Responses to Comments Received on the Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment for a Youth Waterfowl Hunt on 50 Acres of the North Riverboat Unit of Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge.

Washington County, Oregon

I. INTRODUCTION

During the 30 day public comment period ending September 30, 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) received approximately 200 written comments on the Youth Waterfowl Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment for the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge).

II. COMMENTS RECEIVED, RESPONSES

Similar comments have been grouped where appropriate to provide better readability. Comments received on common factual content of the draft Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment have been grouped together to be addressed below. Unique factual comments on the content of the drafts are also presented and addressed below. Copies of the actual letters and comments are not reprinted here, however, comments have been paraphrased to reflect the comment provided. The Service responses immediately follow the comment(s).

Comment: Concern was expressed about the location of the hunt due to safety and user conflict of visitors using the public use trails.

Response: The Youth Waterfowl Hunt program will take place on approximately 50 acres of the North Riverboat Unit, located 3.3 miles from the Atfalat'i Unit. The Refuge headquarters, Wildlife Center, and the public use trails are located on the Atfalat'i Unit. The North Riverboat Unit is currently closed to all public uses and will only open for the duration of the hunt program. There will be no other visitors in that area and as such, there will be no safety concerns to non hunting visitors. There are private residences located near the hunt area, however, those residences are approximately 400 yards from the nearest hunt blind. (Shotgun pellets generally travel 100 yards, but can travel a maximum distance of 300 yards). All hunt blinds face inwards towards the wetlands, away from a private residence, and this placement of blinds, in addition to the distance, will minimize risk and ensure safety to those homes.

Visitors on the public use trails on the Atfalat'i Unit will not be able to hear gunshots from the North Riverboat Unit. If they do hear gunshots, it is most likely from an existing hunt club adjacent to the Atfalat'i Unit of the Refuge.

To clarify the location of the hunt area, the Hunt Plan was revised with an additional location map and language describing the location.

Comment:s Comments were received that expressed confusion on the number of days that the hunt would occur.

Response: Language was added to the Hunt Plan to clarify that the hunt would occur for a minimum of one day (Saturday or Sunday) a week up to a maximum of two days a week (Saturday or Sunday, and one weekday) as participation and capacity warranted.

Comment: Comments were received opposing either hunting in general or hunting on a National Wildlife Refuge. Comments defined the word "refuge" according to the dictionary and stated that hunting was not an appropriate recreational activity on a sanctuary or refuge. Comments questioned using tax money and government land to promote hunting.

Response: The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, states that National Wildlife Refuges shall give priority consideration to wildlife-dependent recreational uses when such use is compatible and does not materially interfere with the purpose for which the Refuge was established. The Act stipulates that hunting (along with fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation), if found to be compatible, is a legitimate and priority general public use of a refuge and should be facilitated. Furthermore, the Act states that the Service shall provide increased opportunities for families to experience compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, particularly opportunities for parents and their children to safely engage in traditional outdoor activities, such as fishing and hunting.

As described in the Youth Waterfowl Compatibility Determination in the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan, we do not believe implementing the youth waterfowl hunt will materially detract from or interfere with the Tualatin River NWR purposes or the National Wildlife Refuge System mission.

The principal focus of the Act was to clearly establish a wildlife conservation mission for the Refuge System and provide managers clear direction to make determinations regarding wildlife conservation and public uses within the units of the Refuge System. The Service manages NWRs primarily for wildlife conservation, habitat protection, and biological integrity, and allows uses only when compatible with refuge purposes. In passing the Improvement Act, Congress reaffirmed that the Refuge System was created to conserve fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats and would facilitate opportunities for Americans to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting and fishing on Refuge System lands.

National Wildlife Refuges exist primarily to safeguard wildlife through habitat preservation. The word "refuge" may seem like hunting is inconsistent with the word. However, with healthy habitats come healthy populations of wildlife that are a renewable resource.

Comment: Some comments expressed concern that there are not enough sanctuaries for wildlife populations and expressed concerns about the impact of hunting to waterfowl populations.

Response: Harvesting of waterfowl on refuges and throughout the country is monitored very closely. The Service monitors populations of waterfowl in the major flyways every year through surveys. These surveys help determine the population of species which in turn help to determine whether a species can be hunted in a sustainable way that does not decrease the overall population of that species. If any species experiences declining population numbers, the Service makes adjustments to hunting programs to ensure equilibrium is achieved between population numbers and habitats available.

Comment: Comments expressed concern that Refuge and hunting regulations would not be enforced, hunters would be out of compliance, trash would be left behind, and toxic shot would be used by hunters.

