

Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Council

Summer Meeting



July 22, 2025

PRESENTED BY
National Wildlife Refuge System
Samantha Gibbs, Nick Kaczor, Debbie DeVore



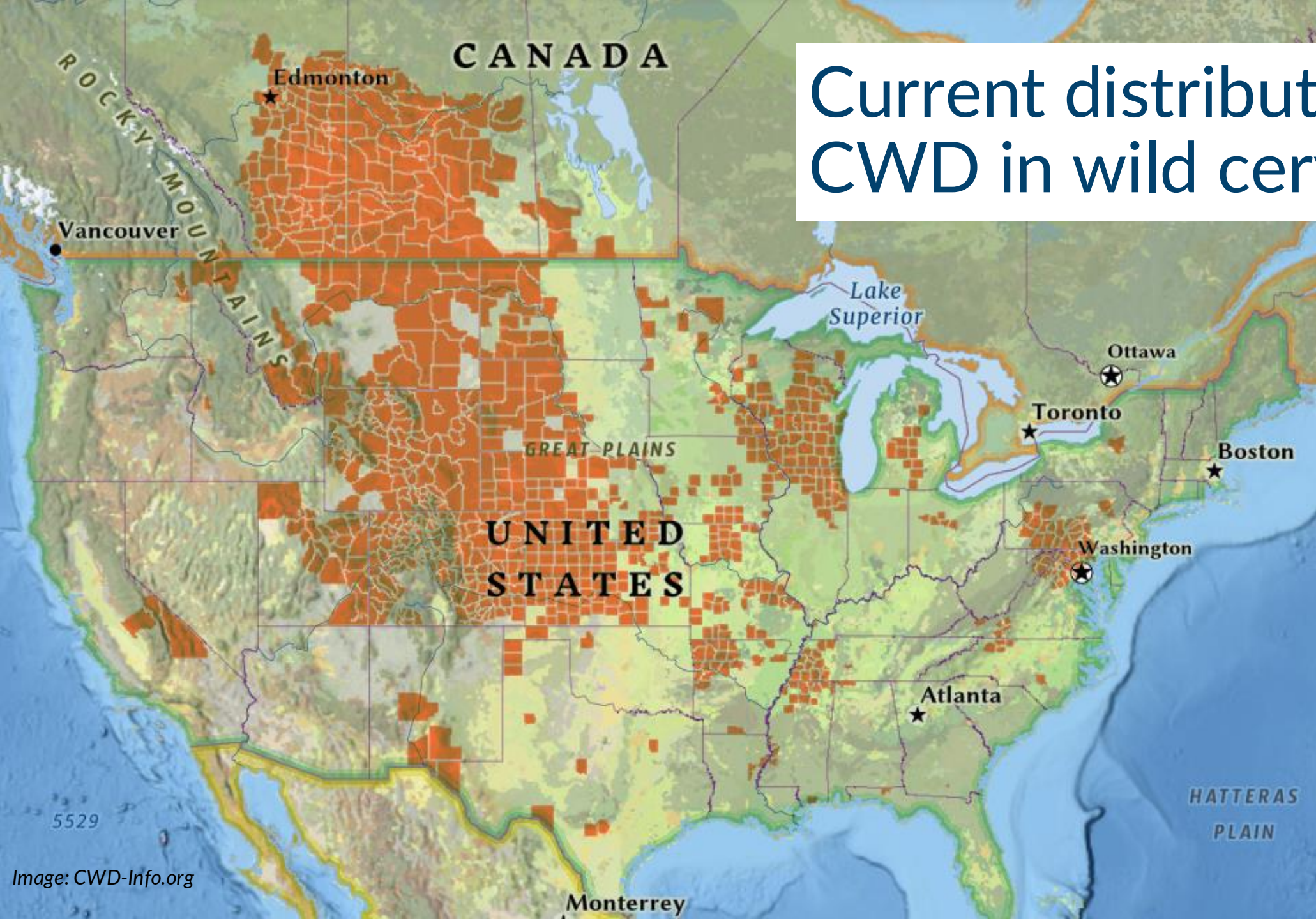
FWS UPDATES

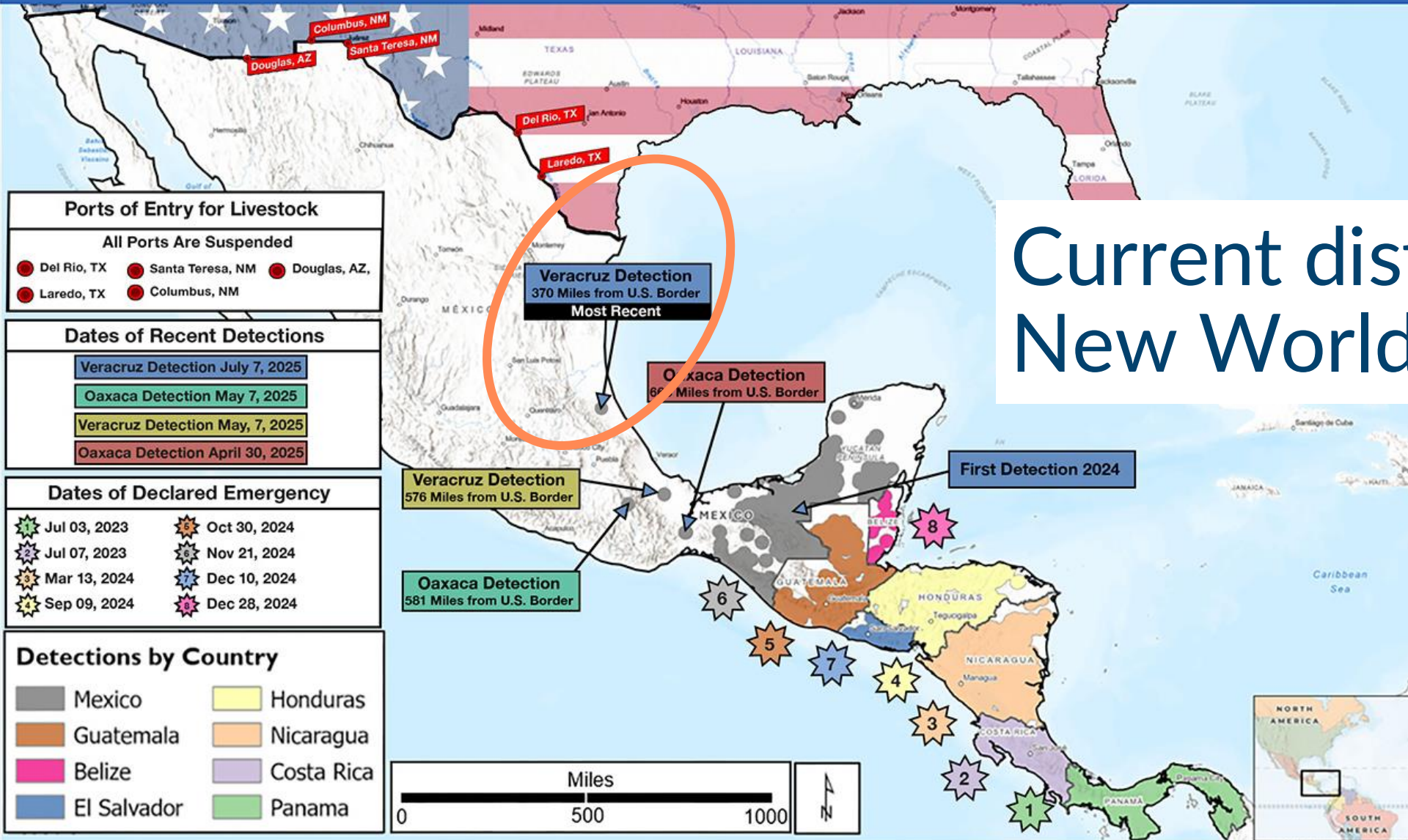
1. Chronic Wasting Disease & New World Screwworm
2. Lead-free Voluntary Incentive Program
3. 2025/2026 Annual Hunting and Fishing Update

CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE and NEW WORLD SCREWORM UPDATE



Current distribution of CWD in wild cervids





Current distribution of New World screwworm

LEAD-FREE VOLUNTARY INCENTIVE PROGRAM

PURPOSE

Encourage the voluntary use of lead-free ammunition for hunting at national wildlife refuges, while supporting the broader efforts of regional, state and non-governmental organizations to reduce the use of lead ammunition.



