

## COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

**Use:** Recreational hunting on Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

**Refuge Name:** Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

**Date Established:** April 6, 1927

**Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:** The Refuge was established by Executive Order 4626 on April 6, 1927, in Jasper County, South Carolina, on 2,352 acres of land owned by the United States near the Savannah River. Numerous other Executive Orders, presidential proclamations, and congressional acts added acreage to the Refuge and determined the authority of the USFWS to manage these lands.

**Refuge Purpose:** The purposes of the Refuge include:

“...as a refuge and breeding ground for birds and wild animals subject to future use in navigation if necessary and to valid existing rights if any” (Executive Order 5748, April 6, 1927)

“...for lands acquired under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act “for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds” (16 U.S.C. 715d)

“...for lands acquired under the Refuge Recreation Act for “(1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species” (16 U.S.C. 460k)

“...for “the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions” (16 U.S.C. 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583, Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1968)

“...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources” (16 U.S.C. 742f (a)4))

“...for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude” (16 U.S.C. 742f (b1), Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)

**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” (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended) (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee).

**Description of Use:** The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has reviewed recreational hunting for compatibility during development of the opening package for hunting on Savannah National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). A new compatibility determination is completed every time a new hunting opportunity is offered.

This compatibility determination updates the compatibility determination for recreational hunting on the Refuge developed concurrently with the Refuge 2007 Hunt Plan package. .

The proposed use would allow limited recreational hunting of big game (deer, turkey), small game (squirrel, rabbit), migratory birds (waterfowl, dove, snipe), coyote and/or feral hog on approximately 27,210 acres of the Refuge. The USFWS considers hunting a priority public use, as stated in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.

All hunting of big game, small game, migratory birds, coyote, and feral hogs would occur in the areas delineated on the Refuge Hunt Map (attached). Big game, coyote, and feral hog hunting would be allowed on 27,210 acres and small game hunting would be allowed on 23,661 acres. Migratory bird hunting would be limited to no more than 40% of the Refuge (11,780 acres) at any given time within mapped areas that total 13,025 acres.

Hunting would occur during the limited Refuge hunting seasons that generally fall within State hunting seasons established by the Georgia and South Carolina Departments of Natural Resources. Deer hunting would normally be permitted during October and November, small game hunting in November and December, turkey hunting in April, and waterfowl, dove, and snipe hunting during State seasons and/or during selected days. The taking of feral hogs and coyote would be permitted during all Refuge hunts with weapons legal for those hunts. An additional feral hog only hunt would be managed in March.

All general public hunts would be open to all hunters who possess valid state hunting licenses and a current annual Refuge hunt permit (\$25 permit fee). Youth hunters age 15 and under are exempt from this license and permit requirement, but must be accompanied by an adult supervisor at all times. There is no quota for these hunts and check-in/check-out is not required.

Quota hunts for youth and mobility-impaired hunters would be managed annually and limited to a small number of hunters. To provide these underserved groups a quality, wildlife-dependent recreational opportunity, these hunts would be conducted on lands not open for hunting to the general public.

The USFWS recognizes hunting as a healthy, traditional outdoor pastime, deeply rooted in American heritage and an important management tool. Hunting can instill a unique understanding and appreciation of wildlife species, their behavior, and their habitat needs. Hunting programs can promote understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management on lands and waters throughout the landscape, not just within the Refuge.

**Availability of Resources:** Many of the annual hunt administration costs including salary, equipment, boundary signs, and maintenance are associated with general management of the Refuge and are required whether hunting is permitted or not. Printing hunt brochures, purchasing replacement boundary signs, and providing law enforcement are the primary costs directly associated with hunting. Immediately prior to and during the active hunting season, one full-time employee is fully devoted to conducting hunt-related administrative activities and this resource is anticipated to be available to support this use.

**Anticipated Impacts of the Use:** Disturbance to non-target wildlife species would be negligible. During the fall, winter, and early spring months waterfowl and other migratory birds

are concentrated on the managed wetlands which, with the exception of limited dove and snipe hunting, two days of mobility-impaired deer hunting, and three days of quota youth waterfowl hunting, will be closed to all other hunting. Threatened and endangered species that could potentially be impacted through recreational hunting include the West Indian manatee and wood stork. Manatees occur infrequently in the Savannah River estuary during summer months and would not generally be in the area during waterfowl hunts. Wood storks primarily feed within the managed wetlands during summer and early fall. Impacts from hunting would be minimal. A Refuge requirement that non-toxic shot be used while hunting migratory birds (waterfowl, dove, snipe) and turkeys would insure that deposited shot has no impact on wood storks or any other species of wildlife.

