

COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

USE: Turkey, Waterfowl, Feral Hog, and Coyote Hunting

REFUGE NAME: Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge (WR/refuge)

ESTABLISHING AND ACQUISITION AUTHORITY(IES):

Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge was originally established as a Forest Reserve by President William McKinley in 1901 through the authority provided by the Act of Congress entitled, “An Act to Repeal Timber - Culture Laws, and for other purposes.” By proclamation of President Theodore Roosevelt, on June 2, 1905, based on a special Act of Congress (33 Stat. 614 “An Act for the Protection of Wild Animals and Birds in the Wichita Forest Reserve”, January 24, 1905), the land was further designated as the Wichita Forest and Game Preserve. The preserve was administered by the U.S. Forest Service until June 1936, when it was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (formerly Bureau of Biological Survey) as a provision of the Agriculture Appropriations bill (40 Stat. 1446). Shortly thereafter, the area was renamed the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge for administration under the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System). On October 23, 1970, Public Law 91-504 established two units of Wichita Mountains Wilderness, consisting of 8,750 acres, in the refuge.

REFUGE PURPOSE(S):

1. “...to be set aside for the protection of game animals and birds and be recognized as a breeding place thereof.” (33 Stat. 614, dated January 24, 1905)
2. “...to be set aside for the protection of game animals and birds and be recognized as a breeding place thereof.” (President Theodore Roosevelt, proclamation of June 2, 1905)
3. The purposes of the wilderness designations are “... to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition.” (The Wilderness Act, September 3, 1964)

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM MISSION:

“The mission of the 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” (National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, Public Law 105-57).

DESCRIPTION OF USE:

What is the use?

Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge will expand public hunting opportunities to include turkey, waterfowl, feral hog, and coyote hunting.

Where is the use conducted?

Wichita Mountains WR will allow waterfowl hunting on all refuge waters within the Public Use Area, except Quanah Parker Lake; youth turkey and spring turkey hunting within the Public Use

Area and hunt units C, D, E, and G; and the incidental take of feral hogs and coyotes during refuge controlled elk, deer, and turkey hunts.

When is the use conducted?

Controlled Youth and Spring Turkey Hunts

Youth and spring turkey hunting will follow or be within the state season dates and conducted in April or May through the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) controlled hunt program. All controlled turkey hunts will be three (3) days in length.

Waterfowl

Season dates and general hunting regulations for waterfowl hunting will follow those established by ODWC for Duck Zone 2 and statewide goose seasons, except closed during elk/deer controlled hunts. Hunting hours are from one half hour before legal sunrise until 1:00 pm.

Feral Hogs and Coyotes

Harvest of feral hogs and coyotes will be allowed incidental to refuge controlled elk, deer, and turkey hunts by permitted hunters in their designated hunt unit.

How is the use conducted?

Controlled Youth and Spring Turkey Hunts

Turkey hunts will be a cooperative effort between the refuge and ODWC. Hunts will be conducted through the ODWC Controlled Hunts Program. Youth and spring turkey hunters will be allowed to access hunt units via walk-in access only from established parking areas. Refuge staff will issue up to 12 permits and ODWC will administer the lottery drawing and issues state permits to successful applicants. Refuge staff will determine what hunt units will be utilized and hunt unit assignments will be assigned through a random assignment process. In lieu of a mandatory hunter safety and orientation, the refuge will communicate the same information in advance via printed or electronic media, including the use of Avenza PDF maps or similar applications on smart devices.

Youth hunters must be 15 years old or younger on the first day of the hunt and have completed a State sponsored hunter education certification. All youth hunters must be accompanied by an adult who is a non-hunting partner. Non-hunting partners do not need a hunting license. Spring turkey hunters must be at least 16 years old by the date of each hunt to qualify.

Waterfowl

Waterfowl hunters can access refuge waters (lakes, ponds, creeks) from any designated parking areas. Waterfowl hunters may hunt on a first come first served basis from the bank or by boat; jump shooting is not allowed. Waterfowl hunting will be open to goose, duck, merganser, and coot. The use of hunting dogs is allowed, provided the dogs are under the immediate control of the hunter at all times. A signed refuge hunt tearsheet is required in addition to all other state and federal licensing requirements. Federally approved lead-free non-toxic shot only.

Feral Hogs and Coyotes

Harvest of feral hogs and coyotes will be allowed during any refuge controlled hunt. There is no limit on feral hogs or coyotes. Hunters must use the weapon allowed for the controlled hunt to

harvest feral hogs or coyotes.

