

DRAFT COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

USE: Trapping of Furbearers

REFUGE NAME: Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge

ESTABLISHING AND ACQUISITION AUTHORITY(IES):

Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order 7437, dated August 21, 1936.

REFUGE PURPOSE(S):

The purposes come from the authority under which Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge was established and from authorities under which subsequent major land additions to the refuge were made. Purposes for Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge are:

" ... a Refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife"
(Executive Order 7437, dated August 21, 1936)

"suitable for-(1) incidental fish and wildlife oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species..." (Refuge Recreation Act(16 U.S.C 460k-460k-4), as amended)

" ... for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources." (6 U.S.C. 742f(a)(4)(Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956.)

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM MISSION: "...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:

What is the Use?

This compatibility determination evaluates the commercial trapping of beaver, muskrat, mink, skunk, raccoon and opossum. Trapping will occur by private individuals operating under a Commercial Use Special Use Permit. Commercial trapping is considered a refuge management economic activity or economic use. Commercial trapping is not a priority public use, as defined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, but rather serves as a management instrument for ensuring priority habitat objectives are being addressed and infrastructure that supports wildlife dependent recreation and management stays intact.

Where is the use conducted?

Trapping may occur anywhere on the refuge where target species are negatively affecting refuge infrastructure, wildlife or habitats. As a result, trapping activity is concentrated in and near the refuge wetlands; the uplands inside of the Wildlife Drive are closed to trapping. The annual muskrat and beaver trapping auction assigns designated units to trappers on their special use permit. See attached maps. Trapping of raccoons may also occur on areas where symptoms of distemper or other diseases are observed or when the population is determined to be too high. Location of activity is determined at the time the special use permit is issued.

When is the use conducted?

Trapping would primarily occur during the established state of Wisconsin trapping seasons for each species. No trapping is permitted west of River Bottoms until after October 31st due to a special waterfowl hunt. Additionally, trapping will be allowed outside of established state of Wisconsin seasons if a refuge need arises. The refuge also cooperates with the Wisconsin Trapping Association and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in trapping animals for the Wisconsin Cooperative Trapper Education Program. With permission from the refuge, the State game warden and the Department of Natural Resources wildlife biologist, the Association traps on the refuge for two days mid to late September to get instructional material for the class. About 10 mammals are taken, most of which are muskrats during this event.

How is the use conducted?

Trapping is permitted for a variety of species, however, muskrat, beaver and raccoon are the primary target species. Mink and opossum are typically taken incidentally to muskrat trapping. Management of furbearing mammal populations on the refuge will be accomplished through an annual trapping program for muskrat and beaver. An open bidding system is used to assign trappers to the various units. Those bidding must have a Wisconsin state trapping license and must be present at the auction of units. The qualified applicant voicing the highest bid on a unit receives the exclusive rights to trap that unit for that trapping season. The minimum bid for any unit is \$40. Persons may bid on more than one unit, but only one unit will be awarded to any one individual during the first round of bidding. Any units without bidders will be brought back up for bidding after all other units have gone through the bidding process; at that time trappers who already have a unit may compete for the remaining units. The senior citizen (65 years or older) and the two youth (16 years of age or under on the day of bidding) muskrat units will be awarded through a drawing. There is no fee for these units. If an in person auction cannot occur, the refuge will set up a bidding process by mail to award the units to interested trappers.

Refuge staff will advise on the specifics of the permitted activity, including trapping method, targeted species, location and duration of the activity in each individual special use permit. Each trapping method will follow state of Wisconsin trapping regulations, specifically related to trap size and types of allowable sets in order to protect non-target species. Selected trappers will be allowed to target animals within predefined areas on Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge as identified by maps at the time the special use permit is issued authorizing removal.

Additionally, a limited number of qualified individuals will be issued a special use permit as needed to remove destructive and nuisance animals annually. The refuge will generate a list of qualified individuals from applications submitted by interested trappers. The list will be used sequentially and without prejudice when a management need has been identified. All species identified in this compatibility determination are eligible for this type of trapping. Usually, raccoon and skunks are not trapped during the regular trapping season and are only trapped when a management need arises.

Why is the use being proposed?

