

DRAFT

**Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge
White-tailed Deer, Mule Deer and Feral Hog Youth Hunt Plan**

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge
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BUFFALO LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE WHITE-TAILED DEER, MULE DEER, AND FERAL HOG YOUTH HUNT PLAN

I. Introduction

Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR or Refuge) was established by the Federal Property and Administrative Service Act of 1949 (40 U.S.C. 471-535), as amended; Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act of 1934 (16 U.S.C. 661-666c) as amended; Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742a-742j Stat. 1119) as amended; the Act of May 19, 1948, Public Law 80-537 (16 U.S.C. 667b-667d; 62 Stat. 240) as amended; and The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee), as amended.

The purpose of this plan is to provide public hunting opportunities for white-tailed deer, mule deer and feral hogs on Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge. This hunting plan supersedes the overall Visitor Services Plan for Buffalo Lake NWR.

In order to meet specific Refuge and other broader U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) directives, the following purposes were established for Buffalo Lake NWR:

The Refuge's official purpose statement is:

"...for use as an inviolate sanctuary,...for any other management purposes,...using the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (16 U.S. C. 712d) "...shall be administered by him {Secretary of the Interior} directly or in accordance with cooperative agreements... and in accordance with such rules and regulations for the conservation, maintenance, and management of wildlife, resources thereof, and its habitat thereon..." 16 U.S.C. 664 (Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act of 1934 "...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources..."

In addition to the stated purpose of the refuge, additional goals of establishment were:

"...for use and administration under applicable laws as a refuge for migratory birds and other wildlife..." Secretarial Order 2843

Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge is located in the southern portion of the Great Plains. This is a native short and mixed grass prairie that once encompassed more than 350,000 square miles in 10 states stretching along the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains from Canada to southwestern Texas. The Refuge is in a portion of the Great Plains called the Southern High Plains. This includes the Llano Estacado, a large non-mountainous geological region at the southern end of the High Plains. This area covers approximately 20 million acres and is characterized by a flat, featureless, relatively high plateau that was virtually devoid of trees prior to substantial development by humans. Huge herds of bison and pronghorns roamed the plains, and prairie dogs numbered in the millions. This prairie adapted to grazing and periodic fire, due to developing under climatic conditions characterized by low precipitation

By the late 1800's, large portions of the original High Plains prairie were converted for agricultural use. By the early 1900's, much of the original shortgrass prairie had been converted to farm lands which increased with the onset of deep well irrigation. Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge is located within Randall County. The total acreage of the county is 906,000 acres of land. Buffalo Lake has a total of 7,664 acres and accounts for less than 1 percent of the county. The remainder of Randall County remains managed for livestock grazing and irrigated and dry land cropping with a small portion being considered urban or suburban. Therefore, this shift in land use over the last 100 years has caused the extirpation of several wildlife species such as the bison, gray wolf, grizzly bear, pronghorn, and elk.

Buffalo Lake was first developed in 1937 with the completion of Umbarger Dam, which was built as part of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 and was managed by the Soil Conservation Service (currently Natural Resource Conservation Service) for water conservation, recreation, and as a wildlife sanctuary. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service took over operation of the area on November 6, 1958. Throughout the 1950's and 60's Buffalo Lake was widely used as a recreational area providing boating, fishing, and other water related activities.

Tierra Blanca Creek and other natural springs fed Buffalo Lake until the 1970's when irrigation and urban water pumping depleted the aquifers to the point that perennial surface water no longer existed. The draining of the aquifer was compounded by multi-year drought which lowered lake levels even further. Given these conditions, the flows into Tierra Blanca Creek eventually ceased and Buffalo Lake dried up.

However, in 1978 a record flood within the Tierra Blanca Creek drainage filled Buffalo Lake to capacity. Shortly after filling, Umbarger Dam was condemned resulting in the release of the all water within Buffalo Lake. In 1992, Umbarger Dam was replaced with a modern flood control structure able to withstand the torrential flooding known to occur within the area. When the lake fills, water quality suffers due to runoff from upstream confined cattle feeding operations. Given the potential health hazard when the lake floods, Buffalo Lake was closed to water activities such as swimming, boating, and fishing. Currently the only public uses allowed on the refuge are environmental education and interpretation, wildlife viewing, wildlife photography, and camping.

