

Draft Environmental Assessment

for Hunting and Fishing on North Platte National Wildlife Refuge

March 2020

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Date: March 2020

This Environmental Assessment (EA) is being prepared to evaluate the effects associated with this proposed action and complies with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500–1509) and Department of the Interior (43 CFR 46; 516 DM 8) and United States (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) (550 FW 3) regulations and policies. NEPA requires examination of the effects of proposed actions on the natural and human environment.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Proposed Action

The Service is proposing to open or expand hunting opportunities on the North Platte National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in accordance with the refuge's 2020 North Platte National Wildlife Refuge Hunt and Fish Plan. We, the Service, propose to expand general archery white-tailed deer and mule deer, and youth squirrel, rabbit, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, and skunk, pheasant hunting on 1,373 acres by extending the season closing date from October 15 to November 1. We propose to open upland game hunting including porcupine, prairie dog, and spring turkey on 1,373 acres in alignment with existing upland game youth seasons. We also propose to open a targeted demographic opportunity for youth on 134 acres (state line unit) for mule deer, white-tailed deer, and turkey hunting in alignment with state seasons.

This proposed action is often iterative and may evolve during the NEPA process as the agency refines its proposal and gathers feedback from the public, tribes, and other agencies. Therefore, the final proposed action may be different from the original. The final decision on the proposed action will be made at the conclusion of the public comment period for the EA and the Draft 2020–2021 Refuge-Specific Hunting and Sport Fishing Regulations.

1.2 Background

National wildlife refuges are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), the purposes of an individual refuge, 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 CFR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.

The 2,722-acre North Platte National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in 1916 by Executive Order No. 2446 as a “preserve and breeding ground for native birds.” The impetus for NWR status was primarily fall concentrations of up to 250,000 mallards, 11,000 Canada geese, and bald eagles. The refuge was, and still is, superimposed on Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) projects and remains subject to “Reclamation service uses.”

Originally, the refuge covered four Reclamation irrigation reservoirs, which were constructed between 1910 and 1917. Three of these are still part of the refuge: Lake Minatare – 430 acres;

Winters Creek – 780 acres; and Lake Alice – 1,377 acres. The Little Lake Alice reservoir was removed from the Refuge System in 1961 by Public Land Order 2291. In 1990, the Service, by Memorandum of Agreement with Reclamation, also assumed management of Stateline Island, a 135-acre diversion project on the North Platte River. It, too, is subject to Reclamation uses. The Refuge is located in the Nebraska panhandle, within the central flyway, in Scotts Bluff County (Figure 1).

This station map is for general location information only and does not imply access. For access information, please check on the refuge's Web page or contact the refuge directly. Many refuges have specific visitor services and other recreation opportunity maps. All lands and boundaries depicted in the above Web map are not survey quality and should not be used for survey or legal purposes.

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 Refuge System to (16 U.S. Code 668dd (a) (4)):

- provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats within the Refuge System;
- ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System are supported 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 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;
- check 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.

