

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and determined that the 2002 Ammendment to the Hunt Plan for Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge involving lands in Ware County, Georgia

Check One:

- is a categorical exclusion as provided by 516 DM 2, Appendix 1 and 516 DM 6, Appendix 1, Section 1.4 A (4). No further NEPA documentation will therefore be made.
- is found not to have significant environmental effects as determined by the attached Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact.
- is found to have significant effects and, therefore, further consideration of this action will require a notice of intent to be published in the Federal Register announcing the decision to prepare an EIS.
- is not approved because of unacceptable environmental damage, or violation of Fish and Wildlife Service mandates, policy, regulations, or procedures.
- is an emergency action within the context of 40 CFR 1 506.1 1. Only those actions necessary to control the immediate impacts of the emergency will be taken. Other related actions remain subject to NEPA review.

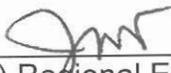
Other Supporting Documents:

Endangered Species Act, Section 7 Consultation, 2007
Compatibility Determination, 2006

Signature Approval:



(1) Originator 4/10/07
Date



(2) Regional Environmental 4/19/07
Coordinator Date



(3) Regional Chief, NWRS, 4/19/2007
Southeast Region Date



(4) Regional Director, 4/24/07
Southeast Region Date

Final Environmental Assessment
Of the

**2002 Amendment to the
Hunt Plan**

To address
Small Game and Turkey Public Hunting on Cowhouse Island

on

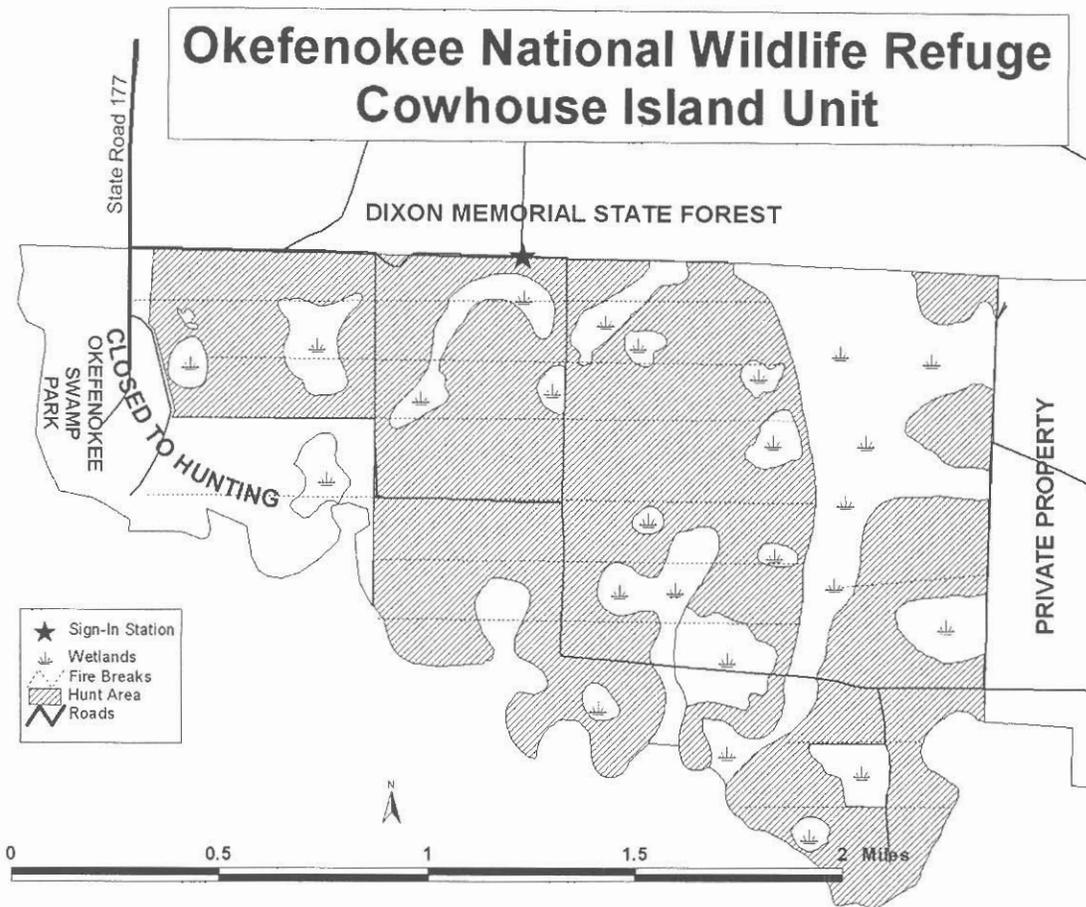
Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
Ware County, Georgia