ADDRESSING LEAD USE ON SERVICE LANDS

Lead ammunition linked
to poisoning in wildlife
(e.g., bald eagles)

Broad support for
incentives to
voluntarily use lead-
free alternatives

Lead-free
alternatives may cost
more and are not as
widely available

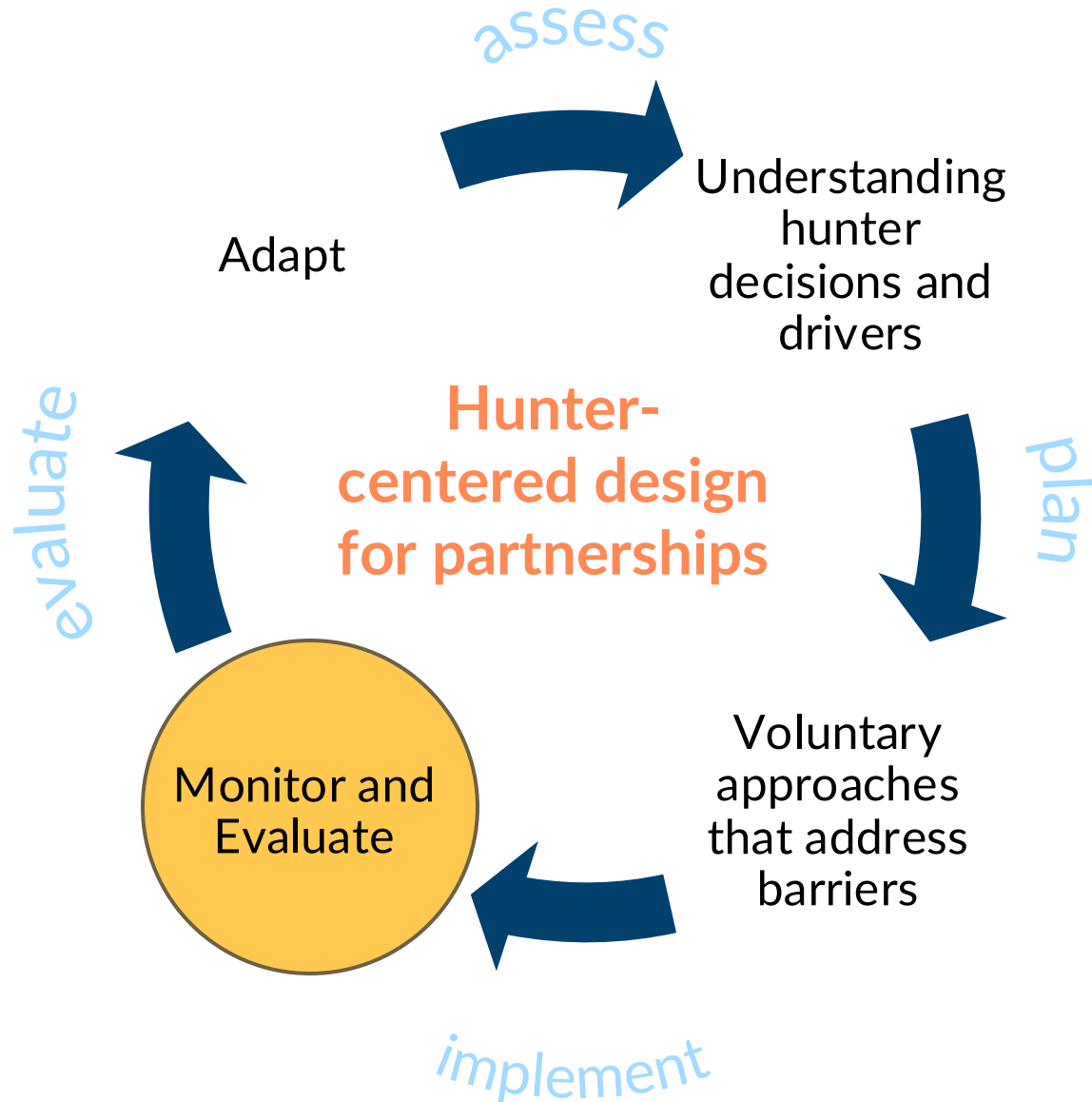




PARTNER-LED

- North American Non-Lead Partnership
 - Switching Name to *Lead-Free Partnership*
 - Updated website coming soon
- NEAFWA
- MAFWA
- Other Stakeholders

ADAPTIVE APPROACH



THE 2024-2025 PILOT PROGRAM

3 Workshops, 129 Incentive Submissions at 7 Refuges, 60% Response Rate to Participant Survey

INCENTIVE
AVAILABLE

HUNT
LEAD-FREE

Submit receipts to receive a gift card for up to \$50 per box of lead-free hunting ammunition (\$25/box for shotgun or muzzleloader and \$50/box for rifle). First come, first served. Limit 2 boxes of ammunition per eligible hunter.