The refuge was established for the purposes of managing wildlife, particularly waterfowl and providing compatible wildlife-oriented interpretive and recreational uses for the public. Trapping provides recreational opportunities for the public and also minimizes destruction of refuge dikes, reduces damage to marsh habitats and reduces the amount of predation by raccoons and skunks on duck nests and ducklings. Opossum and mink are typically taken incidental to muskrat trapping. Mink have also been known to prey on young waterfowl.

Beavers cause substantial issues/damage to Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge. Damage includes undermining roads, plugging water control structures, killing trees, flooding refuge roads, flooding private land, etc. The refuge utilizes a dike system with water control structures to promote a healthy habitat for waterbirds and other wildlife. Refuge staff regularly observe beavers plugging culverts, stop log structures, or building dams, preventing the flow of water through these structures and negatively affecting water and habitat management capabilities.

Muskrat often burrow into roads, ditches and dikes causing holes and cave-ins impacting refuge infrastructure. This damage increases maintenance costs, creates safety hazards to staff and the public, and negatively affects water management capabilities. Muskrats can also feed on native vegetation and cause significant damage when they occur in high numbers.

Raccoons and skunk are found throughout the refuge in both upland and marsh habitats. Extensive studies off-refuge show these species to be an important waterfowl nest predator. A raccoon population increase would have a negative effect on ground and cavity nesting birds, specifically wood ducks and hooded mergansers. Also, a population increase would likely lead to increased occurrences of distemper or other diseases. We feel it is necessary to have the option to trap raccoons to keep the population at a healthy level if a management action is needed.

AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES:

The trapping auction brings in \$800 to \$1900 on an annual basis. Refuge costs associated with recreational trapping are anticipated to be \$3000 including administration costs. Access trails, parking lots, boat landings, signs, and other facilities as well as staff to maintain these facilities are provided by the refuge primarily to meet needs of the public engaged in fishing, hunting, trapping and boating-related activities. The refuge budget adequately covers costs above the amount collected from trappers. Law Enforcement personnel may be needed to monitor the activity or address regulatory issues.

Muskrats will dig bank dens into dikes of water management facilities causing considerable damage and add costs to operations of the refuge. Beaver will sometimes plug water control structures causing damage, limiting access and compromising refuge habitat management capabilities. Managing beaver and muskrat populations at reasonable levels through a public trapping program can reduce costs to the Refuge in wildlife management activities.

- Special equipment, facilities, or improvements necessary to support the use: funded through regular management activities, no additional funding is needed.
- Maintenance costs: funded through regular management activities, no additional funding is needed.
- Monitoring costs: staff may monitor commercial recorders to ensure compliance. This is expected to be covered by the refuge's current funding capacity, no additional funding is needed.
- Offsetting revenues: none

ANTICIPATED IMPACTS OF THE USE:

Impacts of public trapping on the purposes of the refuge and mission of the Refuge System can be either direct or indirect and may have negative, neutral, or positive impacts on refuge resources.

Short and Long-term Impacts:

Generally, commercial trapping will have minimal impacts to non-target species and short-term habitat conditions. Trapping activities may disturb non-targeted fish and wildlife and their habitats. To reduce short-term negative effects, trappers will be limited in number, area and season of use through the issuance of a special use permit. Each trapper will be given a specific area with restrictions on time of entrance, location of access routes and length of trapping season. Some level of disturbance is expected from trappers, especially if trappers enter areas closed to the public. However, disturbance (including altered behavior) of non-targeted species is expected to be localized and temporary in nature. Noise from vehicle use on dike roads may temporarily disturb wildlife.

Long-term, positive benefits to refuge resources through the reduction in targeted species is expected. A reduction in the number of raccoons and skunk on the refuge is expected to improve overall populations of species commonly preyed upon by raccoons and skunk and reduce the number of diseased animals on the refuge. Both raccoons and skunk are important waterfowl nest predators. The reduction in beaver and muskrat populations is expected to reduce impacts to refuge infrastructure such as water control structures, roads and levees. Muskrats will dig bank dens into dikes of water management facilities causing considerable damage and add costs to operations of the refuge. Beaver will sometimes plug water control structures causing damage, limiting access and compromising refuge habitat management capabilities. Managing beaver and muskrat populations at reasonable levels through a public trapping program can reduce costs to

the refuge in wildlife management activities. Reducing beaver population in specific areas will improve forest health by allowing better water management on the refuge.

