

Revised Compatibility Determination for Big Game and Upland Bird Hunting on Willapa National Wildlife Refuge

Use: Hunting (Big Game and Upland Game Bird)

Refuge Name: Willapa National Wildlife Refuge

Location: Pacific County, Washington

Date Established: 1936

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities

- Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, as amended (16 U.S.C. 715-715s)
- Executive Order 7541, Willapa Harbor Migratory Bird Refuge, Washington, signed January 22, 1937
- Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, as amended (16 U.S.C. 742a-754c)
- Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965, as amended (16 U.S.C. 4601-4601.11)
- Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1532-1544, 87 Stat 884)
- Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460k-460k-4)

Refuge Purpose(s)

The purposes for the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) have been identified in historic legal documentation establishing and adding refuge lands. The Refuge was originally established to preserve an important wintering and foraging habitat for migratory waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway with refuge purposes specified as follows:

“... as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife ...” (Executive Order 7541, dated January 22, 1937)

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

“... suitable 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-1)

“... the Secretary ... may accept and use ... real ... property. Such acceptance may be accomplished under the terms and conditions of restrictive covenants imposed by donors ...” (16 U.S.C. 460k-2, Refuge Recreation Act [16 U.S.C. 460k-460k-4], as amended)

“... 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(b)(1), Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)

In accordance with 601 FW 1, all lands acquired since the original establishment of the Refuge retain this purpose.

Management priorities are further stated in subsequent land acquisition documents to preserve, protect, and restore newly acquired habitats and provide habitat for other migratory birds, plants, and wildlife with special emphasis for marbled murrelets, bald eagles, Aleutian Canada geese, shorebirds, marsh birds, and wading birds. Documentation for additional lands also identified the following habitats, wildlife, public opportunities, and management priorities to support a diverse assemblage of native fish, wildlife, and plants which includes: eelgrass beds, gravel bars, old-growth/mature forests, riverine habitats, intertidal mudflats, sand dune habitat, fish species (coho, Chinook, chum salmon, steelhead, sea-run cutthroat trout), amphibian diversity, compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, educational/research opportunities, and cultural resource sites.

Management priorities are further derived from various legal and land acquisition documents:

“... one of the most important concentration points for migratory waterfowl on the Washington Coast. It has a fine supply of natural aquatic foods, especially eel-grass, and thereby has been for years one of the few suitable wintering grounds available for Black Brant ... it is essential for the preservation of the Pacific flyway that the Restoration program provide adequate sanctuary facilities for migratory birds in that state.” (Migratory Bird Conservation Commission Memorandum, Memo 16, May 7, 1936)

“... as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife ...” (Executive Order 7541, dated January 22, 1937)

“... in order to effectuate further the purposes of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (45 Stat. 1222)” and states that “Provided, that any private lands within the area described shall become a part of the refuge upon the acquisition of title thereto or lease thereof by the United States.” (Executive Order 7721, October 8, 1937)

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

“... To preserve and protect unique ecosystems associated with Willapa Bay ... To provide for maximum use and production by migratory birds other than wintering waterfowl, with special emphasis on bald eagles and marsh and wading birds.” (Long Island Land Exchange; September 1983)

“... protect habitat for old growth dependent species including the threatened marbled murrelet and threatened northern spotted owl ... protect and restore upland forest and associated stream habitat in order to protect and enhance declining fish populations, including coastal cutthroat trout, and Chinook, coho, and chum salmon runs ... protect and restore coastal wetlands to provide a diversity of habitats for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, and songbirds ... protect the intertidal mudflats along Willapa Bay by consolidating spartina infested lands for better management of control and eradication efforts on existing Refuge lands and on adjacent tidelands.... provide large scale habitat management through linking existing Refuge lands in a contiguous Refuge boundary, and provide wildlife-dependent public use opportunities compatible with Refuge purposes.” (Willapa Addition Environmental Assessment/Land Protection Plan, and Conceptual Management Plan 1999)

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the 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.