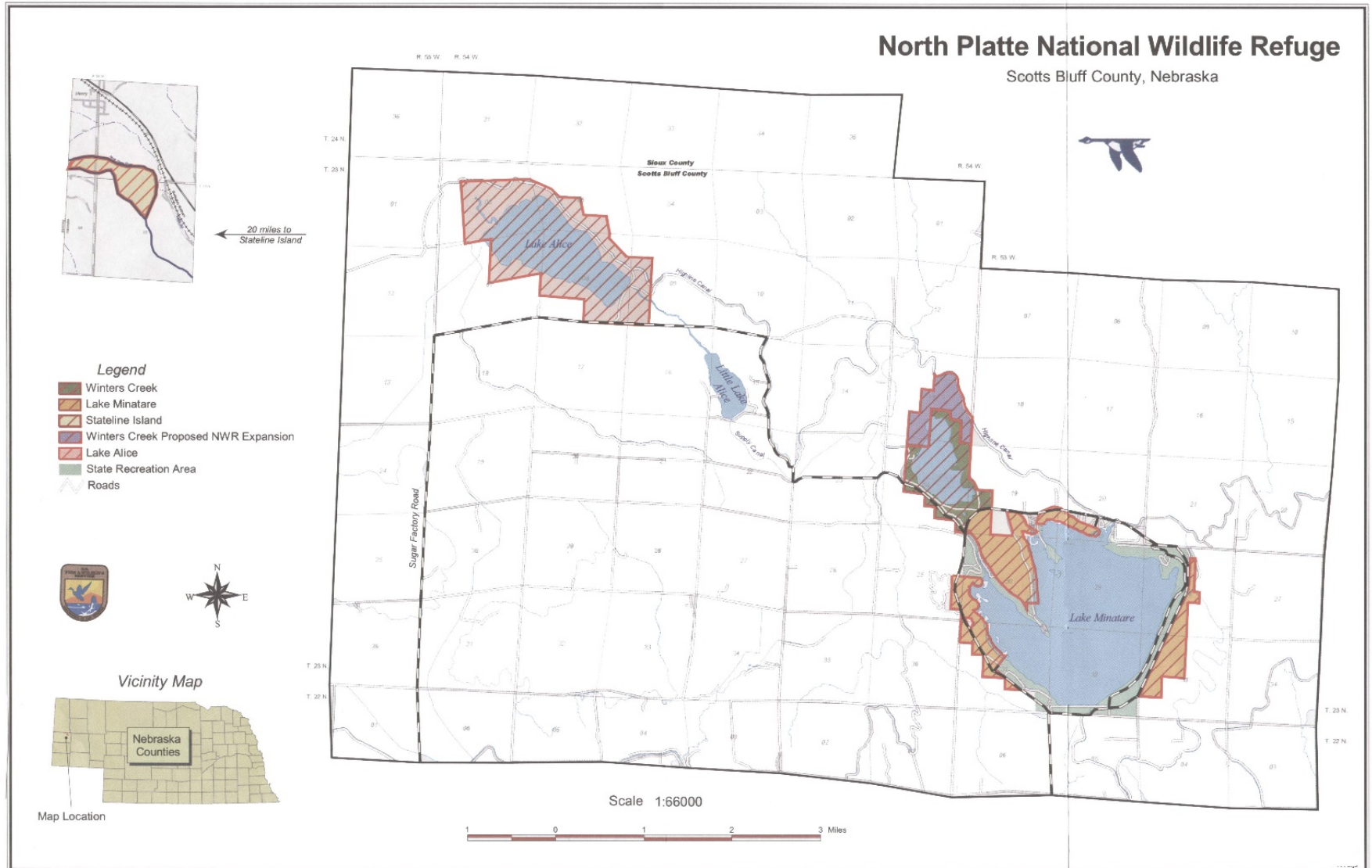


FIGURE 1

Figure 1. North Platte National Wildlife Refuge Hunt Unit Map.

Physical Environment

The refuge is located in the central part of the High Plains Region. The Lake Alice unit lies on a terrace or bench just north of the North Platte River Valley between two bedrock outcrops. The area has many gravel veins, an indication it is a remnant of an old alluvial terrace. The general landscape surrounding the refuge is nearly level to rolling prairie.

The general climate is characteristic of the high plains. Average annual precipitation is about 14.5 inches. The average January temperature is 23.8 degrees Fahrenheit, while the average in July is 72.8 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperature extremes have ranged from –37 to 108 degrees Fahrenheit. Humidity is relatively low and prevailing winds are west to northwest in winter and east to southeast in summer. Winter winds are occasionally warmed by the down slope effect from the higher elevations to the west and bring rapid warming and melting of snow. The growing season is 135 days. The last killing frost is in mid-May and the first is in mid-September.

Tables 2–7 provide brief descriptions of each resource affected by the proposed action.

For more information regarding the affected environment, please see the refuge’s comprehensive conservation plan (CCP), which can be found here: [www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/refuges/refugesUpdate/completedPlanPDFs_M-S/npl_2001_ccpfinal_all%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/refuges/refugesUpdate/completedPlanPDFs_M-S/npl_2001_ccpfinal_all%20(1).pdf).

3.2 Environmental Consequences of the Action

This section analyzes the environmental consequences of the action on each affected resource, including direct and indirect effects. This EA includes the written analyses of the environmental consequences on a resource only when the impacts on that resource could be more than negligible and therefore considered an “affected resource” or are otherwise considered important as related to the proposed action. Resources that would not be more than negligibly affected by the action and have been identified as not otherwise important as related to the proposed action have been dismissed from further analyses, including air quality, floodplain, geology, water resources, and wilderness.

Tables 2 through 6 provide:

- a brief description of the affected resources in the proposed action area;
- impacts of the proposed action and any alternatives on those resources, including direct and indirect effects.

Table 7 provides a brief description of the anticipated cumulative impacts of the proposed action and any alternatives.

Impact Types:

- *Direct effects* are those that are caused by the action and occur at the same time and place.
- *Indirect effects* are those that are caused by the action and are later in time or farther removed in distance but are still reasonably foreseeable.
- *Cumulative impacts* result from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such other actions.

Table 2. Affected Natural Resources and Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of the Proposed Action and Any Alternatives

<p>Affected Resources</p>	<p><u>Alternative A (Proposed Action)</u> <i>Expand hunting and fishing opportunities on North Platte NWR, including expanding general archery hunting by extending the season closing date, opening upland game hunting, and expanding youth hunting opportunities.</i></p>	<p><u>Alternative B (No Action)</u> <i>Current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands would continue as described in the 2007 hunting plan.</i></p>
<p>Hunted Populations</p>		
<p><i>Deer</i> The refuge units are small, and deer move on and off the refuge throughout the year; peak numbers occur during winter and average about 50–60 mule deer and ten white-tailed deer.</p> <p><i>Small Game</i> Mammals include raccoons, striped skunks, coyotes, red foxes, black-tailed prairie dogs, badgers, eastern fox squirrels, and eastern cottontails.</p> <p><i>Pheasants</i> Ring-necked pheasants occur in small numbers, primarily on the Lake Alice and Winters Creek units.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big game hunters: 5 • Small game hunters: 5 • Pheasant hunters: 5 • Deer harvested: 2 • Small game harvested (all species): 5 • Pheasant harvested: 5 <p>Additional mortality of individual hunted animals would occur under this alternative, estimated by refuge staff to be, at the most, two deer harvested annually from the Lake Alice unit. Estimates for other hunted species (squirrel, rabbit, pheasant, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, and striped skunk) would be no more than five individuals per species. Hunting causes some disturbance to not only the species being hunted but other game species as well. However, time and space zoning established by refuge regulations would reduce incidental disturbance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big game hunters: 5 • Small game hunters: 5 • Pheasant hunters: 0 • Deer harvested: 2 • Small game harvested (all species): 5 • Pheasant harvested: 0 <p>Additional mortality of individual hunted animals would not occur under this alternative. Disturbance by hunters to hunted wildlife would not increase, and other public uses that cause disturbance, such as wildlife observation and photography, would still be permitted.</p>
<p>Other Wildlife and Aquatic Species</p>		
<p>Nebraska has 413 bird species on its official list, 228 of which occur on the refuge.</p>	<p>Hunting causes some disturbance to not only the species being hunted but other nonhunted species as well. However, time and space zoning established by refuge regulations would reduce incidental disturbance.</p>	<p>The entire Lake Alice unit is closed to all public entry from October 15 through January 14 to provide undisturbed habitat during peak waterfowl and eagle use.</p>

