Appendix I

John Mosesso Jr./NBII.

Green Frog

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Finding of No Significant Impact
Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In October 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published the draft comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment (draft CCP/EA) for Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The refuge is currently 10,828 acres and located in Basom, New York. The draft CCP/EA identified the refuge's purposes, proposed a vision statement, and included management goals and objectives to be achieved through plan implementation. It evaluated three alternatives for managing the refuge over the next 15 years, and compared their potential contribution to the refuge's purposes, vision, goals, and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). Alternative B is identified as the Service-preferred alternative. Chapter 2 in the draft plan details the respective goals, objectives, and strategies for each of the three alternatives. Chapter 4 describes the predicted direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the environment from implementing each alternative. The draft plan's appendixes provide additional information supporting the assessment and specific proposals in alternative B. A brief overview of each alternative as it was presented in the draft CCP/EA follows.

Alternative A (Current Management): The Council of Environmental Quality regulations on implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require this "No Action" alternative, which we define as continuing current management. Alternative A includes our existing programs and activities and serves as the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives. Under current management, we manage open water and emergent marsh impoundments, early successional habitat including grasslands and shrublands, and forest habitat including a conifer plantation. Under alternative A, we would continue to conduct furbearer management, monitor waterfowl during spring and fall migration, conduct landbird surveys, and manage for invasive species. We would maintain existing opportunities for visitors to engage in wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education and interpretation, as well as maintain existing hunting and fishing opportunities on the refuge. We would maintain existing infrastructure and buildings, and maintain current staffing levels. While this alternative is intended as a "snapshot in time," we include activities that were underway at the time the plan was being prepared, some of which are completed, and some of which are still in progress.

Alternative B (the Service-preferred alternative): This alternative includes an array of management actions that, in our professional judgment, work best toward achieving the purposes of the refuge, our vision and goals for those lands, the Refuge System mission, and the goals in State and regional conservation plans. This alternative focuses on enhancing the conservation of wildlife through habitat management, as well as providing additional visitor opportunities on the refuge. Alternative B incorporates existing management activities and/or provides new initiatives or actions aimed at improving efficiency and progress towards refuge goals and objectives. Some of the major strategies proposed include increasing grassland, shrubland, and forest habitats, replacing non-native conifer plantation with native forest species, restricting public access to designated areas of the refuge year-round, and implementing a permit system for hunting upland game, migratory birds, and big game. This alternative would also increase some existing wildlife-dependent recreational activities, including wildlife observation and hunting.

We would co-locate the Lower Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office (LGLFWCO) with a new visitor contact station and administrative building by adding on to the existing building. We would expand our existing staff to include a full-time permanent law enforcement officer, maintenance worker, biological technician, and one part-time biological technician.

We would also continue our monitoring and inventory program, and regularly evaluate the results to help us better understand the implications of our management actions and identify ways to improve their effectiveness.

Alternative C (Improved Biological Integrity): Alternative C, prominently features additional management that aims to restore (or mimic) natural ecosystem processes or function to achieve refuge purposes. Under alternative C, refuge habitat conditions would change as a result of management decisions that target a more natural state (less management) and emphasize restoration to historical habitats. Refuge impoundments would no longer be actively managed and some would be removed. This would result in a decrease of approximately 329 acres of open water and emergent marsh habitat. Grassland acres would be reduced by 50 percent as only the two largest grassland units would be managed. Management of shrublands would be discontinued and the only shrub habitats that would remain are small native shrub swamps. Forest cover would increase (1,548 additional acres) under this alternative in response to the reversion, succession and conversion of conifer plantations, grasslands, shrublands, emergent marsh and open water to forest. Similar to alternative B, we propose to restrict public access to designated areas of the refuge year-round, allowing wildlife observation, hiking and walking on established refuge nature trails. Also, we propose to co-locate the Lower Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office currently located in Amherst, New York with a new visitor contact station and administration building at Iroquois Refuge.

We distributed the draft CCP/EA for a 30-day period of public review and comment from October 4, 2010 to November 3, 2010. During the comment period, 37 individual comments were received. These were assessed during the content analysis process. Appendix I in the final CCP includes a summary of those comments, our responses to them, and additional rationale for the changes we make in the final CCP outlined below.

After reviewing the proposed management actions, and considering all public comments and our responses to them, I have determined that the analysis in the draft CCP/EA is sufficient to support my findings. I am selecting alternative B, as presented in the draft CCP/EA with the following changes recommended by the planning team, to implement as the final CCP.

- Due to comments directed at closing the refuge to wandering, the refuge has decided to allow visitors unrestricted access off of designated trails, but only during the hunting season (October 1 to the end of February). All visitors, including those wandering on the refuge, must wear hunter orange during the firearm deer seasons. Hunter orange must be visible from 360 degrees and must be at least 400 square inches of solid fluorescent orange on head chest and back -- a hat and vest may fulfill this requirement. There will be no wandering in any refuge wetlands, only upland wandering will be permitted. The refuge will continue to restrict public access for hiking and walking to designated trails from March 1 to September 30.
- Based on feedback we have received from our partners and the public, we have decided to modify the Alternative B turkey hunting proposal. The new framework will consist of two seasons. The first season will run from May 1 – May 15 with 50 permits being available. The second season will run from May 16 - May 31 with 25 permits being available. Permits will be allocated on a lottery system basis with hunters choosing their desired season in order of preference. Hunters may receive a permit for one season only.
- The refuge has also reconsidered its decision to not allow fall turkey hunting on the refuge. There will be no additional administrative burden on the refuge by having this season added to the refuge hunts.

