

COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Vehicular Recreational Transport (all-terrain and utility-task vehicles, bicycles, and snowmobiles)

Refuge Name: Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Refuge).

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities: The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge was established by Public Law No. 268, 68th Congress on June 7, 1924. This act authorized acquisition of lands for Refuge purposes. Additional lands acquired in fee title by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are managed as part of the Refuge under a 1963 Cooperative Agreement between the Department of the Army and the Department of the Interior.

Refuge Purpose(s): The Refuge shall be established and maintained (a) as a refuge and breeding place for migratory birds included in the terms of the convention between the United States and Great Britain for the protection of migratory birds, concluded August 16, 1916, and (b) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior by regulations, prescribes, as a refuge and breeding place for other wild birds, game animals, fur-bearing animals, and for the conservation of wild flowers and aquatic plants, and (c) to such extent as the Secretary of the Interior may, by regulations, prescribe a refuge and breeding place for fish and other aquatic animal life.

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.

Goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System:

- a. To fulfill our statutory duty to achieve refuge purpose(s) and further the System mission.
- b. Conserve, restore where appropriate, and enhance all species of fish, wildlife, and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- c. Perpetuate migratory bird, interjurisdictional fish, and marine mammal populations.
- d. Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants.
- e. Conserve and restore, where appropriate, representative ecosystems of the United States, including the ecological processes characteristic of those ecosystems.
- f. To foster understanding and instill appreciation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their conservation, by providing the public with safe, high-quality, and compatible wildlife-dependent public use. Such use includes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

Description of Use:

What is the use? This use involves the operation of vehicles (All-Terrain and Utility-Task Vehicles, bicycles, and snowmobiles) that operate by fuel, electric or human power, for recreational transportation on the Refuge. This use occurs most frequently during the winter

months when ice is present. Persons who take part in this use often engage in other ice-related recreation as well, mainly ice fishing. However, portions of bicycle trails generally operated by partner organizations traverse the Refuge in select locations. The Savanna District maintains a four-mile section of bicycle trail on the Refuge. These trails are utilized by bicycles in the warmer months, primarily May through October. While vehicular transportation is not in itself a wildlife dependent activity, it is often the means by which to participate in an activity like ice fishing, trapping, or wildlife observation.

Where is the use conducted? This use is conducted on the ice over navigable waters typically on Refuge backwater areas. The exception is summer-time bicycling on the designated trail on the Savanna District.

When is the use conducted? This use occurs during winter months and is allowed only on the ice over navigable waters accessed from boat landings. The exception is summer-time bicycling on the designated trail on the Savanna District. Vehicles, regardless of their source of power, are not allowed on or across Refuge lands.

How is the use conducted? The Refuge maintains 25 boat landings with 425 parking spaces. An additional 222 non-Refuge boat landings are scattered throughout the length of the Refuge and offer ample access options for recreational vehicle access.

Why is this use being proposed? While the number of people who participate in winter activities like ice fishing on the Refuge is unknown, this is a traditional activity on the Mississippi River enjoyed by thousands of people every year. Additionally, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, states and Refuge have provided millions of dollars to habitat projects which benefit the winter fisheries. Aside from accessing backwaters for ice fishing, the advent of “fat-tire” bikes has brought more people interested in riding bicycles in the winter for recreation to the Refuge.

Availability of Resources: The main costs of these uses are law enforcement and litter clean-up. Resources to adequately manage these uses are marginal at best given the number of Fish and Wildlife Officers, the sheer size of the Refuge, and the number of users. Other personnel from the state, county, and local law enforcement community may assist with oversight of many of these uses. Funding for law enforcement staff time and printing of the Refuge Public Use Regulations brochure is limited some years, calling for a redirection of existing Refuge funding. Although not optimum, funding and staffing is available to allow this use at current and anticipated levels. No special facilities are needed in support of these activities since existing accesses or access points are used. The exception is the four-miles of bicycle trail maintained by the Savanna District. Adequate staffing and funding is available at this time to continue this activity.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use: Recreational vehicular access has little resource impact given the season of use and regulation confining these vehicles to ice covered navigable waters. Snowmobiles, ATV's and UTV's do generate noise which may, in certain areas, be viewed negatively by other visitors engaged in silent sports such as cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, or general winter hiking and wildlife observation.

Public Review and Comment: A draft of this CD was released on August 5, 2016 for a 30-day comment period. Public notification of the availability of this CD included media announcements and posting on the Refuge's website. No comments specific to the draft compatibility determination were received.

Determination:

_____ Use is Not Compatible

XX Use is Compatible with Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. All appropriate state and federal boating regulations apply.
2. Maintain a network of five Electric Motor Areas which prohibit combustion engine driven vehicles in sensitive backwater areas (1,852 acres).
3. Vehicles are not allowed to travel on or across uplands and must stay on ice covered navigable waters.

Justification: The winter use of vehicles over the ice has little impact to wildlife and habitat as most migratory birds have already left the Refuge, there are fewer people on the Refuge, and ice-only operations limit disturbance to habitats and wildlife.

Conflicts between user groups occur, but the Electric Motor Areas allow different user groups or subgroups to separate themselves if desired. Snowmobiles, ATV's, UTV's, and fat-tire bikes, given the ice-only restriction, are generally restricted to certain parts of the Refuge, leaving ample space for other visitors.

Closing or severely restricting a large portion of the Refuge to vehicular recreational transport would be nearly impossible given the mix of navigable waters, various jurisdictions and authorities, enforcement practicalities, and commercial and social considerations.

With stipulations in place, vehicular recreational transport by All-Terrain and Utility-Task Vehicles, bicycles, and snowmobiles, given the location and season of most use and the physical nature and size of the Refuge, does not materially interfere with nor detract from the conservation purposes of the Refuge.

Refuge Manager: Saba Chandler 1/3/17
Signature Date

Regional Chief Concurrence: Carol W. Bae 1-26-17
Regional Chief Date

Mandatory 10 or 15 year Re-evaluation Date: 2027