<p>Besides the bald eagle, other raptors common to the refuge include the great-horned owl, American kestrel, rough-legged hawk, golden eagle, red-tailed hawk, northern harrier, and osprey. Use by all raptors averages about 1,500 to 2,000 days per year.</p> <p><i>Average Annual Waterfowl Use Days for the Refuge</i> (includes Lake Minatare proper, which is no longer part of the refuge but adjoins the Lake Minatare unit and is closed as a fall–winter sanctuary under agreement with Reclamation and NGPC)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total Duck Use Days: 5,147,092 • Total Waterfowl Use Days: 5,228,363 <p><i>Average Annual Marsh and Water Bird Use Days for the Refuge</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total Use Day: 30,563 <p><i>Average Annual Shorebird/Allied Species Use Days for the Refuge</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total Use Days: 269,776 <p><i>Amphibians and Reptiles</i></p> <p>The northern leopard frog is the most common amphibian. The bull snake and western plains garter snake are the most common reptiles.</p> <p><i>Amphibians and Reptiles</i></p> <p>The northern leopard frog is the most common amphibian. The bull snake and western plains garter snake are the most common reptiles.</p>	<p>Vehicles are restricted to one road and the harassment or taking of any wildlife other than the game species legal for the season is not permitted. Small mammals, including bats, are less active during the shortened hunting season at the Lake Alice unit. These species are also generally nocturnal and therefore active only when hunters (and other public users) are not present. Hibernation or torpor by cold-blooded reptiles and amphibians also limits their activity during the hunting season.</p> <p>Disturbance to the daily activities of birds, such as feeding and resting, might occur but would be transitory as hunters traverse habitat. Migratory waterfowl and shorebirds using the Lake Alice unit during the limited hunting season are concentrated within the lakebed area where hunting is unlikely to occur.</p> <p>Disturbance to birds by hunters would be commensurate with that caused by nonconsumptive users.</p>	<p>When nesting bald eagles are active on the Lake Alice unit, an area of the unit would stay closed to all public entry to adequately provide for the needs of this protected species. The temporary eagle closure area would be marked with signs similar to that shown on the map. If an area is not signed, you can hunt the entire unit.</p> <p>Disturbance by hunters to nonhunted wildlife would not occur; however, other public uses that cause disturbance, such as wildlife observation and photography, would still be permitted.</p>
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<p style="text-align: center;">Affected Resources</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Alternative A (Proposed Action)</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Expand hunting and fishing opportunities on North Platte NWR, including expanding general archery hunting by extending the season closing date, opening upland game hunting, and expanding youth hunting opportunities.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Alternative B (No Action)</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands would continue as described in the 2007 hunting plan.</i></p>
<p>Threatened and Endangered Species and Other Special Status Species</p>		
<p>Whooping cranes, a federally listed endangered species, have not been seen on the refuge but are occasionally sighted nearby. In 1987, a lone bird was observed east of Scottsbluff and 12 miles north of Lake Minatare. One bird was seen among a flock of sandhill cranes just west of Scottsbluff in 1999.</p>	<p>The exposed and shallow water beaches of Lake Minatare and Lake Alice are considered potential fall roosting sites.</p> <p><i>Mitigation if Whooping Cranes Are on Refuge</i></p> <p>If sightings occurred during hunting seasons, hunting activities would temporarily be shut down.</p>	<p>A section 7 evaluation associated with the implementation of the 2001 CCP (which included the proposal to open the Lake Alice unit to limited hunting) was conducted, and it was determined that the proposed action is not likely to adversely affect the listed endangered species.</p> <p>Under this alternative, hunting would remain as it now occurs. Consequently, disturbance by hunters to bald eagles would not occur.</p>
<p>Vegetation</p>		
<p><i>Grasslands</i></p> <p>The refuge has approximately 1,625 acres of grassland, mostly native prairie. The primary native grasses are blue grama, needle and thread, western wheatgrass, and prairie sandreed. Little bluestem, sand bluestem, love grass, and switchgrass are native grasses that were reseeded on about 16 acres in 1998 and 1999. Nonnative species or species not typically found in mixed-grass prairie are interspersed throughout all refuge units. The most widespread are smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass.</p> <p>The Lake Alice unit consists of approximately 760 acres of grasslands.</p>	<p>While a hunting public would be traversing the Lake Alice unit, other nonconsumptive users would also continue to do so, causing potential but minimal damage to individual plants.</p> <p>Refuge hunting regulations would assist in protecting habitat conditions. For example, only portable or temporary tree stands would be permitted and nontoxic shot would be required for hunting upland game with shotguns.</p>	<p>Impacts to habitat directly attributed to hunting are minor in nature and are typically associated with trampling, which may cause damage to individual plants as hunters traverse across the refuge. Our experience during the past several years has shown that impacts to habitat caused by hunting are no greater than those caused as a result of implementing other nonconsumptive public use programs.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Affected Resources</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Alternative A (Proposed Action)</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Expand hunting and fishing opportunities on North Platte NWR, including expanding general archery hunting by extending the season closing date, opening upland game hunting, and expanding youth hunting opportunities.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Alternative B (No Action)</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands would continue as described in the 2007 hunting plan.</i></p>
<p><i>Woodlands and Shrub</i></p> <p>Refuge reservoirs are surrounded with bands of large, naturally established cottonwoods. The bands range in thickness from one or two trees to 100 yards or more. The cottonwoods are very even-aged, in the range of 70 to 80 years old.</p>		
<p>Soil and Topography</p>		
<p>The refuge is located in the central part of the High Plains region. The Lake Alice unit lies on a terrace or bench just north of the North Platte River Valley between two bedrock outcrops. The area has many gravel veins, an indication it is a remnant of an old alluvial terrace. The general landscape surrounding the refuge is nearly level to rolling prairie.</p> <p>Refuge soils are mapped and described in detail in the 1968 soil survey of Scotts Bluff County. Soils on the reservoir units are mostly deep, sandy, and loamy soils on foot slopes and deep sandy soils on uplands.</p>	<p>Some disturbance to surface soils, topography, and vegetation would occur in areas selected for hunting; however, effects would be only from walking disturbances. The refuge would also control access to decrease habitat degradation.</p>	<p>The impacts of the current hunting program to soil and topography are typically associated with occasional trampling, resulting in less impact than some routine refuge management operations.</p>