Why is the use being proposed?

Expanding hunting opportunities to include turkey, waterfowl, feral hogs, and coyotes will provide additional recreational hunting opportunities to the public. Hunting is one of the six priority uses for refuges identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. The proposed use will provide additional high-quality hunting experiences on the refuge, especially for youth, while providing for the safe enjoyment by non-hunting visitors. Additionally, allowing take of feral hogs, an invasive species, will help maintain biological diversity by preserving the naturally diverse biotic communities that occur on refuge lands.

Expanding hunting opportunities on the refuge promotes positive relationships with the public, hunting organizations, and ODWC. This activity also encourages family-oriented outdoor recreation and supports the tradition of hunting.

AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES:

Adequate funding is available to ensure compatibility and to administer these uses at their current level. The refuge's ability to offer recreational hunting is dependent upon adequate staff to administer the program, adequate law enforcement coverage, and adequately maintained access roads, parking areas, and facilities. There are four law enforcement officers assigned to Wichita Mountains WR that are available to patrol and conduct surveillance, check hunter permits, respond to hunter emergencies, enforce laws and regulations, ensure public safety, and protect refuge resources during the hunt seasons. Additional support is available through other Service law enforcement officers from nearby stations, Service zone officers, and from local State game wardens. Road maintenance, parking area maintenance, and provision of hunting brochures are other costs associated with hunting on the refuge. Additional resources may be required for refuge protection and administration as participation within the program increases.

ANTICIPATED IMPACTS OF THE USE:

Short- and Long-term Impacts:

Providing additional hunting opportunities, as proposed, will generally minimize disturbance to wildlife populations, the environment, and non-consumptive users. Visitor and hunter safety and law enforcement issues are the priority when designing and planning all hunting activities on refuges. Vehicle traffic will increase slightly during the elk and deer hunting events, but no noticeable changes should occur with waterfowl or turkey hunters. The sound of gunshots will temporarily reduce the serenity for the non-hunting public. Loss of plants from foot traffic is expected to be minor, or temporary. There is the potential for hunters to spread invasive species, but this is considered minor due to the low number of expected hunt participants. 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.

Hunting will not have a significant impact on the local, regional, or national populations of wild turkey because the percentage taken is expected to be low. Because of the limited amount of quality wetland habitat for waterfowl and the low numbers of hunters anticipated, it is estimated that the waterfowl harvest on the refuge will be minimal. This level of harvest would not have a significant impact on the local, regional, or national populations because the percentage taken

would be low. Incidental take of feral hogs during controlled hunts will lessen impacts of feral hogs on other wildlife species, such as nest depredation; competition for resources; direct consumption of small mammals, amphibians, and snakes; and so forth. Although the incidental take of feral hogs is expected to be low, any additional reduction to the feral hog population will be beneficial. Incidental take of coyotes is not expected to have a significant impact on the local, regional, or national populations because the percentage taken would be low.

Migratory game birds are a renewable resource. Sustainable populations of waterfowl are present throughout the Central Flyway. Recreational hunting at WMWR will not adversely impact these populations.

The proposed use would support the Refuge System mission, refuge establishment purposes, and refuge objectives by providing a high-quality recreational opportunity for public use and enjoyment of wildlife resources. No detrimental long-term impacts from hunting are anticipated as long as wildlife populations are monitored through the refuge biological program or by state/federal agencies. Further information on short- and long-term impacts of the expansion of hunting opportunities on Wichita Mountains WR can be found in the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge Big Game (Elk, Deer, Turkey) and Waterfowl Hunt Plan and associated Environmental Assessment.

Cumulative Impacts:

We do not anticipate negative cumulative impacts caused by expanding hunting opportunities to include turkey, waterfowl, feral hogs, and coyotes on the refuge. Cumulatively, the turkey, waterfowl, feral hog, and coyote harvest on all national wildlife refuges open to these hunting activities in Oklahoma and the Central Flyway represents a very small percentage of the overall harvest of these species. The hunt program on the refuge will not have any measurable effect on overall populations or the long-term viability of these populations.

