

Draft Compatibility Determination

Title

Draft Compatibility Determination for Environmental Education and Interpretation, Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Use Category

Environmental Education and Interpretation

Refuge Use Type(s)

Environmental education (National Wildlife Refuge System staff and authorized agents, not conducted by National Wildlife Refuge System staff or authorized agents, and general)

Interpretation (National Wildlife Refuge System staff and authorized agents and not conducted by National Wildlife Refuge System staff or authorized agents)

Refuge

Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge

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

Congress established the refuge on May 25, 1990 by appropriating \$6 million for land acquisition through the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act (Public Law 101-302). Public Law 101-302 did not describe specific purposes for the refuge, so its legal purposes are derived from the following broad authorities:

“... for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources...” 16 U.S.C. § 742f(a)(4) “...for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude...” 16 U.S.C. § 742f(b)(1) **Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956**

“... the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions ...” 16 U.S.C. § 3901(b) **Emergency Wetland Resources Act of 1986**

“... conservation, management, and ... restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats ... for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans...” 16 U.S.C. § 668dd(a)(2) **National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act**

The intent of Congressman Neal Smith in working to establish the refuge was clear. He stated in the Congressional Record (H2727) that the proposed refuge would offer “*an unusual opportunity for interpretive programs, wetlands, a habitat for some 300 species of indigenous and migratory birds, the regrowth of many acres of now scarce species of trees, buffalo and elk which were indigenous to the area, and the largest native prairie grass fields in Iowa*” and that “*tens of thousands of school children ... could use the area as an outdoor study area.*”

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife 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 compatibility determination reviews, replaces, and combines the 2006 compatibility determinations for environmental education and interpretation. Environmental education and interpretation were evaluated in conjunction with the 2007 comprehensive conservation plan and associated environmental assessment (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2006; 2007).

What is the use?

Environmental education is defined as on-refuge activities that use a planned process to foster awareness, knowledge, understanding, and appreciation in students about fish, wildlife, plants, ecology, natural sciences (e.g., astronomy) and refuge management. This use could be conducted by refuge staff, authorized agents, non-refuge staff or non-authorized agents. This use may also occur off refuge lands; however, those activities are outside the scope of this determination, as compatibility requirements only apply to activities occurring within areas of the National Wildlife Refuge System. General environmental education activities include those not specifically defined elsewhere in this category.

Interpretation is defined as on-refuge activities for refuge visitors that are designed to foster an understanding and appreciation for natural and cultural resources and associated management. This use could be conducted by refuge staff, authorized agents, non-refuge staff or non-authorized agents. This use may also occur off refuge lands; however, those activities are outside the scope of this determination, as compatibility requirements only apply to activities occurring within areas of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Is the use a priority public use?

Yes, this is a legislated priority wildlife-dependent public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Where would the use be conducted?

Staff- and partner-led environmental education and interpretive programs may take place throughout the refuge, off-site and through digital platforms. Locations on refuge include the following:

Trails

- Overlook Trail (0.5 mile paved trail in tallgrass prairie)
- Tallgrass Trail (2 mile paved trail in tallgrass prairie with views of the bison and elk)

enclosure)

- Oak Savanna Trail (0.5 mile gravel trail in oak savanna, with a vault toilet at the trailhead)
- Basswood Trail (0.5 mile mowed grass trail in wooded area)
- Prairie Parkway Bike Trail (4.5 mile paved bike trail through tallgrass prairie, connects the visitor center to Prairie City)
- Mowed fire breaks (45 miles total) are open to foot traffic but are not maintained as trails

Roads

- Entry Road (4.7 miles, two-way traffic, paved entry road through tallgrass prairie)
- Wildlife Drive (5 miles, two-way traffic, mainly gravel roads through tallgrass prairie and the bison and elk enclosure)
- Refuge roads (16.61 miles of public roads excluding roads on the refuge perimeter, two-way traffic, gravel roads through tallgrass prairie and oak savanna)

Visitor Center and Other Infrastructure

- Visitor center (at the time of writing, building is approximately 43,000 square feet total, including exhibit area, multipurpose room, nature store, classroom, lab and non-public office areas) and grounds (butterfly garden, tallgrass prairie). Proposed changes to the visitor center would reduce the size to approximately 21,000 square feet total, including exhibit area, multipurpose room, nature store and non-public office areas.
- Picnic pavilion (attached to visitor center)
- Overlook on entry road (tallgrass prairie)

Other Resources

To explore the full range of wildlife and plants present on the refuge, environmental education and interpretive activities could occur in any habitat type. Select additional locations could be used across the refuge depending on program subject matter and education objectives.