Key: CCP = Comprehensive Conservation Plan; NGPC = Nebraska Game and Parks Commission; NWR = National Wildlife Refuge

Table 3. Affected Visitor Use and Experience and Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of the Proposed Action and Any Alternatives.

<p>Affected Resources</p>	<p><u>Alternative A (Proposed Action)</u> <i>Expand hunting and fishing opportunities on North Platte NWR, including expanding general archery hunting by extending the season closing date, opening upland game hunting, and expanding youth hunting opportunities.</i></p>	<p><u>Alternative B (No Action)</u> <i>Current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands would continue as described in the 2007 hunting plan.</i></p>
<p>All four refuge units are open during daylight hours for wildlife observation and photography, interpretation and environmental education, fishing, hiking, canoeing, boating (with no internal combustion motors), and mushroom and berry picking. The Lake Minatare, Winters Creek, and Lake Alice units are closed during portions of the fall and winter to provide sanctuary for migrating birds. Stateline Island is open year-round.</p> <p>About 4,500 people visit the refuge annually; about 90 percent are from local communities. Visitors often engage in more than one activity and an approximate breakdown by activity is: wildlife observation/interpretation (2,100); environmental education (1,400); and fishing (1,900). In addition, refuge staff present off-site educational programs to about 1,100 people annually, mostly students.</p>	<p>This alternative would also allow the public to enjoy new and expanded hunting opportunities at little or no cost in a region where private land is often leased for hunting. This alternative would allow youth the opportunity to experience a wildlife-dependent recreational activity; instill an appreciation for and understanding of wildlife, the natural world, and the environment; and promote a positive land ethic and environmental awareness.</p> <p>As public use levels expand over time, unanticipated conflicts between user groups may occur. Experience has proven that time and space zoning (such as the establishment of separate use areas, use periods, and restrictions on the number of users) is an effective tool in eliminating conflicts between user groups. This also limits disturbance to wildlife during the spring and summer when most species reproduce. Conflicts between hunters and nonconsumptive users might occur but would be mitigated by time (nonhunting season) and space zoning. Nonconsumptive use (mainly bird watching and other wildlife viewing) occurs within the other three units (Minatare, Winters Creek, and Stateline Island) closed to hunting.</p>	<p>The public would continue to have the opportunity to harvest a renewable resource, participate in wildlife-oriented recreation that is compatible with the purpose for which the refuge was established, and have an increased awareness of the refuge and the Refuge System.</p>

Key: NWR = National Wildlife Refuge

Table 4. Affected Cultural Resources and Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of the Proposed Action and Any Alternatives.

<p>Affected Resources</p>	<p><u>Alternative A (Proposed Action)</u> <i>Expand hunting and fishing opportunities on North Platte NWR, including expanding general archery hunting by extending the season closing date, opening upland game hunting, and expanding youth hunting opportunities.</i></p>	<p><u>Alternative B (No Action)</u> <i>Current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands would continue as described in the 2007 hunting plan.</i></p>
<p>Cultural resources were described in the CCP completed in 2001. No significant historic, prehistoric, or paleontological resources have been identified within the refuge.</p>	<p>Because of the temporary and superficial use of refuge habitats during hunting and fishing activities, there should be no direct or indirect impacts to cultural resources under this alternative from visitors engaged in hunting and fishing activities, as delineated in the hunt and fish plan. The Service has determined that, in accordance with the implementing regulations for section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (36 CFR 800), "... the undertaking is a type of activity that does not have the potential to cause effects on historic properties, assuming such historic properties were present, [and] the agency official has no further obligations under section 106 or 36 CFR 800.3(a)(1)."</p> <p>New infrastructure or facilities such as fencing, posting, and parking areas that may be developed in association with the new hunt areas would require compliance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.</p>	<p>Under this alternative, there would be no change to existing environmental conditions; subsequently, no direct or indirect impacts to cultural resources are anticipated.</p>

Key: CCP = Comprehensive Conservation Plan; CFR = Code of Federal Regulations; NWR = National Wildlife Refuge

Table 5. Affected Refuge Management and Operations and Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of the Proposed Action and Any Alternatives.