For Further Information, Contact:
Refuge Manager
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
Route 2, Box 3330
Folkston, GA 31537

Prepared by:
U. S. Department of Interior
Folkston, GA
April 2007

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Chapter 1. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

In response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will amend or rewrite environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at twenty-three national wildlife refuges located in the Southeast Region. The new environmental assessments addresses the cumulative impacts of hunting at all refuges which were named in or otherwise affected by the lawsuit. This document addresses the hunting program on one upland management compartment at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia.

The executive order establishing Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in 1937 stated the purpose of the refuge as being “a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.” For lands acquired under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (16 USC 715-715r), as amended, the purpose of the acquisition is: for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds (16 USC 715d).

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.) provides authority for the Service to manage the Refuge and its wildlife populations. In addition, it declares that compatible wildlife-dependent public uses are legitimate and appropriate uses of the Refuge System that are to receive priority consideration in planning and management. There are six wildlife-dependent public uses: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation. It directs managers to increase recreational opportunities including hunting on National Wildlife Refuges when compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The original hunt plan for Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge was written in January, 1980 and revised in 1981 and 1994. This revised Environmental Assessment addresses the third amendment to the original plan proposing the opening of Upland Management Compartment 1 on Okefenokee NWR to the public for hunting small game (rabbit, squirrel, and bobwhite quail) and turkey. The objectives of the refuge hunt program as per the Refuge Manual (8RM5) are as follows:

1. To provide the general public with a quality wildlife-oriented recreational experience and an opportunity to utilize a renewable natural resource. Hunting is a priority public uses under the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997.
2. To maintain wildlife populations at levels compatible with the refuge habitat. Hunting at Okefenokee NWR is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established, is biologically sound, and will not cause negative impacts to other wildlife populations.

Chapter 2. ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING PROPOSED ACTION

This chapter discusses the alternatives considered for hunting on the Cowhouse Unit of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. These alternatives are:

Alternative 1. Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)

This action would permit small game (rabbit, squirrel, and bobwhite quail) hunting and turkey hunting in accordance with State of Georgia seasons, with several special refuge regulations on the refuge portion of Cowhouse Island.

The proposed hunt will take place on the Cowhouse Unit, located along the refuge's northern boundary in Ware County. The 1,424 acres are currently open to the public only for deer hunting in accordance with the State season on the adjacent Dixon Memorial Wildlife Management Area. There are no other public recreational uses on this unit. Entrance fees will be required, consistent with other public uses on the refuge. Hunters will be required to walk into the area (no vehicles) and only pointing dogs will be allowed during quail hunts. The hunt period will extend from fall (small game) through spring (turkey).

Alternative 2. No Action Alternative

This alternative would involve no small game (rabbit, squirrel, bobwhite quail) or turkey hunting on the refuge. Whitetail deer would continue to be hunted during the special hunts at the east entrance and on the Pocket.

Chapter 3. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The Okefenokee Swamp is located in southeastern Georgia and is considered to be one of the largest and best preserved freshwater wetland complexes in America. It extends 38 miles from north to south, 25 miles east to west, and contains about 438,000 acres. Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, containing 401,000 acres, was established by Presidential Order on March 30, 1937 and was included in the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1974. Some 16,000 acres of upland surrounding the swamp are managed for a wide variety of wildlife and plant species, several of which are threatened and endangered.

The Okefenokee Swamp is a vast peat bog, unique in geologic origin and history, with many unusual forms of animals and plant life. Once a part of the ocean, it is now more than one hundred feet above sea level.

There are three primary and two secondary entrances into Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. The East Entrance (Suwannee Canal Recreation Area), near Folkston, GA, is the main U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service entrance. The West Entrance (Stephen C. Foster State Park), near Fargo, GA is operated under a lease agreement with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The North Entrance (Okefenokee Swamp Park), near Waycross, GA, is a private, non-profit organization. The two secondary entrances, Kingfisher Landing and the Suwannee River Sill, are operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Compartment 1 is located on three tracts of land acquired by the Soil Conservation Service in 1937 as part of the Coastal Flatwoods Resettlement Project [Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act (50 Stat. 522)]. Because the tracts were within the refuge acquisition area established by executive order in 1937, they were subsequently transferred to the Department of Interior.