Self-led environmental education and interpretive activities could take place at locations across the refuge that would be open to public use. Primary access to the use would be by foot or vehicle.

Staff and partner-led large education-based refuge events would be restricted to durable surfaces including the visitor center and visitor center grounds, the Overlook Trail, the Tallgrass Trail, the Savanna Trail and the Basswood Trail, associated parking lots and select waysides on refuge roads that would accommodate heavy foot and vehicle traffic. Staff and partner-led environmental education and interpretive programs could also be conducted off-refuge in local communities and could take place in schools, libraries, parks, education or nature centers or other sites conducive to experiential learning.

Interpretive signage is available in the visitor center, on the Overlook and Tallgrass Trails, at the Entry Road Overlook kiosk and at the Savanna Trail trailhead kiosk. Brochures are available at kiosks, the visitor center and digitally on the refuge website. Materials and equipment to enhance

learning may be checked out from the visitor center for use on-refuge.

Most equipment and supplies used for staff and partner-led environmental education and interpretive programs are stored in the visitor center located near the center of the refuge at the end of the Entry Road.

Pre-recorded digital programming may be shared through the refuge website, social media, host sites, and other platforms that provide the ability to share accessible content. Live programming hosted by the refuge is conducted in formats that meet Department terms of service and accessibility requirements.

When would the use be conducted?

The refuge consists of approximately 6,000 total acres, most of which is open to the public year-round, from dawn to dusk. The bison and elk enclosure, encompassing about 800 acres, is only open to the public by vehicle only via the Wildlife Drive; no other public uses are permitted in this area

Access for environmental education and interpretation could occur daily from dawn to dusk. Some staff and partner-led programs with topics including astronomy, nocturnal wildlife and photography could be hosted outside of these hours and would take place at the visitor center or select locations on the refuge. These after hours programs would be advertised and may require registration. There are no self-led programs after hours.

Self-directed or independent environmental education and interpretive activities would be allowed during open hours throughout the year, except when necessary to restrict access because of management activities, weather related closures or specially scheduled activities that require closures.

Most staff and partner-led environmental education, including Partner School programs, and interpretive programs would range from 1-4 hours in duration on days when the visitor center is open but could vary depending on the needs of the audience. Most often, guided environmental education field trips would be scheduled morning to early afternoon to accommodate school day schedules. These activities could be scheduled throughout the year to address different seasonally dependent topics. Historically, field trip visits have been most numerous in the spring between mid-March and mid-May and during the fall between mid-September and early November. Large events could be scheduled for full days.

Staff or partner-led teacher workshops, such as “Teaching in the Outdoor Classroom,” may take place anytime during the year. These workshops are typically 1-5 full days in duration.

Off-site environmental education and interpretive activities and events may be conducted throughout the year and throughout the week in coordination with refuge staff. Digital programming could be developed and delivered throughout the year and could be time-bound or available at the user’s convenience.

How would the use be conducted?

Environmental education and interpretation involve creating experiences for visitors to forge meaningful connections with the natural environment and conservation through interactive experiences, informative programs, and non-formal education. Most environmental education

and interpretation is conducted through scheduled group visits, programs and events on-refuge or off-site. Thoughtful planning controls the number of events and volume of visitors to ensure that refuge resources (e.g., infrastructure, wildlife) can support the activity and that participants have a positive experience. The refuge provides high quality place-based education to local students throughout the year for the purpose of developing meaningful connections to the local environment and critical thinking skills to help make informed decisions when addressing conservation and environmental issues in their communities, while also meeting grade level-specific education standards.

Supporting uses of environmental education and interpretation include hiking trails, bicycle trails and driving the Wildlife Drive. In this compatibility determination, impacts of these supporting uses are specific to environmental education and interpretation. When considered non-supporting, the compatibility of these uses on the refuge would be evaluated separately.

Staffing levels and volunteer capacity determine how many guided programs can be scheduled. Large self-led environmental education or interpretive program groups may require a special use permit to mitigate potential negative impacts to refuge resources.