<p>Affected Resources</p>	<p><u>Alternative A (Proposed Action)</u> <i>Expand hunting and fishing opportunities on North Platte NWR, including expanding general archery hunting by extending the season closing date, opening upland game hunting, and expanding youth hunting opportunities.</i></p>	<p><u>Alternative B (No Action)</u> <i>Current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands would continue as described in the 2007 hunting plan.</i></p>
<p>Facilities</p>		
<p>Interior refuge roads are two-track trails, which are difficult to travel when wet. Mowed parking areas are located near fishing access points, including a boat launch at Winters Creek. Five information kiosks with leaflet dispensers are located at refuge entrances. No restroom facilities are provided. Refuge entrances and boundaries are signed.</p>	<p>Under the proposed action, facilities most utilized by hunters would be roads, parking lots, and signage. Maintenance or improvement of existing facilities are estimated to cost \$25,000 annually. The facility maintenance and improvement activities described are periodically conducted to accommodate daily refuge management operations and public uses, such as wildlife observation and photography. These activities would be conducted at times (seasonal and/or daily) to cause the least amount of disturbance to wildlife. Roads and parking areas that have been impacted by a flood event or other natural cause would be closed to vehicular use.</p> <p>Maintenance or improvement of existing facilities (parking areas, roads, and fences) would cause minimal short-term impacts to localized soils and vegetation and may cause some short-term wildlife disturbances.</p>	<p>Some damage to roads and parking areas due to hunter use occurs, necessitating periodic facilities maintenance and continued law enforcement presence. The estimated annual cost associated with managing the current hunting program is \$35,000 and covers providing informational signage, brochures, and law enforcement.</p>
<p>Administration</p>		
<p>The refuge is currently managed as part of the Sandhills Refuge Complex and has no dedicated staff. The three full-time employees of Crescent Lake NWR also administer North Platte NWR. There are currently no law enforcement officers on staff at either refuge.</p>	<p>More money is needed to provide law enforcement for new and expanded hunting opportunities. Coordination with the State of Nebraska conservation officers is critical.</p>	<p>The limited hunting program that has occurred on the Lake Alice unit since 2003 has minimal costs. There are some costs associated with the program in the form of informational brochures and law enforcement. These costs are minimal relative to total refuge operations and maintenance costs and do not diminish resources dedicated to other management programs.</p>

Table 6. Affected Socioeconomics and Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of the Proposed Action and Any Alternatives.

<p>Affected Resources</p>	<p><u>Alternative A (Proposed Action)</u> <i>Expand hunting and fishing opportunities on North Platte NWR, including expanding general archery hunting by extending the season closing date, opening upland game hunting, and expanding youth hunting opportunities.</i></p>	<p><u>Alternative B (No Action)</u> <i>Current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands would continue as described in the 2007 hunting plan.</i></p>
<p>Local and Regional Economies</p>		
<p>The approximate population of Scotts Bluff County is 35,989. Of this number, 26,000 live in the nine communities within the county. The twin cities of Scottsbluff and Gering have a combined population of 22,958. The entire county population lives within 20 miles of a refuge unit.</p> <p>Scottsbluff and Gering form a regional trade center for the Nebraska panhandle and parts of eastern Wyoming. Agriculture is the primary economic activity. Major crops are sugar beets, beans, corn, and alfalfa. Beef production is an important trade. Construction, manufacturing, and retail merchandising are increasing in importance.</p>	<p>It is expected that the new hunts would result in a net gain of public hunting opportunities positively affecting the public, nearby residents, and refuge visitors. The refuge expects increased visitation and tourism to bring added revenues to the local community but not a significant increase in overall revenue in any area.</p>	<p>Little to no change in wildlife-based recreational opportunities are expected under current conditions. Spending associated with refuge visitation can generate considerable economic benefits for the local communities near a refuge. For example, more than 34.8 million visits were made to refuges in fiscal year 2006; these visits generated \$1.7 billion in sales, almost 27,000 jobs, and \$542.8 million in employment income in regional economies (Carver and Caudill 2007). Revenues generated by hunters and nonconsumptive, wildlife-dependent visitors for lodging, food, gas, and miscellaneous purchasing would continue to benefit the Scottsbluff and Gering communities.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Affected Resources</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Alternative A (Proposed Action)</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Expand hunting and fishing opportunities on North Platte NWR, including expanding general archery hunting by extending the season closing date, opening upland game hunting, and expanding youth hunting opportunities.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Alternative B (No Action)</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands would continue as described in the 2007 hunting plan.</i></p>
Environmental Justice		
<p>Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, requires all federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice into their missions by finding and addressing disproportionately high or adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs and policies on minorities and low-income populations and communities.</p>	<p>Within the spirit and intent of Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations, and Low-Income Populations, no actions being considered in this EA would disproportionately place any adverse environmental, economic, social, or health effects on minority or low-income populations when compared with the public.</p> <p>The Service is committed to ensuring that all members of the public have equal access to the Nation’s fish and wildlife resources, as well as equal access to information that would enable them to take part meaningfully in activities and policy shaping.</p>	<p>Impacts would be the same as described under the Proposed Action Alternative.</p>

Key: EA = Environmental Assessment; NWR = National Wildlife Refuge

3.3 Cumulative Impact Analysis

Cumulative impacts are defined as “the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such other actions” (40 CFR 1508.7).