www.fws.gov/initiative/lead-free

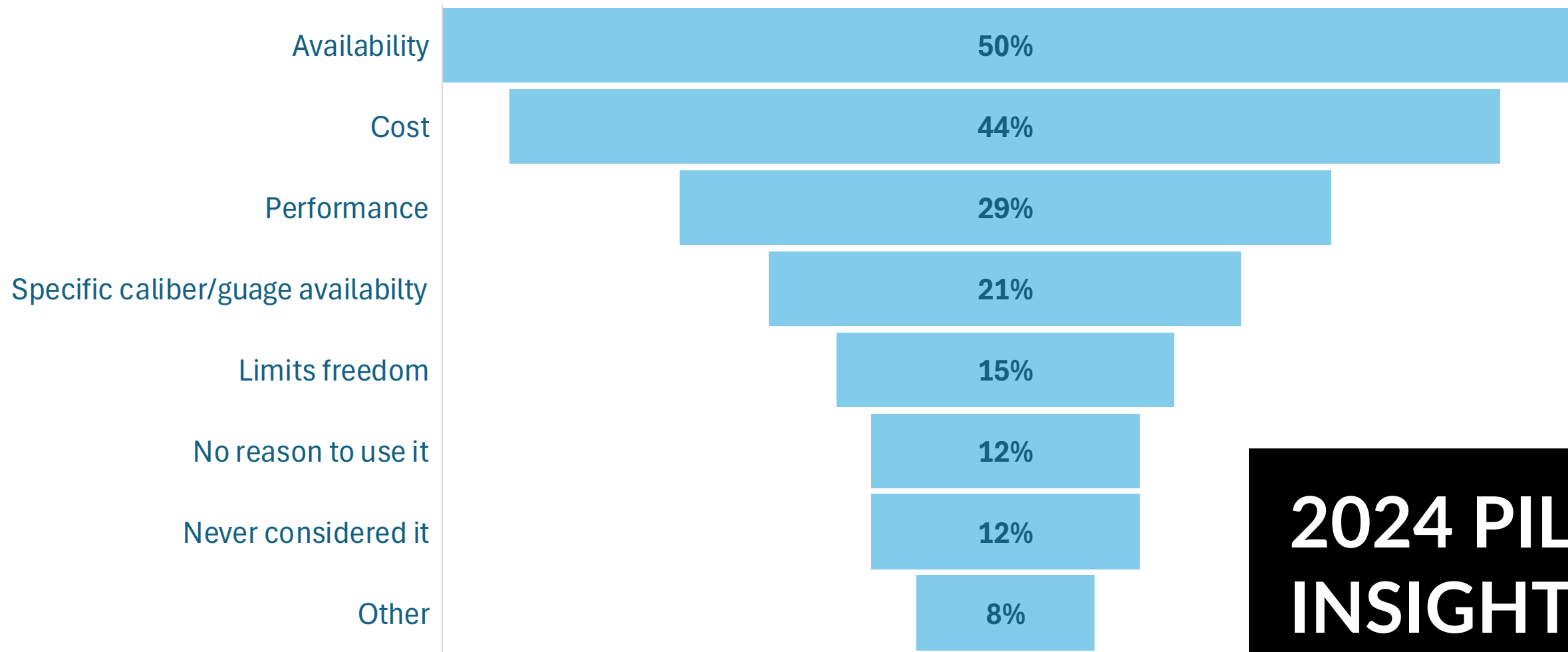




Refuge	Submissions as of 6/23/25
Blackwater (MD)*	78
Canaan Valley (WV)*	30
Patoka River (IN)	1
Trempealeau (WI)	1
Wallkill River (NJ/NY)*	15
William L. Finley (OR)	4
Pocosin Lakes (NC) (Pungo Unit)	0
Grand Total	129

