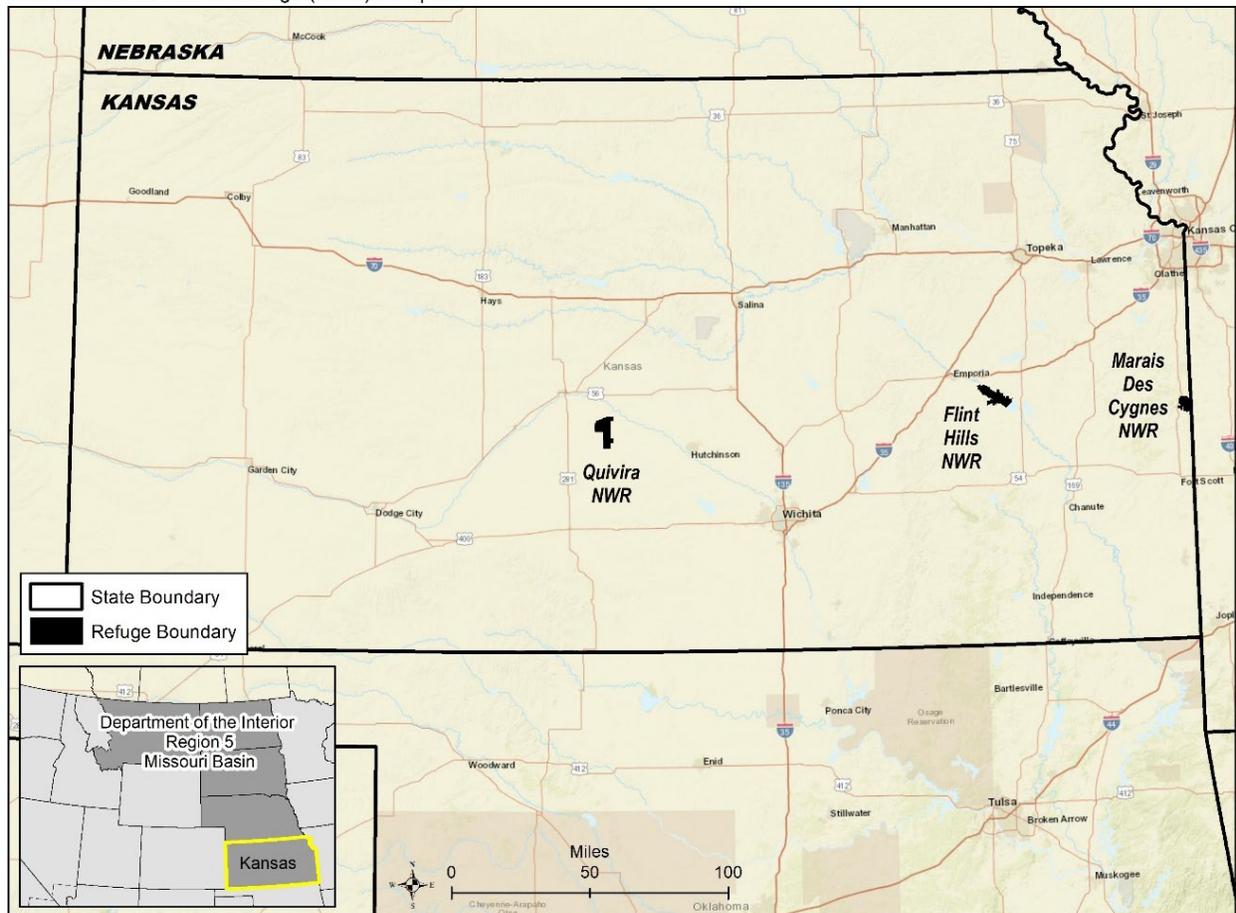


Figure 1. Area Map of Kansas National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

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.

This 2020 hunting plan expansion will not open additional acres for hunting, but rather new species (furbearers and coyote), and additional days for deer hunting. The Trail Areas and South 19th unit (9,108 acres combined), historically closed to hunting, will remain as such.

This hunting plan proposes to maintain existing hunting opportunities and provide new hunting opportunities on the refuge. The hunting program generally will follow State of Kansas regulations with respect to the target species, seasons, bag limits, and method of take. In certain instances, we may deviate from those regulations to meet refuge wildlife population, public use, and public safety goals. This plan also proposes to use members of the general public with select skills to participate in hunts at specific times and locations that are designed to provide unique hunter opportunities. These special hunts will be conducted in cooperation with Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism (KDWPT).

