

DRAFT COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

USE: Aquatic Vegetation Harvesting for Boat Access in the Travel Corridor, Lake Onalaska Pool 7

REFUGE NAME: Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

ESTABLISHING AND ACQUISITION AUTHORITY(IES): The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge was established by Public Law No. 268, 68th Congress on June 7, 1924. This act authorized acquisition of lands for Refuge Purposes. Additional lands acquired in fee title by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers are managed as part of the Refuge under a 2001 Cooperative Agreement between the Department of the Army and Department of the Interior.

REFUGE PURPOSE(S):

“The refuge shall be established and maintained (a) as a refuge and breeding place for migratory birds included in the terms of the convention between the United States and Great Britain for the protection of migratory birds, concluded August 16, 1916, and (b) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior by regulations, prescribed, as a refuge and breeding place for other wild birds, game animals, fur-bearing animals, and for the conservation of wild flowers and aquatic plants, and (c) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior may, by regulations, prescribe a refuge and breeding place for fish and other aquatic animal life,” (Public Law No. 268).

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?

The Lake Onalaska Protection and Rehabilitation District (District) is seeking a refuge Special Use Permit to harvest aquatic plants from a boat travel corridor (including boat landings along the corridor) on Lake Onalaska in Navigational Pool 7 of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. The District proposes to deploy an aquatic plant mower to cut submersed plants below the water surface and remove floating vegetation with the goal of improving navigation in the travel corridor. The District also proposes to mark the described travel corridor with standard waterway markers to include both buoys and signs. This use is being evaluated for compatibility as a new use and a Refuge management economic activity. This use is not one of the six priority general public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System, however in allowing this use it would support some of the priority wildlife-dependent public uses of fishing, hunting, interpretation, wildlife photography and wildlife observation.

Where is the use conducted?

Aquatic plant harvesting would be permitted in a designated travel corridor on Lake Onalaska Navigational Pool 7 of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (see attached map), but further described as an area less than or equal to 30ft wide and

commencing with multiple sections, including:

Section A: From the "Tubes" Black Deers Slough (along Brice Prairie Channel) to Black Deers Cut (approximately 2385 feet).

Section B: Black Deers Cut to Fred Funk Boat Landing (approximately 650 feet).

Section C: Brice Prairie Channel to Northern tip of Rosebud Island (approximately 9630 feet).

Section D: Northern tip of Rosebud Island to the Northwest tip of Bell Island near the La Crosse Sailing Club (approximately 4710 feet).

Section E: starting at the dredge cuts traveling around the southeast end of Rosebud Island (La Crosse Airport lights) (approximately 5000 feet).

Section F: starting at the northern tip of Bell Island traveling east towards the La Crosse Airport Lights (approximately 2900 feet).

Section G: Starting at the northern tip of Bell Island traveling south west (approximately 1475 feet)

Total length of possible cutting is 26,750 linear feet or 18.42 acres. Included in this corridor are the public boat landings: Fred Funk Boat Landing, Mosey Landing, Nelson Landing, Fisherman's Road Landing and Upper Spillway Landing. The travel corridor may be marked with navigational buoys or signage at regular intervals.

When is the use conducted?

Aquatic plant harvesting from the travel corridor would be conducted during the growing season from approximately May through October as conditions permit. This would involve up to two mowing sessions per typical growing season.

Maintenance of the travel corridor marking buoys would typically take place in the spring season after high water subsides and following any high water events. Buoys would be removed or replaced with ice buoys in fall, prior to freeze-up in the late fall or early winter.

How is the use conducted?

Aquatic vegetation harvesting or cutting would utilize a boat-mounted sickle bar mowing system that cuts aquatic plants, similar to mowing a lawn. The typical cutting depth of a harvester ranges from 0-6 feet deep and the width of the cutting path varies from 5 to 10 feet. The goal of the cutting is to create a path for boats, where aquatic plants are far enough below the water surface to not make contact with the boat's propeller. Cutting of the path would take two to three passes for a 30 foot wide corridor. Total length of possible cutting is 26,750 linear feet or 18.42 acres. Not all areas will need to be cut to remain open for travel and not all areas will accommodate a 30 foot wide corridor.

Marking of the travel corridor is done using a boat to deploy navigational marker buoys. Buoys have a chain or rope attached to a weight (concrete) preventing them from floating away with currents, senesced vegetation build up, and wind.

Why is the use being proposed?

Recreational boat access on Lake Onalaska has historically been a topic of local concern due to the presence of abundant and diverse aquatic plants. In 2015, staff from the La Crosse District office of the refuge met with concerned citizens, the Lake Onalaska Protection and

Rehabilitation District, La Crosse County Conservation Alliance, Brice Prairie Conservation Association, North American Squirrel Association, La Crosse Sailing Club, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and representatives from U. S. Congressman Ron Kind's and U. S. Senator Tammy Baldwin's Offices to discuss issues raised about fishing and boating access to Lake Onalaska due to aquatic plant growth. Through brain-storming and issue clarification in 2016- 2018, a proposed map that outlined a suitable travel corridor was developed. The proposed corridor identifies historic travel areas used by local recreational boaters and known areas where propeller-cut damage to vegetation resources has been observed.

This use is being proposed to help provide refuge visitors boat access to Lake Onalaska and the Mississippi River in a safe manner, using standard propeller watercraft. The travel corridor would concentrate boat traffic to an area outside the refuge's Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area, leading to fewer boat disturbances to waterfowl during migration. The travel corridor would also offer a travel path open for the refuge's Lake Onalaska Canoe Trail during the summer and early fall months. Additionally allowing this use would support five of the six priority public uses, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography and interpretation.

AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES:

The refuge has the resources necessary to administer this use including development and issuance of a Special Use Permit and monitoring of compliance with permit conditions. Refuge resources, including funding, would not be used for the travel corridor aquatic plant clearing. Staff resources and funding may be used to assist with the installation and marking of the travel corridor. Current refuge staffing and funding levels would accommodate this use.

- Special equipment, facilities, or improvements necessary to support the use: this use will be done by the District and no special equipment, facilities or improvements will be funded through the refuge with the exception that the refuge may partner in supplying marking buoys.
- Maintenance costs: maintenance will be the responsibility of the District. Some staff time maybe dedicated to helping mark the travel corridor prior to cutting.
- Monitoring costs: Volunteers and staff monitor usage of the refuge through current funding capacity, no additional funding is needed.
- Offsetting revenues: none

ANTICIPATED IMPACTS OF THE USE:

Short and Long-term Impacts:

Anticipated short-term impacts of this use include the loss of aquatic vegetation through cutting and harvest. Aquatic habitat structure would be adversely affected. Like with mowing grass, the cut aquatic vegetation would grow back from the established root system and still provide some habitat structure and function. Long-term Impacts including loss of some aquatic habitat features would be realized on approximately 18.42 acres. Fish and invertebrates which utilize aquatic vegetation would be affected, however some structure would remain and/or regrow, as plants would not be cut to the substrate. Some fish species such as centrarchids (bass, bluegill, sunfish) and perch may benefit from the harvesting as it creates better spawning

habitat for these species. Some species of fish such as predatory species, may realize increases in suitable hunting habitat by the creation of established edge features and/or “ambush sites” in the vegetation beds.

Although the plants are not cut to the substrate a loss in aquatic biomass and potential decline in winter tuber available for waterfowl forage in the corridor area is anticipated.

Short-term disturbance to fish and other aquatic wildlife would likely occur at the time of harvest through displacement by the machine.

Disturbance from noise of the harvester would be another anticipated impact. The harvester is powered by a diesel engine which operates at approximately the same decibel level as a surface drive boat (mud motor). Noise disturbance from the harvester may displace some waterfowl, water birds and some fish, however this would only be temporary and short term. Additional noise disturbance from recreational boat operation may occur on Lake Onalaska, as boat operators would be able to travel at greater speeds with fewer stops through the travel corridor.

Indirect and Cumulative Impacts:

The risk of spreading aquatic invasive species to other locations may increase as a result of harvesting practices, however the travel corridor is currently used by boats and propellers are cutting and transporting plants and plant parts to other locations in the pool.

Impacts may be considered not significant when analyzed alone, but may be considered important when they are evaluated cumulatively. The act of mowing and continued use on an annual basis is not considered to have a cumulative impact on the refuge’s primary concern of repeated disturbance of resting, foraging or nesting birds by visitors. Creating this path will concentrate use and minimize impact to the overall resting, foraging or nesting birds that utilize the refuge.

PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT:

The draft compatibility determination (CD) will be available for public review and comment for 30 days from May 16th to May 30th. The CD will be posted at the La Crosse District Visitor Center at (N5727 County Road Z, Onalaska, WI 54650) and made available by request from refuge manager, Tim Miller at 608-799-2385; or tim_a_miller@fws.gov. Notification about public comment opportunities and electronic drafts of the draft CD will be available online https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Upper_Mississippi_River/LaCrosse_District.html. 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. Plants may be cut no greater than 4 feet below the water surface and no closer than six inches from the ground surface.
2. Cut paths may be no wider than 30 feet.
3. Cut vegetation will be removed from the Refuge and appropriately disposed offsite.
4. Cutting will only be permitted in the agreed travel corridor depicted in the attached map.
5. All necessary permits will be the responsibility of the permittee and are required for harvesting.
6. No more than two cuttings will be permitted in one growing season, unless authorized by the District Manager.
7. A harvest report will be compiled at the conclusion of the season containing the approximate weight of all plants harvested, species composition, and area treated by the date established in the Special Use Permit.
8. Special use permits will be issued by the refuge manager and list special conditions that must be met to avoid or minimize adverse impacts to habitat, fish and wildlife resources, cultural resources and the visiting public.

JUSTIFICATION:

In view of the above and with the stipulations previously described, aquatic plant harvest in the travel corridor will not materially interfere with or detract from the Refuge System mission or purposes of the refuge. Allowing a permittee to harvest aquatic vegetation has been determined to be compatible because impacts would be minimal and can be controlled by permits. Additionally, the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 specifies six priority public uses on National Wildlife Refuges and most of these uses involve boat access on the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. The refuge realizes some the highest visitor use numbers in the Refuge System, due to the amazing natural and scenic resource values. A balance needs to be present on the refuge to provide access for priority public uses and recreation, while protecting the wildlife and habitat values that the refuge was established to protect. Allowing a permittee to harvest aquatic vegetation is a way to work with our refuge partners and communities to create safe travel paths for visitors using the refuge and reducing propeller cuts to vegetation resources, along with protecting the Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area during the critical migration period. Aquatic vegetation harvesting in this travel corridor will have some impacts to habitat and wildlife, however these impacts will be offset by the protection of the Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area from more frequent disturbance. Marking of the travel corridor with navigation buoys will provide visitors with a safe identifiable travel route and prevent unnecessary traffic in the Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area.