The visitor center exhibit areas can support approximately 150 people at one time, and the multipurpose room can hold approximately 80 people. Proposed changes to the Visitor Center would reduce capacity to approximately 50 people in the exhibit space. Existing refuge infrastructure around the visitor center (e.g., restrooms, picnic pavilion, parking) could accommodate approximately 500 people at one time while continuing to ensure a quality experience for environmental education and interpretive program participants. The visitor center parking lot can hold 10 full size buses, up to 131 passenger vehicles, or a combination of both. The Oak Savanna Trail parking lot can host 2 buses, up to 10 passenger vehicles or a combination of both. The Basswood Trail parking lot can host up to 4 passenger vehicles.

See section “Where would the use be conducted?” for a description of trails, roads, visitor centers and other infrastructure that could be used for environmental education and interpretation.

Environmental Education

Environmental education program development incorporates state education and next generation science standards and best practices for place-based and experiential learning. Educational activities occur with refuge staff capacity or other authorized agents and include traditional environmental education, such as staff- or teacher-led on-site field trips and off-site programs in classrooms. Education also occurs with non-refuge staff and includes wildlife observation, wildlife photography, research, art, outdoor recreation and hiking. Information may be presented using formal lesson plans, guided outdoor activities, stewardship activities, workshops, exhibits and educational materials aimed at promoting environmental stewardship and sustainability.

Education support may be provided to teacher- or self-led groups to improve experience and adherence to use stipulations. Programs may vary from simple discussions to equipment and curriculum-intensive formal interactions. Teacher workshops, such as “Teaching in the Outdoor Classroom,” may be offered by staff or partners and provide support for teachers engaging their learners during field trips to the refuge and at natural spaces near their schools.

On-refuge environmental education visits vary in size depending on class size and in frequency depending on requests and resource availability. Over the past 10 years, the refuge has hosted an annual average of 5,452 environmental education participants in groups ranging from five students to 400 students (this figure excludes years when facilities were closed/reduced due to COVID-19 or storm damage; data derived from refuge annual reporting 2015-2025).

Off-site program audiences vary depending on the size and capacity of the host site. Digital audience varies based on the topic presented and the level of interaction necessary.

Interpretation

Interpretive programs are developed to create emotional and intellectual connections between visitors and refuge resources and to increase knowledge and stewardship of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its mission. Presented topics may include habitats, ecology, wildlife and natural resources management, natural and cultural history, photography, hydrology, astronomy, geology, Leave No Trace, stewardship, hunting and fishing education, outdoor recreation and traditional skill building. Subjects of public interest that support wildlife dependent recreation may be regularly developed.

Non-personnel interpretation is conducted through interpretive media such as printed materials, signage and digital platforms throughout the refuge and online. Wildlife drives, educational kiosk content, developed trails and off-trail pedestrian access support self-led interpretation. The refuge contains approximately 16.61 miles of public roads, 2 interpretive kiosks, numerous interpretive signs, four established walking trails and one bike trail.

On-refuge interpretive programs vary in size depending on group size and in frequency depending on requests and resource availability. Audience size for interpretive programs varies depending on activity design and interest. Self-led interpretive activity participation ranges from individuals to class-size groups, and groups larger than family-size are infrequent. Guided group size ranges from a few individuals to 150 in a day with an average size of 30. Over the past 10 years, the refuge has averaged 6,492 interpretive visits annually, excluding years when facilities were closed/reduced due to COVID-19 or storm damage (data derived from refuge annual reporting 2015-2025). Large events, such as Bison Day, may have up to 1,200 visitors throughout the day. Off-site programs vary from small groups to 500 or more participants at community events.

Why is this use being proposed or reevaluated?

This use is being reevaluated because the 15-year renewal period ends in 2027 (603 FW2.11 H). Due to recent storm damage and subsequent construction and repairs, administrative changes are being proposed to the way this use has previously been conducted on the refuge.

Availability of Resources

To comply with the Refuge Recreation Act (Public Law 87-714), the Project Leader must determine whether sufficient resources—financial, staffing, facilities, or other infrastructure—are available to support the proposed use without materially interfering with the refuge purpose(s) or the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. This determination should be informed by a review of current capacity and, where applicable, the refuge’s Comprehensive Conservation Plan

(CCP).