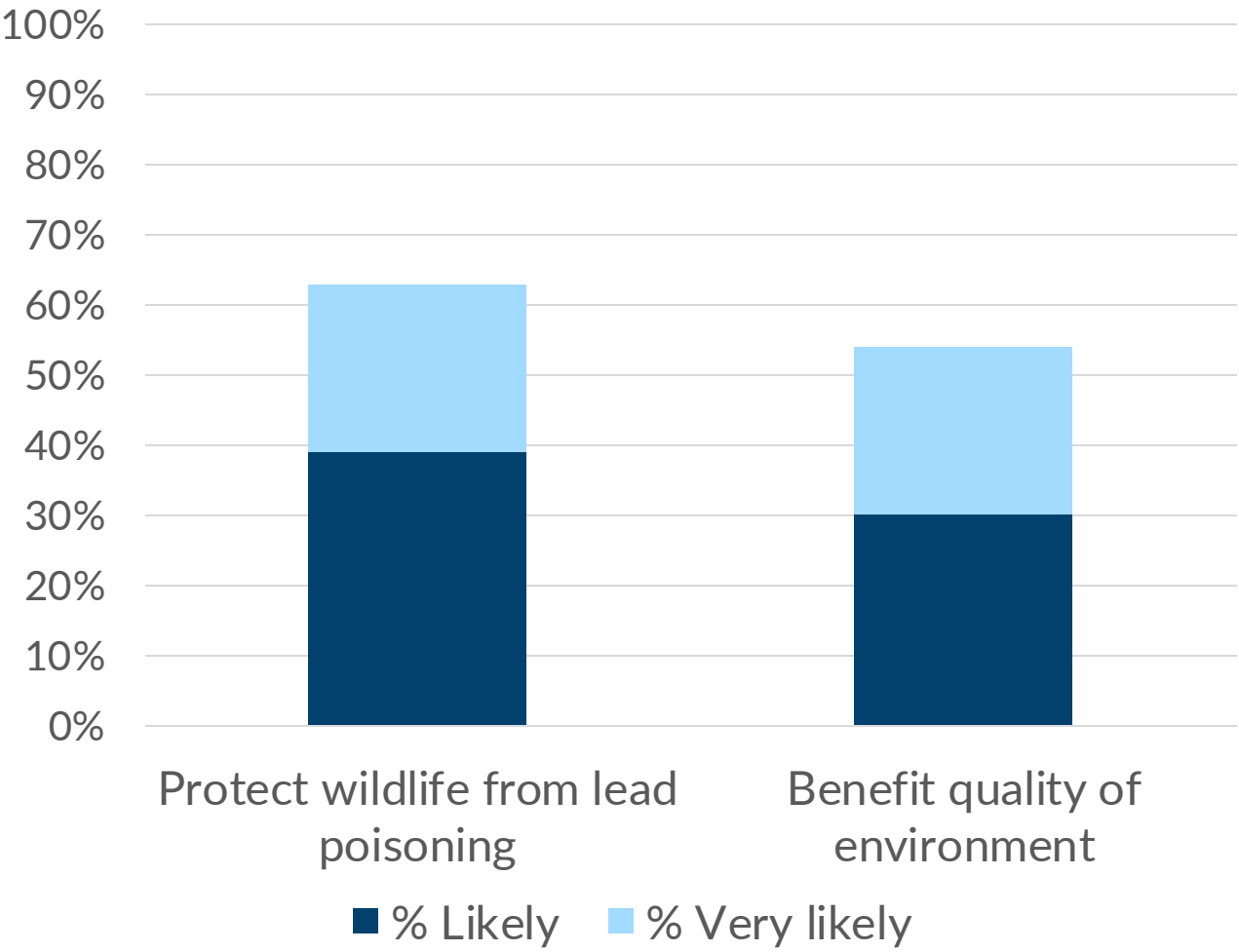
* Hosted an education workshop

SURVEY CONFIRMS TOP BARRIERS TO LEAD-FREE



**2024 PILOT
INSIGHTS**

SURVEY CAPTURES BELIEFS ABOUT GOING LEAD-FREE

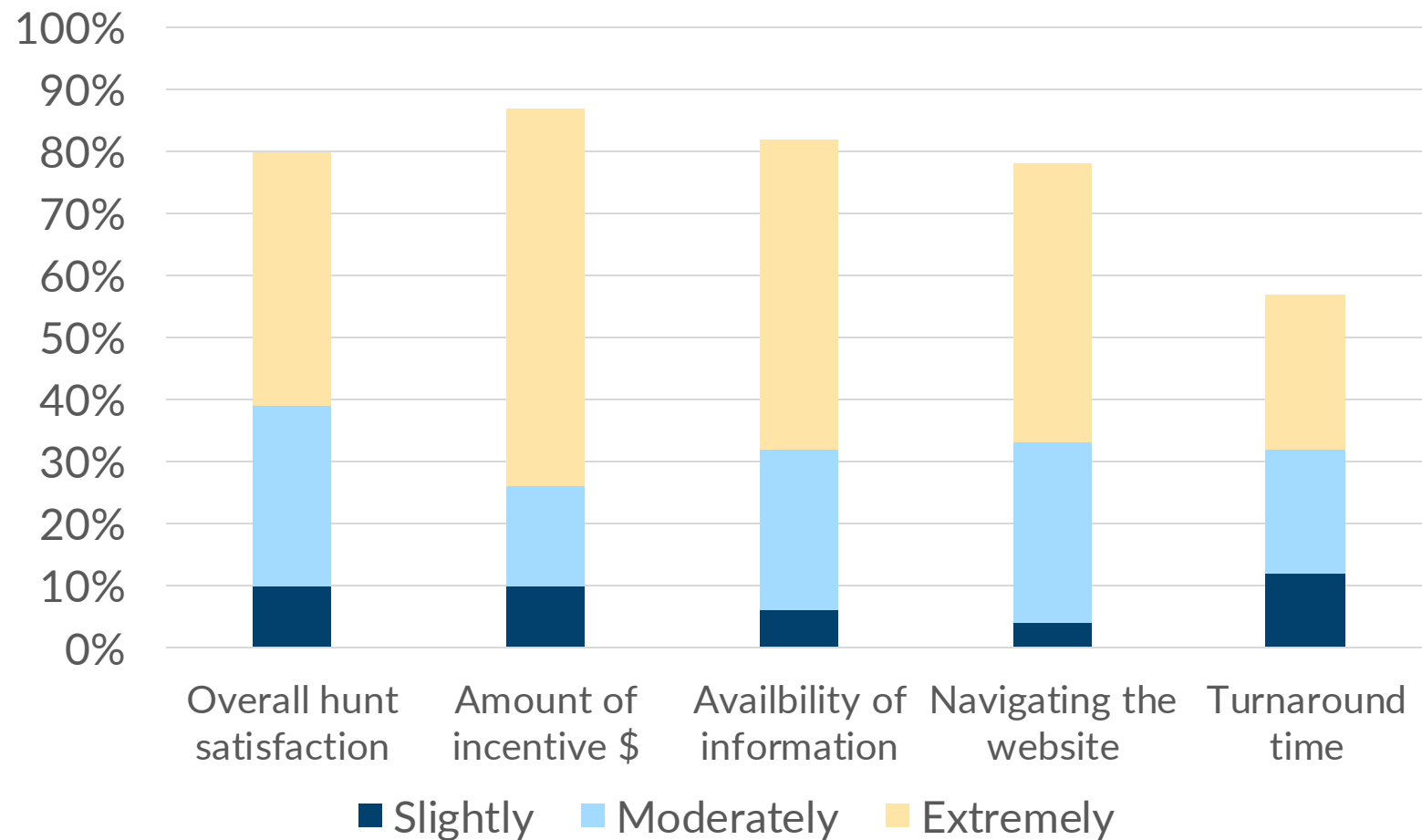


2024 PILOT INSIGHTS

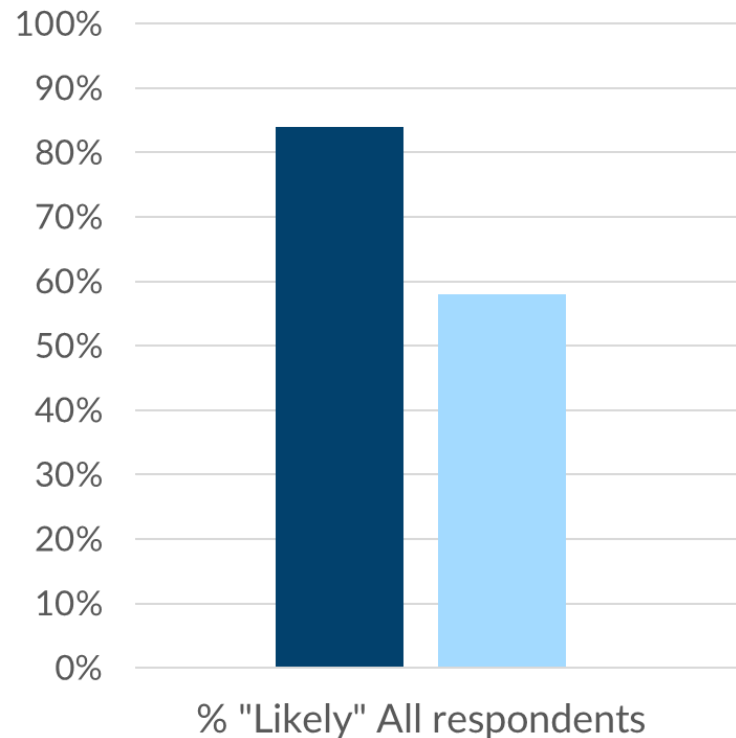
Most hunters believed that going lead-free means positive outcomes on the landscape.



SURVEY CAPTURES SATISFACTION WITH PROGRAM



SURVEY CAPTURES LIKELIHOOD OF USING LEAD-FREE IN FUTURE



- Use Lead-free (WITH incentive program)
- Use Lead-free (NO incentive program)

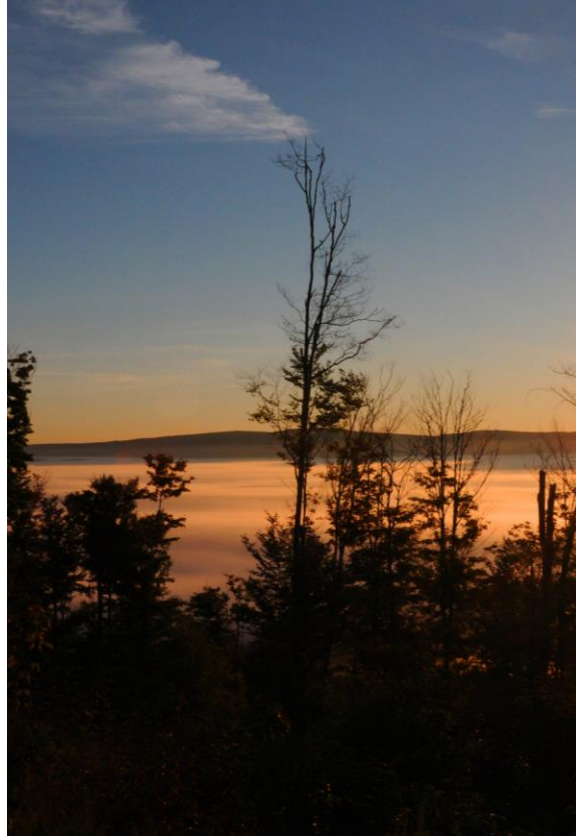
2024 PILOT INSIGHTS

Over 50% of hunters are more likely to use lead-free in the future. Even with NO incentive program.

TAKEAWAYS



An incentive program builds trust with hunters.



Not every refuge and hunt is a good fit, need to be strategic about expanding to more sites.



Partners, especially local vendors, are key to success.