II. Conformance with Statutory Authorities

The Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 (16 U.S.C. 460K) authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to administer refuges, hatcheries, and other conservation areas for recreational use. The Refuge Recreation Act requires 1) that any recreational use permitted will not interfere with the primary purpose for which the area was established; and 2) that funds are available for the development, operation, and maintenance of the permitted forms of recreation.

Fundamental to the management of lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) is the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57), an amendment to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 provided a mission for the System and clear standards for its management, use, planning, and growth. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 recognized that wildlife-dependent recreational uses involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation, when determined to

be compatible with the mission of the System and purposes of the refuge, are legitimate and appropriate public uses of the System. Compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are the priority general public uses of the System and shall receive priority consideration in planning and management. Hunting as specified in this plan is a wildlife-dependent recreational use and the law states that as such, it “shall receive priority consideration in national wildlife refuge planning and management.” The Secretary of Interior may permit hunting on a refuge if it is determined that the use is compatible. The hunting program would not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the purposes of the refuge or the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Recreational hunting authorized by the regulations should not interfere with the primary purpose for which Buffalo Lake NWR was established. This determination is based upon the completion of a Compatibility Determination (Section D).

With an estimated 3,000 visitors annually, the Refuge plays a minimal role in the local economy. The refuge employees typically live in the community, own property and support local businesses through routine purchases. It is estimated that the hunt program’s annual cost is \$6,000.

III. Statement of Objectives

The objectives for big game (deer and feral hog) hunting on Buffalo Lake NWR are to:

1. Provide a quality hunting experience for youth hunters.
2. Protect riparian areas and other native habitats from being over utilized by the current deer population.
3. Remove potentially detrimental feral hogs which currently occur periodically and are likely to increase in the future on the Refuge.
4. Provide wildlife-dependent public recreation as mandated by and according to Service Policy.

IV. Assessment

A. Are wildlife populations present in numbers sufficient to sustain optimum population levels for priority refuge objectives other than hunting?

White-tailed Deer

Regional Analysis

In the early 1900's there were an estimated 500,000 white-tailed deer in the United States. Unregulated commercial hunting and subsistence hunting threatened to eliminate the white-tailed deer from much of its range. At that time, many state wildlife agencies were formed with the goal of conserving the nation's depleted wildlife resources. Hunting regulations were put into place, and the harvest of antlerless (female) deer was prohibited. The rebound of white-tailed

deer populations that followed is considered a wildlife management success story. Today there are over 20 million deer in the United States and numbers are rising (Swihart and DeNicola 1997). In Texas, the white-tailed deer population was estimated at 3,804,500 deer in 2013 (Cain 2014). In Texas, an estimated 625,577 white-tailed deer were harvested in 2013-2014, of which 1,625 were in the High Plains (Purvis 2014). Anticipated annual deer harvest on the Refuge and other national wildlife refuges open to deer hunting is an extremely small percentage of the state's annual harvest and just a fraction of the national population. TPWD estimated 1,625 white-tailed deer were harvested in High Plains Ecoregion of the State during the 2013-2014 hunting season (Purvis 2012).

Local Analysis

White-tailed deer populations have grown at such a rate in Randall County that TPWD has increased the limit of white-tailed deer to 3, with no more than 1 buck. The increase of white-tailed deer in Randall County and the Texas Panhandle appears to coincide with the increase in white-tailed deer on the Refuge. The reason for this increase in the white-tailed deer population is unclear, but may be because of changes in land use, such as, increased suitable habitat (CRP and brush encroachment), and increased corridors. Beginning in 2010, the refuge started to monitor mule and white-tailed deer abundance. Ungulate surveys were conducted between December 2010-March 2011 (2010), September 2011-February 2012 (2011), August 2012-October 2012 (2012), and September 2013-December 2013 (2013). White-tailed deer abundance were estimated to be 34 (90% CI = 16–72) during 2010, 23 (90% CI = 9–61) during 2011, 13 (90% CI = 4–37) during 2012, and 24 (90% CI = 11–51) during 2013. (Butler 2014). White-tailed fawn to doe ratio ranged from 0 fawns/100 does in 2011 to 40.3 fawns/100 does in 2013 (Butler 2014). White-tailed deer sex ratio ranged from 0 bucks/100 does in 2012 to 38.7 bucks/100 does in 2013 (Butler 2014).