Assessment of current resources and capacity

Annual administration costs: Guided environmental education and interpretive programs require dedicated staff time, equipment and supplies. Refuge staff may welcome visitors, orient them to the refuge, develop non-personal interpretive material, manage digital interpretive material, facilitate self-led environmental education and interpretive experiences, and/or plan, conduct and evaluate staff-led environmental education and interpretation programming as a regular part of their duties. Resources and staff time needed for these uses are considered part of general visitor services operations and are accounted for within the general refuge operations budget. As of this writing, the refuge has one FTE GS-11 Visitor Services Manager. Average annual costs for signage and printed materials is \$5,000.

Maintenance, special equipment, facilities and infrastructure: Existing infrastructure such as a portion of the visitor center, trails and interpretive signage would support environmental education and interpretation. Routine maintenance and operations expenses are accounted for within the general refuge operations budget, with an average annual cost of \$15,000. Some current infrastructure, facilities and refuge resources were damaged by a storm in July 2024. Improvements and repairs are needed and proposed, with an estimated one-time cost of seven million dollars. Any future improvements would vary in cost depending on materials used and project scope. For some infrastructure projects that support these and other priority wildlife dependent recreational uses, such as improvements to trails or observation docks, external funding could be pursued if they could not be covered by the current refuge budget or through offsetting revenues.

Equipment and supplies that support environmental education and interpretive programming will be available for staff-, partner- and volunteer-led programs and by check-out for teachers, librarians, home-school organizations and self-led programs. An average of \$2,500 is required for upkeep and replacement of equipment and supplies. Refuge staff spend an average of 210 hours per year to maintain equipment and supplies. Volunteers and refuge staff spend approximately 300 hours annually checking and maintaining kiosks and interpretive signage as part of normal job duties.

The refuge will maintain and improve access as necessary on current trails, roads, parking lots and access points. Maintenance includes mowing, vehicle maintenance, cleaning, repair, snow removal and digital equipment maintenance. Staff time can vary annually based on improvements needed; however, roughly 25% of time for a single full-time employee is spent on maintaining trails and working on improvement projects.

Monitoring costs: Approximately 500 hours is spent annually as part of normal staff duties to monitor event and program participation and to collect and report participation data.

Impacts of changes to resources and capacity

The availability of resources is subject to change and the level of use provided may vary based on current staffing, partner support, funding, or infrastructure conditions. Costs may increase over time, in relation to changes in the costs for equipment, maintaining facilities, etc. A substantial increase to the number of requests may also create the need for additional resources to administer the use. The Project Leader will use sound professional judgment in evaluating whether the refuge or its partners can develop, operate, and maintain the use in a compatible manner.

For priority public uses—including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, or environmental education and interpretation—if resource conditions shift such that the refuge can no longer sustain the use in a compatible manner, the Project Leader may temporarily modify or suspend the use pursuant to 50 CFR 25.21(E) (or for Alaska pursuant 50 CFR 36.42(D) for a period of up to one year). If it becomes apparent that insufficient resources will be sustained into the long-term, the Project Leader may re-evaluate the compatibility of the use and discontinue the use if necessary. The public will be notified of any changes to refuge uses, including temporary modification or suspension, re-evaluation of compatibility and/or discontinuing of refuge uses.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Environmental education and interpretation were evaluated in the environmental assessment associated with the comprehensive conservation plan (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013). In both cases, environmental education and interpretation were found to not significantly impact the human environment through finding of no significant impact determinations. The analysis below is supplemental to the previous environmental effects described in those documents and, where applicable, incorporated by summary and reference. This compatibility determination was developed using the most recent refuge biological information and data and scientific literature.

The effects and impacts of the proposed use on refuge resources, whether adverse or beneficial, are those that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close causal relationship to the proposed use. This compatibility determination includes a written analysis 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.”

Environmental education and interpretation are two of the National Wildlife Refuge System’s priority wildlife-dependent recreation uses that are important tools to further the mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Historical and potential levels of use are not anticipated to adversely affect refuge resources. Between 2015 and 2025 (excluding years when facilities were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic or storm damage), the refuge averaged 5,452 environmental education participants per year and 6,492 interpretation visits per year. (USFWS annual reporting). Trends since 2020 have been variable, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2024 storm damage to the visitor center. It is anticipated that, with the reopening of the visitor center and sufficient staffing, participation will return to pre-2020 levels. The range and purpose of environmental education and interpretation occurring will continue to align with the goals set forth in the refuge’s comprehensive conservation plan, including 4.2.3, “The Refuge will provide a variety of wildlife -dependent recreational and educational opportunities for visitors to experience and develop an appreciation for the native tallgrass prairie heritage, ecological

processes, and cultural resources while participating in ecological restoration efforts or enjoying other activities on the Refuge.”