Habitat management can be enhanced, however, by these same animals. Muskrats build houses and dens using aquatic vegetation, thus creating openings available for fish, waterfowl and other migratory birds. Beaver dams create ponded habitat, and their lodges are also associated with openings in aquatic vegetation beds. These benefits minimize the need to commit refuge resources to achieve these habitat conditions. The trapping program will be administered so not to impact the ability for these benefits to occur.

When considering impacts to refuge purposes, impacts of the trapping program include those to the furbearer populations themselves. Individual animals are harvested and removed, yet Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources indicate furbearer populations, with exceptions, are stable (see below). Harvest data derived from trapper harvest reports indicate that trapper efficiency has remained fairly constant despite fewer total animals trapped. Harvest data reflects the number of trappers, trapping conditions and fur prices.

Furbearer Status and Harvest: Wisconsin generates and distributes various types of wildlife population status reports that include furbearers. Factors affecting furbearer harvest on the refuge and within the state includes length of the trapping season, fur prices, weather conditions, habitat changes, extent of aquatic vegetation coverage and trapping effort. From 2011-2016 the average number of muskrats harvested annually on the refuge was 1536 and the average number of beaver was 68. Harvest data derived from trapper harvest reports indicate that trapper efficiency has remained fairly constant. A 2018-2019 Beaver Trapping Questionnaire by Brian Dhuey and Shawn Rossler for the whole state of Wisconsin found that, “beaver trappers felt that annual beaver populations were stable or increasing in all Beaver Management Zone’s. Over the past 6-8 years beaver trappers also felt that populations were increasing in all Beaver Management Zone’s. The beaver harvest in 2018-19 (20,569) increased 14% from the 2017-18 total of 18,122” (Dhuey and Rossler, 2019). In 2015, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources finalized a Wisconsin Beaver Management Plan that included multiple agencies including the Service in the development.

Muskrat populations nationwide have shown a decreasing trend and that has also been noticed on the Mississippi River. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources muskrat house counts in the winter have shown a declining trend. However, the decline in the muskrat population is not to a point of concern for continued habitat management benefits provided for these species.

Indirect and Cumulative Impacts:

Cumulative impacts would occur if over-trapping or other uses, such as hunting, were occurring that influence the same resources at the same time or if the duration of the trapping is long-term. No cumulative impacts are expected as the refuge manager can minimize the potential for cumulative impacts through issuance of a special use permit. Managers retain the option to

prohibit trapping on the refuge that causes undue resource disturbance or harm. The refuge manager may limit the amount of trapping occurring in a particular habitat, season, location and/or relative to a single species or species group to mitigate long-term indirect impacts. All non-target species will be released unharmed where possible or turned over to the refuge manager if unsuitable for release. The restriction of exposed bait is intended to minimize the likelihood of catching eagles and other raptors. Incidental take of species, are reported to the manager, and historically incidental take has not occurred very often. In the last two years there was one otter reported to refuge staff. The manager can then use this information to mitigate any long-term indirect impacts from trapping. The manager can also control overlapping uses in the same area as trapping with the use of a special use permit.

Indirect impacts to wildlife nesting and breeding success can result from the removal of animals under a trapping program. In many instances, these impacts are positive. Reductions in populations of nest predators such as raccoon, skunk, and mink have a limited positive impact on nesting birds. The degree to which predator management, through a public trapping program, benefits migratory bird production can vary widely depending on the timing of the removal of predators, size of the habitat block, habitat isolation (for example islands) and adjacent land use.

Indirect impacts are expected to be a general improvement over time. A reduction in the long-term degradation of infrastructure and forested habitat by the removal of beaver and muskrats is expected. Trapping could lead to economic gain by individuals that are permitted to remove furbearers. It is unlikely that this economic gain would have major effects on the local economy; however, there is a likely economic benefit to the individuals.

PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT:

The draft Compatibility Determination will be available for public review and comment for 15 days from August 31st, 2020 to September 15th, 2020. A public notice will be sent to local newspapers, as well as a press release, on August 31st, 2020 notifying the public of the comment period. The compatibility determination will be made available online at <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/trempealeau/>. You can contact the refuge at 608-539-2311 x. 6 or [Stephanie edeler@fws.gov](mailto:Stephanie_edeler@fws.gov) to request either printed or electronic copies. Please let us know if you need the documents in an alternative format. Concerns expressed during the public comment period will be addressed in the final draft.

DETERMINATION:

- Use is not compatible
- Use is compatible with the following stipulations

STIPULATIONS NECESSARY TO ENSURE COMPATIBILITY:

1. Permittees may trap only in the refuge unit specified on the special use permit.
2. Trapping is restricted to the shores of dikes and roads before freeze-up occurs as determined by the refuge manager or the second Monday in November, whichever comes

first. After that time, the entire unit is open for trapping until the end of the trapping season defined by the state.

3. Refuge trappers are authorized to take the following species only: muskrat, mink, skunk, opossum and raccoon. All other furbearers will be released unharmed or turned over to the refuge manager if injuries preclude their release.
4. Traps may be tended only during the hours of 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM daily.
5. It is mandatory for all trappers to keep record of their catch and submit this report by the due date described in their special use permit, each year. Information needed includes number of traps out each night and number of each species taken.
6. Vehicles are restricted to on-road use. Permittees must register all vehicles they plan to use during the trapping period, including those of helpers.
7. Scouting of runs will be permitted prior to freeze up on dates specified by the refuge manager.
8. Boats may be used for scouting runs, but outboard motors are prohibited.
9. Airboats, snowmobiles, and all-terrain vehicles may not be used on the refuge.
10. Raptors or waterbirds accidentally caught in traps must be turned over to the refuge manager as soon as possible.
11. The use of exposed meat or fish bait, or animal carcasses for making sets is prohibited.
12. No carcasses or animal parts may be disposed of on the refuge.
13. Staking requirements on the refuge are as follows:
 - a. Trap stake tops must be marked with a visible marking or paint of the trappers choosing. Neighboring units should have different colored stakes.
 - b. Willow stakes may be cut on the refuge but they must be 1" or less in diameter. Cutting is not permitted along the auto tour road, entrance road, Black Oak Island or any other location visible to the general public.
14. All equipment will be furnished by the trapper and must be removed within 3 days after the close of the trapping season.
15. All gate keys must be returned within three days after the close of trapping season.
16. Failure to comply with State regulations or conditions of the special use permit may result in revocation of refuge trapping privileges.

JUSTIFICATION:

This use will not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which the Refuge was established with the above stipulations in place. Furbearer trapping on the refuge is a useful tool in maintaining balance between furbearers and habitat, and safeguarding refuge infrastructure.

This use is critical for the refuge to meet goals and objectives regarding water management and habitat management. It is also a viable management tool for reducing damage from furbearers to infrastructure including levees, dams, roads, and water control structures. Costs of repair require the refuge to divert resources away from other management activities that otherwise meet the purposes of the Refuge. High predator populations, like raccoon, can decrease nest success of ground-nesting and cavity nesting migratory birds, thus compromising a purpose of the refuge.

The Refuge's Furbearer Trapping Plan (2010) concludes that the trapping program does not have any appreciable negative impacts on furbearer populations. Commercial trapping follows all applicable laws, regulations and policies including: Title 50 Code of Federal Regulations, National Wildlife Refuge System manual, National Wildlife Refuge System goals and objectives, and refuge goals and objectives. This activity is compliant with the purpose of the Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

In view of the above, trapping of furbearers, with the stipulations previously described, will not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes of the refuge and the mission of the Refuge System. Overall, managed furbearer trapping contributes to the purposes of the refuge by maintaining vigor and health of furbearer populations and by safeguarding refuge infrastructure critical to habitat for scores of fish and wildlife species.