Refuge staff members are able to manipulate the natural system to enhance and optimize wildlife habitat and diversity at vital times throughout the year. A primary Refuge management objective is to provide wintering habitat for migratory birds. However, wetland management also benefits a high diversity of wildlife and fish throughout the year. The 3,000 acres of intensely managed wetlands consistently provides high quality habitat for up to 20,000 wintering ducks.

Potential conflicts with the primary Refuge objective, to provide habitat and sanctuary for migratory birds, would be avoided by providing only limited public hunting in the intensively managed wetland pools and by strictly adhering to the USFWS policy 605 FW2 which requires that no more than 40% of the Refuge be open to migratory bird hunting at any one time.

Refuge personnel would coordinate hunting on the Refuge with other compatible non-hunting public uses to minimize conflicts. These potential conflicts would be minimized by temporal and spatial separation. The majority of non-hunting public use occurs within the area of the Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive. This drive meanders through 1,500 acres of actively managed wetlands and offers hiking trails for excellent wildlife viewing opportunities. The only hunting that would be allowed within this area is the two-day mobility-impaired deer hunt which would have minimal, short-term impacts to other users. In addition to the Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive, many non-hunting visitors frequent the Tupelo Trail and associated spur trails that lie north of SC 170. Some conflicts between hunting and non-hunting users could occur here but would be minimized by temporarily closing these areas during hunt days.

## **PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT**

This compatibility determination will be posted in the Savannah NWR Visitor Center, all Refuge kiosks, and on the Refuge website (<http://www.fws.gov/refuge/savannah>) and Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/SavannahCoastalRefugesComplex>). A news release will also be sent to area newspapers in both Georgia and South Carolina. The public comment period will be open for 30 days and end on July 8, 2016. This public comment period will run concurrently with the release of the draft Savannah National Wildlife Refuge Hunt plan and Environmental Assessment.

## **DETERMINATION (CHECK ONE BELOW)**

USE IS NOT COMPATIBLE  
 USE IS COMPATIBLE WITH FOLLOWING STIPULATIONS

## **STIPULATIONS NECESSARY TO ENSURE COMPATIBILITY**

The following stipulations will be implemented and/or maintained to ensure compatibility:

1. This use must be conducted in accordance with State and Federal regulations and special Refuge regulations published in the hunt regulations brochure. Refuge-specific regulations are reviewed annually.
2. Reserve hunting within the 3,000-acre intensively managed impoundment system for quota youth waterfowl hunts, mobility-impaired deer hunts, and limited dove and snipe hunts.
3. Coordinate waterfowl hunting on strategic areas of the Refuge, ensuring that the primary Refuge objective, to provide habitat and sanctuary for migratory birds, can be met.
4. Administer migratory bird hunts so that no more than 40% of the Refuge is open to migratory bird hunting at any one time.
5. Regulate public hunting on permitted areas within seasons and bag limits established by the states and the Office of Migratory Bird Management.
6. Length of hunting seasons can be modified, if needed.
7. This use is subject to modification if on-site monitoring by Refuge personnel or other authorized personnel results in unanticipated negative impacts to natural communities, wildlife species, or their habitats.

## **JUSTIFICATION**

The Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 (16 U.S.C. 460K) authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to administer refuges, hatcheries, and other conservation areas for recreational use. The Refuge Recreation Act requires: 1) that any recreational use permitted will not interfere with the primary purpose for which the area was established and 2) that funds are available for the development, operation, and maintenance of the permitted forms of recreation.

Fundamental to the management of lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System (System) is the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57), an amendment to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 provides a mission for the System and clear standards for its management, use, planning, and growth. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 recognized that wildlife-dependent recreational uses, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation, can be allowed when determined to be appropriate and compatible with the mission of the System and purposes of the Refuge. These top six compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses (known as the “Big 6”) are the priority general public uses of the System and shall receive priority consideration in planning and management over other uses. Hunting, as specified in this plan, is a Big 6 wildlife-dependent recreational use and the law states that as such, it “shall receive priority consideration in National Wildlife Refuge planning and management.” The Big 6 wildlife-dependent recreational uses are therefore automatically

considered appropriate uses. The Secretary of Interior may then permit hunting on a refuge if it is determined that the use is also compatible and does not materially interfere with the primary purpose for which Savannah NWR was established.

The proposed hunting activities on the Refuge do not interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission. Moreover, hunting does not conflict with the purpose specified in the Executive Order that established the Refuge. The final words of the USFWS mission statement, “for the continuing benefit of the American people”, will depend on continued public support, including hunters and non-hunters. The Refuge will continue to provide opportunities for all who are interested in quality wildlife-oriented recreation.

