

Draft Compatibility Determination

Title

Compatibility Determination for Expanded Public Motorized Access, San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge.

Refuge Use Category

Outdoor Recreation (General)

Refuge Use Type(s)

Auto touring

Refuge

San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Purpose(s) and Establishing and Acquisition Authority(ies)

The primary role of San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge is the recovery of native fishes of the Río Yaqui watershed (Service 1995).

The refuge was established in 1982 under authorization of the Fish and Wildlife Act, which provides “...for the development, advancement, management, conservation and protection of fish and wildlife resources...for the benefit of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services...” (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, as amended [16 U.S.C. 742a-742j, not including 742d-1]), and of the Endangered Species Act, “...to conserve (a) fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species...or (b) plants...” Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended [16 U.S.C. 1531-1544]).

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, otherwise known as 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 United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans (Pub. L. 105-57; 111 Stat. 1252).

Description of Use

Is this an existing use?

Yes. This use was originally found compatible in a 1994 determination. Currently staff, volunteers, and contractors utilize this stretch of road on a regular basis, however all refuge roads were closed to public motorized access in 2005 due to human safety concerns. See below for more information on use reevaluation at this time.

What is the use?

This use would allow auto touring on a portion of the refuge's main entrance road, recommended not to exceed the gravel parking lot located adjacent to the refuge vault toilet (Figure 1).

Is the use a priority public use?

No

Where would the use be conducted?

Auto touring would be allowed on the main refuge entrance road, recommended not to exceed the gravel parking lot located adjacent to the refuge vault toilet (Figure 1). This road can be accessed via E Geronimo Trail Rd that runs east from Douglas, AZ. At the time of this compatibility determination, the refuge only plans to allow this use on the first 0.6 miles of the entrance road which leads to the refuge overlook parking area. The portion of the entrance road discussed in the determination primarily lies on the mesa area of the refuge which was historically grassland habitat, though is currently largely encroached upon by woody vegetation. The entrance road does not contain habitat for federally listed species that occur in other portions of the refuge and is unlikely to result in incidental impacts to such species or their habitat. This stretch of road is currently regularly driven by refuge staff, volunteers, and contractors.

When would the use be conducted?

The entrance road will remain open daily from sunrise to sunset.

How would the use be conducted?

The existing gate at the beginning of the entrance road would be opened such that visitors could drive the road. At the time of this determination, the open portion would include the 0.6 miles of road that leads to the overlook parking area (Figure 1). In the future, the road may be driven up to the gravel parking lot located adjacent to the refuge vault toilet. Gates will be installed to prevent public motorized vehicle access further into the refuge. Currently, the refuge receives approximately 3,000 visitors per year. Visitors can enter through three points, one of which being the entrance road discussed in this determination. With this expansion of public motorized access, it's likely that a higher proportion of visitors may utilize this entrance. Overall visitation may increase to some degree, however due to the rural location of the refuge, any change in visitation is unlikely to be substantial.

Why is this use being proposed or reevaluated?

This use is being reevaluated at this time because conditions surrounding the 2005 road closure have significantly changed. At the time of closure, the international border, which aligns with the southern border of the refuge, consisted only of a 5-

strand barbed wire fence. Since then, a 30ft tall wall has been constructed along the international border and increased camera surveillance from permanent towers has been established. These cameras capture the vast majority of the entrance road identified in this determination.

The use is also being reevaluated to aid in more equitable on-site access to view and hike to the refuge's riparian areas and ponds. These are the locations that typically draw visitors to the refuge for activities such as wildlife observation and photography. The use will allow these areas to be more accessible to persons with a wider array of physical ability.

Availability of Resources

Added cost to the refuge for this use is not anticipated to include substantial reoccurring expenses. However, as discussed below in the "Anticipated Impacts of Use Section" there is the possibility that the expanded auto touring leads to increased invasive plant species establishment and litter along the entrance road. Should these things occur, refuge resources, primarily in the form of staff time would be needed to mitigate with invasive species treatment and litter pickup. If impacts to refuge resources become greater than anticipated as result of this use, refuge management may adjust or reduce the scope of the use if necessary in the future.

