

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Environmental Assessment for the Elk Management Plan Willamette Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) developed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Willamette Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex (WVNWRC) Elk Management Plan to evaluate effects on the human environment associated with implementing the Elk Management Plan. Three refuges are included in the WVNWRC, Ankeny, Baskett Slough, and William L. Finley NWRs.

The purpose and need for the Environmental Assessment (EA) was to implement an Elk Management Plan for WVNWRC that establishes target herd sizes meant to reduce off-Refuge damage while maintaining on-Refuge public use objectives. Developing an Elk Management Plan is consistent with the 2011 Willamette Valley National Wildlife Refuges Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP), as described in Objective 10e.

Alternatives Considered

The EA evaluated a No Action Alternative and Alternative B, which would implement the WVNWRC Elk Management Plan. Two additional alternatives, Hazing, and Live Trapping and Relocation, were considered but not evaluated further since it was determined that they were nonviable management options. Due to the small herd size at both Ankeny and Baskett Slough NWRs, and with the herd predominantly remaining off-Refuge, no management action, other than monitoring, was proposed for these refuges. Therefore, the focus of the EA was on management actions proposed for implementation on W.L. Finley NWR.

Alternative A: No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, the WVNWRC would continue the existing elk management framework on W.L. Finley NWR. This approach consists primarily of allowing elk dispersal and density patterns to fluctuate in response to weather, forage availability, other ecological processes, off-Refuge hunting, and Refuge management activities.

Alternative B: Implementation of the WVNWRC Elk Management Plan

Under Alternative B, the W.L. Finley NWR elk population would be managed according to the WVNWRC Elk Management Plan, the details of which are found in Appendix A of the EA. The Elk Management Plan has three goals for the WVNWRC:

Goal 1. Manage for elk population levels compatible with WVNWRC purposes, adjacent land use practices, and current habitat conditions.

Goal 2. Manage for healthy Refuge elk populations with a balanced age distribution and bull/cow ratio within the WVNWRC.

Goal 3. Maintain and enhance quality wildlife-oriented recreational and educational opportunities (elk viewing, hunting) at W.L. Finley NWR.

Under Alternative B of the WVNWRRC Elk Management Plan EA, an elk hunting program would be implemented at W.L. Finley NWR. Implementation of the elk hunting program was described within Appendix B (Elk Hunt Plan) of the EA as well as Appendix C (Compatibility Determination for Elk Hunting on W.L. Finley NWR).

Summary of Effects

Alternative A: No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, the Service would not implement an elk hunting program at W.L. Finley NWR. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) would retain sole management responsibility for the elk herds, including implementation of population control strategies outside of the Refuge boundaries. Elk would continue to disperse on and off W.L. Finley NWR in response to environmental conditions and on- and off-Refuge management activities.

Off-Refuge damage complaints would likely continue and potentially increase with herd growth and expansion. Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no change in current Refuge implementation of the "Big Six" wildlife-dependent public uses that are allowed on national wildlife refuges.

Alternative B: Implementation of the WVNWRRC Elk Management Plan

The effects to the elk population in the Willamette Valley would be negligible since even a hunter success of 100 percent (one elk harvested for each of the 15 permits) would equate to less than a 10 percent reduction in the herd. Off-Refuge damage complaints would likely continue but would potentially decrease due to the slightly reduced herd size. The effects to non-target wildlife from accidental or intentional disturbance, wounding, or killing, and to Refuge habitats from trampling would be negligible to minor due to the limited number of hunters and seasonal limitations on the hunt. Effects to listed species would be negligible since, while some trampling could occur, any listed plants in the areas would have senesced by the start of the hunt season. Effects to other priority public uses would be minor due to the limited number of elk hunters allowed on the Refuge at any one time and the limited hunt season. The effects to the economy would be minor to moderate due to elk moving off-Refuge and contributing to property damage, but that could also increase hunting opportunities off-Refuge, contributing to achieving a lower elk herd population and ultimately reducing off-Refuge damage.

In summary, there would be a negligible effect to the elk herd, negligible minor effects to other Refuge resources because of the limited numbers of hunters and other stipulations designed to minimize adverse effects to Refuge resources and other Refuge visitors and a temporary minor to moderate effect to off-Refuge property. Therefore, the effects from implementing Alternative B are not expected to have any significant beneficial or adverse effects on Refuge resources or other elements of the human environment.

Mitigation Measures

Measures to minimize adverse effects and to ensure compatibility with other Refuge uses have been incorporated into the Elk Hunting Plan. These measures include:

1. The Refuge and State law enforcement programs and closely regulated seasons would ensure hunt regulation compliance and protection of Refuge resources.
2. The number of elk hunters on the Refuge at any one time will be limited to five (5).
3. In an effort to meet elk population objectives while also maintaining healthy herd bull/cow ratios and mature bulls for viewing and photography, no bull elk harvest would be allowed on the Refuge.
4. Camping, overnight use, and fires would be prohibited.

Public Involvement

The proposal has been thoroughly discussed and coordinated with ODFW and has been shared with interested and affected parties. A public review and comment period for the EA, Hunt Plan, and Compatibility Determination opened on February 27, 2014, and ended on March 28, 2014. Notification of the comment period was published in the local newspaper and W.L. Finley NWR website. Copies of the Elk Management Plan and EA, Elk Hunting Plan, and Compatibility Determination were made available for public review at the Refuge office and on the W.L. Finley NWR website.

During the 30-day public comment period ending March 28, 2014, the Service received 51 written comments. Twenty-six letters were in general support of a controlled elk hunt at the Refuge to manage local elk populations and provide for additional wildlife-dependent recreational activities. Twenty-five letters were opposed to allowing elk hunting on the Refuge for a variety of reasons. Reviewing and responding to comments resulted in our decision to delay implementation of the Refuge elk hunt until 2015.

Conclusion

Based on this information, and after reviewing and responding to public comments, the Service has found that Alternative B best meets the Service's needs because it provides an adaptive management approach in managing elk consistent with Refuge purposes and agency guidelines. Implementation of the elk hunting program is not expected to have any significant beneficial or adverse effects on Refuge resources or other elements of the human environment due to the negligible effect to the elk herd and other Refuge resources because of the limited number of hunters and other stipulations designed to minimize adverse effects to Refuge resources and other Refuge visitors.

Based on the information referenced above, it is my determination that the proposal does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 as amended. Accordingly, preparation of an Environmental Impact

Statement is not required. Copies of supporting references are available upon request from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, WVNWRC, 26208 Finley Refuge Rd, Corvallis, OR 97333, phone 541-757-7236.

Supporting documents for this decision include relevant office file material and the following references:

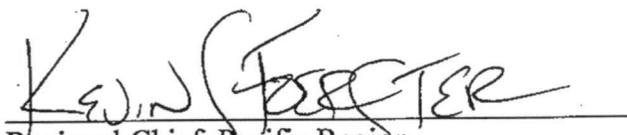
Elk Management Plan Environmental Assessment for the Willamette Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex. 2014.

Willamette Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex Elk Hunting Plan. 2014.

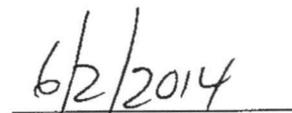
Determination of Effects to Federally Listed Species. 2014

Compatibility Determination for a Controlled Elk Hunt on William L. Finley Refuge. 2014

Responses to comments received on the Elk Management Plan EA and attachments. 2014.



Regional Chief, Pacific Region
National Wildlife Refuge System



Date