The Service believes that hunting on Wichita Mountains WR will not add significantly to the cumulative impacts of migratory waterfowl management on local, regional, or Central Flyway waterfowl populations because the percentage likely to be taken on the refuge would be a fraction of the estimated populations. In addition, overall populations will continue to be monitored and future harvests will be adjusted as needed under the existing flyway and state regulatory processes. Several points support this conclusion: 1) the proportion of the national waterfowl harvest that occurs on national wildlife refuges is only 6 percent (US DOI 2009); 2) there are no waterfowl populations that exist wholly and exclusively on national wildlife refuges; 3) annual hunting regulations within the United States are established at levels consistent with the current population status; 4) refuges cannot permit more liberal seasons than provided for in Federal frameworks; and 5) refuges purchased with funds derived from the Federal Duck Stamp must limit hunting to 40 percent of the available area.

The wild turkey population (Eastern and Rio Grande subspecies) is stable to increasing throughout much of the state. Oklahoma hunters harvested nearly 27,000 turkeys in 2017. Anticipated harvest on the refuge is expected to be low (5–12 birds) with a negligible impact locally and regionally.

Feral hogs occur throughout much of Oklahoma and cause substantial damage to agriculture, wildlife, and native rangelands. In 2017, Oklahoma hunters reported harvesting 623,132 feral hogs. On the refuge, management activities to control feral hogs remove on average 200 individuals. Removal of feral hogs during refuge hunts is expected to be low, but any additional remove of feral hogs will provide beneficial impacts to the wildlife and habitats on the refuge.

Coyote population indices are tracked annually during deer surveys and trends fluctuate widely from year to year, presumably following trends in prey abundance. Harvest of coyotes during refuge hunts is expected to be low and not likely to impact the population regionally or locally.

PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT:

The initial period of public review and comment occurred from 06/05/2019 through 07/07/2019. Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge Big Game (Elk, Deer, Turkey) and Waterfowl Hunt Plan and associated Environmental Assessment was made available for public comment from 06/05/2019 through 07/07/2019.

To solicit public review and comment, the refuge published notices in the Elgin Chronicle and Lawton Constitution Newspapers that have wide local distributions, posted a notice at the refuge headquarters and visitor center, posted notices in public places including Facebook, and posted on the refuge website at https://www.fws.gov/refuge/wichita_mountains/.

Based on comments received during the CCP (2009), hunting has already been allowed on Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge for many years and little negative reaction is expected regarding the continuation or expansion of controlled elk and deer hunts. However, we expect some negative public response to the turkey and waterfowl hunts. Some individuals may have concern with spring turkey hunting in the public use area as this season is during some of the highest public use periods on the refuge.

XYZ comments were received during the comment period.

DETERMINATION:

Use is not compatible

Use is compatible with the following stipulations:

STIPULATIONS NECESSARY TO ENSURE COMPATIBILITY:

The refuge will implement the following stipulations to ensure that hunting remains a compatible use:

1. Hunters may park only in designated parking areas and use only roads open to the general public for vehicular travel.
2. No turkey or waterfowl hunting will occur during the elk and deer controlled hunts.
3. Waterfowl hunting is limited to refuge waters only. Jump shooting is prohibited.
4. Hunters are required to follow all refuge regulations.

JUSTIFICATION:

This program, as described, was determined to be compatible in view of potential impacts that hunting and supporting activities can have on the Service’s ability to achieve refuge purposes and goals. The refuge would be opened to turkey, waterfowl, feral hog, and coyote hunting with sufficient restrictions in place on hunting to ensure that an adequate amount of quality feeding and resting habitat would be available in relatively undisturbed areas for these species and other species using the refuge.

Limiting the area opened to hunting and number of days open to hunting provides a means to provide for a high-quality hunting experience, provide sufficient sanctuary for hunted species, and prevent conflict with other public use activities on the refuge. Given these restrictions, it is anticipated that hunted species will find sufficient food resources and resting places such that their abundance and use of the refuge will not be measurably lessened, the physiological condition of hunted birds and other wildlife will not be impaired, their behavior and normal activity patterns will not be altered dramatically, and their overall population status will not be impaired.

Hunting is a priority wildlife-dependent public use of the Refuge System under the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. The Service strives to provide priority public uses when compatible with the purpose of the refuge and the mission of the Refuge System. Hunting has given many people a deeper appreciation of wildlife and a better understanding of the importance of conserving habitat, thereby ultimately contributing to the overall mission of the Refuge System.

Through the compatibility determination process, the refuge has determined that providing public opportunities to hunt turkey, waterfowl, feral hogs, and coyotes in accordance with the stipulations provided above will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the Refuge System mission or the purpose for which the refuge was established.

Signature: Refuge Manager _____
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief _____
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 15-Year Re-Evaluation Date: 2034