

## **Compatibility Determination**

**Use:** Collection of Wild Plant Materials for Personal Use

**Refuge Name:** Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge

### **Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:**

Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (refuge) was established by Public Law No. 94-466, 94<sup>th</sup> Congress on October 8, 1976. The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Act authorized acquisition of lands for refuge purposes.

Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. § 742(a)(4)) and (16 U.S.C. § 742(b)(1))

Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 (16 U.S.C. § 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583).

National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, 16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee (Refuge Administration Act).

Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, 16 U.S.C. 460k-460k-4 (Refuge Recreation Act).

### **Refuge Purposes:**

The Secretary shall develop and administer ... the refuge, in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Act ... The Secretary may also exercise any other authority available to him for the conservation and management of wildlife and natural resources, the development of wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, wildlife interpretation, and environmental education, to the extent deemed by him to be appropriate ... The Secretary shall construct, administer and maintain, ... a wildlife interpretation and education center ... to promote environmental education and to provide an opportunity for the study and enjoyment of wildlife in its natural habitat.

The purposes of the refuge “are to (1) provide habitat for a large number of migratory waterfowl, fish, and other wildlife species; (2) to provide environmental education, wildlife recreational opportunities, and interpretive programs for hundreds of thousands of Twin City residents; (3) to protect important natural resource areas from degradation; and to (4) protect the valley’s unique social, educational, and environmental assets.”

### **National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:**

The Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System 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:**

**What is the use?**

Allow public to collect plant food products and/or plant materials on the Refuge for personal use. Some plants growing on the Refuge produce edible products such as fruits, nuts and fungi. Apples, raspberries, walnuts, mushrooms and asparagus are examples of these products.

Allow the public to collect plant material growing on the Refuge which provide important wildlife habitat and can also be desirable for establishing habitat “gardens” on private property or decorative uses. Individuals occasionally request permission to hand harvest native prairie plant seed from Refuge lands in order to establish small plots of native plants on private property. These plots can be for landscaping purposes or to develop habitat for wildlife.

**Where would the use be conducted?**

Harvest could occur throughout the Refuge in the uplands and along river and wetland edges. Fruit and nut bearing plants grow in the uplands, occupy a small percentage of the total upland acreage, and are often found at abandoned building sites that have been reclaimed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Prairie plant seed harvest could occur throughout the Refuge where native prairie has been restored in uplands, or Refuge areas that contain remnant prairie.

**When and how would the use be conducted?**

Harvest occurs during the daylight hours, usually in the late summer or fall and typically is of short duration. These foods and/or seeds and plant parts are hand harvested by picking the products from the plant or gathering what has fallen to the ground or cut by hand. Access to harvest sites is accomplished by walking from a designated parking area or public roadway.

Prairie plant seed harvest occurs during daylight hours, primarily in September and October, but can occur for individual species throughout the summer growing season (June – October).

**Why is this use being proposed?**

For a small number of people, this is a traditional, family oriented activity which provides an opportunity for those participating to collect wholesome, healthy foods while enjoying the beauty of the natural environment. Gathering allows the public to build a connection to the Refuge through personal outdoor experiences that engage the senses and foster an appreciation of the outdoors. Individuals occasionally request permission to hand harvest native prairie plant seed from Refuge lands in order to establish small plots of native plants on private property. These plots can be for landscaping purposes or to develop small tracts of habitat for wildlife.

There is a paucity of other public lands in Minnesota and specifically the Minneapolis/St. Paul Metro area, where this activity could occur. Surrounding lands are highly developed housing, industrial or commercial properties that typically do not contain edible wild plants or wild plant materials suitable for establishing small native plant garden/habitat plots.

**Is the use a priority public use?**

Collection of plants, seeds and edible plant food products is not a high priority public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

**Availability of Resources:**

Access trails, parking lots, signage and other facilities as well as staff to enforce regulations and maintain these facilities have been provided by the Service. These facilities will be maintained to meet the needs of the visitors participating in high priority public uses and will be used incidentally by those who are collecting edible wild plant foods or plant materials. The Service will not have to provide special equipment. No additional expenditures will be spent to accommodate this use.

**Anticipated Impacts of the Use:**

**How does the use affect Refuge purposes, the Refuge System mission, and Refuge goals and/or objectives?**

Historically, public participation in the gathering and collection of plant food products or hand collecting plants or seeds on the Refuge was low, and future participation is also expected to be low. Presently, the level of this use is estimated at 50 visits annually and is not expected to increase much above present rates in the future. In general, the quantity and frequency of gathering/collection removal of plant materials and products from the Refuge in accordance with Refuge regulations is not expected to significantly diminish wildlife food sources nor adversely affect fish and wildlife populations or the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge as defined in Service policy (USFWS 2001).

Short-term disturbance to wildlife may occur during these activities, but will be insignificant. Most of these activities occur in the late summer or fall, after ground nesting birds have completed the nesting season. This activity should not result in short or long-term impacts that adversely affect the purpose of the Refuge or the mission of the National Wildlife System.

*In Managing Visitor Use and Disturbance of Waterbirds: A Literature Review of Impacts and Mitigations* DeLong (2002) included a summary of effects on wildlife from disturbance from various forms of recreation. The author documents that disturbance can alter behavior (e.g. foraging time), population structure, and disturbance patterns of wildlife. It is probable that gathering would cause some or all of these effects to some degree on Refuge wildlife, but at present and expected future levels are not expected to adversely affect wildlife populations. A number of measures mitigate these effects.

**Public Review and Comment:**

This compatibility determination is part of the 10-year review for Compatibility Determinations of the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Public notification and review will include a comment period from September 6, 2016 - September 20, 2016