II. Statement of Objectives

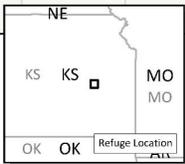
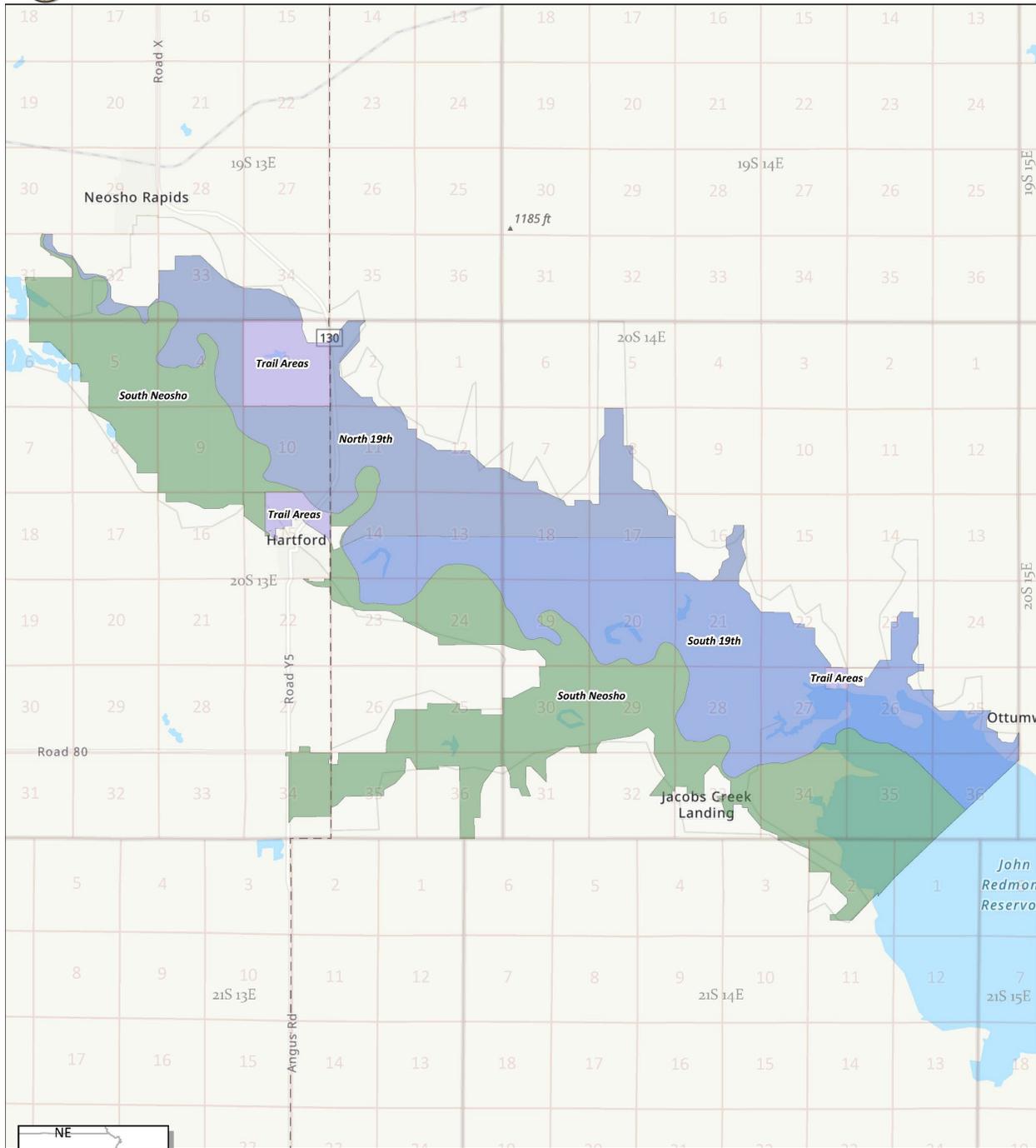
A purpose of this hunting plan is to bring Flint Hills NWR into alignment with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism (KDWPT) regulations, as well as other national wildlife refuges in Kansas. Furthermore, the coyote hunting proposal will provide some consistency of regulations with the adjacent Otter Creek State Wildlife Area and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers John Redmond Reservoir. Simplifying regulations likely will assist with reducing the downward trend in hunters and anglers by providing for the recruitment, retention, and reactivation of sportsmen and sportswomen.

In addition, hunting is justified by the abundance of wildlife on the refuge. The furbearer populations have increased on the refuge and throughout the state in recent decades. In addition, refuge data show deer densities more than twice that of the surrounding private land.

Hunting is consistent with the refuge's CCP Goal #3: To provide opportunities for wildlife-dependent public access and recreational opportunities to include compatible forms of hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and educational activities (CCP, p. 1).

III. Description of Hunting Program

The Service is proposing to open hunting for badger, bobcat, mink, muskrat, fox, opossum, raccoon, striped skunk, weasel, and coyote on the 8,295-acre South Neosho Unit on the refuge (Figure 2). Methods of take will include shotgun, muzzleloader, archery, and rimfire rifle.



