

Compatibility Determination

Use: Installation of Bluebird Boxes, Henhouses, Wood Duck Boxes, or other Nesting Structures by the Public, Individuals or Groups

Refuge Name: Fergus Falls Wetland Management District

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

Waterfowl Production Areas - The Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act, March 16, 1934, (16 U.S.C. Sec. 718-718h, 48 Stat. 452) as amended August 1, 1958, (P.L. 85-585; 72 Stat. 486) for acquisition of “Waterfowl Production Areas”; the Wetlands Loan Act, October 4, 1961, as amended (16 U.S.C. 715k-3 - 715k-5, Stat. 813), funds appropriated under the Wetlands Loan Act are merged with duck stamp receipts in the fund and appropriated to the Secretary for the acquisition of migratory bird refuges under provisions of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, February 18, 1929, (16 U.S.C. Sec. 715, 715d - 715r, as amended).

FmHA fee title transfer properties - Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act 7 U.S.C. § 2002.

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).

Refuge Purposes:

Waterfowl Production Areas - “...as Waterfowl Production Areas” subject to “...all of the provisions of such Act [Migratory Bird Conservation Act]...except the inviolate sanctuary provisions....” and “...for any other management purpose, for migratory birds”
FmHA fee title transfer properties - “for conservation purposes....”

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:

Allow the installation of nest structures such as bluebird nest boxes, henhouses, and wood duck boxes by individuals or groups on Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs). Site-by-site authorization will be made by the Project Leader via a special use permit. Requests for installing nesting structures are occasionally made by individuals and sporting groups. Some requests could be for artificial mallard nesting sites or other artificial nest sites for migratory birds. Nest structures enhance the existing waterfowl habitat by providing safer locations for duck nests. Nest success is the primary factor influencing annual population growth of ducks. Nest success in Minnesota nest structures (Henhouses) is very high, averaging 83% since 2007. Recent research on ground nests in the same region of MN found nest success of 12.9%, which is below the threshold believed necessary to sustain duck populations.

Is the use a proposed new use or an existing use?

The Wetland Management District (District) has allowed and partnered with many individuals and groups to install a variety of nesting structures on the District. The District currently has approximately 100 structures throughout the District.

Is the use a priority public use?

Placing artificial nesting structures on WPAs is not a priority public use as defined in the Refuge Improvement Act (1997). The use is a non-essential contributor to other priority uses such as wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

Where would the use be conducted?

Nesting structures would be placed on Waterfowl Production Areas throughout the District. The majority of requests are for bluebird and wood duck boxes to be placed along roads near the edge of WPA boundaries. Some structures (Henhouses) are placed directly in wetlands.

When would the use be conducted?

The structures are usually placed in late winter or early spring. Maintenance usually takes place during the winter months. Generally, the groups or individuals are required to maintain the structure for three to five years or longer.

How would the use be conducted?

Nest structures are often erected on a post in a shallow wetland or along roads near the edge of the WPA, preventing access by many common duck nest predators. Structures may be affixed using either floating rafts (less common) or poles or posts. Structures are occasionally mounted to existing trees although this is less desirable due to increased nest predation.

Maintenance is one of the more critical components of a successful nest structure program. Over time, use by birds, weather and other factors, contribute to deterioration of the nest structure. Damaged or dilapidated structures are less likely to be used and they reflect poorly on the landowner and responsible waterfowl management agency or organization. These issues can be remedied by visiting nest structures during spring and again during winter for routine maintenance.

Why is this use being proposed?

The intention of the requestors for this use, installation of nesting structures, is to enhance wildlife populations by providing safe nesting sites. Monitoring and record keeping can provide important management data.

Availability of Resources:**What resources are needed to properly and safely administer use?**

Installation of artificial nest structures on WPAs by private individuals or groups requires minimal Service resources. Monitoring and maintenance of structures is required by the private individual or group as well as all associated costs of the installation. Should cooperators fail to adequately maintain the structures, there will be some cost associated with removing abandoned structures.

Are existing District resources adequate to properly and safely administer the use?

District resources are currently adequate to administer the use. Installation of artificial nest structures on Waterfowl Production Areas by private individuals or groups requires minimal District resources.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

The installation of artificial nesting structures has a minimal impact on the purposes for which Waterfowl Production Areas were established. Waterfowl nesting structures will likely increase the production of waterfowl by providing sites for nests where predators are less likely to destroy the nests. Waterfowl nesting in structures are far more likely to be successful than nests in uplands. Other structures such as bluebird houses will provide nesting sites for other migratory birds. Artificial nesting boxes are widely credited with helping increase the population of Eastern Bluebirds, *Sialia sialis*, in North America. There is some small, temporary wildlife disturbance caused during placement and maintenance of the structures. This disturbance is minor. There are some aesthetic costs associated with the placement of artificial structures in natural settings. These costs are minimized by requiring placement of non-waterfowl structures along the edges of WPAs in areas already appearing unnatural due to fences, signs, and adjacent crop fields. Wood Duck, *Aix sponsa*, boxes and other waterfowl nesting devices are typically placed in or near wetlands, although private individuals or groups typically prefer to place the structures adjacent to roads. Minimal access by motorized vehicles or other special access may be provided for installing nest structures.

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

Artificial nesting structures do not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which the units were acquired. In fact, these structures likely contribute to the purposes of the WPA by providing secure nesting sites for waterfowl and other migratory birds.

Public Review and Comment:

This compatibility determination was available for public review as part of the District’s Environmental Assessment and Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) in 2002. Comments received and agency responses were included in the final version of the District’s Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

This compatibility determination is part of the 10-year review process for Compatibility Determinations in the District’s CCP. Public notification and review will include a comment period from April 14 through May 5, 2014. Comments received and agency responses will be included in the final version of this Compatibility Determination.

Determination:

Use is Not Compatible

Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. Approval from Project Leader via a Special Use Permit is required prior to installation.
2. Annual maintenance, monitoring and summary reports are required.
3. Structures may be removed upon Project Leaders' request. Possible reasons for removal include: lack of maintenance, poor placement, or variation from approved installation plan.
4. Ownership of any nest structure placed on any Waterfowl Production Areas by private individuals or groups will be forfeited to the Service upon installation.

Justification:

Artificial nesting structures do not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which the units were acquired. In fact, these structures likely contribute to the purposes of Waterfowl Production Areas by providing secure nesting sites for waterfowl and other migratory birds. Nest success for ducks using artificial nest structures is higher than for ducks nesting in grasslands. Nesting boxes for cavity nesting birds like bluebirds and wood ducks can increase populations when natural cavities are scarce. At worst, nesting structures are neutral in their effect; likely there is a positive effect. The aesthetic costs of artificial nest structures are modest and can be minimized through appropriate structure location.

Signature: District Manager _____
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief _____
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-Evaluation Date: 2024