

DRAFT COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

USE: Tree Harvest by Third Parties for Habitat Management Purposes

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 NWR are:

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

"suitable for-(!) 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? Tree harvest includes the removal of standing, felled, or fallen trees, and their stumps. Cutting of trees is an important tool for the purposes of maintaining safety, restoring prairie and oak savanna habitats, removing invasive species, and improving forest diversity and health. This Compatibility Determination applies to all wood removal activities regardless of the ultimate use of the wood (e.g. firewood, pulp, fence posts, dimensional lumber, etc.). Tree harvest is not a priority public use, as defined by the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997, of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Standing or down tree harvest may be an economic use and considered commercial if the individual or entity is selling the wood or products from the wood. Non-commercial use would be harvest for personal use firewood or crafting uses. Commercial tree harvest is considered a refuge management economic activity or economic use.

Where is the use conducted? The use will be conducted in forested areas, native prairies, and oak savannas. Tree harvest could occur anywhere within the refuge boundary, however it will be specifically defined at the time the Special Use Permit or contract is issued. Cutting areas would

be determined by habitat management objectives, principally invasive species control, dike rehabilitation, reduction of dangerous fuels and hazard trees in burn units, and in the consideration of the goals and objectives of the Refuges' Habitat Management Plan. The goal is to restore the oak savanna, woodlands, dikes, and native prairie by removing invasive and undesirable trees. Various forms of selective harvest (removal of encroaching vegetation, thinning, deadfall removal, etc.) will occur as part of the restoration efforts. Additionally, harvesting of trees that pose a threat to safety of visitors or impede use by the public in certain areas could occur. Tree harvest will occur only where the refuge has determined that a management need exists for tree removal and may occur in both open and closed areas to the public. Where suitable demand and economic value exists, the Refuge may elect to award the permits through a competitive bidding system.

When is the use conducted? A special use permit will indicate the dates, time and location when tree harvest will be permitted. The manager has the discretion of when to authorize tree removal recognizing timing effects with federally listed species, especially Northern long-eared bats. Usually, wood removal activities will occur from November 1st through March 31st and when the ground conditions facilitate access and prevent damage to roads, soil, plant roots and cultural resources. In wetland areas, tree harvest would be conducted when the ground surface allows equipment access and wildlife and cultural resource disturbance would be minimized. Permitting of some small scale personal use tree harvest may be allowed but periods of activity will depend on circumstances. This activity will only occur where the Service has determined a management need exists to remove wood/trees.

How is the use conducted? The scope of the activity will be determined by the management objective for the area and by the quantity and quality of available wood. Equipment used for harvest may range from chainsaws and axes, to traditional logging equipment such as feller-bunchers and log skidders. Access may be by pick-up truck, farm tractor, or larger traditional logging equipment. Where possible, access will be limited to roadsides or mowed fire breaks.

Why is the use being proposed? Refuge staff spend a considerable amount of time controlling invasive tree species in prairies. Coupled with this, a 1993 forest inventory shows that 160 acres of black locust dominated stands occur in the original 700 acres of refuge. In addition, many more hundreds of acres of forest contain a black locust and Siberian/Chinese elm component. Removing the mature invasive and exotic trees from the adjacent forest habitats would eliminate the seed source of these prairie invaders. Pine species are also present on the refuge and although not invasive, are exotic to the area and are in poor condition. Thinning these pine stands will allow individual trees to grow larger.

Allowing the cutting and removal of trees/woody vegetation as proposed allows the refuges to meet its purpose of restoring oak savanna, native prairie and woodland habitats. In addition, there is sometimes a need to remove down trees from trails, roads, dikes, and parking lots. Additionally, standing and down trees compromise infrastructure on Refuge dikes and water

control structures. This use will assist with maintaining those public use areas and other infrastructure. A failure to act on removal of trees/woody vegetation will continue to degrade and potentially eliminate what remains of the native ecosystems. Additionally, allowing for the removal of trees that pose a threat to safety or impede use of an area is important for visitors and neighbors of refuge land.

The amount of wood that would be generated from removing these trees would be far more than the Refuge could burn in its wood stoves or use for other projects such as fish structures and fence posts. Wood cutters would remove much of the wood thus reducing staff time needed to pile and burn the trees.

AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES:

Under current staffing levels, the refuge has the required resources to support and administer tree harvesting. The refuge will also utilize Upper Mississippi River NW&FR/Audubon Forester and the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers resources for timber cruising, forest inventory, timber stand improvement projects, contract harvest, and follow up treatment options.