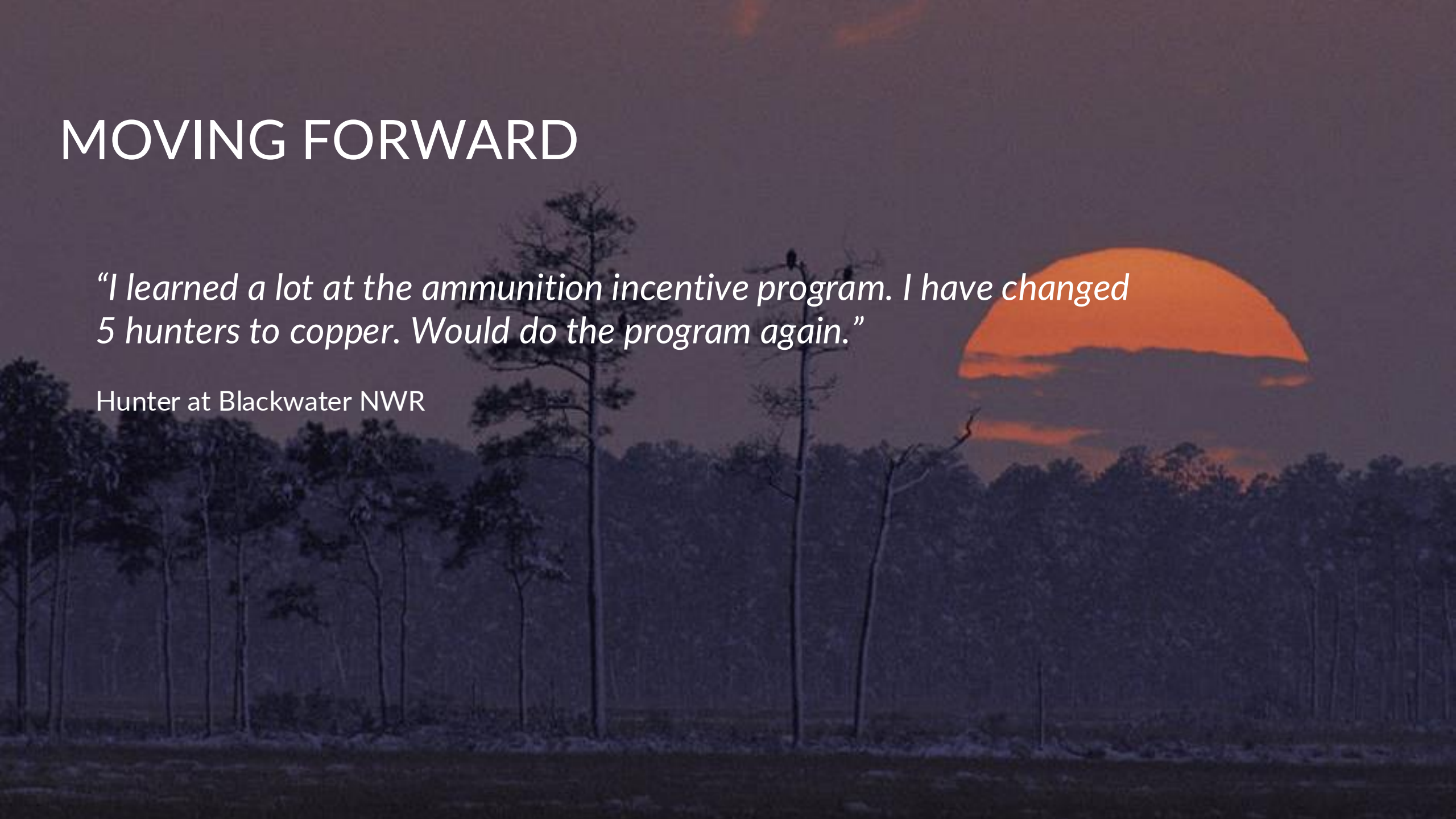


Communications should come from trusted partners and be practical.

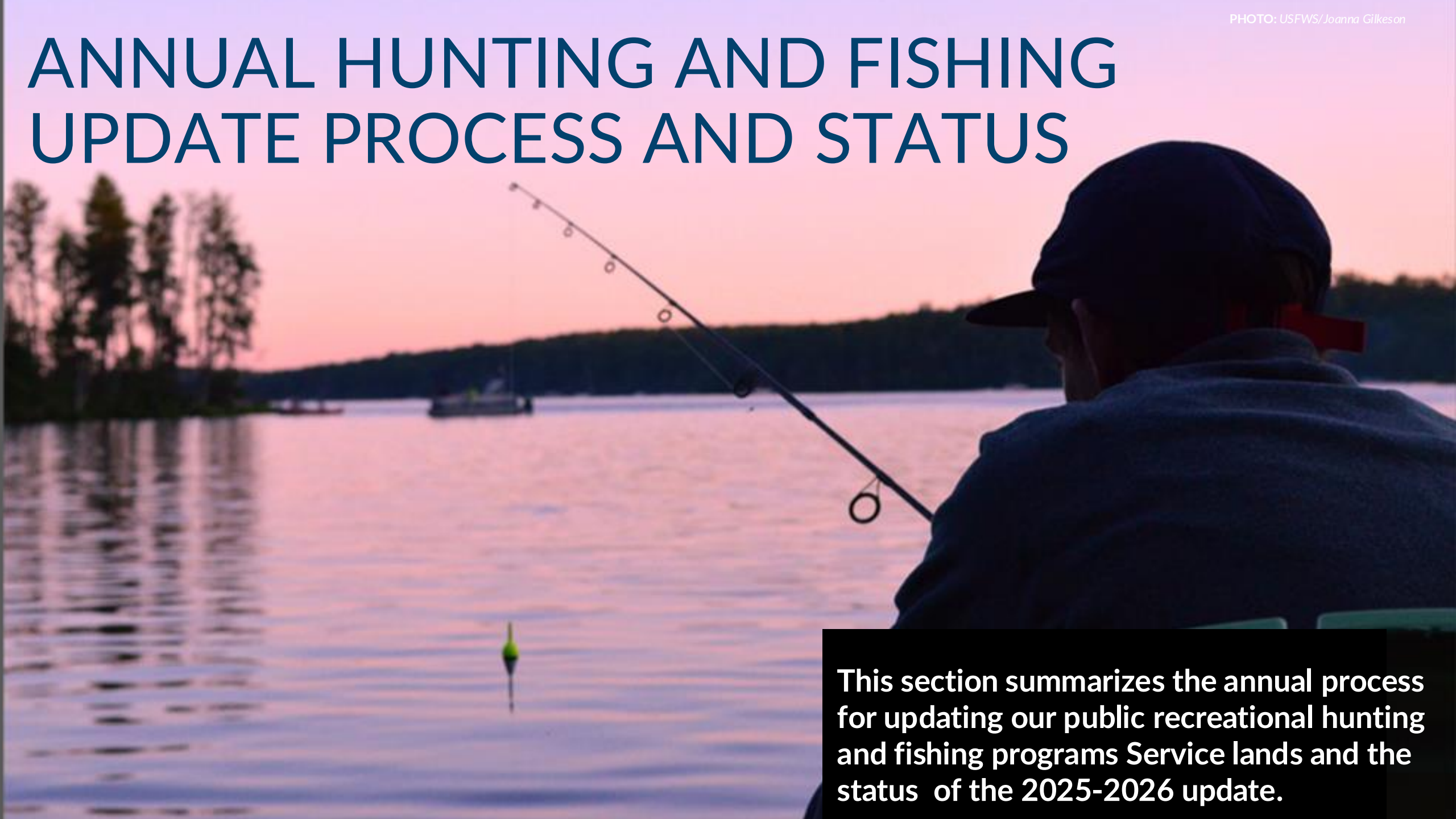
MOVING FORWARD

“I learned a lot at the ammunition incentive program. I have changed 5 hunters to copper. Would do the program again.”

Hunter at Blackwater NWR



ANNUAL HUNTING AND FISHING UPDATE PROCESS AND STATUS

A person wearing a dark cap and a grey hoodie is seen from the back, sitting on a boat and fishing. They are holding a fishing rod that extends over the water. A green bobber is visible in the water. The background shows a calm lake at sunset, with a line of trees on the far shore and a few boats in the distance. The sky is a mix of orange, pink, and purple.

This section summarizes the annual process for updating our public recreational hunting and fishing programs Service lands and the status of the 2025-2026 update.

Value of Recreational Hunting and Fishing

\$144.6B

\$99.4B Fishing
\$45.2B Hunting

**ANNUAL
NATIONWIDE
ECONOMIC
IMPACT**

Most Recent Data (2022)

54.3M

39.9M Fishing
14.4M Hunting

**ANNUAL
NATIONWIDE
PARTICIPATION**

Most Recent Data (2022)



10.9M



8.3M Fishing
2.6M Hunting

**FISCAL YEAR
2024 REFUGE
SYSTEM VISITS**

Most Recent Data (FY 2024)