3.1 Physical Environment

Compartment 1 is located on Cowhouse Island along the northern perimeter of the Okefenokee Swamp in Ware County. The 1,424 acre compartment lying in the northwest end of Cowhouse Island covers about 15% of the island. The remainder of the island is part of the Dixon Memorial State Forest and International Paper Company lands. Cowhouse Island is separated from the mainland by the Wide Slough and Green Swamp and extends from Cowhouse Prairie to Gum Slough. Like most of the large islands in the Okefenokee Swamp, Cowhouse Island has a wetland depression extending the full length of the island. A wide, shallow savannah-like depression located in the eastern end of the compartment, connects part of this central wetland to the main body of the swamp. Compartment 1 includes Land Lots 27, 66 and part of 72 in the 9th District, Ware County, Georgia. The National Wilderness Area boundary follows the swamp's edge south of the compartment.

Drainage within the compartment is poor. Elevation of most of the compartment is less than five feet above the surface of the swamp. Upland soil types are primarily Pelham loamy and Plummer loamy sands, both poorly drained and often wet.

The compartment presently supports stands of mixed pines and hardwoods, including several hardwood hammocks. Native American archeological sites and 19th and early 20th century cultural sites are located within the compartment.

3.2 Vegetation

Management history of this area parallels the events occurring throughout the Southeastern Coastal Plain. Prior to settlement, most of the southeast Georgia area supported variations of the longleaf pine/wiregrass community. During the past century, the composition of the old growth forest was drastically changed by clearing for farm land and settlement of the coastal plain, resulting in severe fragmentation of the forest. Fragmentation, along with fire suppression disrupted the natural fire regime. After indiscriminate logging during the early 20th century, less fire tolerant but reproductively more prolific pine species rapidly encroached onto the uplands. The fire dependent wiregrass/low shrub understory was replaced by dense thickets of gallberry and palmetto.

Although an occasional longleaf pine still exists throughout almost all of the compartment, it is unclear how much of the area once supported predominately longleaf pine as a result of the frequent fire regime of the pre-settlement days. Probably, only the highest areas of Cowhouse Island, outside the compartment, were burned frequently enough to maintain pure longleaf pine stands. Within Compartment 1, fire frequency probably varied with longer (ten or more year) wet-dry cycles. This cyclic fire frequency probably resulted in mixed longleaf, loblolly and slash pine stands mixed with hardwoods on wetter sites. In addition to disruption of the historic fire regime and the usual 20th century logging operations, three active settlements in the compartment contributed to a substantial amount of alteration as areas were cleared for such things as building sites, fields and pastures.

Compartment 1 now supports only one pure longleaf pine stand. Longleaf pine was hand-seeded in one 30 acre stand in 1975. Most stands are primarily slash pine with a substantial amount of longleaf pine scattered throughout. Both slash and longleaf pine date back to 1930 to 1950, following the 1920 logging operations and cessation of farming/pasturing operations during the depression era.

3.3 Wildlife Resources

Okefenokee NWR is home to 48 species of mammals, 200 birds, 33 fish, 101 species of reptiles and amphibians, and an undetermined number of invertebrates. The executive order establishing Okefenokee NWR stated the purpose of the refuge as "a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife." Although large numbers of waterfowl were reported to use Okefenokee Swamp at that time, they were not specifically mentioned in the purpose of the refuge. It was recognized that this area was important for a large variety of wildlife.

Even prior to the swamp becoming a refuge, it drew the attention of herpetologists. It quickly became world renown for its amphibian and reptile populations. Besides the expanse of wetland habitats inhabited by the American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) and many species of

frogs and turtles, the refuge uplands contain many ephemeral ponds. Management of these ponds is important for the flatwoods salamander (*Ambystoma cingulatum*), the striped newt (*Notophthalmus perstriatus*), the gopher frog (*Rana areolata aescopus*), and other species.

Okefenokee NWR is important for large populations of wading birds that find food and shelter. Their movements from off-refuge sites and between the open prairies depend on food availability and the depth of water. In the past, three to four nesting colonies were found each year. These birds, along with the sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*), are considered to be indicators of the health of the wetland system.

Because of its size, the Okefenokee NWR is valuable for species such as the black bear that have large home ranges. A healthy population of the Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridianus*) exists today, moving on and off the refuge depending on the resources available. The Florida panther (*Felis concolor coryi*) once roamed the area as well; however, there have been no recent confirmed sightings.