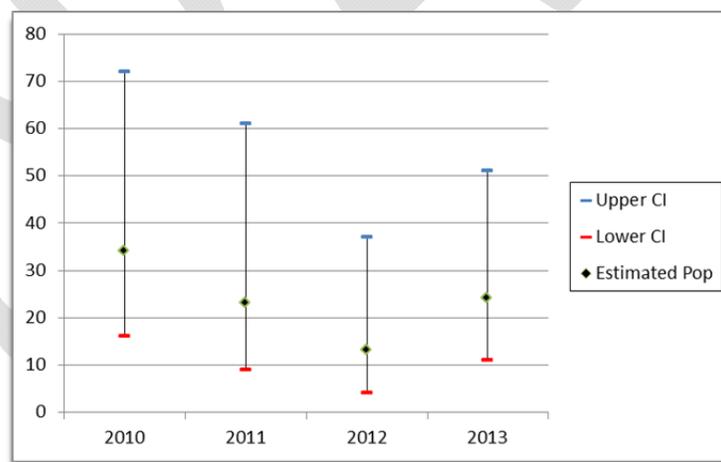


Figure 1. White-tailed deer Abundance on Buffalo Lake NWR 2010-2013.

Mule Deer

Regional Analysis

The mule deer population in Texas ranges from 150,000 to 250,000 depending on climatic cycles. In 2013, the statewide population estimate was 218,834 mule deer. Prior to a relocation effort by TPWD in 1949, a small population existed in the `Panhandle. In 1949, Texas Game,

Fish, and Oyster Commission relocated 89 mule deer to Armstrong and Randall Counties. In 2013, the population estimate for mule deer was 218,834 deer of which 62,268 were located in the Panhandle. A total of 8,386 mule deer were harvested in Texas in 2013-2014 (Gray 2014).

Local Analysis

Mule deer in the Texas Panhandle have access to energy-rich grain crops during the growing season (Sowell 1981). In winter, deer have access to high-protein food crops such as wheat and alfalfa (Cantu and Richardson). In 2013, the population estimate for the Texas Panhandle indicated a population of 62,268 mule deer (Gray 2014). Ungulate surveys were conducted between December 2010-March 2011 (2010), September 2011-February 2012 (2011), August 2012- October 2012 (2012), and September 2013-December 2013 (2013). Mule deer abundance varied over a four year survey period from 84 (43–162) during 2010, 101 (51–199) during 2011, 28 (11–71) during 2012, and 83 (53–131) during 2013 (Butler 2014). Mule deer age- ratios ranged from 5.6 fawns/100 does in 2011 to 39.1 fawns/100 does in 2013 (Butler 2014). Sex ratios for mule deer ranged from 23.9 bucks/100 does in 2011 to 191.7 bucks/100 does in 2012 (Butler 2014).