Refuge Hunters are LOCAL, LOYAL, and SATISFIED

PHOTO: USFWS

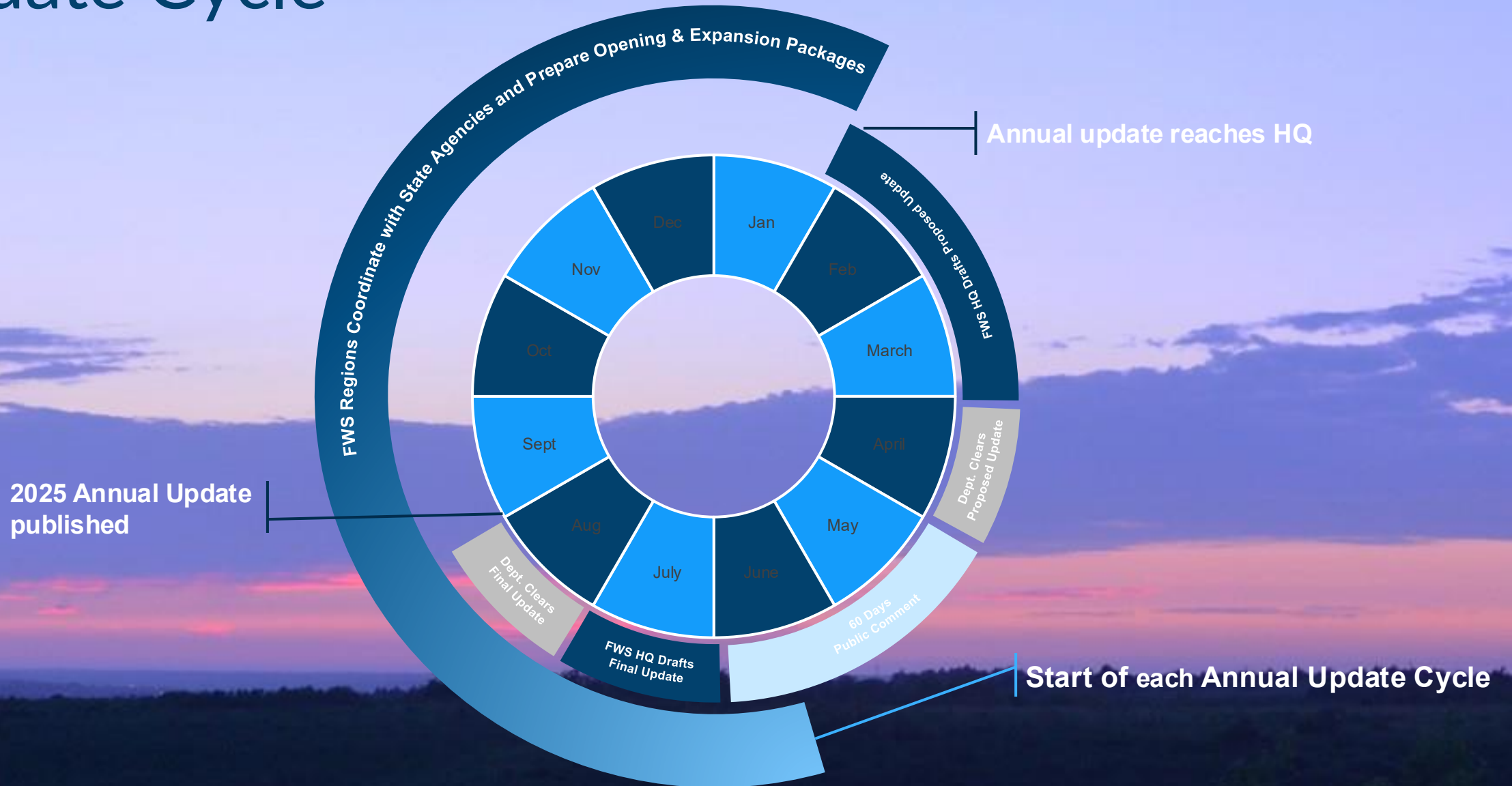
49% LIVE IN THE
LOCAL AREA

17 AVERAGE ANNUAL
VISITS TO THE
REFUGE

92% SAY REFUGE WAS THE
PRIMARY PURPOSE
OF THEIR TRIP

94% SATISFIED WITH THEIR
VISIT AND PLAN TO
RETURN

14 Month Update Cycle



2025-2026 Proposed Update Content Continued

42

NEW
OPPORTUNITIES

87k

ACRES

17

FWS
STATIONS

22

REMOVED
REGULATIONS

Public Comment Period

**Began
May 15, 2025**

**Closed
June 30,
2025**

**194 public
comments**

**168 form
comments**

**26 unique
comments**

2025-2026 Final Update

13 topics
for
response to
comments

No changes
from
proposed to
final update

On track for
a targeted
August 28
publication
date

Extra Slides for Detailed Conversations

Lead Free



Timeline

2025 Key Dates

- Stations & Hunts Identified: *July 1st*
- Framework Finalized: *July 1st*
- Press Release: *July 15th*
- Workshops: *August & September*

Ideal Future Year Program Cycle Dates

- Internal Requests: *September*
- Stations & Hunts Identified: *January*
- Comms. Packages: *February-March*
- Workshops: *May-August*

Refuge Participation Criteria

Desired attributes for refuge participation:

- Hunts are conducted on a permitted basis, particularly where contact information is collected online, which can be used to achieve targeted communication.
- Support from associated State wildlife management agencies exists.
- Refuge staff possess the capacity and desire to support.
- Represent a variety of geographic areas and user groups.

2025 Timeline

2025 Draft Tasks	2025 Draft Date Goal
Draft Framework Completed Ahead of Chiefs Face to Face	5/22/2025
Internal Request Sent to Regions for Upcoming Year	6/1/2025
Brief Regional Refuge Chiefs	6/12/2025
Brief Incoming Director	mid-late June 2205
Stations & Hunts Identified	6/20/2025
Framework Finalized	7/1/2025
Official Press Release (Last year was 7/24/25)	7/15/2025
Discussions with Potential Funding Partners Completed	June-August 2025
Hunting Seasons <i>Generally</i> Begin	9/1/2025
Funding Agreements Completed	9/1/2025
Educational Workshops Completed	9/30/2025

Ideal Future Year Program Cycles

Subsequent Year Program Cycle	Target Date
Internal Request Sent to Regions for Upcoming Hunting Season	September
Indentification of Stations & Hunts for Upcoming Hunting Season	January
Development of Communication Packages	February-March
Official Press Release	May-June
Funding Agreements Completed	June
Communication with Potential Hunters Sent by Respective Refuges	May-August
Education Workshops	May-August
Hunting Seasons	September-May
Surveys	November-December



DESIRED OUTCOMES

- Expand Participation
- Increase Use of Lead-Free Ammunition
- Support Hunter Choice, Knowledge, and Access
- Raise Awareness
- Build Partnerships
- Evaluate and Improve



PROGRAM DESIGN

- Voluntary Participation
 - Refuge Participation Criteria
- Incentive Options
- Outreach and Communication
- Partnership Engagement
- Data Collection



PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

- National Coordination
- Regional Staff
- Refuge Staff
- Partners

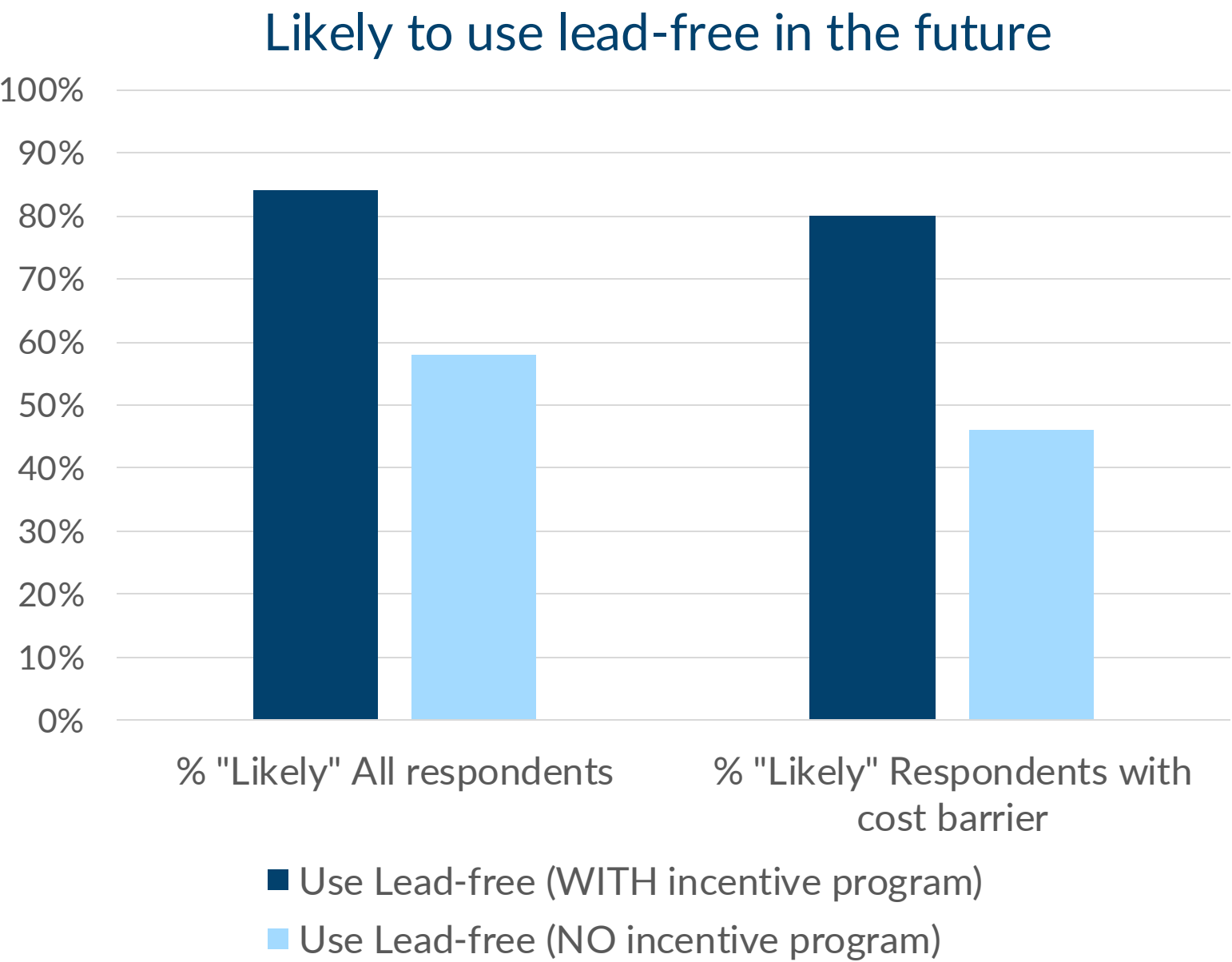
WHO WE SURVEYED

- Highly engaged big game hunters
- Multiple motivations for hunting
 - Practical (food)
 - Recreational (seeing wildlife)
 - Social (time with family & friends)
- Strong hunting, shooting and stewardship identities
- White (100%) men (100%) who are educated (85% with at least some college education)