Federally listed threatened or endangered species that make their home in the refuge include the red-cockaded woodpecker, indigo snake, the wood stork, and the flatwoods salamander. The bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) passes through the area and has nested nearby, but has not been known to nest on the refuge. The ivory-billed woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) was part of the Okefenokee ecosystem in the past but has not been seen since 1948.

3.4 Threatened and Endangered Species

Red-cockaded Woodpecker

With the development of the cooperative agreement between the FWS and the Dixon Memorial State Forest through a memorandum of understanding, a primary management goal for this compartment will be developing habitat for the red-cockaded woodpecker. The short range objective is to improve potential RCW nesting and foraging habitat within approximately 1,000 acres of existing mixed pine stands to provide adequate foraging for up to five groups of RCW translocated from other federal properties. Longer range objectives are to increase the proportion of longleaf pine in the mixed stands and to increase the size of pure and predominantly longleaf pine stands. Where the site is more suited to other pine species, emphasis will be on the maintenance of multi-age classes with an abundance of mature pines. As the RCW population becomes established, stands adjacent to the Dixon Memorial Forest may provide nesting sites supporting foraging areas on the State Forest. Ultimately, habitat within the compartment will be continuous with similar habitat on the forest and may support a population of 15 or more groups. In addition, management emphasis will include maintaining habitat diversity to satisfy needs of other species closely associated with the open pine forest communities. Habitat types on Cowhouse Island were probably very diverse, even in pre-settlement times. This abundance of habitat types implies the presence of other threatened and endangered species. The goal for these varied habitats is to allow the opportunity to revert to types that historically existed.

3.5 Cultural Sites

The body of federal historic preservation laws has grown dramatically since the enactment of the Antiquities Act of 1906. Several themes recur in these laws, their promulgating regulations, and more recent Executive Orders. They include: 1) each agency is to systematically inventory the historic properties on their holdings and to scientifically assess each property's eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places; 2) federal agencies are to consider the impacts to cultural resources during the agencies' management activities and seek to avoid or mitigate adverse impacts; 3) the protection of cultural resources from looting and vandalism are to be accomplished through a mix of informed management, law enforcement efforts, and public education; and 4) the increasing role of consultation with groups, such as Native American tribes, in addressing how a project or management activity may impact specific archaeological sites and landscapes deemed important to those groups. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, like other federal agencies, are legally mandated to inventory, assess, and protect cultural resources located on those lands that the agency owns, manages, or controls. The Service's cultural resource policy is delineated in 614 FW 1-5 and 126 FW 1-3. In the FWS's Southeast Region, the cultural resource review and compliance process is initiated by contacting the Regional Historic Preservation Officer/Regional Archaeologist (RHPO/RA). The RHPO/RA will determine whether the proposed undertaking has the potential to impact cultural resources, identify the "area of potential effect," determine the appropriate level of scientific investigation necessary to ensure legal compliance, and initiates consultation with the pertinent State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and federally recognized Tribes.

Three cultural sites have been identified within the Upland Management Compartment 1. These include two homestead sites and one Indian mound. Periodic monitoring of these sites identifies any observable changes.

Chapter 4. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This chapter describes the foreseeable environmental consequences of implementing the two management alternatives in Chapter 2. When detailed information is available, a scientific and analytic comparison between alternatives and their anticipated consequences is presented, which is described as “impacts” or “effects.” When detailed information is not available, those comparisons are based on the professional judgment and experience of refuge staff and Service and State biologists.

4.1 Summary of Effects

Physical Environment

No Action Alternative

Public access is limited to deer hunting under this alternative and therefore impacts to the refuge’s physical environment would have minimal to negligible effects. Some disturbance to surface soils, topography, and vegetation would occur in areas selected for hunting; however effects would be minimal due to the requirement that hunters are required to walk into the hunting area. Travel would continue to be along roads and firelines minimizing the impact to the natural hydrology. With no vehicle traffic within the unit by hunters, air and water quality would not be degraded related to the current use patterns. Impacts associated with solitude are expected to be minimal given the low use of the area.

Preferred Alternative

With increased hunting opportunities, use of the compartment is expected to increase but not significantly. Foot travel would be allowed minimizing the impacts to soil, hydrology, and vegetation. Roads and firelines would be the primary travel corridors. Air and water quality would be maintained even with a slight increase in use.