Produced in the Natural Resource Program Center
Fort Collins, Colorado
Land Status Current To: 7/31/18
Map Date: 12/6/2018
Basemap: ESRI Vector Base v2, FWS, USGS DEM
Web Mercator Projection
NAD 83

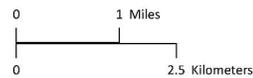


Figure 2. Vicinity Map, Showing Open (Blue) Areas and Closed (Green) Areas of the Refuge.

A. Areas to Be Opened to Hunting

The refuge consists of 18,463 acres of wetlands, riparian forests, restored grasslands, and agricultural lands. Prior to refuge's establishment, significant alterations occurred to vegetation and hydrology. Although much of the native tallgrass prairie was cleared for agriculture, native habitats still occur within wetlands, riparian forests, and remnant grasslands. Former agricultural fields provide sites for wetland management.

The hydrology of the Neosho River remained intact until the construction of the John Redmond Reservoir in 1965. Numerous federal reservoirs were constructed as flood control, following the record floods of 1951 in eastern Kansas. Despite the name "Flint Hills," the refuge is located within a floodplain of the Neosho River. Flood frequency and duration increased after construction of the reservoir, limiting the success of tallgrass restoration efforts. Although refuge is managed primarily for migratory waterfowl, significant habitat occurs for furbearer, deer, and other wildlife.

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

Furbearer and Coyote

The Service will open hunting for badger, bobcat, fox, mink, muskrat, opossum, raccoon, striped skunk, weasel, and coyote on the 8,295-acre South Neosho Unit on the refuge in accordance with the refuge's hunting plan. No trapping is being proposed. Hunting for beaver and otter is not permitted by state regulations and is not proposed in this alternative. Method of take for furbearers will include shotgun, muzzleloader, archery, and rimfire rifle. Dogs, vehicles, or bait may not be used to hunt furbearers or coyotes. Coyotes may not be hunted from a vehicle or a road. Electronic calls will be permitted for coyote and furbearers. Hunting will be permitted during daylight hours (one-half hour before legal sunrise until one-half hour past legal sunset). Hunting seasons will be consistent with state regulations.

Deer

The Service also proposes allowing the extended whitetail antlerless only season (WAO) on the 8,295-acre South Neosho Unit on the refuge in accordance with state regulations. Methods of take will include archery, muzzleloader, and shotgun (slugs only). Centerfire rifles and pistols will be prohibited.

C. Hunter Permit Requirements (if applicable)

Hunters will be required to have a state license, as well as a refuge-specific permit. See "Hunter Permit Application and/or Registration Procedures" below.

D. Consultation and Coordination with the State

Representatives of the Kansas NWR Complex (Flint Hills, Marais des Cygnes, and Quivira National Wildlife Refuges) met with the Secretary of Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism (KDWPT) and a KDWPT wildlife research supervisor migratory bird specialist about potential future hunting opportunities on the refuges on October 30, 2019, in Hartford, Kansas.

The state shared organization and public interests and responded to proposed hunting opportunities at the meeting and in follow-up verbal and written communications. These discussions helped adjust our plan to align, where possible, with state management goals. Overall, the state was supportive of the Service's proposals of expanded hunting opportunities, and both agencies confirmed the continuance of a strong partnership. The refuge received a letter of concurrence from the state director on November 18, 2019.

The refuge and KDWPT will continue to work together to ensure safe and enjoyable recreational hunting opportunities. Law enforcement officers from both the Service and the KDWPT work together to patrol the refuge, safeguarding hunters, visitors, and both game and nongame species.

E. Law Enforcement

Enforcement of refuge violations normally associated with management of a national wildlife refuge is the responsibility of commissioned federal wildlife officers. Other officers, special agents, state game wardens, and the local sheriff's department often assist the Service federal wildlife officers.

The following methods are used to control and enforce hunting regulations:

- Refuge and hunt area boundaries will be clearly posted.
- The refuge will provide a brochure that shows hunt areas.
- Service law enforcement staff will randomly check hunters for compliance with federal and state laws.

F. Funding and Staffing Requirements

The proposed alternative (expanded hunting opportunities) will not require any additional cost for law enforcement. The proposed hunting seasons will occur during months of the year when officers would be making other hunter contacts anyway. The hunts will occur in existing hunting units, and thus will require no new signage. The only local administrative change will be reprinting the refuge hunting brochure with the updated regulations, at a cost of approximately \$800 per year. Regulations are updated annually, with minimal expense involved.

IV. Conduct of the Hunting Program

A. Hunter Permit Application, Selection, and/or Registration Procedures (if applicable)

There is no application, registration, or selection process for hunting or fishing at the refuge.

Information and forms on refuge hunting can be downloaded from the Flint Hills NWR website: https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Flint_Hills/.

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/occurs.

