

Draft Compatibility Determination

Title

Draft Compatibility Determination for Prescribed Grazing at Seedskafee National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Use Category

Agriculture

Refuge Use Type

Grazing

Refuge

Seedskafee National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Purpose and Establishing and Acquisition Authorities

- ... for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds. 16 U.S.C. § 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act) "
- ... shall be administered by him [Secretary of the Interior] directly or in accordance with cooperative agreements ... and in accordance with such rules and regulations for the conservation, maintenance, and management of wildlife, resources thereof, and its habitat thereon, ..." 16 U.S.C. § 664 (Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act) "
- ... to acquire lands necessary for the construction, operation, and maintenance ..." of "... (1) public recreational facilities on lands withdrawn or acquired ..." for the Colorado River project in order to "... conserve the scenery, the natural, historic, and archeologic objects, and the wildlife on said lands, and to provide for public use and enjoyment of the same and of the water areas created by these projects ... and (2) facilities to mitigate losses of and improve conditions for, the propagation of fish and wildlife." The Secretary may "... dispose of ..." the facilities "... to Federal ... agencies ... upon such terms and conditions as will best promote their development and operation in the public interest." 43 U.S.C. § 620g (Colorado River Storage Act)

The principal purpose of Seedskafee NWR is to provide for the conservation, maintenance, and management of wildlife resources and its habitat including the development and improvement of such wildlife resources. Additionally, the Refuge is charged to protect the scenery, cultural resources and other natural resources and provide for public use and enjoyment of wildlife-dependent activities.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (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 and replaces the 2014 compatibility determination for the use of prescribed grazing at Seedskadee NWR.
- This use is being reevaluated because policy requires commercial uses be reevaluated every 10 years (603 FW 2.6N).
- Prescribed grazing has been conducted on the refuge since 2014. The use was evaluated independently in 2013-2014, posted at the refuge headquarters and online for comments, a section 7 consult completed as well as a Categorical Exclusion. Grazing was found to be compatible.
- Prescribed grazing is also consistent with the 2009 Seedskadee NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

What is the use?

Grazing (Cooperative) – The feeding on vegetation by domestic livestock, this includes trailing and watering of livestock. Prescribed grazing is a tool for habitat restoration and management on lands owned in fee title or managed through agreement by the National Wildlife Refuge System. This is a refuge management economic use (603 FW 2.6 N.).

Is the use a priority public use?

No

Where would the use be conducted?

Prescribed grazing will be used on 500 up to 10,000 acres of flood irrigated wet meadow habitat at Seedskadee NWR. Un-irrigated meadows in the river bottom if prescribed for grazing treatments, will be rotated and rested between grazing treatments. Sheep or cattle may be trailed across areas of the refuge to avoid hauling and honor historic agreements for trailing across the refuge. Temporary corrals or loading chutes may be used. One area (less than a ½ acre) of the refuge near the Big Sandy River is fenced and used for loading/unloading stock as part of the purchase agreement and deed to sell the land to the refuge. Much of the refuge has been in long-term rest and prescribed grazing would be used to achieve specific habitat objectives in certain areas. The use of grazing ideally will mimic historic bison use on the landscape.

When would the use be conducted?

Grazing would occur at various times in different management units, according to the prescription developed to achieve desired habitat results. Some units may utilize deferred grazing system with short term, high intensity grazing in spring or summer;

while in other units winter or fall grazing might be best to achieve habitat goals.

How would the use be conducted?