I concur that modified alternative B, including the above changes, helps fulfill the mission of the Refuge System; best achieves the refuge's purposes, vision, and goals; maintains and, where appropriate, helps restores

the refuge's ecological integrity, addresses the major issues identified during the planning process, and is consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management. It also provides the most reasonable and effective enhancements to existing public use programs that are in high demand, with minimal impacts to wildlife and habitats. The plans to increase staffing and improve infrastructure are reasonable, practicable and will result in the most efficient management of the refuge and best serve the American public. This finding of no significant impact (FONSI) includes the EA by reference.

We have reviewed the predicted beneficial and adverse impacts with alternative B that are presented in chapter 4 of the draft CCP/EA, and compared them to the other alternatives. We specifically reviewed the context and intensity of those predicted impacts over the short- and long-term, and considered the cumulative effects. The review of each of the NEPA factors to assess whether there will be significant environmental effects is summarized here (40 C.F.R. 1508.27).

(1) Beneficial and adverse effects – we expect the final CCP (alternative B) management actions to benefit both the wildlife and habitats at Iroquois NWR. Important examples include the measures to increase forest habitats through natural early succession of grasslands and scrub-shrublands, control non-native invasive species, and manage a variety of other habitats on the refuge to benefit breeding and migrating songbirds, waterfowl, and raptors, as well as amphibians, reptiles, and mammals of conservation concern. These benefits will not result from any major change in management strategy; rather, they will be incremental to the effects of the current management. Therefore, we do not anticipate any significant beneficial or adverse effect on the human environment.

(2) Public health and safety – we expect the good safety record of the refuge to continue based on the protective actions provided in the stipulations of the compatibility determination for each of the authorized public uses on the refuge. There should be no significant impact on public health and safety from the implementation of the CCP.

(3) Highly controversial effects – the management actions in the final CCP such as invasive species control, early successional habitat restoration, hunting, and other wildlife-dependent recreational uses are time-tested measures. Their effects on the refuge are well-studied and widely known from past management and monitoring. There is no scientific controversy over what these effects will be. Thus, there is little risk of any unexpectedly significant effects on the environment.

(4) Highly uncertain effects or unknown risks – the management measures in the final CCP are evolutionary: they are mostly refinements of existing management measures that we have used for years. As discussed in the draft CCP/EA and in the final CCP, the selected alternative includes a comprehensive monitoring program to reassess the effectiveness of each planned improvement. With the data available on the current management results and the system in place to adjust for any unplanned effect, we do not find a high degree of uncertainty or unknown risk that the CCP will cause any significant impact on the environment.

(5) Precedent for future actions with significant effects – the purpose of the CCP is to establish the precedent for managing the refuge for up to 15 years. But the effects of that management are designed as gradual improvements over the existing conditions, not global changes. For example, strategies such as marsh restoration will be completed over several years. Therefore, we do not expect this precedent to cause any significant impact on the environment.

(6) Cumulatively significant impacts – the CCP provides the programmatic, long-term management plan for the refuge. We plan to coordinate with surrounding land managers to promote common goals. Our management jurisdiction is limited, however, to the refuge lands, and we do not foresee any of the coordinated activities rising to the level of a significant effect on the environment. Within the term of the CCP, we intend to pursue

additional projects such as constructing an additional trail and installing additional observation areas. We will review the alternatives for these projects and their effects in additional NEPA studies tiered from the draft CCP/EA. We will design these tiered projects so they are not likely to have a significant effect on the environment. Further, we will examine the cumulative effects of all projects under the CCP before they are approved, and we will conduct whatever level of additional NEPA review is warranted.

(7) Effects on scientific, cultural, or historical resources – the archaeological and cultural studies summarized in the CCP showed no significant impacts on these resources from the planned management activities. Service cultural resource managers in the Regional Office keep an inventory of known sites and structures, and ensure that we consider them in planning new ground-disturbing or structure-altering changes to the refuge. Throughout the implementation of the CCP, we will continue to conduct or contract archaeological or architectural surveys when needed.

(9) Effects on Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species and habitats – as detailed in the CCP, we have completed a consultation with the Service's Ecological Services Field Office under Section 7 of the ESA. Their endangered species specialists have concurred in our biological assessment that the planned actions are not likely to adversely affect any of the ESA-listed species that may be present on the refuge. The CCP also protects the delisted bald eagle. Our management actions are designed to preserve and improve the existing habitat for these species and there is no ESA-designated, critical habitat on the refuge. Therefore, we do not anticipate any significant effects on these ESA resources.

(10) Threat of violating any environmental law – our habitat management actions are designed to benefit the environment. They will comply with all applicable protections such as the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act. Pursuant to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (16 U.S.C. 668dd(e)(3), 668dd(m)), our public hunting and fishing programs under the CCP require all participants to comply with State regulations. We do not anticipate a threat that the CCP will violate any environmental law or cause any significant impact on the environment.

Based on this review, we find that implementing alternative B will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, in accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. Therefore, we have concluded that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required, and this FONSI is appropriate and warranted.

Theresa E Rabot

Theresa E. Rabot
Acting Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Hadley, Massachusetts

9-26-11
Date