Signature: REFUGE MANAGER: \_\_\_\_\_  
(SIGNATURE AND DATE)

Review: REGIONAL COMPATIBILITY  
COORDINATOR \_\_\_\_\_  
(SIGNATURE AND DATE)

Review: REGIONAL SUPERVISOR \_\_\_\_\_  
(SIGNATURE AND DATE)

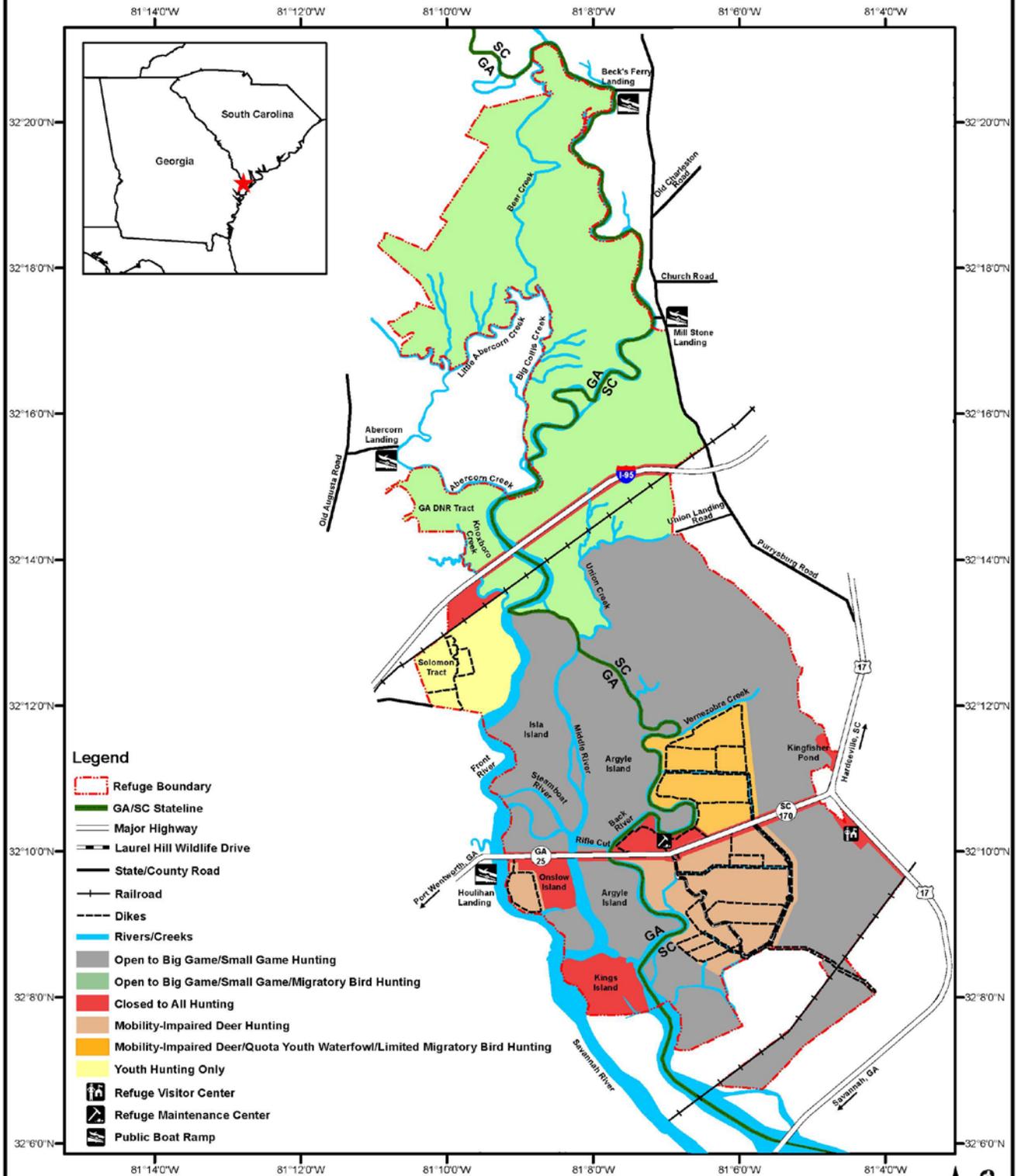
Concurrence: REGIONAL CHIEF \_\_\_\_\_  
(SIGNATURE AND DATE)

MANDATORY 15-YEAR REEVALUATION DATE: \_\_\_\_\_



**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**  
**Savannah National Wildlife Refuge**  
 Chatham and Effingham Counties, Georgia and Jasper County, South Carolina

Refuge Hunt Map



Produced by the Biological Program  
 Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex  
 03 May 2016