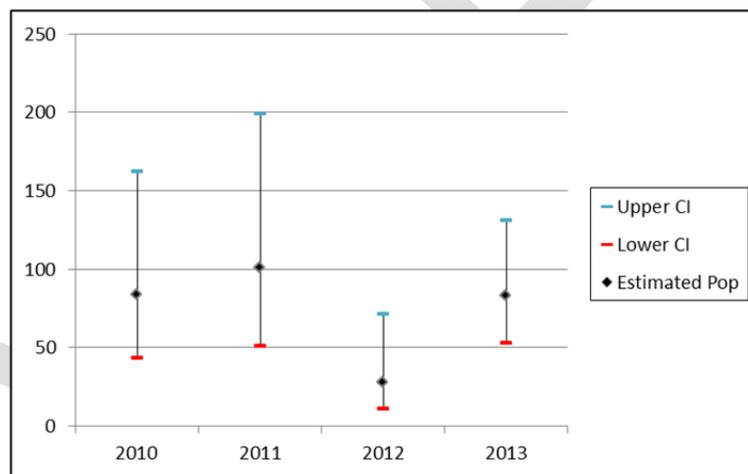


Figure 2: Mule Deer Abundance on Buffalo Lake NWR 2010-2013

Feral hog

Regional and Local Analysis

Feral hogs are an extremely invasive species and not considered a game species by the State of Texas and are also considered a non-climate change stressor to other more sensitive species. There is an estimated population in excess of 1.5 million feral hogs in Texas (Taylor 2003). This is due in part to intentional releases, improved habitat, increased wildlife management, disease eradication, limited natural predators, and a high reproductive potential. Due to the fact that feral hogs are not a native species, there is no need or desire to sustain a population for any refuge objective. In fact, the removal of as many of these destructive, exotic, feral animals as possible would positively benefit the refuge (and neighboring) habitat. Feral hog populations are not monitored per se but trapping/harvest numbers are recorded yearly. At this time, feral hogs are

rare on the refuge. However, off refuge populations (Palo Duro Canyon and Caprock Canyon) have increased and feral hogs are moving west towards the refuge. Any harvest of feral hogs will be opportunistic at this time. As previously mentions, feral hogs can be very destructive to habitat and while total eradication is unlikely, our goal is keep the population as limited as possible.

B. Is there competition for habitat between target species and other wildlife?

White-tailed Deer and Mule Deer

Mule and white-tailed deer occur on the refuge. They can be found in different habitat and vegetation types on the refuge. White-tailed deer prefer higher densities of brush height and cover. Mule deer prefer more open areas such as canyons, brushy draws, and lowlands. There may be direct and indirect impacts from deer to vegetation, such as browse lines, that would limit habitat for migratory birds. Habitat competition between hunted wildlife species has not been studied on the refuge. However, reducing the total number of deer and hogs in an area will reduce interspecies competition for some resources within the habitat.

Feral Hogs

The refuge has not directly studied habitat competition between the target species and other wildlife. However, population management of hogs is expected to reduce intra- and interspecies competition within available habitat. Feral hogs compete with native wildlife for food, cover, water, and space. They are highly adaptable, have high reproductive capabilities, and can be found in a wide range of habitat types. Rooting and digging activities negatively impact vegetative communities, soil properties and plant successional patterns (Stevens 2010). Feral hogs are opportunistic omnivores and compete with game and non-game wildlife species for available food resources. Tate (1984) found that feral hogs compete with deer, turkey, squirrels, waterfowl and other wildlife species for food resources. Feral hogs can impact ground-nesting species, more specifically quail and turkey, through nest destruction and predation. Beach (1993) also found that feral hogs prey on fawns and ground nesting birds.

C. Are there unacceptable levels of predation by target species on other wildlife?

Feral hogs

Predation levels by feral hogs on other wildlife at Buffalo Lake NWR have not been measured. However, feral hogs, which are opportunistic omnivores, can negatively affect quail, turkey, and other native ground-nesting species through nest destruction and predation. Numerous studies (Beach 1993, Taylor 2003, West, et al. 2009, and Stevens 2010) have noted detrimental feral hog impacts on deer fawns; ground nesting birds, and numerous other native species.

White-tailed Deer

Whited-tailed deer are herbivores and do not predate on other wildlife species.

V. Description of Hunting Program

A. Areas of the Refuge that support populations of the target species.

The refuge possesses a mixture of short and mid grasses as well as riparian habitat that supports white-tailed and mule deer as well as feral hogs. These habitat types as described below provide food and cover to white-tailed and mule deer and feral hog.

B. Areas to be opened to hunting.

All areas of the refuge that do not pose a safety concern may be opened for hunting for deer and feral hogs at the Manager's discretion, based on current population survey data. The refuge would be split into 3 hunting units (North, Middle, and South Units).