Prescribed grazing would be used to meet specific wildlife and/or habitat objectives. Use could occur during any season depending on the specific objectives to be achieved in the unit. Prescriptive grazing would be administered through issuance of a special use permit or cooperative agriculture agreement. Permittees would be selected using the criteria identified in the Refuge Manual or updated policy 620 FW 2. Habitat management plans or annual plans of operations or permit addendums would identify season of use, number of animals and length of time to achieve the management objectives. Grazing AUMs would not likely exceed 10,000 per year. Winter grazing likely would be the best fit to accomplish habitat goals. During winters with unusual snow depths, plans for feeding locally sourced hay might have to be implemented to ensure the habitat prescription can still be completed. Permittees will pay fees based on local market rates as determined by annual USDA Agricultural Statistics or surveys of local prices. Permittees may also complete habitat improvement projects such as fence repair/maintenance, interseeding native vegetation or control of noxious weeds or other mutually agreed upon projects in exchange for a portion of the grazing fee. Monitoring effectiveness of grazing treatments will help determine effectiveness and fine tune grazing prescriptions in each unit to best accomplish unit goals.

Why is this use being proposed or reevaluated?

The use of prescribed grazing is being reevaluated to continue on Seedskaadee NWR because the renewal period of 10 years is nearly up (603 FW 2.11 H). The use of prescribed grazing is a management tool that helps maintain productivity of the refuge's wet meadow, riparian and upland habitats. Especially in areas with Garrison creeping foxtail, crested wheatgrass, Canada wildrye and other nonnative grasses, and in areas of thick cattails and bulrush. In irrigated areas, naturally or through a series of man-made ditches and levees, the undisturbed vegetation can become so thick that productivity declines and habitat conditions deteriorate. Wetlands require periodic disturbance to maintain productivity, grazing helps to open the canopy to sunlight and warmth earlier in spring to create areas where invertebrates, vegetation and amphibians are jump started in the spring to provide food for migratory birds using the area as a stopover during migration as well as migratory birds that will use the area for nesting and brood-rearing. Open areas are also critical to reduce chytrid fungus, which thrives in shaded cool areas with dense vegetation, to help maintain healthy amphibian populations, mainly Boreal chorus frogs and tiger salamanders. Prescriptive livestock grazing will function as an ecological substitute for the roll that bison historically played in the area.

Availability of Resources

Annual, reoccurring expenses are estimated to require around 10 hours per permittee and would include coordination, billing, permitting, monitoring, and permit sale

package preparation (if necessary). This would come to a total of approximately one to two weeks to manage the grazing program per year, which might come out to less than 10% of one FTE's time spent administering the program. Off-setting revenue will be collected as well; revenue collected will first be subject to fund PILT payments to the county and approximately 80% that is retained by the station will be used to improve habitat conditions or maintain necessary infrastructure on the refuge.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Determine what resources may be impacted:

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." Wildlife and aquatic species, habitat, vegetation, soil, water quality, refuge management and operations, socioeconomics, visitor use, and experience will not be more than negligibly impacted by the action (or potentially positively impacted, in the case of wildlife habitat and vegetation response) and have been dismissed from further analyses.

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

Prescribed grazing management is intended to be utilized to meet habitat and species-specific goals and objectives. This management tool is intended to maintain and enhance habitat conditions for the benefit of a wide variety of wildlife that utilize the Refuge. Minimal negative impacts are expected through the use of this tool. Excessive trampling in high uses areas may occur around watering areas or mineral licks, though no more than what may have occurred with large numbers of bison. Electric fences or GPS collars are used to keep livestock away from sensitive areas. In addition, while the presence of livestock would be disturbing to some wildlife species and some public users, the benefits of this habitat management tool are felt to outweigh these negative impacts.

The use of prescribed grazing will result in short-term disturbances and long-term benefits to both resident and migratory wildlife using the refuge, similar to when large herds of bison would frequent an area. Short-term effects include direct displacement of wildlife due to disturbance from livestock use and disturbance from permittee checking or moving livestock. Areas grazed will also have a temporary loss of cover, which may open the area up to provide feeding and loafing areas.

Waterfowl and other resident or migratory birds will find food in these open areas, such as frogs, snails, aquatic invertebrates, fresh vegetation regrowth. Establishing more desirable and productive habitat for nesting, escape cover, and especially feeding are longer-term benefits resulting from prescribed grazing. Prescribed grazing will annually provide stop-over habitats or brood rearing areas for resident

and migrating wildlife, especially waterfowl and waterbirds. Resulting stopover habitat with resting areas and food sources would offset negative effects from short term grazing activities.

