

DRAFT COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

USE: Hunting - Big Game Tatton Unit and Waterfowl Matagorda Island Unit

REFUGE NAME: Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

ESTABLISHING and ACQUISITION AUTHORITIES:

Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 (45 Stat. 1222), as amended; Executive Order 7784, dated December 31, 1937; Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife Conservation Purposes Act of 1948; Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956; and Endangered Species Act of 1973.

REFUGE PURPOSE(s):

- “as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.” Executive Order 7784, December 31, 1937.
- “...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.” 16 U.S.C. 715d-715r, as amended (Migratory Bird Conservation Act).
- “...for wildlife conservation purposes if the real property has particular value in carrying out the national migratory bird management program...” Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife Conservation Purposes Act of 1948 (16 U.S.C. 667b-667d), Public Law 80-537, as amended; and
- “...for the development, advancement, management, conservation and protection of fish and wildlife resources...” Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742(a) (4), as amended, and “...for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services...” Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742f (b) (1), as amended.
- “...to conserve (A) fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species...or (B) plants...” 16 U.S.C. 1534 (Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended).

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: Aransas NWR proposes opening waterfowl (duck, merganser, and coot) hunting on the northern end of MI Unit, and big game (white-tailed deer and feral hog) hunting on the Tatton unit.

Where would the use be conducted?

The 7,000 acre Tatton unit will be opened to deer and feral hog hunting. Matagorda Island Unit will open waterfowl hunting on approximately 500 acres. Designated hunting areas within the Tatton Unit are located in Aransas County; designated hunting areas on MI Unit are located in Calhoun County

When would the use be conducted?

Waterfowl hunting on the northern end of MI Unit will occur at 17 designated upland locations, consist of twelve hunt days during the TPWD regulations south zone waterfowl season. Hunting hours are from morning legal shooting hours until noon, maximum 60 hunters daily.

White-tailed deer and feral hog youth hunts on Tatton unit. Hosted by USFWS, in partnership with a youth hunting organization (e.g. Texas Wildlife Association) one rifle hunt will occur within the state season limited to 7, preferably first-time youth hunters.

How will the use be conducted?

Waterfowl: will be administered by TPWD; TPWD vehicles will transport hunters to and from their designated upland locations.

White-tailed deer: Hunters will be selected by lottery and these hunts will take place within the regular hunting season. Take limit will be set at two deer/youth hunter and no limit on feral hogs

Why is this use being proposed?

Existing white-tailed deer and feral hog hunts on the Refuge are a relatively popular public hunt and a long standing tradition for local hunters since 1966 (archery) and 1968 (firearms) and increasingly popular for youth. TPWD has administered public hunts on the northern two-thirds of Matagorda Island since 1982. Big game hunts are proposed as an additional hunting opportunity on the Tatton Unit and waterfowl hunts on Matagorda Island Unit.

Expansion of hunting opportunities on the Refuge promotes positive relationships with the public, hunting organizations, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES: The Tatton Unit hunts will be administered by Refuge staff and resources and Matagorda Island Unit, State permitted hunts will be administered by TPW staff and resources. Annual hunt administration costs, for Aransas NWR, including salary, equipment, law enforcement, brochures, collection of hunt data and analysis of biological information, etc. totals approximately \$25,000. Aransas NWR funds are used to conduct hunts on the Blackjack Unit and the youth hunts on the south end of MI and the Tatton Unit. Funding specifically for hunts has not been allocated, although funds are available through hunter fees. Incurred salary and other related operational costs for the hunt and operation of the Matagorda Island unit hunts are incurred by TPWD. It is anticipated that funding would continue to be sufficient to continue the hunting program at Aransas NWR in the future.

ANTICIPATED IMPACTS OF THE USE:

Short-term Impacts:

The proposed use would support the NWRS mission, Refuge establishment purposes, and Refuge objectives by providing a high-quality recreational opportunity for public use and enjoyment of wildlife resources.

There would be minor disturbance of limited duration to other wildlife during the hunt. Short term impacts include a slight increase in vehicle emissions and stirring of dust from hunting traffic on roads and trails; minor disturbance to habitat/vegetation due to hunter foot traffic during hunts and scouting; a small potential of spreading invasive species by vehicle and hunter foot traffic; and minimal short-term disturbance to migratory wildlife from human noise. There would be a positive impact on the local economy and positive benefit to hunters by allowing the public to enjoy hunting at an affordable rate in a region where public land is limited and private land lease prices are high. There is an inherent public safety risk associated with the use of firearms.

Only 7 additional hunters on the Tatton unit would not be expected to change the overall feral hog population. Any change that results in the increase would be negligible to water quality. No impacts to water quantity are anticipated with either white-tailed deer or waterfowl. There is a potential displacement of other Refuge visitors who would not be able to participate in non-hunting activities during hunt periods. However, portions of the Refuge will remain closed to hunting and available for non-hunting uses.

Long-term Impacts:

No significant adverse impacts to non-target species are expected. Negative impacts to public use activities are not expected and no adverse socioeconomic impacts are anticipated. It is intended that the primary positive impact will be a better understanding of the role of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in the conservation arena for all parties involved in the Refuge's hunting program.

Cumulative Impacts:

The Refuge believes that its hunt program will have negligible impacts on Climate Change; however, much is unknown about this subject. The feral hog is an exotic and generally an undesirable species. Its destructive habits are well known. 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. Hogs compete with native species for food such as acorns, grapes, tubers, grubs, etc. and their aggressive, predatory nature can cause depredation problems for ground nesting birds, fawns, sea turtles, and other wildlife such as collared peccary. The refuge has had a hog removal program for many years. Feral hogs are offered as a target species with no bag limits imposed. The cumulative effects to the deer, feral hog and waterfowl populations will be increased individual mortality, but the number of deer feral hogs and waterfowl likely to be harvested from the Refuge is, and will remain, small due to limits in the number of permits issued and the average success rate for hunters.

