

Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge Hunt Plan

July 2020

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 3509
Douglas, AZ 85608**

Submitted By:

WILLIAM RADKE Digitally signed by WILLIAM RADKE
Date: 2020.07.20 05:47:48 -07'00'

Project Leader Signature

Date:

Concurrence:

DAVID SIEGEL Digitally signed by DAVID SIEGEL
Date: 2020.07.22 10:30:01 -06'00'

Regional Historic Preservation Officer Signature

Date:

Concurrence:

JULIETTE FERNANDEZ Digitally signed by JULIETTE
FERNANDEZ
Date: 2020.07.21 11:22:42 -06'00'

Refuge Supervisor Signature

Date:

Approved:

STEVEN REAGAN Digitally signed by STEVEN REAGAN
Date: 2020.07.23 22:31:38 -06'00'

Regional Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System Signature

Date:

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Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge Hunt Plan

I. Introduction

National wildlife refuges (NWR) are guided by the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), the purposes of an individual refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) policy, and laws and international treaties. Relevant guidance includes the NWRS Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the NWRS Improvement Act of 1997, Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, and selected portions of the Code of Federal Regulations and Service Manual.

Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge (refuge) was established in 1988 under the authority of the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, in order "...to conserve fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species... or plants." Specifically, to protect two of the eight native fish species of the Río Yaqui watershed, the Yaqui chub (*Gila purpurea*) and the Yaqui topminnow (*Poeciliopsis sonoriensis*).

The 2,765-acre refuge is 17.5 miles north of the international border with Mexico in southeast Arizona's Cochise County and is one of more than 560 NWRs, a federal network of lands and waters set aside for the benefit of wildlife.

A unique velvet ash-black walnut-cottonwood forest exists along Leslie Creek and is important for many migrating and nesting birds. While there are many species of birds (more than 340 species), reptiles (approximately 43 species), and mammals (approximately 67 species) at Leslie Canyon NWR, the property is managed primarily for the benefit of federally listed threatened and endangered fish and frog species: the Yaqui topminnow, the Yaqui chub, and the Chiricahua leopard frog (*Lithobates chiricahuensis*).

The mission of the NWRS, as outlined by the NWRS Administration Act (NWRSA), as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.), 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."

The NWRSA mandates the Secretary of the Interior in administering the System to (16 U.S.C. 668dd(a)(4):

- Provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and their habitats within the NWRS;
- Ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the NWRS are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans;
- Ensure that the mission of the NWRS described at 16 U.S.C. 668dd(a)(2) and the purposes of each refuge are carried out;

- Ensure effective coordination, interaction, and cooperation with owners of land adjoining refuges and the fish and wildlife agency of the states in which the units of the NWRS are located;
- Assist in the maintenance of adequate water quantity and water quality to fulfill the mission of the NWRS and the purposes of each refuge;
- Recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority general public uses of the NWRS through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife;
- Ensure that opportunities are provided within the NWRS for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses; and
- Monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

Therefore, it is a priority of the Service to provide for wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities, including hunting and fishing, when those opportunities are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established and the mission of the NWRS.

Secretarial Order 3356 continues the Department of the Interior's efforts to enhance conservation stewardship; increase outdoor recreation opportunities for all Americans, including opportunities to hunt and fish; and improve the management of game species and their habitats for this generation and beyond. It directs several components of the Department to assess past and ongoing implementation of the recommendations set forth in Executive Order 13443, "Facilitation of Hunting Heritage and Wildlife Conservation," to inform how best to enhance and expand public access to lands and waters administered by the Department-lands and waters owned by all Americans-for hunting, fishing, recreational shooting, and other forms of outdoor recreation.

Public hunts on Leslie Canyon NWR have not been conducted since its establishment in 1988. This plan proposes to provide the visitor with an additional recreational opportunity where hunting opportunities on public lands are limited. The public is able to access the open area (attached map) of Leslie Canyon NWR every day of the week during daylight hours. The public can also participate in hiking, wildlife photography, wildlife observation, environmental education, bicycling, and horseback riding. Fishing, camping, and off-road vehicular traffic are not permitted. The refuge will maintain a closed area for protection of sensitive riparian habitat and listed species.

