

COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Hunting

Refuge Name: Crane Meadows NWR

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

- Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742f(a)(4)) & (16 U.S.C. 742f(b)(1))
- Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 (16 U.S.C. 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583)

Refuge Purpose(s):

Crane Meadows National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1992...

- "... for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources ..." 16 U.S.C. 742f(a)(4) "... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude ..." 16 U.S.C. 742f(b)(1) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)
- "... the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions ..." 16 U.S.C. 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583 (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986)

National Wildlife System Mission:

The National Wildlife Refuge System mission is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee).

Description of Use:

What is the use? Hunting of game is an activity conducted by the public under regulation authority of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Under the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 hunting is a priority public use. The Refuge plans to open hunting as a public use in the form of special, managed hunting events for white-tailed deer (firearms and archery) and spring turkey. The specialty hunts will be for persons with disabilities and youth hunters.

Where is the use conducted? Refuge hunting areas must meet minimum size criteria in order to offer quality hunting experience opportunities, and must have enforceable boundaries. Within the existing Refuge landholdings, hunting events will occur on any tract of land that is deemed to have the necessary characteristics to provide a safe hunt and in accordance with the population

goals of both the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) and Crane Meadows NWR.

When is the use conducted? All hunting activities will coincide with seasons set by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

How is the use conducted? All hunting activities will follow applicable state regulations, except where the Refuge administers further restrictions to ensure a quality hunt and visitor and staff safety.

Why is the use being proposed? Hunting is a priority general public use of the Refuge System that is also an important wildlife management tool. The Service recognizes hunting as a healthy, traditional outdoor pastime, deeply rooted in the American heritage. Hunting can instill a unique understanding and appreciation of wildlife, their behavior, and their habitat needs. Hunting programs can promote understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management on lands and waters in the Refuge System. A substantial portion of land within the Refuge acquisition boundary is already currently utilized for hunting, including land owned and managed by the Minnesota DNR in wildlife management areas, by private hunting clubs, and by private landowners. Hunting was discussed during initial planning events for the establishment of Crane Meadows NWR, and has been a desired activity on the Refuge ever since.

Availability of Resources:

These events will require a great deal of coordination and collaboration with partners and local hunters. No current staff time is allocated for coordinating hunting activities, but it is anticipated that a considerable amount of time and financial resources will be required to host these managed hunts. A great deal of time would be required to make initial contacts, write grants, and coordinate activities with partners and other contributing groups. Scouting and setup activities would follow, as well as coordinating logistics such as transportation of hunters to and from blinds. It is estimated that at least 160 hours of preparation time would be required to conduct the first special hunt, and that planning would begin a minimum of one year in advance of the event. Once established, it is assumed that planning and setup for successive hunts would be less labor intensive. Any hunts that are open to the general public should require minimal resources.

A small amount of road maintenance, mowing, and other upkeep will need to be performed, but are funded as part of regular Refuge management activities. Based on a review of the Refuge budget there is currently enough funding to ensure compatibility and to administer and manage the use. Law enforcement is a primary tool necessary to ensure proper and safe administration of this use, and although there is no Law Enforcement Officer stationed at the Refuge, law enforcement services are available through the Service's Regional Law Enforcement Program. The Refuge will work with the Minnesota DNR to ensure that conservation officers are aware of this use on the Refuge, and are available to assist with law enforcement as a part of their routine duties.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Short-term impacts: Providing carefully planned and managed hunting events with restrictions that limit access to specific Refuge locations will generally minimize disturbance to wildlife populations, the environment, and non-consumptive users. Although hunting causes mortality of target species, harvesting populations to the carrying capacity of existing habitat and only taking the harvestable surplus ensures long-term health and survival of game species, populations, and their associated ecosystem. The presence and activity of hunters may cause temporary disturbance to other wildlife in the area, but there are no foreseeable detrimental impacts to these species. Concerns are primarily centered on the possibility of impacting non-target species that are sensitive to disturbance; especially during spring turkey hunting when most animals are breeding or nesting. Non-hunting public uses may be temporarily disrupted or postponed during specialized hunts. Visitor safety and law enforcement issues are the priority when designing and planning all hunting activities on refuges. Vehicle traffic will increase slightly during the hunting events, and the sound of gun shots will temporarily reduce the serenity for the non-hunting public. Loss of plants from foot traffic is minor, or temporary. Soil and plant disturbance may occur in ingress and egress routes, but will be minor and temporary because of the limited and controlled use associated with the managed hunts.