Big game and waterfowl hunts serve primarily a recreational objective on the Refuge. Data from the last 20 years of deer harvest on the entire Aransas NWR indicate the annual average number of deer harvested from the 115,000 refuge was 109 individuals. This represents 0.0009 deer per acre, indicated the harvest rate on the refuge is 10% lower than the rest of the region. The impact of harvest at this rate from the Aransas NWR is negligible within the context of the estimated four million white-tailed deer found in Texas (Graves 2004).

The hunting of waterfowl in the United States is based upon a thorough regulatory setting process that involves numerous sources of waterfowl population and harvest monitoring data. In 2011, the total breeding duck population estimate was 45.6 million waterfowl,

which is 35% higher than the long-term average (USFWS 2012). In 2011, Texas hunter's harvested an estimated 1.3 million ducks (USFWS 2012). This is approximately 8.2 percent of the U.S. harvest (15.8 million) and 44.8 percent of the Central Flyway's (2.9 million) estimated waterfowl harvest. Annually Texas Parks and Wildlife sets harvest regulations within the limits set by U.S. Fish and wildlife Service's Division of Migratory Birds. These regulations will be enforced for waterfowl hunters on the refuge.

A Section 7 Evaluation completed during this assessment determined that the proposed alternative is not likely to adversely affect any threatened or endangered species. The restriction on the number of hunters participating on Refuge hunts during deer and waterfowl season along with the restrictions on areas open to hunting would greatly reduce the possibilities of disturbing other wildlife.

The Service has concluded that cumulative impacts on the Refuge's wildlife populations, either hunted or non-hunted species will be negligible. The Service has also concluded that the proposed action will not cumulatively impact the Refuge environment or Refuge programs. This determination was based upon a careful analysis of potential environmental impacts of hunting on the Refuge together with other projects and/or actions. Hunting is an appropriate wildlife management tool that can be used to manage wildlife populations. Some wildlife disturbance will occur during the limited hunting seasons.

PUBLIC REVIEW and COMMENT:

On November 12, 2012, the Service announced its intent to prepare an Environmental Assessment of alternatives for opening Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to feral hog and deer hunting on Tatton Unit and Waterfowl hunting on Matagorda Island. A 30-day scoping period (January 11, 2011 – February 11, 2011) was established under that notice. The Service provided a news release and sent out letters and emails to potential interested parties, our Friends group email list, the local media and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, announcing the initial scoping period for development of this EA. Additional meetings were held with numerous federal, state, non-profit entities and partners during the development of the hunt plan and Environmental Assessment.

The Aransas NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan currently serves as the Refuge's management guidance. This document contains management information satisfying the "comprehensive conservation plan" requirement of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Steps for completing the step-down plans in the CCP are ongoing. Upcoming public review and comments of associated Compatibility Determinations will meet public participation and review requirements for those specific documents.

DETERMINATION (check one below)

USE IS NOT COMPATIBLE

USE IS COMPATIBLE WITH THE FOLLOWING STIPULATIONS

STIPULATIONS NECESSARY TO ENSURE COMPATIBILITY:

- Compliance with refuge rules and regulations through surveillance and law enforcement.
- Continued monitoring of endangered/threatened species for any detrimental impacts.
- Hunts may be suspended periodically for biological reasons.
- Intra Service section 7 evaluation is completed.

-Continue to assure that harvest rates and bag limits are consistent with State and Federal laws.

JUSTIFICATION: Hunting programs are a good way to combine approved public use activities (hunting and environmental education) by integrating environmental and management concepts associated with hunting with the educational activities of the FWS. The goals of this combination-public use are to promote an awareness of the ecological interrelationships between human activities and the natural system; along with the need to show citizens the role of the FWS in the management and maintenance of healthy ecosystems; and motivate citizens to support the Service in the conservation of our fish and wildlife resources and the Refuge System. Good hunt programs can do much to educate and mentor hunters towards developing and maintaining a legal and ethical hunting heritage. With repetition this can lead an individual to a greater appreciation of large scale and cumulative conservation needs. Additionally, the Refuge hunting program provides affordable and accessible public hunting opportunities that are otherwise limited in South Texas.

The Refuge hunt program as a means of harvesting white-tailed deer, feral hogs and waterfowl will be used as a management tool and will become part of our management arsenal to protect Refuge habitat and wildlife. Hunting is an important wildlife management tool to control populations of some species that might otherwise exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat and threaten the well being of other wildlife species, and in some instances, that of human health and safety. With the ability to regulate the number and type of hunts, the number of hunters, the hunted species and the bag limit within State game bag limits we can more certainly adjust to current environmental conditions in order to meet desired Refuge conditions. Biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of this Refuge Unit will be maintained by carefully planning and orchestrating these hunts in the presence of qualified Refuge personnel.

Hunting is a compatible wildlife-dependent recreation and consistent with the mission and purposes of this national wildlife refuge. The current Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) will serve as the primary Refuge management guidance document. This proposed action would not violate any provisions of these codes, agreements, and management plans. There will be no notable, permanent negative impacts to any Refuge wildlife. This use will not diminish the primary purpose for the Refuge and will help 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 these lands. Hence hunting on the Aransas NWR is consistent with Refuge and Refuge System objectives and thus this use has been determined compatible.

SIGNATURE: Refuge Manager _____
(Signature and Date)

CONCURRENCE: Regional Chief _____
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year
Re-Evaluation Date: _____