Cultural Resources

Both alternatives provide access by the public into the compartment that otherwise would not exist. Cultural sites are located within the open area and thus, provides more exposure to humans. However, travel by foot discourages excavations and taking objects from historical sites.

Habitat

No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, additional acreage would not be opened to deer hunting. When deer are overpopulated, they overbrowse their habitat, which can change the structure and plant composition of a forest. The refuge does periodically plant longleaf pine seedlings for restoration purposes. Young tree seedlings can be killed by overbrowsing. Although this compartment is only 1,424 acres and the deer are able to travel across boundary lines freely, damage could occur if the deer population were not kept in check on or off the refuge.

Preferred Alternative

Maintaining the biological integrity of the refuge through good quality habitat would be supported by allowing hunting for other species besides deer. Bobwhite quail, squirrels, and rabbits require certain successional stages within the habitat that requires refuge management to examine the results of their management

The potential for additional hunter usage may increase the trampling of vegetation in popular areas. However, use will still be near 1 person per day which would pose a negligible effect.

Hunted Wildlife

No Action Alternative

Additional mortality of individual hunted animals would not occur under this alternative. Disturbance by hunters to hunted wildlife would not occur. This area is not open to the general public so no other disturbance would occur except from refuge management.

Deer, hog, turkey, rabbit and squirrel populations could increase potentially above the habitat's carrying capacity if not hunted. However, this is such a small area and linked to the populations that are hunted on adjacent lands, that over population is unlikely.

Preferred Alternative

Additional mortality of individual hunted animals would occur under this alternative. Estimates for hunted species is less than 20 individuals per species. Hunting causes some disturbance to not only the species being hunted but other game species as well. However, time and space zoning established by refuge regulations would minimize incidental disturbance.

Non-hunted Wildlife

No Action Alternative

Increased disturbance to non-hunted wildlife would not occur on the 1,424 acres in Compartment

1.

Preferred Alternative

Disturbance to non-hunted wildlife would increase due to the extended hunting times when humans are present. Small mammals, including bats, are less active during winter when most hunting occurs. These species are also nocturnal. Both of these qualities make hunter interactions with small mammals very rare. Hibernation or torpor by cold-blood reptiles and amphibians also limits their activity during the hunting season when temperatures are low. Hunters would rarely encounter reptiles and amphibians during most of the hunting season. Invertebrates are also not active during cold weather and would have few interactions with hunters during the hunting season. The refuge has estimated current hunter density to be 1 hunter per day. Refuge regulations restricting hunters to foot travel only further mitigate possible disturbance by hunters to non-hunted wildlife. Disturbance to the daily wintering activities, such as feeding and resting, of birds might occur, but would be transitory as hunters traverse habitat.

The spring turkey hunt poses the greatest impact on non-hunted wildlife due to wildlife being more active during this time of year. Most disturbance would be transitory as hunters travel to their destination. However, by chance a nest could be disturbed if a hunter chooses a site nearby.

Endangered and Threatened Species

No Action Alternative

Current public access would not change so there would be no increased chance of adversely affecting threatened and endangered species.

Preferred Alternative

Endangered and threatened species using Compartment 1 are the wood stork, gopher tortoise, and indigo snake. The flatwoods salamander may occur in some of the wetlands. The gopher tortoise and the indigo snake would be impacted the most due to being ground dwellers on the higher zones of the compartment where most hunting activity would occur. A Section 7 Evaluation associated with this assessment was conducted, and it was determined that the proposed action is not likely to adversely affect these species.

Continued management to improve the longleaf pine community will benefit both the hunted species and all the native fauna.

Refuge Facilities (roads, trails, parking lots, levees)

With public access limited to foot travel, minimum impacts to refuge facilities would occur. Hunting requires additional trips into the compartment for law enforcement but the amount of use is insignificant costs and would not diminish resources dedicated to other refuge management programs.

Wildlife Dependant Recreation

No Action Alternative

With only deer hunting, the following benefits occur but to a lesser extent than in Alternative 2. The public would have the opportunity to harvest a renewable resource, participate in wildlife-oriented recreation that is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established, have an increased awareness of Okefenokee NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System; and the Service would be meeting a public use demand. Public relations would be enhanced with the local community.

Preferred Alternative

The public would be allowed to harvest more than one renewable resource, and the refuge would be promoting a wildlife-oriented recreational opportunity that is compatible with the purpose for which the refuge was established. The public would have an increased awareness of Okefenokee NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System and public demand for more hunting would be met. This alternative would also allow the public to enjoy hunting at no or little cost in a region where private land is leased for hunting.