North Unit

The North Unit encompasses the area North of Campground Road to F.M. 168 and Grazing Units 11 and 12. This unit occupies 1,035 acres and consists of part of the old lake bottom, riparian areas, mixed grass prairie, and canyon breaks. Vegetation in this area includes a mixture of trees along the old lake edge, many grasses such as little blue stem, side oats grama, blue grama, buffalo , and western wheat grass. This area has canyon outcrops with rocky slopes.

Middle Unit

The Middle Unit encompasses the area south of Campground Road to Stewart dike and Grazing Units 1, 2, and part of Unit 3. This unit is 2,966 acres and area consists of the dry lake bed, riparian areas, and short grass prairie. Vegetation in this area includes trees along the north edge of the old lake bottom, forbs in the old lake bottom, and grasses such as little blue stem, side oats grama, blue grama, buffalo, and western wheat grass.

South Unit

The South Unit encompasses the area south of Stewart dike and south of Tour Road Wind Mill in Grazing Unit 3, Grazing Units 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. This unit is 3,063 acres and consists of wooded areas along the old lake bottom edge and Tierra Blanca Creek. Grasses such as western wheat grass, little blue stem, sideoats grama, and buffalo grass. In some areas of this unit sage bush is present.

Buffalo Lake NWR- Hunt Plan Map

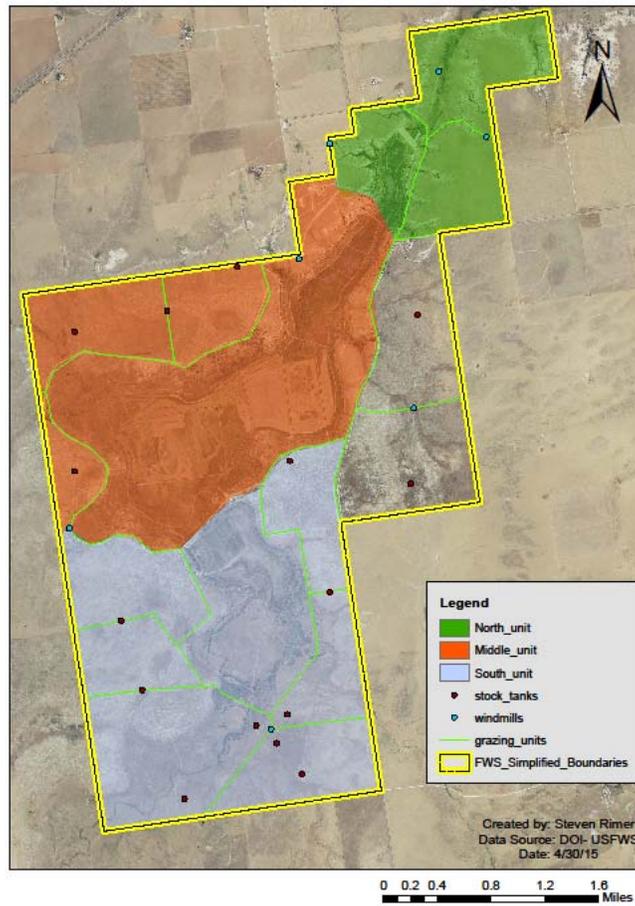


Figure 3: Buffalo Lake NWR Hunt Plan Map

| New Units (Acres Hunted) | Type of Hunt (Number of Permits Available) | Species | Estimated number to be taken |
|--------------------------|--|---|-------------------------------|
| North (1,035) | Big Game Rifle Youth (1) | Mule deer, white-tailed deer, and feral hog | 2 deer Unlimited feral hog |
| Middle Unit (2,966) | Big Game Rifle Youth (1) | Mule deer, white-tailed deer, and feral hog | 2 deer Unlimited feral hog |
| South Unit (3,063) | Big Game Rifle Youth (1) | Mule deer, white-tailed deer, and feral hog | 2 deer Unlimited feral hog |

Table 1. Acres to be hunted, hunt type, species to be taken

C. Species to be taken, hunting periods, hunting access

Mule deer, white-tailed deer and feral hog youth hunts are will be held on the refuge. Hunters will be selected by lottery through the TPWD Public Hunting Lands Program. Lands entered in this program may specify hunt dates that suit purposed goals. Each hunter will be allowed to harvest one mule deer or one white-tailed deer (either sex). There will be no limit on feral hogs.

