

Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

Questions and Answers

2016 Hunt Plan

- 1) Does the 2016 Hunt Plan comply with the original designation of the Refuge as an inviolate sanctuary for migratory birds? Yes, the 2016 Hunt Plan actually decreases the Refuge acreage open to migratory bird hunting and ensures that migratory bird hunting on the Refuge meets Service policy 605 FW2 related to inviolate sanctuary. This policy states that migratory bird hunting is not allowed on more than 40% of the Refuge at any given time. There are no regulations that prohibit hunting on the historical rice field impoundments.
- 2) Is hunting a compatible public use at Savannah NWR? Yes, recreational hunting was identified in the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act as one of the top six compatible forms of wildlife-dependent recreation and as such hunting shall receive priority consideration in National Wildlife Refuge planning and management. A compatibility determination for the 2011 Comprehensive Conservation Plan concluded that hunting opportunities are compatible with the Refuge purposes and mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- 3) Are the proposed 3 half-day quota youth waterfowl hunts within the historic rice field impoundments north of SC170 in addition to the current quota youth waterfowl hunts on the Solomon Tract? No, to provide the opportunity for youth to hunt in a more open setting, encounter a greater variety of waterfowl species, have fewer issues with all-weather access, and possibly harvest species other than wood duck, we are proposing to move the quota hunts from the Solomon Tract to the impoundments.
- 4) Does the Service manage Savannah National Wildlife Refuge similarly to Georgia and South Carolina state-owned Wildlife Management Areas? No, the Refuge is managed exclusively for federal trust wildlife species, particularly waterfowl, wading birds, water birds, and shorebirds. Some areas, such as the forested Savannah River floodplain, are passively managed with only invasive species control projects implemented while the historic rice field impoundments are intensively managed by regulating water levels, controlling invasive species, and manipulating plant succession. State Wildlife Management Areas are often managed primarily for the increased hunting opportunities. For example, impoundments would not be drained any earlier than they normally would be for the benefit of snipe hunting. As stated in the 2011 compatibility determination, we believe all Refuge hunting opportunities, including those proposed in the 2016 Hunt Plan are still compatible, ancillary benefits of Refuge management.
- 5) Does the 2016 Hunt Plan, Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination address disturbance to hunted and non-hunted wildlife within the historic rice field impoundments? Yes, added disturbance within the impoundments from hunting was addressed and is expected to be negligible as these areas are currently open to other public uses 365 days per year. A total of 16 full-days and 3 half-days of migratory bird hunting are proposed in these areas. Taking into account these 19 days plus two days for the mobility-impaired deer hunt, the impoundments north of SC170 would still be open to other public uses 344 days per year.
- 6) Will access to the Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive be impacted by proposals in the 2016 Hunt Plan? Yes, the drive will be closed for the proposed two-day mobility impaired deer hunt. These are the only two days during the entire year when hunting will occur adjacent to the drive and access will be limited only to the mobility-impaired hunters.

- 7) Are there other local opportunities, such as those on large plantations, for the public to access for hunting? No, there are no other public hunting opportunities near the Refuge. All of the large, privately-owned hunting plantations are reserved for the owners, their guests, and/or individuals that can afford to purchase club memberships. Hunting opportunities afforded by the Refuge can be enjoyed by all, including youth, mobility-impaired, and other underserved hunters, by buying a state hunting license and the \$25 Savannah Coastal Refuges hunt permit.
- 8) Do hunting activities proposed in the 2016 Hunt Plan cause disturbance to wildlife? Yes, all public uses, including hiking, wildlife observation, fishing, interpretation, and environmental education, impart some form of disturbance on both hunted and non-hunted Refuge wildlife. Whether it is a fisherman excluding wading birds from using a portion of the diversion canal, a birder flushing a Ross' goose from a dike, a passing car causing an alligator to swim away from its favorite sunning bank, or a dove hunter jumping a deer, all Refuge users create disturbance to wildlife. The Refuge Manager is charged with balancing these disturbances while also ensuring that the Refuge serves its purposes. All public access, regardless of activity, results in varying levels of disturbance to both hunted and non-hunted species.
- 9) Why do some proposals in the 2016 Hunt Plan seem vague? Some proposals, such as allowing snipe and dove hunting two days per week but not specifying which two days and which particular impoundments will be open, are dependent on management activities. This allows the Refuge Manager the ability to determine specific regulations and areas each year, as annual conditions are never the same in a given impoundment. This also gives the Refuge Manager the flexibility to completely close selected areas to hunting, if warranted.
- 10) Why is migratory bird hunting being proposed in the historic rice field impoundments but the dredge spoil impoundments on Onslow Island are only open to public access one day per week? These areas cannot reasonably be compared. The impoundments north of SC170 are used daily, throughout the year, for hiking, biking, and wildlife observation and photography. These impoundments are generally large, ranging from 150 to 250 acres, are interspersed with dense vegetation, and do not provide the best habitat to support great numbers of shorebirds. In contrast, the dredge spoil impoundments on Onslow Island provide outstanding habitat for migrating shorebirds while also being much smaller and more open than the historic rice fields. A walk around the small impoundments on Onslow Island typically imparts much more disturbance on the bird life than does walking around the much larger historic rice field impoundments. Additionally, Refuge personnel manage Onslow Island in cooperation with the US Army Corps of Engineers under the 1996 Savannah Harbor Long Term Management Strategy. All other contained dredge spoil areas maintained by the US Army Corps of Engineers are closed to all public access.
- 11) Why are migratory bird hunters allowed to use retrieving dogs on the Refuge? Retrieving dogs have always been allowed for migratory bird hunting on the Refuge. Retrievers are most effective at finding downed game, are under direct control of the hunter, and do not impose added disturbance.