Compatibility Determination

Use: Haying for Habitat Management

Refuge Name: Fergus Falls Wetland Management District

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:
Waterfowl Production Areas - The Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act, March 16, 1934, (16 U.S.C. Sec. 718-718h, 48 Stat. 452) as amended August 1, 1958, (P.L. 85-585; 72 Stat. 486) for acquisition of "Waterfowl Production Areas"; the Wetlands Loan Act, October 4, 1961, as amended (16 U.S.C. 715k-3 - 715k-5, Stat. 813), funds appropriated under the Wetlands Loan Act are merged with duck stamp receipts in the fund and appropriated to the Secretary for the acquisition of migratory bird refuges under provisions of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, February 18, 1929, (16 U.S.C. Sec. 715, 715d - 715r, as amended.

FmHA fee title transfer properties - Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act 7 U.S.C. 2002.

Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. § 742(a)(4)) and (16 U.S.C. § 742(b)(1))
Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 (16 U.S.C. § 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583).

Refuge Purposes:
Waterfowl Production Areas - "...as Waterfowl Production Areas" subject to "...all of the provisions of such Act [Migratory Bird Conservation Act]....except the inviolate sanctuary provisions..." and "...for any other management purpose, for migratory birds."

FmHA fee title transfer properties - "for conservation purposes..."

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.

Description of Use: The Wetland Management District will allow haying by private individuals for the purpose of habitat management on Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA) and easements.

Is the use a priority public use?
Haying is not a priority public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Where would the use be conducted?
The decision to use haying as a management tool on Waterfowl Productions Areas and easements within the Wetland Management District will occur as part of strategies developed under specific program or unit habitat management planning. The total area on which haying will be permitted during any one year will likely be less than 1000 acres.

When would the use be conducted?
Haying operations typically occur after July15 with bales and equipment being removed no more than 7 days post haying. In some cases where sweet clover or noxious weeds have invaded an area, earlier haying may be allowed.

How would the use be conducted?
The WMD will allow haying by private individuals for the purpose of habitat management. Permittee selection and associated determination of cost will follow relevant Refuge Manual guidance (5 RM 17 and 6 RM9.11) and Region 3 specific guidance for haying and grazing. Haying is the cutting and processing (typically baling) of grass, forbs, cattails or woody vegetation, with subsequent removal to an off-WMD location. Haying of any area is usually conducted as a single event during any one year, but may be repeated periodically to: remove undesirable grasses and forbs; remove accumulated plant biomass; remove or reduce woody vegetation; provide a desired vegetative condition (such as short grass browse); reduce vegetation fuel levels where wildfires are a concern; prepare sites for establishment of desired vegetation, including prairie or wetland communities; reduction of dense emergent growth and invasive plant suppression in wetlands; or may be best option should other management alternatives (grazing, Rx, etc) not be available or feasible.

Haying activities will be subject to the terms and conditions of a Special Use Permit issued by the Refuge/WMD Manager. The terms of the Permit will ensure compatibility through implementation of Service policy and WMD specific stipulations.

The haying process typically requires 3-4 visits to each site with heavy equipment over a period of 7-10 days. Haying begins in late July when standing grasses and forbs are cut and gathered into windrows using a tractor, mower, and rake; or a swather—a self-propelled mowing machine. The hay cures for 3-7 days to reduce moisture content, and is occasionally turned once with a tractor-drawn rake to speed and even drying. Once cured a tractor-drawn baler is used to package the windrows into bales of hay. A tractor-drawn wagon is typically used to collect the bales and remove them from the site.

Why is this use being proposed?
Haying is a needed management tool to maintain and restore refuge grasslands and wetland habitats.

Availability of Resources:

What resources are needed to properly (considering quality and compatibility) and safely administer use?
Most of the needed work to prepare for this use would be done as part of routine management duties. The decision to use haying as a management tool would occur as part of strategies developed under specific program or unit habitat management planning. The additional time needed to coordinate issuance and oversight of the needed Special Use Permits is relatively minor and within existing WMD resources. The need to monitor haying effects will take additional time, however, it will be incorporated into the already existing grassland monitoring program.

Are existing refuge resources adequate to properly and safely administer the use?

No additional fiscal resources are needed to conduct this use. The needed staff time is already committed and available. Most of the needed work to prepare for this use would be done as part of routine grassland management duties. The decision to use a private operator for haying would only follow as part of strategies developed under grassland management discussions. The additional time needed to coordinate issuance and oversight of the needed Special Use Permit for haying is relatively minor and within existing refuge resources. Monitoring haying effects will be a part of the existing grassland monitoring program.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

How does haying affect Refuge purposes and the NWRS mission?
The use of haying provides a management tool that allows the Refuge/WMD staff to meet the habitat goals and objectives. Service policy calls for maintaining or restoring WPA habitats to historic conditions if doing so does not conflict with WMD purposes (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2001).

How does haying affect Fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats; and the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the refuge/NWRS?
Haying will result in short-term disturbance and benefits as well as long-term benefits to both resident and migratory wildlife. Short-term impacts will include disturbance and displacement typical of any noisy heavy equipment operation. Cutting and removal of standing grasses will also result in short-term loss of habitat for those species requiring tall grasses for feeding and perching such as obligatory grassland bird species such as the bobolink or dickcissel. Short term benefits may include creating open water pockets for spring migrating waterfowl and shorebirds; setting back invasive emergent wetland vegetation, and creating short grass patches within a prairie landscape for bird species that prefer the structural diversity in the landscape

Long-term benefits will accrue due to the increased vigor of newly established grasses or the establishment of highly desirable native tallgrass prairie species, which will improve conditions for those same species affected by the short-term negative impacts. Longer-term negative impacts may occur to resident wildlife species such as pheasant that would lose over-wintering habitat in the hay areas. This is offset by the fact that the entire WPA will not be hayed, leaving unhayed blocks containing suitable winter habitat near any area that will be hayed.

Some nest destruction or nesting hen mortality may occur. Strict time constraints such as delaying most haying until after July 15th will limit the potential for these type of negative effects to occur within areas hayed. Wetland Management Districts are managed first and foremost for wildlife (USFWS 2001). But the focus is on wildlife populations not individuals (USFWS 1992). Haying is likely to cause mortality of some individual animals, but is not expected to affect the perpetuation of wildlife populations.

Public Review and Comment:
This compatibility determination is part of the 10-year review for Compatibility Determinations in the Minnesota Wetland Management Districts' Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Public notification and review will include a comment period from

14April 2014 through 5 May 2014. Comments received and agency responses will be included in the final version of this Compatibility Determination.

Determination:

Haying

____ Use is Not Compatible

__x__ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. Haying must meet specific habitat and related wildlife objectives and contribute to the purposes of the WMD.
2. Most haying will begin after July 15 to minimize disturbance to nesting migratory birds. In some years it may be necessary for haying to occur before July 15 to prevent seed dispersal of undesirable plant species.
3. Windrowed grass left lying to dry prior to baling must be raked and moved every two days if left on newly seeded native grass and in no cases should remain on the ground more than six days prior to baling.
4. All equipment and bales must be removed from the Waterfowl Production Area within 7 days of baling.

Justification:

Signature: Refuge/WMD Manager _____
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief _____
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-Evaluation Date: __2024__