Description of Use

This CD examines existing and proposed hunting for elk, deer, bear, and grouse on designated units of the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge currently has 8,039 acres available for big game hunting and proposes to expand big game hunting to 10,759 acres (Figures 1 & 2). Under the management direction, the Long Island Unit will continue as currently opened to archery only for the take of grouse, bear, deer, and elk. Existing open portions of the South Bay and East Hills units will also continue as they are now open to the take of deer and elk in accordance with WDFW regulations. Expansion of elk and deer hunting opportunities on the Refuge will include approximately 396 acres at the South Bay Units; 143 acres at the Nemah Unit; and 2,181 acres at the Leadbetter Point Unit (early muzzleloader and/or permit-only elk hunt). South Bay, East Hills, and Nemah units will continue to include elk and deer hunting as refuge expansion opportunities occur. For additional details about the hunt program see Appendix M, Hunt Plan, in the Final Willapa NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (2011), as amended.

All existing and proposed hunting areas are located within Pacific County, Washington. Under this CD, elk, deer, bear, and grouse hunting will be allowed consistent with Washington State regulations except as specifically noted herein.

Existing Big Game and Upland Game Bird Hunting Opportunities

The Long Island Unit (5,452 acres) is open to archery hunting of elk, deer, bear, and grouse hunting only. During the early archery season, elk hunters that are camping must register their campsite at the parking lot kiosk prior to traveling to the island. Camping is on a first-come, first-served basis. Groups are limited to five people per campsite. Individuals and groups are limited to 14 consecutive nights camping on the island. Use of bicycles is permitted on Long Island logging roads and trails, except on the Cedar Grove Trail.

The South Bay Units are open to elk and deer hunting in designated areas of Lewis, Porter Point, and Riekkola. The area available for big game hunting is approximately 981 acres, and there is a prohibition on the use of centerfire or rimfire rifles given the unit's proximity to residential areas and other public uses. The South Bay Units are not open to bear or upland game bird hunting.

The East Hills Units are open to elk and deer hunting during modern firearms and archery seasons at most of the refuge lands between Bear River and Teal Slough with the exception of the quarters and headquarters area. The area available for big game hunting is approximately 1,606 acres. The East Hills Units are not open to bear or upland game bird hunting. Use of bicycles is permitted on the East Hills Units logging roads and trails, except for the Teal Slough and Willapa Art and Cutthroat Climb trails.

Proposed Elk and Deer Hunt on South Bay and Nemah Units

The proposed elk and deer hunting areas include portions the South Bay Units (Lewis and Porter Point) that have been recently acquired. This expansion would incorporate approximately 396 acres into the existing big game hunt area (Figure 1). These areas, and any future acquisitions in the South Bay Units, would adhere to the existing Washington State and refuge-specific regulations in place at the South Bay Units.

The proposed elk and deer hunting area at the Nemah Unit would include approximately 143 acres (Figure 1). This area, and any future Nemah Unit acquisitions, would adhere to the existing Washington State regulations. The Nemah Unit would not be open to bear hunting.

Prior to the Refuge's acquisition of these properties, land owners allowed elk and deer hunting. The Refuge is proposing to continue this wildlife-dependent public use activity for these areas, and any new acquisitions in the future.

Proposed Elk Hunt on the Leadbetter Point Unit

The proposed elk hunting area at the Leadbetter Point Unit would include approximately 2,181 acres, extending from just north of the Bearberry Trail to the tip of the peninsula (Figure 2). This area would be open to the regulated (permit or hunt-by-reservation) early elk muzzleloader season, which typically lasts approximately seven days in early October. The public would be notified about the hunt season to minimize potential conflict with other public uses; although, public use of the trails during this time is minimal, due to the inclement weather and seasonal rains that regularly flood the trails. The proposed hunt falls outside the general tourist season. Since the waterfowl hunting season is much longer than the elk muzzleloader season, there would be little, if any, impact on this user group. In keeping with existing elk hunting regulations on adjacent private property and for safety purposes, the use of muzzleloader firearms only would be authorized.

The Refuge also proposes to have the option to hold special elk hunts to be offered sometime between October and February in the same hunt area. If elk are not found within the unit during the early muzzleloader hunt season, or the elk hunt proves unsuccessful due to weather or other uncontrollable influences, the special permit hunt could then be implemented. Opening the special permit hunt would offer an opportunity to assist the State in management of the expanding elk herd. This additional hunt would draw from a pool of hunters who have applied for a muzzleloader permit through WDFW. The number of permits in this additional hunt would be determined after consultation with WDFW after the early season hunt.