One-time costs will be those associated with the removal, movement, and installation of a currently existing vehicle gate that is in another location on the refuge. This gate will be moved and re-placed to prevent motorized access beyond the overlook parking area. Approximately one week of maintenance personnel staff time and minimal equipment cost (i.e., concrete; sign indicating "no unauthorized vehicle traffic beyond this point"; installation of a 25MPH speed limit sign) will be one-time costs totaling approximately \$2,200.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Potential impacts of a proposed use on the refuge's purpose(s) and the Refuge System mission

The effects and impacts of the proposed use to refuge resources, whether adverse or beneficial, are those that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close causal relationship to the proposed use. This CD 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."

Resources not discussed below will not be more than negligibly impacted by the action and have been dismissed from further analyses.

Short-term impacts

No short-term impacts would be considered "more than negligible" as a result of this use.

Long-term impacts

- Visitor Use and Experience. This resource will be positively impacted by this use. Currently, visitors that enter the refuge from the main entrance road must walk or bike approximately 0.75 miles across the exposed mesa area before entering the portion of the refuge with the ponds and riparian features that draw most visitors. This use will make these areas more accessible to visitors with a wider breadth of physical ability as it will allow for greater viewing opportunity and reduced traversing distance to the refuge's water resources.
- Habitat and Vegetation. This resource could be impacted as vehicles are known to be vectors for the spread of invasive plant species.
- Refuge and Management Operations. This resource could be impacted if the use results in increased litter or illegal activity along the entrance road where auto touring is being reevaluated.
- By only considering a portion of the entrance road for this use, the refuge avoids and mitigates additional impacts to resources.

Public Review and Comment

The draft compatibility determination will be available for public review and comment for 14 days. The public will be made aware of this comment opportunity via the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge website. A copy of this document will be made available electronically on the refuge website (<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/san-bernardino>). Additionally, a hard copy of this document will be posted at the refuge headquarters office (7628 N HWY 191, Douglas, AZ 85608). Please let us know if you need the documents in an alternative format. All comments should be submitted via email to r2_plancomments@fws.gov. Concerns expressed during the public comment period will be addressed in the final Compatibility Determination.

Determination

Is the use compatible?

Yes. Though the refuge currently only plans to allow public motorized access on the 0.6 miles of entrance road that lead to the overlook parking area, we have determined that this use is compatible up to the gravel parking lot adjacent to the vault toilet.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

1. Motor vehicles must not leave the designated roadway.
2. Motor vehicles must abide by a 25 MPH speed limit.
3. Only street legal motor vehicles may utilize the road.
4. The public must abide by all refuge regulations, including open refuge hours (daily from Sunrise to Sunset).

Justification

The stipulations outlined above would help ensure that the use is compatible at San

San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge. Auto touring on the designated portion of the refuge main entrance road, as outlined in this compatibility determination, would not conflict with the national policy to maintain the biological diversity, integrity, and environmental health of the refuge. Based on available science and best professional judgement, the Service has determined that auto touring at San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge in accordance with the stipulations provided here and in the designated area, would not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purpose of San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge. Rather, appropriate and compatible auto touring would be a use of refuge through which the public can develop an appreciation for wildlife and wild lands.

Signature of Determination

Refuge Manager Signature and Date

Signature of Concurrence

Assistant Regional Director Signature and Date

Mandatory Reevaluation Date

April 2034

Literature Cited/References

San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge. 2023. Categorical Exclusion Checklist and Environmental Action Statement. On file at San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters Office, Douglas, AZ.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). 1995. San Bernardino and Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuges Comprehensive Management Plan 1995-2015. Albuquerque, NM

Figure



Figure 1. Location where auto touring use is being reevaluated on San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge (green). Black line represents the section of entrance road to be opened at the time of this determination. Orange line represents the additional section of entrance road where auto touring use is also compatible. Hatched polygons represent the refuge overlook parking area and parking area adjacent the vault toilet (left to right, respectively).