II. Statement of Objectives

The objectives of this plan are to provide public hunting opportunities where there are currently none and to better come into alignment with state hunting opportunities. Hunting will be open for Migratory Game Bird, Upland Game, and Big Game hunts.

Migratory Game Birds hunts: Mourning dove (*Zenaida macroura*), white-winged dove (*Zenaida asiatica*), and Eurasian collared-dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*).

Upland Game hunts: Badger (*Taxidea taxus*), bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), coati (*Nasua narica*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), desert cottontail (*Silvylagus audubonii*),

black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*), Gambel's quail (*Callipepla gambelii*), scaled quail (*Callipepla squamata*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), ring-tailed cat (*Bassariscus astutus*), striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), hooded skunk (*Mephitis macroura*), western spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*), and American hog-nosed skunk (*Conepatus leuconotus*).

Big Game hunts: Black bear (*Ursus americanus*), javelina (*Pecari tajacu*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).

Hunting is a priority public use identified in the NWRS Improvement Act of 1997, and it helps accomplish the goals and objectives of the refuge and promotes appreciation and support for the NWRS mission. Hunting provides the public with a unique opportunity to participate in one of the wildlife-dependent public uses.

III. Description of Hunting Program

A. Areas to be Open to Hunting

Leslie Canyon NWR is located in State Hunt Unit 30A in the southern portion of the unit, it is approximately 17.5 miles north of the United States-Mexico international border. The open area of Leslie Canyon NWR is approximately 810 acres, and includes all refuge lands north of Leslie Canyon Road (attached map). This area is open to public uses including hunting of all the above listed species. This area is open to non-motorized access only.

B. Species to be Taken, Hunting Periods, Hunting Access, Fees

Hunting on Leslie Canyon NWR will align with State age requirements and bag limits. Hunters must possess any and all State and Federal required licenses, tags, and stamps. The refuge will align with state hunting methods with the following exception: we prohibit falconry, pneumatic weapons, night hunting, and the use of dogs for pursuit or retrieval.

Refuge Hunting Periods

Species in alignment with State seasons (AZGFD):

Mule deer:

- General hunts occur during November of each year (~14 days).
- Youth only hunts occur during October of each year (~7 days).
- Archery only non-permit tag hunts occur during August, September, December, and January of each year (~71 days).

White-tailed deer:

- General hunts occur during October, November, and December of each year (~42 days).
- Youth only hunts occur during October of each year (~7 days).
- Archery only non-permit tag hunts occur during August, September, December, and January of each year (~71 days).

Mourning dove, white-winged dove, and Eurasian collared-dove:

- Early season occurs during September of each year (~15 days).

- Late season occurs during November, December, and January of each year (~30 days).
- *Note that Eurasian collared-dove is not allowed year-long on refuge; it is only allowed during the other dove seasons.

Javelina:

- General hunts occur in February of each year (~7 days).
- Youth only hunts occur in January, February, and November of each year (~17 days).
- Archery only spring hunts occur in January of each year (~23 days).
- State Spring HAM hunts (~10 days).

Gambel's quail and scaled quail:

- General hunts occur in October, November, December, January, and February of each year (~115 days).

Species not in alignment with State seasons: badger, black bear, bobcat, coati, coyote, gray fox, black-tailed jackrabbit, cottontail rabbit, raccoon, ring-tailed cat, striped skunk, hooded skunk, western spotted skunk, and American hog-nosed skunk (AZGFD). Hunting of these species will only be allowed when their state season dates overlap with a general or archery state deer and/or javelina hunt season, excluding youth seasons (i.e., these species may only be hunted during general/archery state deer or javelina seasons but not during youth only deer and javelina seasons).

Season overlaps occur in August, September, October, November, and December of each year:

- Black bear (~71 days).

Season overlaps occur in August, September, October, November, December, January, and February of each year:

- Badger, bobcat, gray fox, raccoon, and ring-tailed cat (~116 days).
- Coyote, striped skunk, hooded skunk, western spotted skunk, and American hog-nosed skunk (~116 days).
- Coati, jackrabbit and cottontail rabbit (~116 days).