Issuing the special permit for the muzzleloader elk hunt provides the refuge staff with an opportunity to control the number and timing of hunters in a specific area, thereby reducing potential hunter impacts to the resource and/or other refuge users. Providing permits addresses the elk management issue by limiting the amount of animals taken or not taken in the area. Due to the size and shape of the unit and limited access points, the number of hunters would be regulated. While there is the potential for elk hunters to disturb waterfowl and waterfowl hunters at certain times of the year, the permit system offers staff the opportunity to monitor take and potential impacts to resources while providing an opportunity for a quality and safe hunting experience.

Areas Closed

Areas closed to hunter access include the current refuge headquarters, refuge quarters, the Tarlatt Unit, and portions of the Leadbetter Point, Nemah, and Riekkola units (Figures 1 & 2).

Availability of Resources

This expanded hunt opportunity would not require any new infrastructure or personnel. Administration of the hunt and annual coordination with the State of Washington would be required as would some law enforcement patrols. However, refuge staff is in place and capable of conducting these additional duties. The annual revision and printing of the refuge brochure and updates to the Refuge's website and other outreach information would be required at an estimated annual cost of \$14,800. Refuge base funding is available to cover these costs.

Anticipated Impacts of Described Use

This proposed use would result in temporary displacement of bald eagles, songbirds, and other resident wildlife that reside in and near refuge uplands. Hunters can be expected to disturb resident wildlife, migratory birds, and other wildlife species by their movements and/or shooting activities in the field. The hunt season's limited duration (daylight hours only) should limit the disturbance factor. The Long Island hunting program is an archery hunt only, which reduces impacts to migratory birds and resident wildlife of the island.

Nearby resting and feeding areas would be available for use by bald eagles, migratory birds, and other resident wildlife species that are disturbed by hunting activities. These species would likely move to other areas of the Refuge which are less accessible to the hunters. A Section 7 evaluation about big game hunting on the Refuge has been completed.

Anticipated impacts to vegetation are expected to be limited due to the short duration of the hunt season, as well as the limited hunting and refuge use hours (daylight hours only). There is no camping allowed except in designated camp sites on Long Island. In addition, no effects are expected to refuge fish populations because activities would not take place in environments used by fish.

Effects to other public uses are expected to be minimal due to short duration of the hunt season. To further minimize impact to other user groups, the Refuge provides trails in areas where no hunting is occurring,

The big game hunting program is based on healthy, sustainable populations of the species hunted. The numbers of elk, deer, bear, and grouse that populate the Refuge may vary from year to year. As described in the Refuge's Hunt Plan (Appendix M), the elk, deer, bear, and grouse populations are monitored annually.

Roosevelt elk are native to western Oregon and Washington, northwestern California, and Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The Willapa Hills, which surround the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, support one of the highest concentrations of elk in Washington. The elk and deer populations currently range throughout all of the units of the Refuge and also range into adjacent properties including Washington State Park and private property on the Long Beach peninsula, Willapa Hills, Nemah/Naselle, and South Bay areas.

Elk reproduction continues to add to the estimated population of 40 to 70 animals on the Leadbetter Point Unit. Outside recruitment into the herd may also add to this population annually. Impacts from the proposed hunt to the elk population would be monitored by issuing the special permit for the muzzleloader elk hunt; it provides the refuge staff an opportunity to control the number and timing of hunters in a specific area thereby reducing potential hunter impacts to the resource and/or other refuge users. Providing permits addresses the elk management issue by limiting the amount of animals taken or not taken in the area. Due to the size and shape of the unit and limited access points, the number of hunters would be regulated. The permit or hunt-by-reservation system offers staff the opportunity to monitor take and potential impacts to the local herd while providing an opportunity for a quality and safe hunting experience. It is anticipated that on the Leadbetter Point, East Hills, and South Bay Units the population may fluctuate due to hunting pressure. Overall impacts to the elk populations either locally or regionally, from elk hunting on the current and proposed refuge lands are not expected. At the Leadbetter Point Unit, the reduction in herd size may have a positive effect by protecting essential habitat for western snowy plovers, streaked horned larks, and pink sandverbena, which may be impacted by the large herd in the area.

The black bear is the most common and widely distributed species of bear found in North America. The black bear population in Washington State may exceed 25,000 animals. Systematic surveys of black bear are not conducted on the Refuge. However, (according to WDFW and observations by refuge staff) the Willapa Hills and the Long Beach Peninsula support healthy populations of black bear. This species has been observed routinely throughout the Refuge. Bear would continue to be hunted only on Long Island. A small number of bear are harvested annually due to the archery only hunt, and the impact of the hunt on the existing population should not have an impact on the overall populations of black bear.

