FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
AND DECISION TO ALLOW FALL ARCHERY HUNTING FOR ELK, AND DEER

SWAN RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
LAKE COUNTY, MONTANA

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to allow fall, archery only big game hunting on the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge), Lake County, Montana. The following state seasons, archery-only hunting will be permitted for white-tailed deer, mule deer, and elk on all 1,960.86 acres. At the request of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MT FWP), we have excluded moose from the definition of big game. We both agree that the Refuge offers one of the best opportunities for visitors to view moose in that portion of Lake County and we want to carefully balance the needs of non-consumptive wildlife observers with additional opportunities for big game hunters.

Selected Action

Proposed Action Alternative: Allow Archery Only Big Game Hunting on Swan River National Wildlife Refuge

The refuge proposes to allow archery only big game hunting on Swan River National Wildlife Refuge, in accordance with State regulations, subject to the following conditions:

1. Allow archery hunting for elk, white-tailed deer, and mule deer within the boundary of the refuge.

2. Allow the use of portable blinds and stands, which could be installed no sooner than August 1, and removed by December 15 of each year. Each hunter would be limited to one stand or blind and the hunter must have their name, address, phone number, and automated licensing system number (ALS) visibly marked on the stand. Stands must be placed a minimum 100 yards from the Tollefson Trail on the south end of the refuge.

3. Game or trail cameras would be prohibited year-round. This alternative offers increased opportunities for public hunting and is supported by the laws that established and govern the National Wildlife Refuge System, including the Refuge Administration Act, as amended. The Service has also determined that this modification to the current hunting program does not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the Refuge.

This alternative was selected over the other alternatives because:

It provides additional recreational opportunity for hunters and could contribute to the local economy by attracting new user groups. I believe these benefits outweigh the potential for negligible adverse effects.

Other Alternatives Considered and Analyzed

No Action Alternative: Continue current levels of public use on Swan River National Wildlife Refuge

Under the no action alternative, big game hunting would not be allowed on Swan River National Wildlife Refuge. Waterfowl hunting would continue on lands located north of Bog Road and recreational fishing would be allowed on the Swan River and Service-owned portions of Spring Creek, as per State regulations. The refuge would continue to be open to wildlife observation and photography north of Bog Road and on the southern end of the refuge (Oxbow Preserve tract recently acquired from The Nature Conservancy). Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing would continue to be allowed refuge-wide during applicable winter months.

This alternative was not selected, because it did not provide additional hunting opportunity.

Summary of Effects of Selected Action

An Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide decision-making framework that 1) explored a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives, 2) evaluated potential issues and impacts to the refuge, resources and values, and 3) identified mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts. The EA evaluated the effects associated with the proposed action and the no action alternative. It is incorporated as part of this finding.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects:

Affected Environment:	**No Action Alternative:**	**Proposed Action Alternative:**
Hunted Species	Negligible, short-term adverse impacts (migratory birds)	Negligible short-term adverse impacts (migratory birds and big game species)
Migratory Waterfowl and other birds	Negligible, short-term adverse impacts (disturbance)	Minor, short-term adverse impacts (disturbance)
Mammals	Negligible, short-term adverse impacts (disturbance)	Minor, short-term adverse impacts (disturbance)
Threatened and Endangered Species	Negligible short-term impact (disturbance, temporary displacement)	Minor, short term impact (disturbance, temporary displacement)
Visitor Use and Experience	Negligible, short-term impacts (minimal user group overlap)	Negligible, short-term impacts (user group overlap, new opportunity)

Refuge Management and Operations	Negligible, negative (funding) impacts	Minimal, long-term positive (providing opportunities) and negative (funding) impacts
Socioeconomics	Negligible, long-term positive impacts (economic growth)	Minimal, long-term positive impacts (economic growth)

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects of this new hunting opportunity have been incorporated into the selected action. These measures include:

Archery only hunting was selected to minimize disturbance to other wildlife species using the refuge. Firing an arrow creates minimal noise and the necessary hunter concealment associated with this type of hunting will minimize interactions with other user groups. Archery hunting requires the hunter to get close to the hunted species, thus, most hunting will occur in timbered areas which conceal hunters from other user groups. For safety reasons, stand placement must be a minimum of 100 yards from the Tollefson Trail, located at the southern end of the refuge to minimize overlap between hunters and non-consumptive user groups.