50 CFR 32.35 Kansas

(a) Flint Hills National Wildlife Refuge

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

- (i) Portable hunting blinds and decoys must be removed at the end of each day's hunt.*
- (ii) We only allow shotguns, muzzleloaders, and archery equipment.*
- (iii) We prohibit shooting from or over roads and parking areas.*
- (iv) We allow the use of dogs when hunting migratory birds.*

(2) Upland game hunting. We allow hunting of pheasant, prairie chicken, quail, rabbit, state defined furbearers, and squirrel on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following condition:

- (i) We allow the use of dogs when hunting upland game but prohibit the use of dogs when hunting coyotes and furbearers.*
- (ii) Shooting hours for upland game species are ½ hour before legal sunrise until legal sunset.*
- (iii) We prohibit the harvest of beaver and otter.*
- (iv) The conditions set forth at paragraphs (a)(1)(ii) and (iii) of this section apply.*

(3) Big game hunting. We allow hunting of white-tailed deer and turkey on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

- (i) You may possess only approved nontoxic shot for turkey hunting.*
- (ii) We allow two portable blinds or stands per hunter. Stands may not be placed until 14 days prior to the season and shall be removed within 14 days of the close of the season. Portable blinds must be removed at the end of each days hunt. Portable blinds and stands must be labeled with the owner's name and address or KDWPT number. Labels must be clearly visible from the ground.*
- (iii) We prohibit the use of dogs when hunting turkey.*
- (iv) The conditions set forth at paragraphs (a)(1)(ii) and (iii) of this section apply.*
- (v) We only allow the possession of slugs for white-tailed deer shotgun hunting.*

(4) Sport fishing. We allow sport fishing on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

(i) We prohibit the take of reptiles and amphibians

C. Relevant State Regulations

The refuge adheres to state seasons for furbearers, coyote, and deer.

D. Other Refuge Rules and Regulations for Hunting

Access

Hunting hours are the same as those set in state regulations, except furbearer and coyote (one-half hour before sunrise to one-half hour after sunset). Hunters can park in designated areas and along the shoulder of refuge roads within one car width from the nearest edge of the road.

Retrieving Game

Reasonable effort must be made to retrieve harvested game. Dogs may be used to retrieve game. We prohibit hunters or dogs from retrieving game in areas closed to hunting.

Neosho River

All of the Neosho River is closed to hunting and cannot be used to gain access to hunting areas.

Baiting/Spotlighting/Monitoring Devices

The distribution of bait or hunting over bait is prohibited. The use of artificial light to locate wildlife is prohibited. The use of electronic or photographic trail monitoring devices is also prohibited.

Tree Stands/Blinds/Decoys

All personal property must be removed daily. The use of permanent blinds, tree stands, nails, screw-in steps, or other items that penetrate the outer bark of a tree is prohibited. Decoys may not be left unattended.

Vehicles/Boats

Only licensed vehicles are allowed on designated refuge roads. ATVs and UTVs are prohibited on the refuge. All vehicles and boats must comply with state and federal regulations. Air-thrust or in-board water-thrust boats are prohibited.

Firearms/Fireworks

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).

Carrying, possessing, or discharging fireworks or explosives on national wildlife refuges is prohibited.

Alcohol/Controlled Substances

Possession or consumption of alcohol and controlled substances while hunting is prohibited.

Camping and Fires

Camping and fires are prohibited on the refuge.

Natural and Cultural Resources

Collecting wild edibles is allowed. Collecting shed antlers is prohibited on the refuge. Collecting of artifacts and historic items is also prohibited as they are protected on refuge lands by federal law.

V. Public Engagement

A. Outreach for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunting Program

The refuge will advertise the proposed hunting plan in the refuge office, the local post office, and the grain elevator. Special announcements and articles may be released in conjunction with hunting seasons. In addition, information about the hunting plan revision will be available at refuge's headquarters or on the Flint Hills NWR website. There will be a public comment period on the proposed hunting plan.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunting Program

Because hunting has already been allowed on refuge for more than 50 years, little negative public reaction is expected. Hunting is an important economic and recreational use of Kansas's natural resources. The public regularly request the opportunity to hunt furbearers and coyotes at the refuge. In addition, the public may welcome expanded hunting opportunities for white-tail deer hunting, especially considering that approximately 2 percent of the state is publicly owned. Public land becomes more important for hunting with the growth of leasing private land for hunting. The ability to gain hunting permission from private landowners has greatly diminished in the past 20 years.

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 Flint Hills NWR headquarters at 530 West Maple, Harford, KS 66854, or by calling (620) 392-5553. Information and forms on refuge hunting can be downloaded from the Flint Hills NWR website: https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Flint_Hills/.

VI. Compatibility Determination

Hunting and all associated program activities proposed in this plan are compatible with the purposes of the refuge. See the compatibility determination for more information.