Long-term impacts: No detrimental long-term impacts from hunting are anticipated as long as wildlife populations are monitored through the Refuge biological program or by state officials. Long-term beneficial impacts of this use would be the ability to manage targeted wildlife populations to levels that reflect the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. When deer populations become over-abundant they can have profound negative impacts on their environment through herbivory thereby directly and indirectly affecting other native plants and wildlife species.

Cumulative impacts: There are no anticipated cumulative impacts. Harvest on the Refuge would be very limited and would fall within the state's population management goals which are based on the best available information.

All hunts would follow all applicable laws, regulations and policies; including title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations, the National Wildlife Refuge System Manual, the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the purposes, goals, and objectives of Crane Meadows NWR. Operating this activity does not hinder the Refuge's ability to meet habitat goals, provides for the safety of the area's citizens, and supports several of the primary objectives of the Refuge. The Environmental Assessment for the Draft CCP for Crane Meadows NWR contains a more detailed discussion of the anticipated impacts of hunting on the Refuge.

Public Review and Comment:

This compatibility determination is part of the Hunt Plan for Crane Meadows NWR. Public notification and review includes a notice of availability published in the Federal Register, 30-day comment period, and coordination with the state. Comments received and agency responses will be included in the final plan.

Determination:

_____ Use is not compatible.

_____ Use is compatible with the following stipulations.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

To ensure compatibility with National Wildlife Refuge System and Crane Meadows NWR goals and objectives the activity can only occur under the following stipulations:

1. Hunting will only occur on the Refuge during the State's regulated hunting seasons.
2. Appropriate state hunting licenses and antlerless harvest permits (for deer) are required. Deer and turkeys harvested must be registered at MNDNR check stations in accordance with state regulations. All state hunting regulations apply unless otherwise stated in the Refuge hunt plan and state regulations.
3. Hunting will only occur within designated areas on the Refuge that meet minimum size requirements and have enforceable boundaries.
4. Use of motorized vehicles is limited to maintained roads and parking areas. Exceptions would be allowed as a means to provide access to hunters with disabilities, but only under the review of the Refuge Manager.
5. This use is subject to modification if on-site monitoring by Refuge personnel or other authorized personnel results in unanticipated negative impacts to public safety, wildlife species, or their habitats.
6. Camping, overnight use, and fires are prohibited.

Justification:

This use has been determined compatible provided the above stipulations are implemented. This use is being permitted because it is a priority public use and will not diminish the primary purposes of the Refuge. This use will meet the mission of the NWRS by providing renewable resources for the benefit of the American public while conserving fish, wildlife, and plant resources on Refuge lands.

Hunting is one of the six priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Service policy directs us to provide hunting opportunities when compatible with Refuge management, and offering this use was a long-term goal of the Refuge when it was established in 1992. Managed hunting programs help promote an understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management. Additionally, managed hunts on the Refuge provide a traditional recreational activity with no definable adverse impacts to the biological integrity or habitat sustainability of Refuge resources. The limited size and distribution of current Service land ownership at the Refuge continues to limit our ability to offer quality hunting experience opportunities, but management has long understood the demand for, and importance of providing this activity on the Refuge. By beginning with short-duration, assisted, managed hunts, Refuge staff can provide hunting

opportunities in a controlled fashion, direct these activities to specific audiences, and adaptively evaluate the hunting program for expansion or reduction based on demand and program success.

Without a deer hunting program as a management tool, this species could adversely affect plant communities and hence alter ecological diversity and succession. Excessive herbivory by deer populations could result in significant negative impacts to plant and animal communities, including those of special concern, or of Service trust responsibility. This impact has been well documented and accepted through research. Hunting is also an effective management tool to keep turkey populations within ecosystem limits.

Refuge Manager: _____

Signature

Date

Concurrence:

Regional Chief: _____

Signature

Date

Mandatory 10 or 15 year Re-evaluation Date: 2029

DRAFT