Short-term impacts

Short-term effects include direct displacement of wildlife due to disturbance from livestock use and disturbance from permittee checking or moving livestock. Areas grazed will also have a temporary loss of cover, which may open the area up to provide feeding and loafing areas. Waterfowl and other resident or migratory birds may find food in these open areas, such as frogs, snails, aquatic invertebrates, fresh vegetation regrowth. Establishing more desirable and productive habitat for nesting, escape cover, and especially feeding are longer-term benefits resulting from prescribed grazing. Potential for water quality issues such as sedimentation due to instream watering is also a potential short-term impact, but should last only as long as livestock are present. Livestock grazing may create a minor and temporary disturbance to wildlife, but generally does no harm. Grazing on public lands, especially on a wildlife refuge, can create an aesthetic issue of concern for visitors who are not familiar with habitat management techniques. There is a slight potential for conflict between visitors and the livestock or permittees, especially if grazing is prescribed in areas outside of the 'closed to hunting areas' during hunting seasons.

Long-term impacts

Improved habitat conditions for wildlife, especially migratory and resident bird species is our expected long-term result of the prescribed grazing program.

Public Review and Comment

The draft compatibility determination will be available for public review and comment for 30 days from 8/28/2023 to 9/24/2023. The public will be made aware of this opportunity to comment through postings at local Post Office. A hard copy of this document will be posted at Refuge Headquarters, Visitor Center, 246 Seedskaadee Road, Green River, WY 82935. It will be made available electronically on the refuge website www.fws.gov/refuge/seedskaadee. Concerns expressed during the public comment period will be addressed in the final Compatibility Determination.

Determination

Yes, prescribed grazing is compatible.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

- Annual coordination with refuge manager to ensure proper response to annual conditions and habitat goals is considered with stocking rates and season of use.
- Utilize electric fence and/or maintain existing fence to ensure stock stay where desired grazing needs to be completed and to protect sensitive areas.
- Cooperators or permittees who own the livestock will be subjected to the same restrictions, terms and agreements regarding land and water management as that of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Justification

Habitat conditions would deteriorate without the use of a full range of management tools. Prescriptive grazing is a tool that will help the refuge manage flood irrigated areas, wet meadow, riparian and upland habitats to continue to provide high quality areas for stopover, resting and refueling for resident and migrating wildlife, including monarch butterflies. Prescribed grazing is a tool that can be used to reduce the vigor of nonnative grasses to encourage forbs or other native vegetation growth. Grazing in sedge and grass communities will support or improve the health and vigor of vegetation and keep the area as open wet meadows or grasslands for use by sandhill cranes, shorebirds, ducks, geese, bitterns, soras, wading birds and other water-dependent species. Periodic disturbance creates ideal seedbed conditions for further expansion of showy milkweed and other forbs that will provide habitat for native pollinators. Continued irrigation of wet meadows provides foraging, nesting, or resting areas for geese, ducks, cranes, sage-grouse, bitterns, soras, Virginia rails, white-faced ibis, black necked stilts, avocets and other migratory birds and native insects as well. Other species that will likely be positively affected include monarch butterflies, greater sage grouse, deer, elk, pronghorn, and amphibian species. Continued use of the water supply will also maintain water rights for the refuge, which are required to maintain the wetland habitats, for which the refuge was created to protect and maintain as mitigation for Flaming Gorge and Fontenelle Reservoirs.

The stipulations outlined above would help ensure that the use is compatible at Seedskaadee NWR. Grazing, 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 the use of prescribed grazing at Seedskaadee NWR, in accordance with the stipulations provided here, would not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife

Refuge System mission or the purpose of Seedskadee NWR. Rather, appropriate, and compatible grazing would be the use of the Seedskadee NWR 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

2033

Literature Cited/References

USFWS. 2002. Seedskadee National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. DOI, Lakewood, CO.

Figure

N/A.