Feral hogs may be taken at any time during the youth hunt to reduce or eliminate this invasive species as they occur on the Refuge.

Antlered or antlerless deer will be legal game to harvest, as management needs dictate.

Two youth hunts will occur during the mule deer and/or white-tail deer season, which is typically in November and December of each year. Each hunt will include 3 youth hunters. This would allow 6 youth hunters over the hunting season. A two day Special Use Permit to allow hunting access will be issued to youth who are drawn by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD).

Hunters will be given a map of the general area as well as their assigned hunting unit.

During each of the 2 day hunts (2 hunting periods equaling 4 total days), general public use of the refuge will be closed for safety purposes.

Hunters will be given a safety briefing and orientation prior to participating in public use activities. Hunter orientations will utilize hunting regulation leaflets with maps delineating areas open for hunting and no hunting areas. Hunters may scout at any time during normal Refuge hours from public roads and areas open to public.

Hunter Management and Hunt Experience

This hunt will offer a quality outdoor hunting experience to youth hunters as well as maintain a healthy mule and white-tailed deer populations, while reducing feral hog numbers.

D. Justification for the permit, if one is required

Permits for all refuge hunts are required. All permits contain appropriate maps, rules, and regulations pertaining to refuge use. Names and phone numbers for each hunter are known, thus they could be notified of units closing due to flood, fire, or other natural event that could close the unit to hunting.

After hunters are selected by TPWD, the Refuge will issue a Special Use Permit (OMB 3-3183-G) that will be required to participate in the youth hunt. A State of Texas hunting license will also be required. The primary reason for requiring a permit is to ensure a safe, high-quality hunt by limiting the number of youth hunters allowed on the refuge during their specific hunt period. There will be no charge for the refuge permit.

E. Consultation and Coordination with the State.

Coordination with TPWD has taken place since 2007. The State has expressed their support for increasing youth hunting opportunities in the Texas Panhandle. The youth hunt plan has been reviewed and coordinated by TPWD since the hunt dates will potentially fall outside of their general season and the bag limits might deviate from State regulations because of biological management decisions

F. Law Enforcement

Enforcement of refuge violations normally associated with management of a National Wildlife Refuge is the responsibility of commissioned Refuge Law Enforcement Officers. Other refuge officers, Special Agents, State game wardens, and the local Sheriff’s Department often assist National Wildlife Refuge full time law enforcement officers.

The following methods are used to control and enforce hunting regulations:

- Refuge and hunt area boundaries will be clearly posted;
- The Refuge will provide a brochure that shows hunt areas;
- Service law enforcement and Buffalo Lake NWR staff will coordinate with TPWD and other law enforcement agencies; and
- Information will be made available at the Buffalo Lake NWR Visitor Center and website.

Procedures for obtaining law enforcement assistance are based on legal jurisdiction, pending where the incident occurred. The Buffalo Lake NWR law enforcement officer has met with local law enforcement agencies in the three counties that contain refuge units to develop good working relationships and coordinate appropriate strategies.

G. Funding and Staffing Requirements

Total annual expense including 2 staff (4 days), maintenance of boundary postings and gates, putting up signs, printing hunting brochures, and fuel are estimated to be about \$9,000.

Summary of cost for youth hunting program:

| | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|
| Staff salaries | \$4,200 |
| Signage, maps, brochures, misc. | \$ 1 800 |
| | <u>\$6,000</u> |

The National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) has shown interest with proposed the hunting program and for habitat improvements on the Refuge through the “Save the Habitat, Save the Hunt” program. The NWTf program dictates that they can only conduct habitat improvement projects if a hunting program is offered on the refuge.