Staff and partner-led programs cover a broad range of experiential learning and can take groups into undeveloped areas of the refuge, but heavier use is planned on durable surfaces and developed locations. Self-led groups tend to be less frequent and more likely to use durable surfaces and developed locations. Accommodating this wildlife-dependent use has and is expected to result in minimal impacts.

Short-term impacts

This compatibility determination includes the written analyses of the environmental consequences on a resource only when the short-term impacts on that resource could be more than negligible and therefore considered an “affected resource.” Air quality, water quality, floodplains, refuge management and operations, and socioeconomics would not be more than negligibly impacted by the action and have been dismissed from further analyses.

Wildlife Species

The response of wildlife to environmental education and interpretation would be variable. Depending on the nature of the program, activities could disturb wildlife. Human induced disturbance is defined as any situation in which human activities lead animals to behave differently than they would in the absence of these activities (Smit and Visser, 1993). Disturbance would vary in magnitude, frequency, predictability, distribution and duration (Cayford, 1993). Wildlife responses to disturbance could vary between species, between individuals of the same species and between different periods of time for a single individual (Haysmith and Hunt, 1995; Knight and Temple, 1995).

Environmental education and interpretation-based disturbance could have direct and indirect effects on wildlife (Cline et al., 2007; Knight and Cole, 1991; Gill et al., 1996; 2001). Direct impacts to wildlife would be those that cause direct physiological effects (e.g., energetic costs, altered fitness), behavioral modifications (e.g., avoidance of otherwise suitable habitat, nest abandonment) or death (Cline et al., 2007). Indirect effects on wildlife would be incidentally caused by environmental education and interpretation activities and would generally occur later in time.

Terrestrial and Aquatic Species

Temporary disturbance to wildlife could result from guided and self-led interpretive and environmental education activities taking place at all locations on the refuge. The activity is not expected to cause greater than negligible impacts because, at current and anticipated use levels, there is sufficient refugia for wildlife adjacent to activity areas and a limited number of individuals participating in activities at any one time. This use occurs in a dispersed manner to lessen impacts, and activities that cause more disturbance are limited to areas that were created for this purpose. Sampling of aquatic wildlife for environmental education may occur, would be limited in scope, and monitored by staff, partners and/or volunteers. Negligible impact to small quantities of aquatic insects and small fish may occur, but the population is sufficient to support individuals being removed (Muter, et. al, 2005).

All motor vehicle use associated with environmental education and interpretation is restricted to designated roads and parking areas which reduces disturbance to wildlife. Though wildlife roadkill can be an unintended impact of vehicle traffic for this use, it is not an impact specific to this use. Littering can potentially impact wildlife, but existing staff resources and maintenance are used to mitigate this impact. Handling and temporary collection of wildlife for education purposes is expected to be minimal and cause only temporary disturbance. Activities are planned and conducted in several areas for larger groups so as not to overstress or overuse any one resource.

Threatened and endangered species

Federally threatened, endangered, special status species do occur on the refuge, but it is expected that this use will not conflict with recovery or protection of these species. Areas with known threatened and endangered species will be avoided during periods of occupation. There have been no issues to date with this use in relation to threatened, endangered, or special status species.

The refuge hosts Indiana bats (*Myotis sodalis*, endangered), monarch butterflies (*Danaus Plexippus*, proposed threatened), rusty patched bumble bees (*Bombus affinis*, endangered), western regal fritillaries (*Argynnis idalia occidentalis*, proposed threatened), and western prairie fringed orchids (*Platanthera praeclara*, threatened). Studies and anecdotal information suggest that roosting bats are tolerant to transient, low intensity disturbances (e.g., humans walking near roost trees, nearby machinery) and ongoing disturbances (U.S Fish and Wildlife Service, 2008). Insects are similarly tolerant to transient, low-intensity disturbances, and areas with known threatened plants will be avoided (Muter, et. al, 2005).