Based on the very limited number of individuals which are harvested, hunting impacts to the overall populations of these species are not expected to impact future recruitment or reproduction.

Public Review and Comment

This Compatibility Determination effectively updates the CD developed during the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) planning process in 2011, and incorporates actions identified in the selected alternative. Open-house style public meetings were held, and verbal and written comments were solicited from the public during CCP planning process. Appendix E of the CCP further details public involvement undertaken during its development. This updated CD incorporates the expansion of 2,720 acres of big game hunting on the Refuge. The Draft Revised CD was available for public comment on the Refuge's website (www.fws.gov/refuge/willapa) from March 30-April 30, 2020. Hard copies were available at the Refuge Headquarters.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

Law enforcement patrols to ensure compliance with hunting regulations would be conducted. State fish and wildlife officers also patrol the Refuge. Harvest and season lengths are established by the State of Washington.

Hunters would be expected to comply with all current and applicable Washington State and refuge-specific regulations. This would be achieved through a combination of printed information, signing, outreach efforts, and enforcement of regulations by State and Refuge Law Enforcement Officers.

Limited areas of the Refuge (portions of South Bay, East Hills, Nemah, Leadbetter Point, and Long Island units) would be opened to public deer and elk hunting to minimize human disturbance and impacts. Long Island Unit would continue to be an archery hunt only and include bear and grouse hunting.

Refuge staff and WDFW staff would consult on issues regarding law enforcement and any significant changes in the number or behavior of wildlife.

Camping, overnight use, and fires are prohibited except in the designated campsites on Long Island.

Hunters may set up temporary tree stands, which must be removed at the conclusion of each hunting period.

Access to the hunting areas would be by boat and/or foot access only. Use of bicycles is also permitted on logging roads and trails on Long Island and in the East Hills Units, except for the Cedar Grove, Teal Slough, and Willapa Art and Cutthroat Climb trails.

Justification

The proposed use is one of the priority wildlife-dependent uses that refuges are encouraged to facilitate, where compatible, in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Hunting is one of the six designated wildlife-dependent public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Refuges grant these six uses special consideration in planning and management. When on a refuge-specific basis one or more of these uses is determined compatible with the refuge purpose(s) and the NWRS mission, the Refuge is to strongly encourage (facilitate) the use(s). Providing a quality hunting program contributes to achieving the Refuge's goals and purposes. The program as described has been determined to be compatible. Potential impacts from proposed and existing deer, elk, bear, and grouse hunting within these specified units on other birds and wildlife would be minimal and not materially interfere with or detract from achievement of the NWRS mission or from the Service's ability to achieve refuge wildlife, habitat, or other public-use-related purposes and goals.

By implementing the big game and upland bird hunt program, no habitat degradation would be anticipated; disturbance to birds and other wildlife, if any, would be temporary and localized; and ample amounts of additional quality habitat for these wildlife species exists on the Refuge. Thus, it is anticipated that wildlife populations would find sufficient food resources and resting places such that their abundance and use of the Refuge and local area would not be measurably lessened from hunting activities. The relatively limited number of individuals expected to be removed from the deer and elk populations due to hunting would not cause overall wildlife populations to materially decline; the physiological condition and production of hunted species would not be impaired; and their behavior and normal activity patterns would not be altered dramatically. Expanded hunt opportunities in the South Bay, Nemah, and Leadbetter Point units may reduce elk populations in these areas. The elk hunt at Leadbetter Point would have the effect of reducing the herd size at that site and may result in positive effects for the western snowy plover and streaked horned lark, which may be impacted by the large elk herd in the area.

The areas of refuge lands designated for deer and elk hunting complements activities permitted by Washington State on adjacent uplands and provides distinct, manageable hunt units that can be more easily delineated, posted, and enforced, resulting in less confusion for the deer/elk hunting public. In

addition, due to the time of year and the limited access, minimal conflicts among refuge user groups are anticipated.

Mandatory Re-evaluation Date (provide year for “allowed” uses only)

2035 Mandatory 15-year Re-evaluation Date (for priority public uses)

_____ Mandatory 10-year Re-evaluation (for all uses other than priority public uses)

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision

_____ Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Statement

_____ Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Statement

_____ Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact

X Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision

Refuge Compatibility Determination for Big Game and Upland Bird Hunting

Use is compatible with stipulations.