With increased awareness of this opportunity in an area where other public use is restricted, unanticipated conflicts between public users may occur. Not only different types of hunters may come in contact with each other, other users may want to gain access to observe wildlife.

4.2 Cumulative Impacts Analysis

Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of Proposed Action on Wildlife Species.

Deer

Deer hunting may impact the local population due to the average home range of a deer extending beyond the refuge boundary. Its survival is dependent on the habitat and the numbers of hunters it encounters. Dixon Memorial Wildlife Management Area has had 742 hunters in 2003 and 640 hunters in 2004 taking 86 and 46 deer respectively. In 2005, only 49 hunters used Compartment 1 and took 1 deer. This indicates that hunting on Compartment 1 does not generally impact the local population of deer. Harvest and survey data confirm that decades of deer hunting on surrounding private land have not had a local cumulative adverse effect on the deer population.

Deer herd health checks are conducted every 5 years on Okefenokee NWR by the Southeast Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study at the University of Georgia. Deer checked from this population have been in good health. The health of the deer can impact the regional deer population and contribute to the Georgia's overall deer population management.

Wild Turkey

Turkeys are non-migratory and therefore hunting directly impacts the local population. Proposed turkey hunting on the refuge would extend hunting Compartment 1 until May. Compartment 1 is the only section of the refuge proposed for turkey hunting. This is adjacent to the huntable area of Dixon Memorial Wildlife Management Area. Turkey hunting in the Lower Coastal Plain of Georgia in 2006 resulted in 3,404 hunters taking 6,382 turkeys. Take in Compartment 1 would be insignificant compared to the state harvest. This harvest would be the result of habitat on the refuge and on adjacent state lands. Therefore the refuge hunt would not cumulatively impact the turkey population.

Small Game (Squirrel, Rabbit, and Bobwhite Quail)

Squirrel and rabbit populations may be affected regionally by hunting. Due to the limited refuge hunt area only local effects will be discussed. Studies have been conducted to determine the effects of hunting on the population dynamics of small game. Results from studies have consistently shown that small game, such as rabbits and squirrels, are not affected by hunting, but rather are limited by food resources. Squirrels and rabbits are prolific breeders and their populations have not been threatened by hunting even prior to the passing of hunting regulations as we know them today. Squirrel hunting in Georgia is second to dove hunting. In 2002-2003, an estimated 65,000 hunters killed 803,000 squirrels in Georgia. Rabbits are third most popular small game species with 41,657 hunters taking 325,757 rabbits in 2002-2003. Squirrel and rabbit populations would not be impacted by the refuge allowing hunting on 1,424 acres of Compartment 1. The pressure on these species from hunters would be insignificant with an estimated less than 1 hunter per day during the season.

Quail are non-migratory and therefore are not regionally affected by hunting. Georgia has been known in the past as being the Quail Capital of the World. However, populations have declined by 70% since the 1960's. The state is currently active in a quail initiative to provide improved habitat for this species. With habitat improvements on the refuge, quail populations may expand in the future. However, current populations are small in Compartment 1 and the hunting pressure is minimal.

Non-hunted Wildlife

Non-hunted wildlife would include non-hunted migratory birds such as songbirds, wading birds, raptors, and woodpeckers; small mammals such as voles, moles, mice, shrews, and bats; reptiles and amphibians such as snakes, skinks, turtles, lizards, salamanders, frogs and toads; and invertebrates such as butterflies, moths, other insects and spiders. Except for migratory birds and some species of migratory bats, butterflies and moths, these species have very limited home ranges and hunting could not affect their populations regionally; thus, only local effects will be discussed.

Disturbance to non-hunted migratory birds could have regional, local, and flyway effects. Regional and flyway effects would not be applicable to species that do not migrate such as most woodpeckers, and some songbirds including cardinals, titmice, wrens, chickadees, etc. The

cumulative effects of disturbance to non-hunted migratory birds under the proposed action are expected to be negligible. Only turkey hunting would coincide with the nesting season of other birds. The number of hunters entering the unit is at so low numbers that disturbance would be minimal. This use is unlikely to increase significantly. Disturbance to the daily wintering activities, such as feeding and resting, of birds might occur.

Some species of bats, butterflies and moths are migratory. Cumulative effects to these species at the “flyway” level should be negligible. These species are in torpor or have completely passed through Georgia by peak hunting season in Nov-Jan.