Response: Law Enforcement for the program will be provided by the Service's Zone Refuge Law Enforcement Officer and Oregon State Wildlife Conservation Officers. This hunt program is an opportunity to educate youth about hunting ethics and wildlife conservation. Compliance with State and Federal regulations is required for visitors to engage in this wildlife-dependent recreational use and for the hunt to remain a compatible use. Refuge managers will also monitor and evaluate the hunt program for effects on resources and for the quality recreation experience desired.

Comment: Comments were received expressing that youth should not be taught to hunt and that there are more appropriate activities for urban youth. There were also concerns that we would be promoting mixed messages to youth and causing confusion.

Response: When managed appropriately through careful planning and coordination, this hunt will allow youth the opportunity to learn hunting in an ethical and safe manner. As our American population becomes more and more disconnected from the outdoors, especially youth, it is becoming even more important to engage youth in the outdoors. Youth currently have the opportunity to engage in wildlife observation, interpretation, environmental education, and wildlife photography on the Refuge. Hunting is another form of wildlife-dependent recreation that will provide an additional opportunity for youth to learn about waterfowl, wetland habitats, and to respect the land and the wildlife they are hunting. This program will provide a safe and quality recreational opportunity providing a reasonable opportunity to harvest game.

Additionally, congress has identified hunting as a legitimate and appropriate use of the NWR System through which the American Public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife.

Comment: Comments expressed concern on impacts to endangered flora and fauna and asked how we would ensure they would not be disturbed or killed.

Response: There is only one federally listed species that occurs in the youth waterfowl hunt location. This is the federally threatened Nelson's checker-mallow (*Sidalcea nelsoniana)*. Listed as threatened in 1993, the Tualatin River NWR has worked closely with partners and other biologists to plant introduction sites in the hopes of expanding its range in the Willamette Valley in support of the Recovery Plan for the Prairie Species of Western Oregon and Southwestern Washington. The location of the planting sites and current populations of the Nelson's checker-mallows are out of the footprint of the youth waterfowl hunt and will not be impacted by either construction of hunt blinds or hunting activities. We have received concurrence from the Endangered Species program of the Service that the hunt, as planned, will not affect the Nelson's checker-mallow populations on the refuge.

Comment: Several comments were received questioning staff resources available to implement the program and a concern in shifting of priorities for the Refuge. Others asked why we were opening a hunt at this time and not when the Refuge was first opened.

Response: The Tualatin River NWR's Comprehensive Conservation Plan was published in 2013. Development of this plan included a public process in which we put forth thirteen different goals and subsequent objectives for future management of the Refuge. The goals ranged from habitat conditions to cultural resources to public use opportunities. Objective 12.3 of this plan states that we have the desire and capability to "provide opportunities for youth to participate in high-quality waterfowl hunting on the Riverboat Unit of the refuge". Since publication of this plan in 2013, our priority has been to implement the plan and all of the goals. We did not open a hunt when we first opened the Refuge to public use because we neither had the resources nor the land to offer the opportunity. Implementing this program will require both financial and staff resources and we will work closely with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and other partners to gain those resources.

Comment: Several comments were received about the fees generated from permits and licenses.

Response: The Tualatin River NWR is not charging a fee for hunting at this location. The fees that were referred to in the Hunt Plan are those that are generated from state licenses, and state and federal stamps and other permits that in turn, support those respective programs.

Comment: Concern was expressed regarding a potential fire danger from gunshots.

Response: The youth waterfowl hunt will take place from the end of October to the end of January. This is typically our rainy season here in Oregon and the fire danger is minimal if non-existent. All vegetation in the hunt area will either be flooded and under water or extremely wet. If it were determined that a fire hazard existed we would modify the hunt.

Comment: Comments expressed concern that we we were giving preferential access to hunters.

Response: The National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act (Act), passed by Congress in 1997, recognizes hunting as a priority public use on a National Wildlife Refuge. The Act states that the six priority wildlife-dependent recreational public uses "shall receive priority consideration in refuge planning and management" so long as those activities do not materially interfere with the purpose for which the Refuge was established. The CCP intentionally designated certain uses to occur in specific units to reduce conflicts between user groups. The Atfalati'i Unit of the Refuge, provides opportunities for visitors to enjoy four of those uses; wildlife observation, environmental education, interpretation, and wildlife photography. The Riverboat unit was designated for waterfowl hunting only.

Comment: Comments were received that since other areas to hunt were available, we did not need to hunt on the Refuge.

Response: There are hunt clubs located in the area that do offer hunting opportunities for waterfowl hunters. However, these hunt clubs typically charge a substantial fee to participate. The youth waterfowl hunt program on the Refuge will be free. This will provide access to hunters who may not be able to afford a hunt club fee. Sauvie Island Wildlife Area, managed by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, currently offers the only public youth hunt in the Portland Metropolitan Area.