For more information on the national cumulative impacts of the Service’s hunting and fishing program on the Refuge System, see Cumulative Impacts Report 2020-2021 National Wildlife Refuge Proposed Hunting and Sport Fishing Openings, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Table 7. Anticipated Cumulative Impacts of the Proposed Action and Any Alternatives.

Other Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Activity Impacting Affected Environment	Descriptions of Anticipated Cumulative Impacts
Nonhunted Wildlife	
<p>Nonhunted wildlife would include migratory birds (waterfowl, shorebirds, songbirds); small mammals (voles, moles, mice); reptiles and amphibians; and invertebrates (insects). Except for migratory birds and some species of migratory bats and insects, these species have very limited home ranges and hunting could not affect their populations regionally; thus, only local effects would be discussed.</p>	<p>Disturbance to migratory birds could have regional, local, and flyway effects. However, disturbance by hunting to migratory birds should not have cumulative negative impacts for the following reasons. Hunting season would not coincide with the nesting season. Disturbance to the daily wintering activities of birds, such as feeding and resting, might occur. Migratory waterfowl and shorebirds using the refuge during the limited hunting season are concentrated within the lakebed area where hunting would not be expected to occur. Disturbance to birds by hunters would probably be commensurate with that caused by nonconsumptive users.</p> <p>Disturbance by hunting to nonhunted wildlife would be the most likely negative cumulative impact. However, disturbance would be unlikely for the following reasons. Small mammals, including bats, are less active during the shortened hunting season at the Lake Alice unit. These species are also generally nocturnal and therefore active only when hunters (and other public users) are not present. Hibernation or torpor by cold-blooded reptiles and amphibians also limit their activity during the hunting season. Hunters would rarely encounter reptiles and amphibians during most of the hunting season. Encounters with reptiles and amphibians in the early fall are few and should not have cumulative negative effects on reptile and amphibian populations. Invertebrates are also not active during cold weather and would have few interactions with hunters during the hunting season. The refuge estimates hunter density on peak days to be no more than 1 hunter per 1,000 acres. During most of the hunting season, hunter density is expected to be even lower. Refuge regulations further mitigate possible disturbance by hunters to nonhunted wildlife. Vehicles are restricted to roads, and the harassment or taking of any wildlife other than the game species legal for the season is not permitted.</p>

Other Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Activity Impacting Affected Environment	Descriptions of Anticipated Cumulative Impacts
Resident Wildlife	
<p>Tables 8 and 9 show the average annual statewide harvest and expected annual refuge harvest of resident wildlife</p>	<p>NGPC estimates the statewide, combined (mule and white-tailed) deer population to be 320,000. The current 10-year, statewide harvest average (firearm and archery combined) is 46,556, or 14.5 percent of the herd. NGPC is seeing no cumulative impact to the state's deer population at this harvest rate. Deer hunting does not have regional population impacts due to restricted home ranges. Therefore, only local impacts occur. The largest annual average of deer harvested from the Lake Alice unit is estimated at 2, representing only a 0.004 percent increase in the total state harvest. An abbreviated (30-day) archery hunt on the 1,377-acre Lake Alice unit should not have negative cumulative impacts on the deer herd.</p> <p>Squirrel, rabbit, pheasant, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, and striped skunk cannot be affected regionally by refuge hunting because of their limited home ranges. Only local effects would be discussed. Cumulative adverse impacts to these species are unlikely, considering 1) only youth (with nonhunting mentors) are allowed to hunt small game/furbearers on the refuge, and 2) studies have shown that small game/furbearers are not affected by hunting but rather are limited by food resources.</p> <p>Preparers of this assessment consulted with biologists from NGPC regarding the cumulative impacts of hunting small game and furbearers. The table below depicts statewide annual harvest estimates for various small game and furbearers along with an estimate of harvest from the refuge and the resulting increase in the statewide harvest.</p>
Use of Lead Ammunition	
	<p>Although ingestion of lead shot by nonhunted wildlife could be a cumulative impact, it is not relevant to the refuge because the use of lead shot would not be permitted on the refuge for any type of hunting.</p>
Environment	
	<p>Cumulative effects on the environment result from incremental effects of a proposed action when these are added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. While cumulative effects may result from individually minor actions, they may, viewed as a whole, become substantial over time. The hunting and fishing plan has been designed so as to be sustainable through time given relatively stable conditions. Changes in refuge conditions, such as sizeable increases in refuge acreage or public use, are likely to change the anticipated impacts of the current plan and would trigger a new hunt planning and assessment process.</p> <p>The implementation of the proposed alternative described in this assessment covers actions relating to the refuge hunt program. These actions would have both direct and indirect effects; however, the cumulative effects of these actions are expected to be insignificant. The refuge staff does not foresee any changes to the proposed action in the way of increasing the intensity of hunting in the future.</p>

Other Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Activity Impacting Affected Environment	Descriptions of Anticipated Cumulative Impacts
Anticipated Impacts if Individual Hunts Are Allowed to Accumulate	
	National wildlife refuges conduct hunting programs within the framework of state and federal regulations. As proposed, the refuge hunting program would be considerably more restrictive than the State of Nebraska. By maintaining hunting regulations that are equally, or more, restrictive than the state, individual refuges ensure that they are maintaining seasons that are supportive of management on a more regional basis. The hunting and fishing plan has been reviewed and is supported by NGPC. Additionally, refuge staff coordinate with NGPC officials annually to support regulations and programs that are consistent with the state management program.
Climate Change	
Climate change refers to the increasing changes in the measures of climate over a long period of time, including precipitation, temperature, and wind patterns (USGS 2019). Although climate change is a naturally occurring phenomenon and temperature and precipitation changes are anticipated, there are many unknowns. Consequently, we do not fully understand the potential impacts that climate change may have on terrestrial and aquatic habitats and the associated wildlife species.	Using available and emerging science, the Service continues to assess predictions of these complex effects and the Service would continue to use an adaptive management approach to implementation of this action to ensure that it does not add to the impacts of climate change on the environment. Hunt programs and mitigation measures would adapt with changing conditions to continue to conserve natural resources and balance compatible recreational uses.