While refuges, by their nature, are unique areas protected for conservation of fish, wildlife, and habitat, the proposed action will not have a significant impact on refuge resources and uses for several reasons:

- In the context of local, State, and refuge hunting and fishing programs, the proposed action will result in minimal harvest rates.
- The Service works closely with the State to ensure that additional species harvested on a refuge are within the limits set by the State to ensure healthy populations of the species for present and future generations of Americans.
- Beneficial impacts to the human environment would include increased wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities that could generate minor benefits to the local economy.
- The adverse direct and indirect effects of the proposed action on soil, habitat, wildlife, and aesthetic and visual resource values are expected to be minor and short-term. The benefits to recreation and the local economy are expected to outweigh any of the short-term adverse impacts discussed in this document.
- The National Wildlife Refuge System uses an adaptive management approach to all wildlife management on refuges. Hunting and fishing opportunities on the refuge are monitored and reevaluated on an annual basis, ensuring that hunting does not contribute to any cumulative impacts to habitat or wildlife from climate change, population growth and development, or local, State, or regional wildlife management.
- The action, and the fact that it is archery only, will ensure that there is minimal danger to the health and safety of refuge staff, visitors, and the hunters themselves.
- The action is not in an ecologically sensitive area.
- The action will not measurably impact any threatened or endangered species or any Federally-designated critical habitat.
- The action will not impact any cultural or historical resources.
- There is no scientific controversy over the impacts of this action and the impacts of the proposed action are relatively certain.

- The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988.

The following provides a summary of impacts associated with the two alternatives evaluated.

No Action Alternative. There would be no additional costs, nor changes to current public use and wildlife management programs on the refuge under this alternative. Additionally, there would be no new hunting and access opportunities. This alternative has the least direct impacts on physical and biological resources; however, it would not fully meet our mandates under the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (NWRSAA) and Secretarial Order 3356 as compared to the Proposed Action Alternative to provide wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities in the National Wildlife Refuge System, when compatible.

Proposed Action Alternative. This alternative is the Service's proposed action because it offers the best opportunity for public hunting that would result in a minimal impact on physical and biological resources, while meeting the Service's mandates under the NWRSAA as amended.

The Service believes that hunting on the Refuge will not have a significant impact on local, regional, or migratory bird populations because the number of game species likely to be taken on the refuge would be very low and any disturbance or displacement to other wildlife species would be short term. Overall populations will continue to be monitored and future harvests will be adjusted as needed under state monitoring and regulatory processes. Additional hunting would not add more than slightly to the cumulative impacts to wildlife and habitat stemming from hunting at the local or regional levels, and would only result in minor, negative impacts to resident big game populations.

Public Review

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted include:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks – The Service worked closely with Neil Anderson and Jessy Coltrane (MT FWP regional manager and biologist) to develop the proposed hunt in line with State regulations. Mr. Anderson served as the State Ex Officio at the Migratory Bird Commission meeting on September 6, 2017, and helped the Service secure funding to acquire the 395 acre Oxbow Preserve.

Lake County Commission – On July 31, 2017, the Service briefed the Lake County Commission about the Oxbow Preserve Tract acquisition and the proposed archery only hunting opportunity on the new tract and the refuge. They were in agreement that archery only hunting would be a positive addition to our visitor service program.

Swan Valley Connections – Swan Valley Connections is a local non-profit based out of Condon, Montana and the Service briefed Executive Director Rebecca Ramsey and Conservation Director Luke Lamar on the proposed hunt. Swan Valley Connections was in support of the proposed action.

The **Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission** met on February 15, 2018, and received 10 public comments on the proposed action. All comments were favorable and strongly supported archery only hunting on Swan River National Wildlife Refuge. This included the Montana Bowhunters Association (Marlon Clapham), who commended the State on their efforts to provide the first archery only hunting area in MT FWP Region 1.

On February 27, 2018, the Service put the Hunt Plan EA out for 30 day public review and comment. The Service received three sets of public comments on the EA from two adjacent private landowners (Maria Mantas and Mike Madel), and the Friends of the Wild Swan (Arlene Montgomery and Anne Morley). Where appropriate, comments received were incorporated into the final Environmental Assessment.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based upon a review and evaluation of the information contained in the EA as well as other documents and actions of record affiliated with this proposal, the Service has determined that the proposal to implement fall, archery only hunting for elk, mule deer, or white-tailed deer on the Refuge does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102 (2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required.

Decision

The Service has decided to allow fall, archery only hunting during the State established hunting seasons for 2018.

This action is compatible with the purposes of the refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The action is consistent with applicable laws and policies regarding the establishment of hunting on National Wildlife Refuges.

Noreen E Walsh
Regional Director

7/23/2018
Date