ANTICIPATED IMPACTS OF THE USE:

Short and Long-term Impacts:

Key waterfowl using tree cavities for nesting include wood duck and hooded merganser. Many other bird species use forested habitat for nesting, roosting, protective cover, or feeding. Examples of important species include: bald eagle, great blue heron, great egret, red-shouldered hawk, barred owl, prothonotary warbler, several woodpecker species, and many passerine bird species. The Upper Mississippi River corridor provides habitat critical to the successful migration of many bird species. The forests are also important to a variety of mammals, reptiles and amphibians, insects, and flowering plants. Carefully managed harvest will provide long-term benefits to wildlife and plants by improving overall forest diversity and health. Exotic and invasive tree species will be removed, increasing the extent of the prairie and oak savanna. These are desired upland habitats for Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge as identified in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan and the Habitat Management Plan. Removal of stands of black locust and other woody invaders will enhance native plants' ability to re-establish themselves, thereby restoring prairie and oak savanna habitats and increasing the diversity of the plant and animal communities. Prairie and oak savanna are two of the rarest habitat types in the area and are becoming scarcer with rapid development of remaining farm fields. It is important that these habitats be restored and maintained on the Refuge as an example of vegetation types that once occupied hundreds of thousands of acres in western Wisconsin.

During harvest activities, wildlife will be displaced to adjacent areas, although this disturbance is not likely to have a measurable impact and will be mitigated by timing and duration of harvest. Potential adverse impacts include: short-term loss of site-specific habitats; short-term fragmentation of the landscape with resulting impact to bird use and productivity; loss of dead whole trees on the ground; soil disturbance that may increase exotic plant invasion and erosion;

damage to roads and wetlands from equipment; reduced visual esthetics; and disturbance to wildlife and visitors from cutting operations. These impacts are generally short-term in nature and on relatively small areas, and can be controlled to a large extent by permit conditions and management oversight. There is a very low potential for long-term damage to cultural resources. Timing of harvest between November 1st and March 31st will lessen the likelihood of damage. Required cultural resource surveys and actions will be conducted as determined in consultation with the Service's Regional Historic Preservation Officer.

Indirect and Cumulative Impacts

There are no other tree removal or forest management activities on the refuge that presumably would cause cumulative or indirect habitat impacts. Prescribed burns are done in some areas of the refuge that may cause tree mortality, but this is generally a habitat benefit and typically affects small or brushy trees. Tree removal is most often sporadic or localized (i.e., groves) and only a few trees per year; this removal does not add significantly to any other tree loss on the refuge. Larger timber stand improvement projects would be done under a refuge management plan.

The administering of special conditions set forth in special use permits will assist the refuge in minimizing and/or preventing conflicts or cumulative impacts from other uses or disturbances on the refuge. Closed areas will be in affect during tree removal if deemed necessary for safety.

Indirect effects of the tree harvest removal could lead to economic gain by individuals that are permitted to remove trees. 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 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. Associated impacts with these and combined uses must stay at acceptable levels. Adjustments in timing, location and duration will occur as needed to limit disturbance.

2. Restricted use herbicides may be used to treat stumps as specified by the Refuge Manager. Refuge staff will drop trees for firewood cutters to minimize the risk of accidents.
3. Where possible, heavy equipment used for timber harvesting will be restricted to periods when the ground is frozen, unless required cultural resource surveys and protections are in place.
4. Commercial tree cutting must meet specific habitat and related wildlife objectives and contribute to the purposes of the Refuge.
5. All compliance including National Historic Preservation Act, National Environmental Policy Act, and Endangered Species Act must be completed prior to these activities. Harvest timing may change to mitigate impacts to federally listed species.

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. Restoring upland habitats on the refuge is dependent upon removal of exotic and invasive woody plants that have been on the Refuge since the 1930's. The extent to which encroachment has occurred and the scope of the problem dictates that a major effort is needed if any meaningful restoration can occur. The management techniques recommended have evolved from many years of dealing with invasive species on the Refuge. Recent equipment innovations and interest from local loggers in black locust is encouraging. The changes brought about by the restoration of prairie and oak savanna will directly benefit several species considered to be Regional Resource Conservation Priorities including red-headed woodpeckers, Eastern meadowlark, dickcissels, and blue-winged teal. Harvest would only be done to meet specific forest health objectives, wildlife objectives, or maintenance requirements and thus would only be allowed when it meets the threshold of contributing to Refuge purposes.

SIGNATURE:

Refuge Manager Signature and Date

CONCURRENCE:

Regional Refuge Chief Signature and Date

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