Key: NGPC = Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Table 8. Estimated Cumulative Impacts for Hunting Furbearers and Resident Birds on North Platte National Wildlife Refuge.

Species	Average Annual Statewide Harvest	Estimated Annual Refuge Harvest	% Increase in Statewide Harvest
Mink	813	<2	0.3
Opossum	25386	<1	0.004
Cottontail	14,915	<5	0.03
Jackrabbit	365	<1	0.3
Red Fox	3,391	<5	0.037
Badger	3,741	<1	0.029
Skunk	12,361	<1	0.027
Coyote	46,311	<1	0.008
Raccoon	108,744	<2	0.004
Pheasants	130,449	<5	0.008
Youth Pheasant Hunts	4,772	<5	.001

Source: Furbearer 2017–18 Nebraska Game and Parks Data; Small Game 2005–06 Nebraska Game and Parks Data; Pheasant 2018-19 Nebraska Game and Parks Data; Youth Pheasant Hunters 2018.

Table 9. Estimated Cumulative Impacts for Hunting Deer on North Platte National Wildlife Refuge.

Species	2018 Plains Unit Harvest	Estimated Annual Refuge Harvest	% Increase in Plains Harvest
Deer	2014	<2	0.1

Source: Deer Harvest 2018 Nebraska Game and Parks Data

3.4 Monitoring

Biological monitoring of resident and wildlife is done by state harvest records. Fish are surveyed with our partners at NGPC. In addition, the station would stay apprised on the status of threatened and endangered species on the refuge through consultation and local monitoring.

3.5 Summary of Analysis:

The purpose of this EA is to briefly provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement or a Finding of No Significant Impact.

Alternative A – Proposed Action Alternative

As described in the 2020 hunting and fishing plan, expand youth hunting opportunities to better align with state regulations. Expand acres open for youth hunting opportunities. Open new youth hunting opportunities for more species, including turkey, porcupine, and prairie dog. Extend date

range for archery deer and youth hunting of pheasant, squirrel, rabbit, coyote, raccoon, opossum, long-tailed weasel, mink, fox, badger, and striped skunk until November 1.

As described above, more opportunities are likely to draw a slightly higher number of hunters to the refuge. This increase could potentially lead to conflicts with other refuge visitors. If conflicts develop after the plan is implemented, the impact would be mitigated. Nontoxic shot would be required for hunting when shotguns are used. Vehicle access would be limited to public use roads and no other public use roads would need to be established to accommodate this hunting and fishing plan.

There is not likely to adversely affect endangered or threatened species, and the effects on wildlife and habitat would be negligible.

This alternative helps meet the purpose and needs of the Service as described above because it provides more wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities on the refuge, meeting the Service's priorities and mandates. This alternative also helps to further align Service regulations with state regulations and provides more public land that is accessible for hunting by the American public. The Service has determined that the proposed action is compatible with the purposes of the refuge and the mission of the Refuge System (see the Compatibility Determination for Hunting and Fishing on North Platte National Wildlife Refuge).

Alternative B – No Action Alternative

Continue current hunting opportunities for small game, big game, and furbearers on refuge lands as described in the 2007 hunting plan. New hunting and fishing opportunities identified in the 2020 hunting and fishing plan would remain closed to hunting and fishing. All other existing public uses would remain unchanged.

Under this alternative, current refuge hunting opportunities for specific small game, big game, furbearers, and migratory bird species would continue and remain the same across those portions of the refuge. The refuge would continue to serve as habitat for fish and wildlife as well as provide outdoor recreational opportunities for all six priority wildlife dependent public uses: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

Opportunities to create more outdoor recreation experiences by adding more species would be lost. In addition, the refuge's ability to connect with certain segments of the public would potentially be diminished since hunting for some popular game species would not be permitted. Hunters would pursue these species off-refuge and thus the refuge's ability to reach those members of the public and promote natural resources conservation, environmental education, and natural resources stewardship may be more limited.

This alternative also meets the purpose and needs of the Service as described above because it would provide wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities. However, it does not allow for the Service's implementation of S.O. 3347, Conservation Stewardship and Outdoor Recreation, and S.O. 3356, Hunting, Fishing, Recreational Shooting, and Wildlife Conservation Opportunities and Coordination with States, Tribes, and Territories, by expanding hunting opportunities and aligning Service regulations with state regulations.

3.6 List of Sources, Agencies, and Persons Consulted

The following agencies and organizations were consulted during the development of this EA:

- Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Personnel: Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge Complex Staff

3.7 List of Preparers

Name	Position	Work Unit
Brian DeVries	Refuge Manager	North Platte NWR
Marlin French	Wildlife Biologist	North Platte NWR

3.8 State Coordination

National wildlife refuges, including the North Platte NWR, conduct hunting programs within the framework of state and federal regulations. The refuge has developed this EA and hunting and fishing plan based upon earlier formal coordination with NGPC and intervening informal discussions.