Project Leader
Approval:

(Signature)

(Date)

Concurrence:

Regional
Chief,
National
Wildlife
Refuge
System:

(Signature)

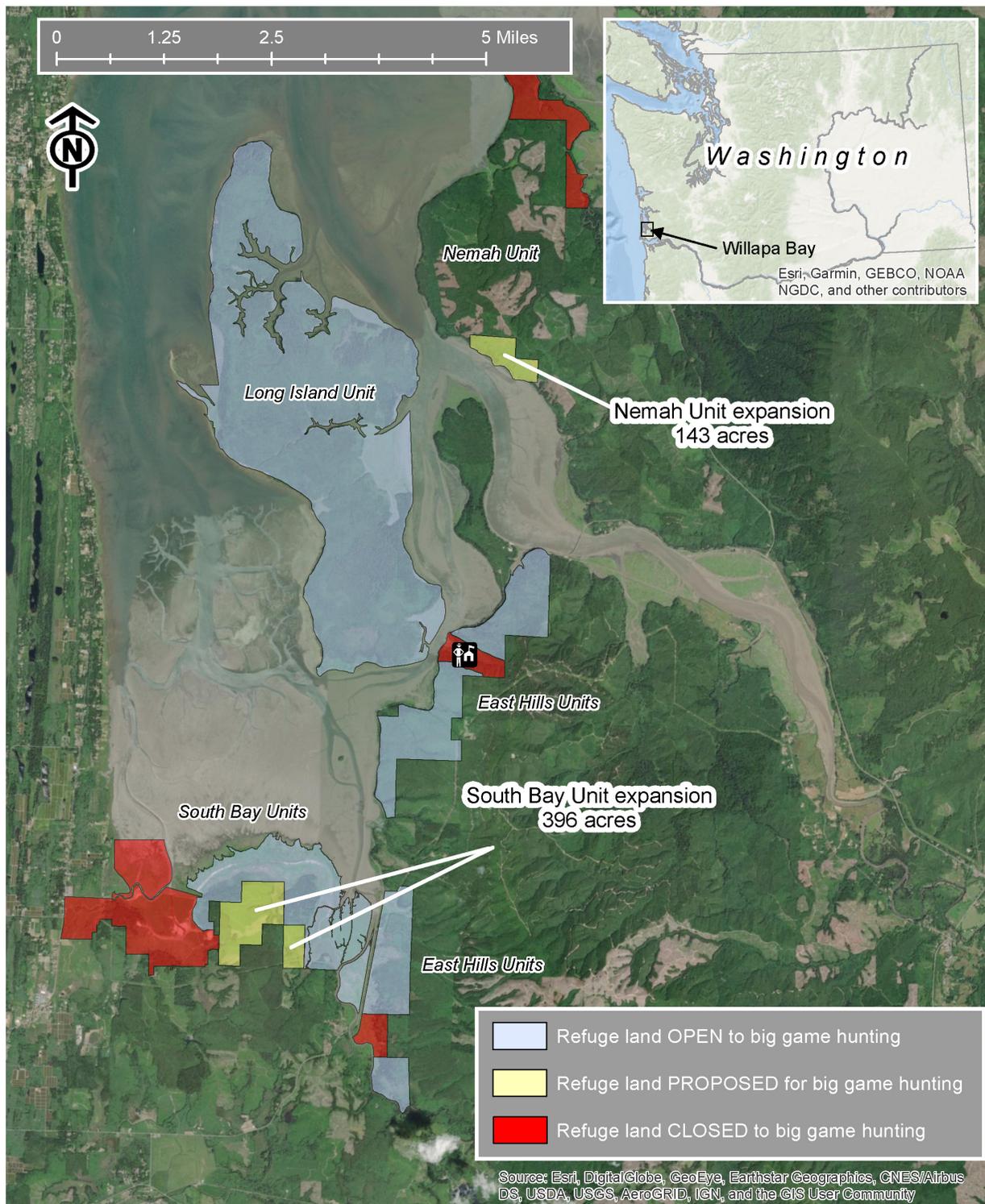
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Willapa National Wildlife Refuge Pacific County, Washington