Comment: Comments requested extension of the comment period.

Response: Under the National Environmental Policy Act, the public comment period requirement is 30 days. On August 10th, a news release was sent to local newspapers to accommodate community newspaper deadlines. This news release contained information directing readers on ways to get copies of the Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment, and also how the public can comment on those documents. The public comment period ran from September 1st to September 30th. Copies of the Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment were available on our website and also in print format at the Refuge Wildlife Center and Headquarters buildings. We believe the 30-day comment period was sufficient.

The September, 2014 comment period was the primary timeframe for the public to submit comments to the refuge on this hunting proposal. The Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can recommend the opening of the Riverboat Unit to hunting but does not have the final authority to do so. Proposed hunt openings are forwarded from the Region to our Headquarters Office in Washington D.C. All proposed hunts throughout the Refuge System are required to go through a National regulation and rulemaking process with opportunity for public comment before a hunt can occur. This process will include a Notice of proposed hunts in April/May, 2015 through publication in the Federal Register. This process will include a 30-day opportunity for public comment. Following that, the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will make the final decision to open proposed hunts and final regulations will be published in the Federal Register in June/July of 2015.

Comment: Several comments were received expressing concern over the noise disturbance while either on the public use trail or in their homes.

Response: The location of the youth hunt will be on the North Riverboat Unit, approximately 3.3 miles away from the public use trails of the Refuge on the Atfalat'i unit. It is unlikely that gunshots on the North Riverboat Unit will be heard on the public use trail. There are private residences near the hunt area and it is likely that there will be some impact from gunshot noise. The hunt will be occurring one to two days a week,, during morning hours only. Hunting will cease at 1:00 p.m. There are currently other hunt areas nearby and the noise from the Refuge program will not be new but rather additive. Shooting noise impacts will occur but will be limited due to the small number of hunters participating in the hunt program and the hours of the Refuge hunt.

Comment: Comments requested a summary of all the comments received.

Response: This document serves as a summary of comments and our responses. This document is available online at our website www.fws.gov/tualatinriver and at the Refuge headquarters located at 19255 SW Pacific Highway in Sherwood.

Comment: Comments expressed support of the hunt program and the opportunity for a free recreation activity to connect youth to nature and to teach ethical and responsible hunting. Comments were also received in support of passing on tradition and building a lifetime respect and appreciation for wildlife and nature.

Response: As one of the six wildlife-dependent priority public uses, when managed appropriately through careful planning and coordination, this hunt will allow youth the opportunity to learn hunting in an ethical and safe manner. According to Oregon's 2008 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, "there is growing evidence that Oregon's youth are gravitating away from outdoor experiences....By providing Oregon's

youth with opportunities to learn outdoor recreation skills, we have the opportunity to rebuild the foundation of future outdoor recreation participation, reestablish personal connections with nature and their public lands, and improve not only the health and well being of future youth and adults, but also install a passion for nature that may parlay into nature stewardship." This program will provide a safe, high quality and free recreational opportunity for those youth to engage in nature and to learn about wildlife and habitats.

Comment: Several comments were received in support of the economic activity that would be generated in the community from the hunt program.

Response: Based on a 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife Associated Recreation for Oregon, hunting in Oregon generated $238.7 million in hunting related expenditures through the purchase of equipment and the cost of travel. On average, hunters spend $1,168 during the year. The data reflects hunters 16 years of age and older, so it is difficult to estimate the figures for a youth hunt. However, a maximum of 168 youth may participate in the youth hunt with an additional 168 supervising adults. Based on interest expressed by local residents, we are assuming that a majority of hunters will be residents of the State of Oregon. Hunters will be required to obtain State and Federal licenses, stamps, and/or other permits which will generate revenue for those programs. Additional expenditures can be assumed to be equipment, clothing, transportation, fuel, and food at local restaurants.

Comment: Comments were received in favor of the hunt program to reduce time and economic barriers for families by providing a local opportunity that may otherwise not be available.

Response: The Tualatin River NWR is not charging a fee for hunting at this location as this is a free recreational opportunity for youth and is open to the public through a drawing and permit system. This program is located near a major metropolitan area and will provide local and other youth the opportunity to participate in a quality hunting experience.

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Oregon's youth are gravitating away from outdoor experiences....By providing Oregon's youth with opportunities to learn outdoor recreation skills, we have the opportunity to rebuild the foundation of future outdoor recreation participation, reestablish personal connections with nature and their public lands, and improve not only the health and well being of future youth and adults, but also install a passion for nature that may parlay into nature stewardship." This program will provide a safe, high quality and free recreational opportunity for those youth to engage in nature and to learn about wildlife and habitats.

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