The results of this coordination are reflected in this EA and hunting and fishing plan. The refuge would continue to consult and coordinate with NGPC annually to support regulations and programs that are consistent with the state; as well as, to observe populations of game species and set harvest goals. The refuge would strive to support consistent regulations with NGPC whenever applicable.

On July 10, 2018, NGPC leadership provided suggestions for expanded hunting opportunities on Service lands in Nebraska. Their input was consistent with the Department of Interior S.O. 3356, Hunting, Fishing, Recreational Shooting, and Wildlife Conservation Opportunities and Coordination with States, Tribes, and Territories. The refuge reviewed the operations and regulations for neighboring state wildlife management areas, public lands administered by other agencies (such as the U.S. Forest Service), and other national wildlife refuges in Nebraska to find consistency where possible. More conversations have occurred with local NGPC biologists in development of this draft EA and hunting and fishing plan. The Service would be sending a letter to the state summarizing efforts to increase hunting opportunities and align with state hunting regulations. We would continue to consult and coordinate on specific aspects of the hunting and fishing plan to ensure safe and enjoyable recreational hunting opportunities.

3.9 Tribal Consultation

The Service mailed an invitation for comments to all tribes potentially affected by initiating an EA to expand hunting opportunities at the refuge. The Service extended an invitation to engage in government-to-government consultation in accordance with Executive Order 13175.

3.10 Public Outreach

Public input was sought several times regarding hunting and fishing opportunities on the refuge as a recreational opportunity as part of public outreach and an open comment period during the planning stages for the 2007 hunting plan and the 2001 refuge CCP.

The hunting and fishing plan and associated EA will be available at www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/huntfish.php#. Hard copies will be available upon request. Public meetings will be held in the area during the public review period for this EA.

3.11 References

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Panhandle Area Development District. Undated (ca. 1998). Economic Development Report. Gering, NE. 10 p.

Scotts Bluff County. 1999. Draft Vision for the Year 2020. Vision 2020 Steering Committee and Scottsbluff/Gering United Chamber of Commerce, Nebraska. 28 p.

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Wilson, Sam; Nawrocki, Julia. 2018. Fur Harvest Survey 2017/2018 Season. Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. 2 p.

APPENDIX A OTHER APPLICABLE STATUTES, EXECUTIVE ORDERS, AND REGULATIONS

Statutes, Executive Orders, and Regulations
Cultural Resources
<p>American Indian Religious Freedom Act, as amended, 42 U.S. Code 1996–1996a; 43 CFR 7.</p> <p>Antiquities Act of 1906, 16 U.S. Code 431–433; 43 CFR 3.</p> <p>Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, 16 U.S. Code 470aa–470mm; 18 CFR 1312; 32 CFR 229; 36 CFR 296; 43 CFR 7.</p> <p>National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, 16 U.S. Code 470–470x-6; 36 CFR 60, 63, 78, 79, 800, 801, and 810.</p> <p>Paleontological Resources Protection Act, 16 U.S. Code 470aaa–470aaa-11.</p> <p>Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 25 U.S. Code 3001–3013; 43 CFR 10.</p> <p>Executive Order 11593 – Protection and Enhancement of the Cultural Environment, 36 Federal Register 8921 (1971).</p> <p>Executive Order 13007 – Indian Sacred Sites, 61 Federal Register 26771 (1996).</p>
Fish and Wildlife
<p>Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, as amended, 16 U.S. Code 668–668c, 50 CFR 22.</p> <p>Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, 16 U.S. Code 1531–1544; 36 CFR 13; 50 CFR 10, 17, 23, 81, 217, 222, 225, 402, and 450.</p> <p>Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, 16 U.S. Code 742 a–m.</p> <p>Lacey Act, as amended, 16 U.S. Code 3371 et seq.; 15 CFR 10, 11, 12, 14, 300, and 904.</p> <p>Migratory Bird Treaty Act, as amended, 16 U.S. Code 703–712; 50 CFR 10, 12, 20, and 21.</p> <p>Executive Order 13186 – Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, 66 Federal Register 3853 (2001).</p>
Natural Resources
<p>Clean Air Act, as amended, 42 U.S. Code 7401–7671q; 40 CFR 23, 50, 51, 52, 58, 60, 61, 82, and 93; 48 CFR 23.</p> <p>Wilderness Act, 16 U.S. Code 1131 et seq.</p> <p>Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, 16 U.S. Code 1271 et seq.</p> <p>Executive Order 13112 – Invasive Species, 64 Federal Register 6183 (1999).</p>
Water Resources
<p>Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, 16 U.S. Code 1451 et seq.; 15 CFR 923, 930, and 933.</p> <p>Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 (commonly referred to as Clean Water Act), 33 U.S. Code 1251 et seq.; 33 CFR 320–330; 40 CFR 110, 112, 116, 117, 230–232, 323, and 328.</p> <p>Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899, as amended, 33 U.S. Code 401 et seq.; 33 CFR 114, 115, 116, 321, 322, and 333.</p> <p>Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, 42 U.S. Code 300f et seq.; 40 CFR 141–148.</p> <p>Executive Order 11988 – Floodplain Management, 42 Federal Register 26951 (1977).</p> <p>Executive Order 11990 – Protection of Wetlands, 42 Federal Register 26961 (1977).</p>

Key: CFR = Code of Federal Regulations; U.S.C. = U.S. Code