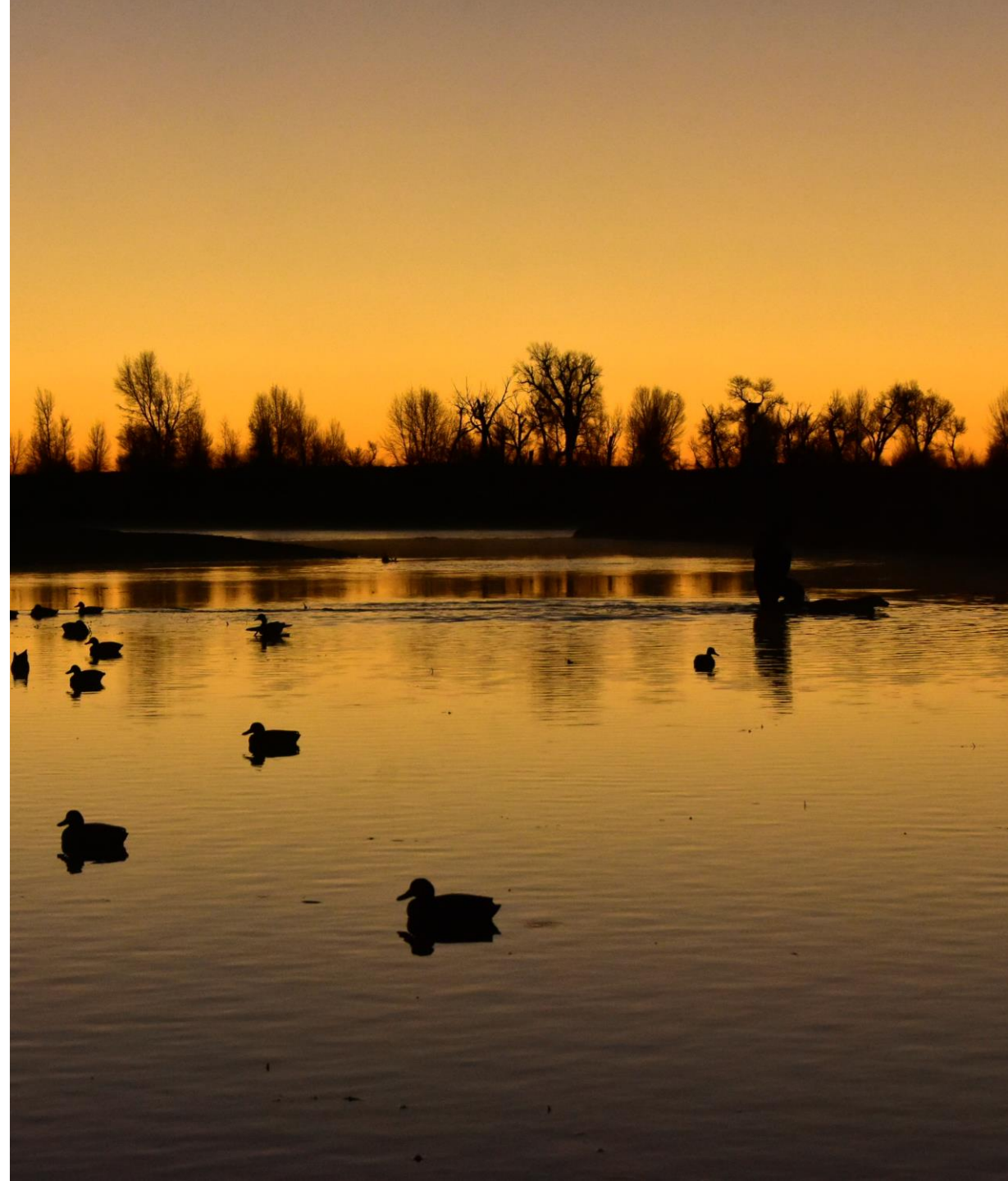


The incentive program addresses the cost barrier



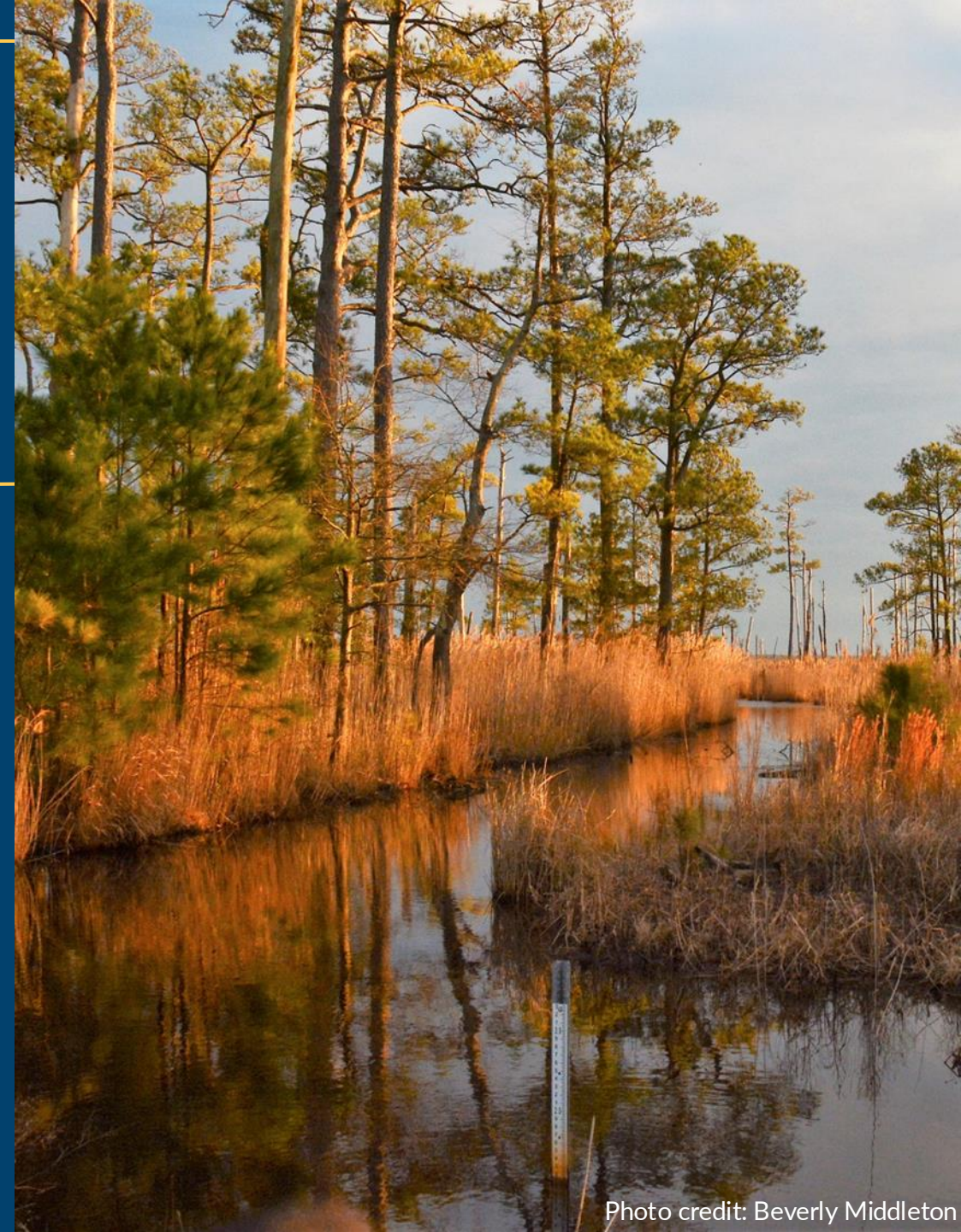
SURVEY BASICS

- Online delivery
- 6 participating stations
 - Blackwater (R5)
 - Wallkill River (R5)
 - Trempealeau (R3)
 - Patoka River (R3)
- ~60% response rate



“I learned a lot at the ammunition incentive program. I have changed 5 hunters to copper. Would do the program again.”

Hunter at Blackwater NWR



"Please continue the incentive program! I can barely justify the unsubsidized expense at current non-toxic prices. I imagine that others cannot and will not buy non-toxic without the enticement of a rebate."

Hunter at Canaan Valley
NWR



ENCOURAGING VOLUNTARY USE OF LEAD-FREE AMMUNITION ON NWRS



HUNTER PARTICIPATION SURVEY



Understanding
Hunter Decisions
and Drivers

Voluntary
Approaches that
Address Barriers

**Evaluating
and Adapting**

*Hunter-centered
Design for
Partnerships*

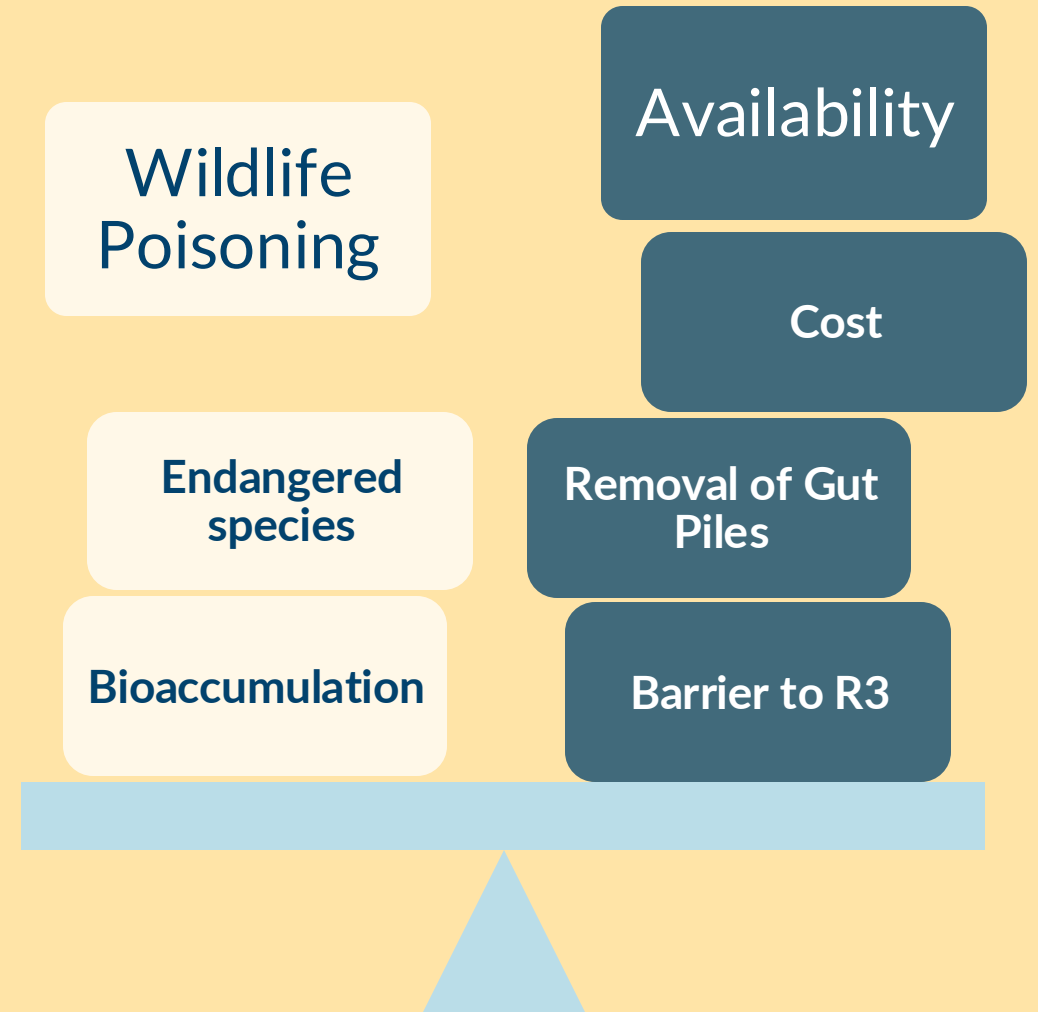


Lead Controversy

Lead ammunition and tackle linked to poisoning in wildlife (e.g. bald eagles)

Lead-free alternatives cost more and are not as widely available

Broad support for incentives to voluntarily use lead-free alternatives



FWS Lead Issue Timeline

December 2021

CBD Lawsuit

2022 & 2023
Updates

Phase-outs of
Lead for
Individual Units

2024

Voluntary Lead-
Free Incentive
Program

2021

Increased
Public
Comments

2022

Deliberate
Approach &
Evaluation

July 2023

Earthjustice
Lawsuit

FWS Approach to Lead Ammunition and Tackle

Deliberative Approach

Pause on new lead-allowed opportunities

Evaluation of Future of Lead Use

Gathering research and stakeholder input



Targeted Phase-outs

Individual NWRS units requiring lead-free

Voluntary Incentives

Incentives for hunters to choose lead-free

Lead-Free Voluntary Incentive Program

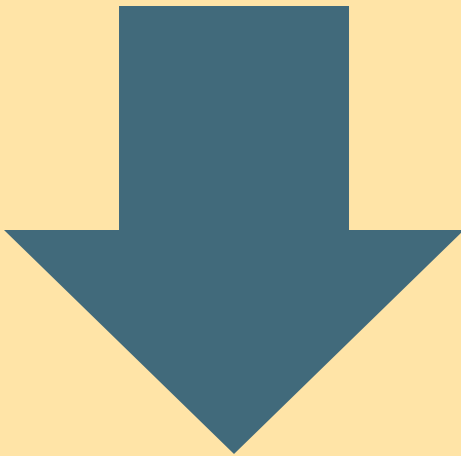


Options for Future of Lead Use



New lead-allowed opportunities

Trade-off: more access, more legal risk



Continue deliberative approach

Trade-off: less access, less legal risk