

Finding of No Significant Impact

Environmental Assessment for a Youth Waterfowl Hunt on the Riverboat Unit of the Tualatin River National Wildlife

Introduction:

In September 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) adopted a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The CCP and its associated Environmental Assessment was available for public comment and review from October 22, 2012 to November 22, 2012. The CCP evaluated three different alternatives for management of the Refuge, and after evaluating comments received and careful consideration, one alternative was selected as the management direction of the Refuge. This CCP sets forth management guidance for the Refuge over the next 15 years, as required by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 688dd-688ee, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997).

The CCP examined the Refuge's public use program and the six wildlife dependent priority public uses offered on National Wildlife Refuges. One such use identified for implementation was a youth waterfowl hunt (Page 2-51 of the Final CCP). A compatibility determination was also prepared and it was determined that a youth waterfowl hunt is compatible (See Pages B-17 - B-27 of the final CCP).

Environmental Assessment and Hunt Plan:

As part of the effort to implement the CCP, the Service has completed a second Environmental Assessment (EA) focusing on a Hunt Plan for a Youth Waterfowl Hunt on the Riverboat Unit for the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). This EA tiers to the broader Comprehensive Plan and evaluates the effects on the human environment associated with opening portions of the Riverboat Unit of the Refuge for an annual waterfowl hunt program beginning in fall of 2015. The hunt is designed to provide an opportunity for youths to experience and engage in a safe and high quality wildlife-dependent priority public use on the Refuge.

Two alternatives were considered and site specific effects and cumulative impacts analyzed in the EA. Alternative B was selected for implementation because it is most likely to meet the goals and objectives identified in the Hunt Plan as well as allow for management flexibility as evaluation of the program occurs and other management conditions change.

As described in detail in the EA, implementation of Alternative B would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects:

- **Environmental** –
 - Effects to target populations -An average of 214 birds a year are estimated to be taken under the refuge youth waterfowl hunt program. This hunt would not have a significant impact on local, regional or Pacific Flyway population because the percentage taken on the Refuge would measure a fraction of a percent of the estimated waterfowl population.
 - Effects to non-target populations - The presence of hunters may cause some disturbance to non-targeted wildlife foraging and resting from noise, human activity, and dogs. Hunter education courses are required by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) for youths under the age of 18 and refuge orientation would be provided to all hunters before the season.
 - Effects to habitats – There may be some disturbance to habitats during construction of the blinds and ADA blind-access trail. During the hunting season, impacts will be minor and temporary and will stem from trampling of vegetation by hunters walking to the blinds.
- **Social**-

- This hunt will provide an opportunity for youth to hunt where very few nearby opportunities exist in the community. There will be no effects to other users as this use is in area where no other public use occurs. There may be minor potential for a perception of favoritism for one user groups over another, and also a possible loss of visitors who do not support hunting.
- Economic-
 - While the refuge will not charge a user fee, there are state and federal license requirement for waterfowl hunting. It is anticipated that during an average hunt season, the hunt program could generate up to \$5000 annually in revenue for state and federal wildlife license programs. Additional expenditures can be assumed to be equipment and clothing, transportation and fuel, and local restaurants.

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

1. Refuge specific regulations specifying hunt hours, shot size, and other regulations.
2. The Refuge and ODFW will work closely together to ensure safety and quality; along with the law enforcement programs to insure hunt regulation compliance and protection of refuge resources.
3. Location of the hunt on a separate unit of the Refuge that is not open to other visitor uses.
4. Placement of hunting blinds are designed to maximize safety for hunters and adjacent landowners.

As described in detail in the EA, implementing a Youth Waterfowl Hunt program is not expected to have any significant effect on Refuge resources or other elements of the human environment because of the limited numbers of hunters and the stipulations designed to minimize adverse effects to Refuge resources and adjacent landowners.

Public Involvement:

The EA and Hunt Plan has been thoroughly discussed and coordinated with interested and affected parties, including ODFW, during development. A public review and comment period for the EA and Hunt Plan opened on September 1, 2014 and ended on September 30, 2014. Notification of the comment period was published in several local newspapers, the Tualatin River NWR website, and on local news channels. Letters were mailed to adjacent landowners and other interested parties informing them of the proposal and the comment period. Copies of the Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment were made available for public review at the Refuge office and Wildlife Center and on the Refuge website. Copies were also sent to the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, and ODFW. The tribe did not respond. ODFW provided a letter for the record with several suggestions to align the hunt with State regulations. We incorporated most of their comments.

During the comment period, 197 comments were received by U.S. mail, email, and delivered in person. Comments were received from people opposed to the hunt and from those in support. Opposing comments were based on a range of concerns including safety, disturbance to non-hunting visitors, shooting noise, and harm to wildlife. Commenters were unaware that hunting could occur on refuge lands and opposed hunting based on concern of conflict with conservation of wildlife.

The level of controversy created by this proposal was considered very carefully in this determination especially since the Refuge serves highly urban audience. Some of the controversy was created by a misunderstanding of where the specific hunt was to take place, thinking the hunt would occur on the Refuge unit with the visitor center and trails. Many of the commenters who opposed the hunt did so based on their values and beliefs and not based on something flawed or overlooked in the hunt proposal itself.