Endangered Species

Endangered and threatened species that utilize the refuge are red-cockaded woodpecker, indigo snakes, gopher tortoise, and wood storks. A Section 7 Evaluation was conducted in association with this assessment for opening hunting in Compartment 1 on Okefenokee NWR. It was determined that the proposed alternative would not likely adversely affect these endangered species.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers (RCW) do not inhabit the upland management Compartment 1 where the proposed action would occur. Indigo snakes and gopher tortoises may be present but minimum disturbance would occur since only foot travel by hunters is allowed. Wood storks would be in the wetland areas, away from the primary upland hunting areas.

Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of Proposed Action on Refuge Programs and Cultural Resources.

Wildlife-Dependant Recreation

As public use levels expand across time, unanticipated conflicts between user groups may occur. The Refuge’s visitor use programs would be adjusted as needed to eliminate or minimize each problem and provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities. Experience has proven that time and space zoning (e.g., establishment of separate use areas, use periods, and restrictions on the number of users) is an effective tool in eliminating conflicts between user groups.

The opportunities for hunting would expand under the proposed action. Due to limited use by target animals and their dependency on the adjacent landscape, the proposed hunt opportunities would be insignificant in altering the local populations of wildlife. The refuge would control access under the preferred alternative to minimize wildlife disturbance and habitat degradation, while allowing current and proposed compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

Cultural Resources

Over time, the cultural sites within the compartment could be disturbed if the habitat surrounding them are favorable to hunt due to food sources. Continued monitoring will identify the

disturbance. Walking into the compartment also lessens the impact to these sites. The further from the entrance, the less use the site will obtain.

Anticipated Impacts of Proposed Hunt on Refuge Environment and Community.

Cumulative effects on the environment result from incremental effects of a proposed action when these are added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. While cumulative effects may result from individually minor actions, they may, viewed as a whole, become substantial over time. The proposed hunt in Compartment 1 has been designed so as to be sustainable through time given relatively stable conditions. Changes in refuge conditions, such as sizeable increases in refuge acreage or public use, are likely to change the anticipated impacts of the current plan and would trigger a new hunt planning and assessment process.

The refuge would work closely with State, Federal, and private partners to minimize impacts to adjacent lands and its associated natural resources; however, no indirect or direct impacts are anticipated. The newly opened hunts would result in a net gain of public hunting opportunities positively impacting the general public, nearby residents, and refuge visitors.

Anticipated Impacts if Individual Hunts are Allowed to Accumulate

National Wildlife Refuges, including Okefenokee NWR, conduct hunting programs within the framework of State and Federal regulations. The proposed hunt in Compartment 1 is managed in coordination with the state hunts on the remaining area of Cowhouse Island. By maintaining hunting regulations that are as, or more, restrictive than the State, individual refuges ensure that they are maintaining seasons which are supportive of management on a more regional basis. The proposed hunt plan has been reviewed and is supported by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The refuge coordinates with GA DNR annually to maintain regulations and programs that are consistent with the State management program. Cooperative enforcement with Georgia DNR and hunt dates that coincide with the adjacent state lands result in more stringent enforcement of regulations than on other refuge hunt areas.

Chapter 5. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION WITH OTHERS

The proposed action has been thoroughly discussed and coordinated with refuge biology, forestry/fire, law enforcement, and public use staff, as well as biologists with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (as both the biological experts and the adjacent land manager). State biologists fully support the proposed action (See Letter of Concurrence).

Appendix. RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

The Service received six comments on the refuge's draft EA titled the Revised Environmental Assessment of the 2002 Amendment to the Okefenokee NWR's Hunt Plan to address small game and turkey hunting on Cowhouse Island. This document was available for public comment for 30 days beginning March 5, 2007 and ending April 5, 2007. Public Notices were placed in eight local newspapers.

Six comments from individuals and organizations were received, of which 5 were in favor of the Proposed Action to implement the Amendment to the refuge's Hunt Plan which opened 1,424 acres to small game and turkey hunting in addition to the already established deer hunting. One letter requested that hunting not be allowed on the refuge..

The following letters were received:

- 1 J. Moller
- 2 L. Mullin
- 3 S. James
- 4 Georgia Wildlife Federation
- 5 Safari Club International and Safari Club International Foundation
- 6 The Humane Society of the United States

Recommendations from the Safari Club International to acknowledge regional contributions of hunting and coordination with state partners were incorporated into the cumulative effects section of this EA.