Habitat and vegetation

Disturbance to terrestrial vegetation may result from trampling during this use as individuals or groups walk off-trail or in unimproved areas. However, individuals primarily remain on trail systems making this impact very limited in scope and duration, and the vegetation will recover annually from use. Activities are conducted in several areas so as not to overstress or overuse any one resource.

Geology and soils

Disturbance to soil is minimal although some soil compaction and erosion can occur along unimproved trails or in off-trail areas. These impacts are generally localized and have little overall negative impact.

Visitor Use and Experience

Activities on the refuge may indirectly impact other recreational users as the use occurs concurrently in places of other recreation (wildlife observation, photography, berry and mushroom picking). These indirect impacts are expected to be infrequent and negligible. This use takes place in a controlled area of the refuge at any one time, and there are sufficient additional locations for other users.

A high volume of visitors could be accommodated over the course of a day on a rolling basis for occasional large interpretive events that would be dispersed across the refuge.

Cultural Resources

The Service recognizes that historic properties—including those of traditional religious and cultural significance to Tribal Nations—may be present within the National Wildlife Refuge. Given that a comprehensive inventory has not been completed across the entire refuge, unidentified historic properties may exist.

Environmental education and interpretation programs are intended to increase public appreciation and understanding of the refuge’s cultural heritage while protecting sensitive cultural resource information. Interpretive materials and programming will not disclose precise site locations or other confidential information protected under Section 304 of the National Historic Preservation Act (54 U.S.C. § 307103) and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act.

Environmental education and interpretation activities are generally limited to guided walks, classroom instruction, temporary demonstrations, and use of established trails, visitor facilities, and designated interpretive areas that have no potential to cause effects on historic properties. No increase in access to sensitive archaeological sites or historic structures is anticipated.

If new undertakings, construction, or ground-disturbing activities are proposed in support of educational facilities or infrastructure, the Service will complete compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act prior to authorization.

Long-term impacts

This compatibility determination includes the written analyses of the environmental consequences on a resource only when long-term impacts on that resource could be more than negligible and therefore considered an “affected resource.” Although some resources were evaluated under short-term impacts, there are no expected long-term impacts.

Public Review and Comment

The draft compatibility determination will be available for public review and comment for 30 days from March 3, 2026 to April 2, 2026. The public will be made aware of this comment opportunity through newspapers, postings at local libraries, two public open houses and online communication such as on the refuge website and social media. The public open houses will be held at the Refuge Visitor Center on Friday, March 13 from 12:00 to 2:00 p.m. and on Saturday, March 14 from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. A copy of this document will be made available electronically on the refuge website at fws.gov/refuge/neal-smith and will be available at the refuge office at 9981 Pacific St., Prairie City, Iowa (please call at 515-994-3400 or email nealsmith@fws.gov to request a printed copy). Comments can be submitted in writing at the public open houses, by email at nealsmith@fws.gov or by mail at P.O. Box 399, Prairie City, IA 50228. Please let us know if you need the document in an alternative format. Concerns expressed during the public comment period will be addressed in the final.

Determination

Is the use compatible?

Yes

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

1. Special use permits may be issued to self-led groups if group size could negatively impact the resource. Permittees may not charge a fee to participants.
2. When collection or handling of wildlife or plants is part of the trip, a special use permit is required, and a species encountered list is required to be submitted to the refuge.
3. Educational groups of any type containing minors under 18 are required to have sufficient adults to supervise their group based on ages.
4. Interpretive and environmental education programs will focus on topics appropriate to the refuge and which are intended to foster respect and stewardship of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the National Wilderness Preservation System, and specifically Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge.
5. Staff- and partner-led environmental education and interpretation programs will only be conducted at a level that does not impact other management objectives and is within staff capacity.
6. Use of motorized vehicles is limited to maintained roads and parking areas except for extenuating circumstances approved by the refuge manager.

Justification

The stipulations outlined above will help ensure that the use is compatible at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. Environmental education and interpretation, as outlined in this compatibility determination, will not conflict with the national policy to maintain the biological diversity, integrity, and environmental health of the refuge. Environmental education and interpretation are two of the six priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Based on available science and best professional judgement, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that environmental education and interpretation at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, in accordance with the stipulations provided here, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purpose of Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. Rather, appropriate and compatible environmental education and interpretation are a use of Neal Smith National Wildlife 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

2040

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