Willapa Bay Big Game Hunt Map



Last revision: January 2, 2020

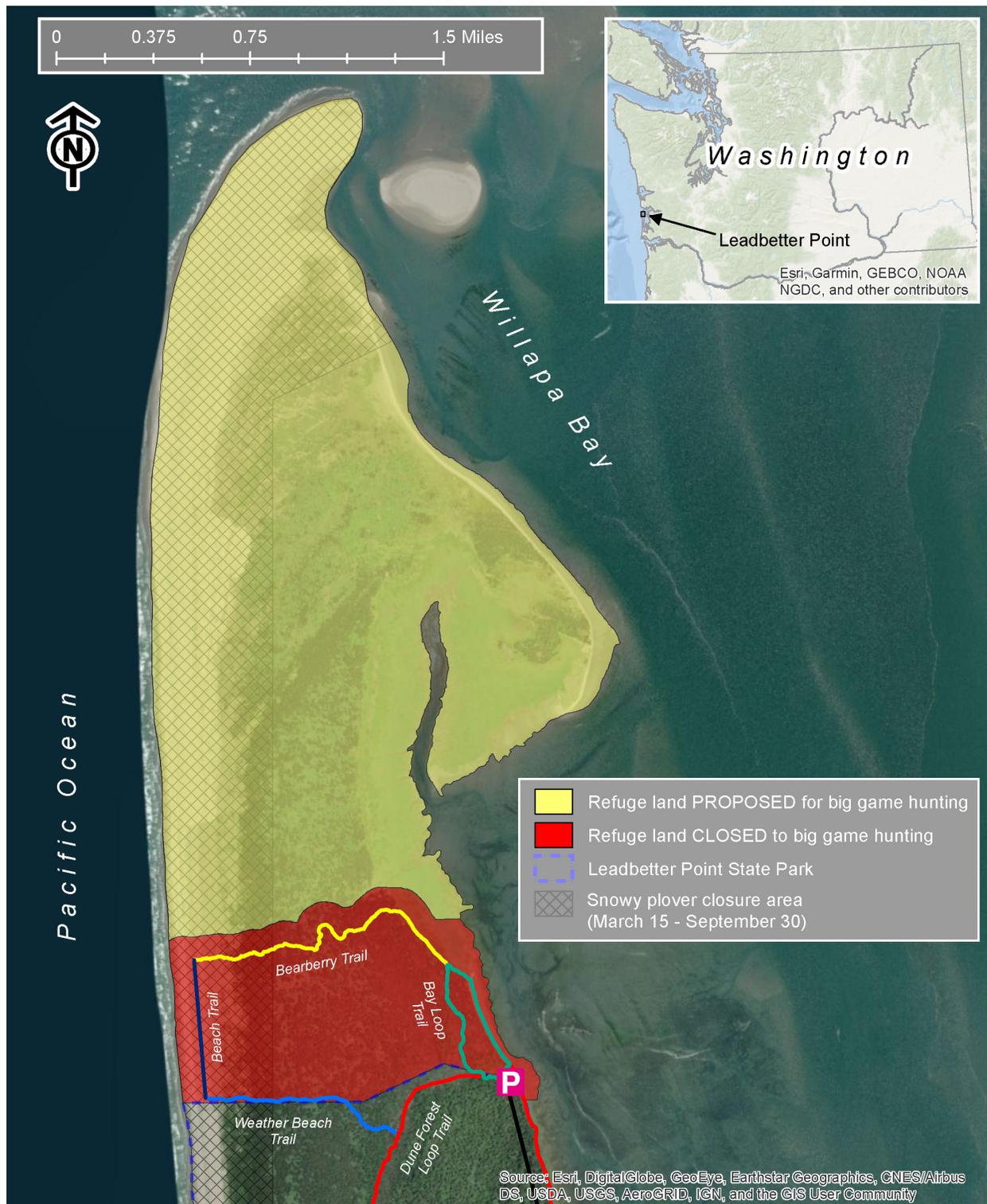
Figure 1. Big game hunting areas at Willapa National Wildlife Refuge (excluding the Leadbetter Point Unit).



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Willapa National Wildlife Refuge Pacific County, Washington

Leadbetter Point Unit Elk Hunt Map



Last revision: December 18, 2019

Figure 2. Big game hunting area at the Leadbetter Point Unit of Willapa National Wildlife Refuge.