

Compatibility Determination

Use: Placement of new, small parking areas on Waterfowl Production Areas

District Name: Minnesota Valley 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; 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)

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

District 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 management purpose, for migratory birds”

FmHA Fee Title Transfer Properties - “for conservation purposes....”

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.

Description of Use:

Allow the placement and construction of small parking areas on any Waterfowl Production Area where the Wetland Manager considers necessary to provide safe off-road parking and access to the general public for the following permitted activities: hunting of migratory birds and resident game animals, hiking, wildlife observation, photography, fishing, and/or interpretation, all priority public uses on National Wildlife Refuge System Lands. In addition, these parking areas will be used by Service personnel in conducting management activities or biological surveys and assessments on each of the Waterfowl Production Areas.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service owns, as of 2013, nearly 179,000 acres of Waterfowl Production Areas in Minnesota. Acquisition of Waterfowl Production Areas is ongoing and as new lands are acquired they will be opened to priority public uses.

These parking areas will be less than an acre in size and will be relatively primitive facilities such as grass or gravel surfaced. Barriers to restrict motorized vehicles within the parking areas and to identify the parking area boundary generally will be constructed of wood posts, wire fence or rock barriers, appropriate and available on a site specific basis. In some cases small access trails are present to allow safe access to these units. Most areas will accommodate 5 – 15 vehicles, and thus the human impact from their use is minimal.

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

This is an existing use.

Is the use a priority public use?

Constructing small parking areas is not a priority use of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Where would the use be conducted?

The use would be conducted in non-native grassland or sparse vegetation adjacent to roadways that would allow visitors to safely get off of road surfaces in order to gain access to our lands that are open for public access.

When would the use be conducted?

Parking areas are typically constructed when the ground is not frozen as they are primarily constructed by pounding or digging in posts. This could occur from March to November. Parking areas are usually constructed in one day but occasionally 2 days, so the duration of the disturbance on the sites is very short. The lifespan of a parking area is typically 20+ years, so the need for major disturbance more frequently is unlikely.

How would the use be conducted?

We will use heavy equipment to construct parking areas. The disturbance involved in this development is limited to typically one day to install the area. In most cases the areas are mowed once per year in to prevent wildfires from vehicles during major use times, especially hunting seasons. No one is permitted to camp, have camp fires, stay overnight, or use parking areas differently than from the regulations governing the use of the entire WPA, except that they are allowed to park their vehicle.

Why is this use being proposed?

The public has access to nearly all Waterfowl Production Areas. We establish parking areas to create access point where rules, regulations, guidelines, and information can be provided to those who access our lands. Due to the accessible nature of our land, safety of the public and our staff is a huge concern. By developing parking areas we can ensure people are safely off roads and out of traffic.

Availability of Resources:

What resources are needed to properly and safely administer use?

A minimal amount of supplies, such as wood posts, steel posts, wire and gates are used for the construction of these parking areas. On an annual basis our stations only construct a hand full of these areas, so the material cost is low. The labor involved with construction is typically less than one week's time for two staff members annually. Maintenance of the areas typically

involves mowing the areas once per year in order to prevent wildfires during high use times of the year. Law enforcement of rules and policies is probably the largest expenditure of time, but in the enforcement of many other rules, policies and boundary compliance, parking area law enforcement does not add significantly to the work load.

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

Waterfowl Production Areas are open to all priority public uses. Parking areas require a minimal effort of time and resources to construct so that the public and our staff have safe access to WPAs. Most of the time less than \$1,000 is spent annually on materials and one week of time is required for two staff members to do new installations. Parking areas require a fair amount of staff time to keep in compliance as well as about 2 weeks of one person's time to mow them and maintain them for public safety. Graveled parking lots are more costly; approximately \$2,000 per lot, but the annual mowing maintenance can be less. The staff time involved with installation, maintenance and compliance is completely acceptable for the safety provided to staff and the public.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

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

Installation and use of these parking areas and access trails will result in minimal impacts as these parking areas are used infrequently during most of the year by either the general public participating in authorized and permitted activities or by Service personnel. Peak use of these areas will generally occur during fall hunting seasons when no disturbance to nesting or young animals will result. Impacts to habitat will be minimal due to their relatively small size (<1acre) by comparison to the average size of the Waterfowl Production Area (average < 200 acres). Impacts will be lessened by selection of sites away from any wetland or native prairie. Generally parking areas will be constructed at or near abandoned farm sites utilizing existing graveled driveways or previously constructed farm field approaches immediately off of public roadways. Parking lots constructed within the interior of a unit will be avoided whenever possible to minimize wildlife disturbance, impacts to unique or critical habitats and conflicts with other authorized public uses.

Public Review and Comment:

This compatibility determination is part of the 10-year review for Compatibility Determinations in the Minnesota Wetland Management Districts' Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Public notification and review will include a comment period from 30 April 2014 through 14 May 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. Parking areas must not be constructed in areas where negative wetland impacts will result.
2. Parking areas must not be constructed on native prairie habitat.
3. Camping, overnight use and fires are prohibited
4. Location of parking areas within the interior of each unit should be avoided whenever possible.
5. An archaeological review of each selected site shall be made through the Regional Historic Preservation Officer prior to construction.

Justification:

This use has been determined compatible provided the above stipulations are implemented. This use is permitted as it is deemed necessary to provide safe off-road access by the public to participate in appropriate and permitted priority uses and will not diminish the primary purposes of waterfowl production and the conservation of migratory birds and other wildlife. This use will meet the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System by providing resources for the benefit of the American public while conserving fish, wildlife and plant resources on these lands.

Signature: Project Leader

(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief

(Signature and Date)

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