Comments made by the Humane Society addressing their concerns with Environmental Assessments on hunts proposed for numerous refuges were evaluated and where appropriate, discussions modified in this document.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

2002 Amendment to the Hunt Plan for Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to expand hunting opportunities on 1,424 acres (Cowhouse Island Unit – Compartment 1) located along the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge's northern boundary in Ware County, Georgia to include small game (rabbit, squirrel, and bobwhite quail) and turkey. Prior to this amendment, the area was only open to the public for deer hunting in accordance with the State season on the adjacent Dixon Memorial Wildlife Management Area. There are no other public recreational uses on this unit. Hunters are required to walk into the area (no vehicles) and only pointing dogs will be allowed during quail hunts. The hunt period will extend from fall (small game) through spring (turkey).

The Service has analyzed the following alternatives to the proposal in an Environmental Assessment (copy attached):

No action alternative - Under this alternative, hunting would be limited to the Pocket and portions of Upland Management Compartments 3 and 4 on Okefenokee NWR during special deer hunts.

Proposed action - Under this alternative, hunting opportunities would be expanded to include small game (rabbit, squirrel, and bobwhite quail) and turkey in accordance with State of Georgia seasons, with several special refuge regulations on the refuge portion of Cowhouse Island.

The preferred alternative was selected over the other alternatives because:

1. The preferred alternative would allow the public to harvest a renewable resource, promote further a wildlife-oriented recreational opportunity, increase awareness of Okefenokee NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System, and meet public demand.
2. The preferred alternative is compatible with general Service policy regarding the establishment of hunting on National Wildlife Refuges.
3. The preferred alternative is compatible with the purpose for which Okefenokee NWR was established.
4. This proposal does not initiate widespread controversy or litigation.
5. There are no conflicts with local, state, regional, or federal plans or policies.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects:

1. The refuge would increase the public hunting area in an area where most hunting is available on private hunt clubs.
2. This would allow the public to harvest a renewable resource.
3. The public would have increased opportunity for wildlife-oriented recreation.
4. Local businesses would benefit from hunter activity through purchases at local stores and restaurants.
5. The Service will be perceived as a good steward of the land by continuing traditional uses of land in Georgia.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the proposal. These measures include:

1. Hunters will be required to walk into the compartment.
2. Only pointing dogs will be allowed during quail hunts.
3. Hunters are encouraged to sign in and out of the compartment at entrance points.
4. The refuge law enforcement program in coordination with state law enforcement will regulate the hunting season, ensure hunt regulation compliance, and protect refuge resources.

The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse affects on wetlands and flood plains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988 because the proposed expanded hunt will primarily be within upland habitats with minimal entrance into wetland areas. Entrance will be on foot with no chance of vehicle damage to wetlands.

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted include:

1. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Ecological Services, Brunswick, GA
2. Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Division

Copies of the Environmental Assessment are available by writing:

Refuge Manager
Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
Rt 2, Box 333043
Folkston, GA 31537

Therefore, it is my determination that the proposal does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environment Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. This determination is based on the following factors (40 CFR 1508.27):
(for each factor list the page numbers of the EA where the factor was discussed.)

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered and this action will not have a significant effect on the human environment (EA, pages 10-16)
2. The actions will not have a significant effect on public health and safety (EA, pages 15-16).
3. The project will not significantly effect any unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historical or cultural resources, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas (EA, pages 10-12, 15-16).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial (EA, page 16).
5. The actions do not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks to the human environment (EA, pages 15-16).
6. The actions will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration (EA, pages 3-4).
7. There will be no cumulative significant impacts on the environment. Cumulative impacts have been analyzed with consideration of other similar activities on adjacent lands, in past action, and in foreseeable future actions (EA, pages 10-16).
8. The actions will not significantly affect any site listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources (EA, page 15).
9. The actions are not likely to adversely affect endangered or threatened species, or their habitats (Intra-Service Section 7 Biological Evaluation Form attached to EA).
10. The actions will not lead to a violation of federal, state, or local laws imposed for the protection of the environment (EA, page 16).

References: Environmental Assessment of 2002 Amendment to the Hunt Plan for Okefenokee NWR, Compatibility Determination, Letter of Concurrence, Refuge-specific Regulations, Intra-Service Section 7 Evaluation



Regional Director

4/24/07
Date