SIGNATURE:

Refuge Manager Signature and Date:

CONCURRENCE:

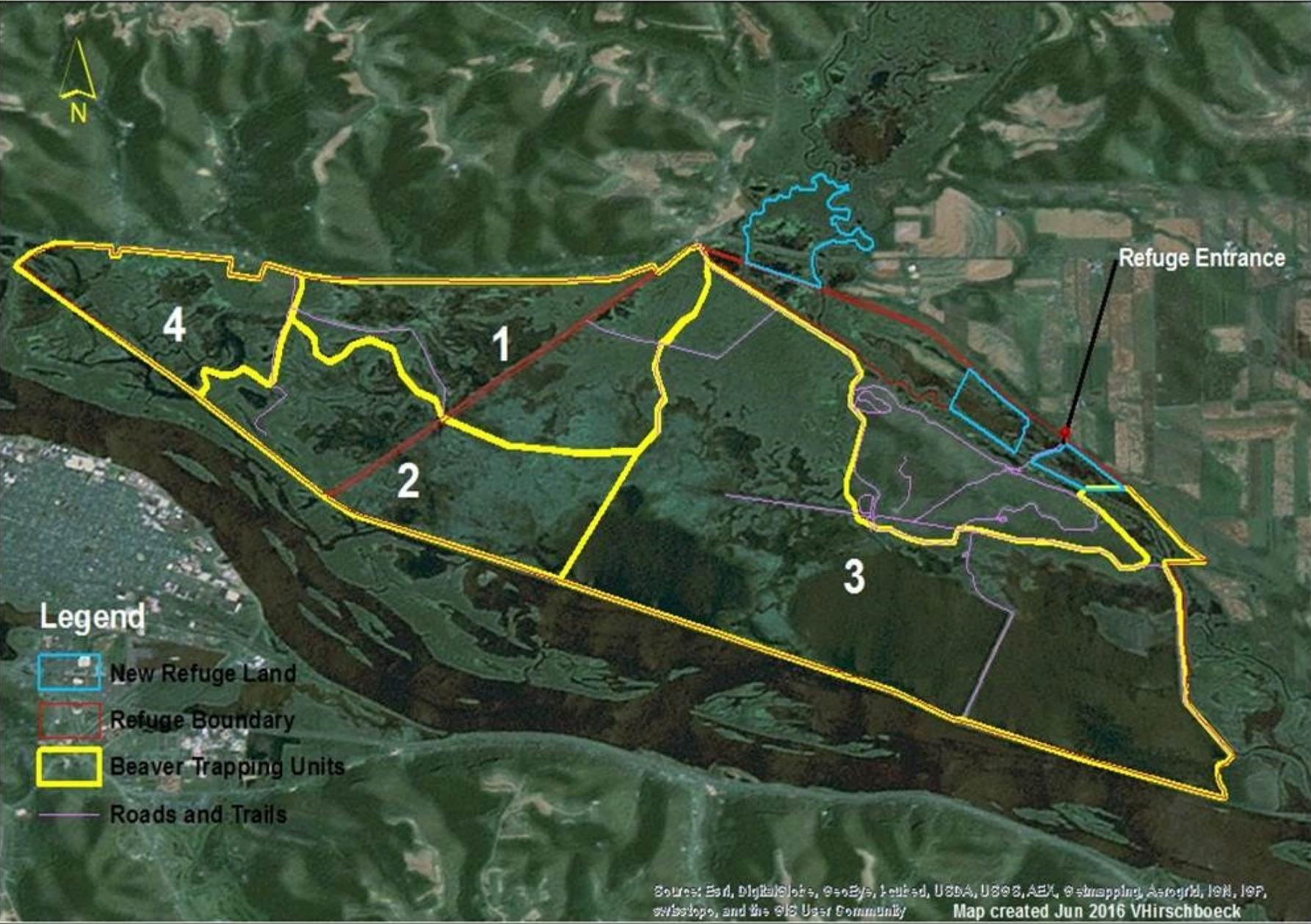
Regional Refuge Chief Signature and Date:

Mandatory 10 or 15-year Re-evaluation Date: 2030

REFERENCES:

Duhey, B. and Rossler, S. (2019). Beaver Trapping Questionnaire 2018-2019.
<https://p.widencdn.net/xwlakr/beavtrapques2>

Trempealeau NWR Beaver Units



Trempealeau NWR Muskrat Units