VI. Measures Taken to Avoid Conflicts with Other Management Objectives

A. Biological Conflicts

Endangered/Threatened Species:

Randall County has two endangered species (whooping crane and least tern), three threatened species (Piping plover, lesser prairie-chicken, and Arkansas River shiner), and one recovery species (bald eagle). Whooping cranes will not likely be utilizing the refuge during the hunt. Between 3 and 30 bald eagles utilize the refuge during the winter months (November- March). Hunters will be advised on eagle locations and will be instructed not to disturb eagles or any other migratory birds during their hunt. Ecological Services was consulted in May of 2015 and advised the Refuge that no further actions was needed in reference to threatened or endangered species. No other endangered, threatened, or candidate species will be present on the refuge during the hunt periods. However, in the case a new species is added to the Endangered Species List in the future, the refuge will initiate consultation with Arlington Ecological Services Field Office prior to any hunting. The “Endangered Species Act” requires the Fish and Wildlife Service to enter into consultation on their own actions in reference to species listed as a candidate species under the “Endangered Species Act”. The refuge will enter into consultation if a new species is listed as a Candidate Species prior to any hunt.

Resident Wildlife:

Conflicts with other species not listed under the “Endangered Species Act” should be minimal due to low hunter density and the short durations of the hunt. Conflicts and disturbance with other wildlife will be minimal in the hunt area as most grassland bird species are not nesting during the hunt dates. Herpetofauna will be in hibernacula during the hunt and should be disturbed very little if at all. The waterfowl management areas are closed to hunting and hunters will be advised to stay out of this area to prevent spooking of waterfowl during the hunt.

Hunter densities should be at a maximum of 1 hunter/1,192 acres. This low hunter density in itself should eliminate or reduce any potential conflicts with non-targeted wildlife. Road use will be allowed but only a maximum of three additional non-government vehicles will be allowed on the refuge during the hunt; therefore, there should be no measurable effect to wildlife from road disturbance.

The refuge will be closed to all public activities and management activities during the hunt for safety purposes. The refuge does not expect to have any management activity conflicts during the hunt because of the timing and the short duration of the hunt.

B. Public Use Conflicts

The refuge is only allowing hunting for a total of 4 days during the year or approximately 2 percent of the year. The refuge is open every day of the year unless the Refuge Manager temporarily closes the refuge due to hazardous conditions (fire, blizzard, flooding events, etc.). During the hunts the refuge will be closed to the general public as a safety precaution. The refuge plans on posting the closure during hunts on the refuge web site, in local businesses, and on local radio channels. We do not anticipate a high public use conflict in relation to the hunt. If hunters reach their bag limits for deer and decide to quit hunting early the refuge will re-open to the public as soon as all hunters are off the refuge.

C. Administrative Conflicts

At this time, no administrative conflicts are anticipated with big game hunting activities. Overall, impacts to visitor services/recreation opportunities are considered short-term, minor and local.

As the refuge establishes and provides more opportunities for priority public use activities, the refuge manager will set station priorities to assure that staff time required to administer the hunting program is adequate.

VII. Conduct of the Hunting Program

Listed below are refuge-specific regulations that pertain to Buffalo Lake NWR as of the date of this plan. These regulations may be modified as conditions change or if refuge expansion continues/occurs.

A. Refuge-Specific Hunting Regulations

C. Big Game Hunting. We allow hunting of White-tailed deer, Mule deer and Feral hogs on designated areas of the refuge in accordance with State regulations subject to the following conditions:

1. We prohibit recreational shooting and target practice or any non-hunting discharge.
2. We prohibit shooting or hunting of all animals except deer and feral hogs during the hunt.
3. We prohibit any use of all-terrain vehicles (ATV).
4. We prohibit the use of dogs for big game hunting.
5. We prohibit the use of horses.
6. We prohibit the use or possession of alcoholic beverages while hunting on refuge lands.
7. We prohibit the use of tree stands or any devices such as nails, tacks, and scaffolding used to climb trees, tripod types of blinds or other elevated blinds.
8. Hunters are not allowed on the refuge after dark except in designated camping areas.
9. We prohibit the use of silencers or any like device that alters the noise on a firearm.
10. We define youth hunters as ages 9 to 16 years of age. A Texas-licensed, adult sponsor age 18 or older that has successfully completed a Hunter Education Certification Course, must accompany youth hunters. The hunter education requirement is exempt for sponsors born prior to September 2, 1971. We define accompanied as being within normal voice contact. Each adult sponsor may supervise only one youth hunter. Hunters must be between 9 and 16 years of age at the time of application and when the hunt occurs to participate. No applicant under the age 9 or over the age 16 at the time of application and hunt when the hunt occurs will be allowed a special use permit to hunt.
11. A sponsor 18 years of age or older must be within normal voice control of the youth hunter at all times.
12. The hunter may have two sponsors, 18 years or older accompany them on the hunt.

