



## ***Compatibility Determination-Horseback Riding on Pond Creek NWR***

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**USE:** Horseback Riding

**REFUGE NAME:** Pond Creek National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)

**DATE ESTABLISHED:** August 12, 1994

**ESTABLISHING AND ACQUISITION AUTHORITY:**

- 16 U.S.C. 3901(b) Stat.3582-91(Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986)
- Sec. 305, P.L.104-33 (Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Act of 1996)

**REFUGE PURPOSES:**

- " ...the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international treaty obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions"
- "...recognize the important public purposes served by non-consumptive activities, other recreational activities, and wildlife-related public use, including hunting, fishing and trapping." Furthermore, this plan " ...shall permit, to the maximum extent practicable, compatible uses to the extent that they are consistent with sound wildlife management, and in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System, Administration Act of 1996 (16 USC668dd-668ee) and other applicable laws."

**NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM MISSION:**

The mission of the Refuge System, as defined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, 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:**

### **(a) What is the use? Is the use a priority public use?**

Horseback riding is not one of the six priority wildlife dependent uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System but is a historical use of the refuge. The proposed use is to allow horseback riding on refuge roads and trails open to vehicular traffic including ATV/UTV trails. Horseback riding on the refuge is low with only occasional use. There are no other associated uses, equipment, and/or facilities necessary for or supportive of this use.

### **(b) Where would the use be conducted?**

Horseback riding would be conducted on the refuge roads and ATV/UTV trails open to vehicular traffic. We do not anticipate other areas being affected by horse use. Some illegal access (riding on closed roads/trails) may occur, but this occurrence should be infrequent and not result in long-term impacts to the habitat or wildlife in the area. A map of the roads and trails can be found in the public use regulations brochure published annually.

### **(c) When would the use be conducted?**

Horseback riding would be allowed year round during daylight hours only on designated roads open vehicular traffic including ATV/UTV trails. We anticipate frequency of horse use to be occasional by individuals or small groups of riders. We estimate horse use to be less than five riders/week throughout the year. Most use would occur on the weekends and during summer months. Horseback riding will be closed during the refuge's muzzleloader and modern gun deer hunts. Some ATV/UTV trails are only open seasonally. Individuals need to consult the public use regulations brochure to determine which trails are open.

### **(d) How would the use be conducted?**

There is no special equipment required, other supporting uses, associated facilities needed to conduct horseback riding on the refuge. Roads and parking lots are established to support other wildlife dependent public uses. These roads and parking lots are maintained to support those other uses plus refuge management activities. No other structures or improvement are necessary to support horse.

### **(e) Why is this use being proposed?**

Horseback riding is a historical recreational activity on the refuge. It is expected or anticipated that wildlife observation would be part of the horseback riding experience on the refuge. The refuge has 49 miles of public roads and numerous ATV/UTV trails making the refuge an ideal place for horseback riding. Horseback riders are prohibited from leaving the roadways and trails open to this use and from entering areas closed to vehicular traffic.

**AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES:**

No additional resources are required to administer this use. Monitoring and compliance can be managed within existing resources, programs, and staff. This use does not require any special facilities or improvement to any existing facilities.

**ANTICIPATED IMPACTS OF THE USE:**

The impact of horses on trails has been well documented. Some impacts include erosion, informal trail development, and invasive species introduction. Hammitt and Cole (1987) stated erosion is considered to be the most severe form of impact because its effects are long-lasting. Erosion can cause siltation which can impact nearby streams and rivers. Soil erosion resulting from horse use is a product of trampling and eventual loss of vegetative cover, soil compaction leading to lowered water infiltration rates, and the churning and lifting of surface soil particles (Widner and Marion, 1993). Wells and Lauenroth (2007) found horses used on recreational trails represent a potentially important dispersal vector for alien plants.

Short-term impacts associated with this use involve littering, minor vegetation disturbance on roadsides, and wildlife disturbance caused by the passage of horse and rider. On rare occasions, riders may illegally leave roadways and cause short-term habitat degradation, as a result of trampling of vegetation or soil compaction. Since riding is confined to existing roads and trails open vehicular traffic it is not anticipated that this use would impact refuge resources any more than vehicle traffic. At current use levels no long-term or cumulative impacts are anticipated. However, if monitoring detects resource damage and/or invasive species invasions on trails open to horseback riding in combination with ATV use these trails may be closed immediately to mitigate resource damage.

**PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT:**

This compatibility determination will be made available for public review and comment for a 14-day period by 1) posting on refuge bulletin board/kiosk, 2) posting on refuge website and social media networks, 3) public media press release.

**DETERMINATION (CHECK ONE BELOW):**

**USE IS NOT COMPATIBLE**

**USE IS COMPATIBLE WITH FOLLOWING STIPULATIONS**

**NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision:** Place an X in appropriate space.

**Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Statement**

*516 DM 8, 8.5 (7) Minor changes in the amounts or types of public use on Service or State-managed lands, in accordance with existing regulations, management plans, and procedures.*

\_\_\_ Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Statement

\_\_\_ Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact

\_\_\_ Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision

**STIPULATIONS NECESSARY TO ENSURE COMPATIBILITY:**

- Horses are allowed on public roads and trails open to vehicular traffic only, which includes ATV/UTV trails.
- The refuge is open to horseback riding from sunrise to sunset year round except during refuge muzzleloader and modern gun deer hunts.
- Trails can be closed without notice for resource damage, flooding, invasive species detections.
- No organized trail rides by local clubs or organizations will be permitted.
- Trucks and trailers are not to block roads or gates.

**JUSTIFICATION:**

Horseback riding is a historic use on Pond Creek NWR. Horseback riding on refuge roads and ATV/UTV trails open to vehicular traffic is a low impact activity that can be managed with existing refuge resources.

Specific refuge regulations address equity and quality of opportunities for visitors and help safeguard refuge habitats. Impacts from this proposal, short-term and long-term, direct, indirect, and cumulative, are expected to be negligible and are not expected to diminish the value of the refuge for its stated objectives. Stipulations above will ensure proper control of the means of use and provide management flexibility should detrimental impacts develop. Allowing this use also furthers the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System by providing activities and information for the benefit of the American public while conserving fish, wildlife, and plant resources on the refuge.

This activity will not materially interfere with or detract from the mission of the Refuge System or the purpose for which the refuge was established.

**REFERENCES CITED:**

Hammitt, W. E. and D. N. Cole. 1987. Wildland Recreation: Ecology and Management. John Wiley & Sons, New York. 341 pp.

Wells, FH and Lauenroth, WK. 2007. The Potential For Horses to Disperse Alien Plants Along Recreational Trails. Rangeland Ecology & Management 60:574-577.

Widner, Carolyn and Jeffery L. Marion. 1993. Horse Impacts: Research Findings and Their Implications. Master Network, A publication of the National Outdoor Leadership School, part 1-1993: No. 5(pp.5,14); part 2-1994: No. 6(pp.5-6).

**SIGNATURE: REFUGE  
MANAGER:**\_\_\_\_\_

**(Signature and date)**

**REVIEW: REGIONAL COMPATIBILITY  
COORDINATOR:**\_\_\_\_\_

**(Signature and date)**

**REVIEW: REFUGE  
SUPERVISOR:**\_\_\_\_\_

**(Signature and date)**

**CONCURRENCE: REGIONAL  
CHIEF:**\_\_\_\_\_

**(Signature and date)**

**MANDATORY 10- OR 15-YEAR REEVALUATION DATE:**

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