- The sponsors will not be allowed to hunt.
13. Proof of successful completion of a state hunter safety course by hunter and/or one sponsor must be provided to refuge staff at the time of the hunt or they will not be allowed to hunt.
 14. Hunting areas may be closed at any time due to fire dangers, inclement weather, or other unforeseen circumstances.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunting Program

Based on the comments received during the CCP (2013) the refuge received four comments supporting a hunting program, 1 comment against hunting, and 1 comment against rifle hunting, but supporting bow or black powder hunting.

On July 10, 2015, the Service announced its intent to prepare an Environmental Assessment of alternatives for the opening of a youth hunt program on Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge. A 2-week scoping period from July 10, 2015 thru July 24, 2015 was established under that notice and the Service provided a news release announcing the scoping period for the development of this EA. The refuge posted the news release at Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Canyon, TX Post Office, and the Umbarger, TX Post Office.

During the scoping period the Service received 2 phone calls with comments. One commenter stated that they were very much in favor of a youth hunt and thought it would help manage the deer population over the long term. The second commenter was also very much in favor of the youth hunt and stated that they thought there needed to be more hunts on federal lands.

C. Hunter Application and Registration Procedures (if applicable)

Hunting will be permitted to youths from the age of 9 to 16 at the time of application and hunt that have satisfactorily passed a state hunters safety course or escorted by a mentor that has completed it or meets the age requirement. A sponsor 18 years of age or older is required to accompany the hunter. The hunter and/or one sponsor must have satisfactorily completed a state hunter's safety course unless the sponsor was born prior to September 2, 1971. Proof of satisfactory completion must be provided to refuge staff at the time of the hunt, if no proof is provided then the hunter will not be allowed to hunt on the refuge.

D. Description of Hunter Selection Process

Hunters will be selected by lottery through the TPWD Public Hunting Lands Program. Lands entered in this program may specify hunt dates that suit purposed goals. Each hunter will be allowed to harvest one mule deer or one white-tailed deer (either sex). There will be no limit on feral hogs.

E. Media Selection for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunting Program

The refuge maintains a mailing list, for news release purposes, to local newspapers, radio, and websites. Special announcements and articles will be released in conjunction with hunting

seasons. In addition, information about the hunt will be available at Buffalo Lake NWR headquarters or on the Buffalo Lake NWR website.

F. General Requirements

General information regarding hunting and other wildlife-dependent public uses can be obtained at the Refuge office at Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, 1.5 miles South of Umbarger on FM 168, Umbarger, Texas 79091, by calling (806) 499-3382, or email at Jude_Smith@fws.gov>. General information on Refuge hunts, applications, and permit requirements – as well as hunting unit directions, maps, and seasons can be obtained through our website at http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Buffalo_lake/visit/visitor_activities/hunting.html.

G. Hunter Requirements

Generally, all hunting will be in accordance with State regulations. Additional refuge specific regulations are provided to each hunter annually.

1. Public access and hunting permits and all applicable state licenses are required
2. Legal firearms include rifles.
3. Hunters are required to check in and out of the refuge daily.
4. All deer harvests must be checked at the designated check point.
5. Harvested game must be legally tagged and taken to the Refuge check station. Hunters and their sponsors will be required to wear a minimum of 144 square inches of blaze orange and a blaze orange hat.
6. Only the youth hunter will be allowed to carry a firearm.
7. A sponsor 18 years of age must accompany the hunter. The hunter and two sponsors over 18 years of age will be allowed on the refuge.
8. Pop-up blinds are allowed, but no tree blinds. The hunter's permit number must be located on the outside of the blind.
9. Litter, including spent casings, must be removed from the refuge daily.

VIII. Compatibility Determination

Hunting and all associated program activities proposed in this plan have been found compatible with purposes of the refuge.

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