Hunting Access

The refuge hunt area is open for hunting during daylight hours only. Leslie Canyon Road is a gravel road maintained by Cochise County, and is the main route for vehicular access through Leslie Canyon NWR, which contains self-guided visitor services activities. During inclement weather, four-wheel drive high clearance vehicles are recommended. Basic services include a small parking area, regulatory signs, and educational signs. The open hunt area is non-motorized access only off of Leslie Canyon Road, and parking is to be in the parking lot or responsibly along road side. The portion of the refuge opened to hunting is also open to other public uses such as hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, wildlife photography, and wildlife observation during the hunting seasons. Hunters and visitors alike should be mindful of other groups. For those hunters needing assistance accessing the refuge due to a physical disability, they may contact the refuge manager to work out appropriate special arrangements. Hunting is on a first-come, first-served basis. If in the future, the number of hunters increase to a level that requires more control over access, the issue will then be addressed.

Fees

The refuge does not currently propose charging fees for any hunting at Leslie Canyon NWR.

C. Hunter Permits Requirements

No hunting permit is required by the refuge. Hunters must have all applicable State and Federal licenses, tags, and stamps.

D. Consultation and Coordination with the State

The refuge reviewed the operations and regulations for neighboring refuges and State wildlife management areas to find consistency where possible. The Service first reached out to the State in June 2018 to discuss expanding hunting on refuges and the upcoming hunt/fish assessments that the service was conducting. The refuge communicated with a local State biologist during April and May 2019. In May 2019, we received a review by the State regional office that covers our area to help adjust our plan to align, where possible, with State management goals. The State expressed a desire for Leslie Canyon NWR to open the entire refuge to hunting, and to fully align with State seasons and regulations for all hunted species found in the refuge area. The refuge responded to the State with justifications supporting the refuges decision not to open the entire refuge. The refuge also provided the State with justifications for not coming into full alignment with the State seasons and regulations for all hunted species found in the Leslie Canyon NWR area. We specifically asked the State if they could include the refuge in the State hunt registration program to ensure consistency and reduce operation costs. A letter from the Regional Office was sent out to all the tribes in Arizona which identified hunting and fishing opportunities that have been identified for each national wildlife refuge in Arizona on December 13, 2019. The tribes were further notified that Leslie Canyon NWR would be one of the refuges that would be submitting and opening package and the tribes would be sent a copy the documents during the public comment period. From early 2018 through October 2019, there have been a succession of meetings with AZGFD and the Regional Office to keep the State updated on the progress of the hunt opening packages scheduled to be prepared for the 2020-2021 hunting season. The refuge has continued to consult and coordinate on specific aspects of the Hunt Plan.

Leslie Canyon NWR and Arizona Game and Fish Department will continue to work together to ensure safe and enjoyable recreational hunting opportunities. Hunter participation and harvest data are to be shared annually. There would be a hunter sign-in sheet on the refuge where hunters can report their harvest. Staff will retrieve and review the sign-in sheets periodically. The State also shares deer tag information with refuge law enforcement officers so the refuge has an estimate of expected participation.

E. Law Enforcement

Enforcement of refuge regulations normally associated with management of a NWR is the responsibility of commissioned federal wildlife officers. Other officers such as special agents, State game wardens, and the local Sheriff's Department may assist the Leslie Canyon NWR full-time law enforcement officer.

The following methods are to be used to control and enforce hunting regulations:

- Refuge and hunt area boundaries will be clearly posted.
- The refuge and Arizona Game and Fish Department will provide a brochure that

- shows hunt areas.
- Federal wildlife officers and Arizona Game and Fish Department law enforcement officers will check hunters for compliance with Federal and State laws as well as refuge-specific regulations pertinent to the hunt.
- Federal wildlife officers will coordinate with Arizona Game and Fish Department, Border Patrol, Cochise County Sheriff's Office, and other law enforcement agencies.
- Information will be made available, such as tearsheets and maps, online, at the refuge headquarters, and at the hunt area.

F. Funding and Staffing Requirements

Administering the refuge hunt program does not require any developed facilities on the refuge, however installing a public restroom may need to be considered in the future. It has been estimated that this hunt program will affect the refuge greatest during August through the following January each year (deer hunt seasons). It is expected to cost the refuge approximately \$50,934.00 annually to operate and manage the annual program, provide brochures and hunting regulations, respond to public inquiries, post signage, collect and analyze hunt data, and conduct enforcement of hunt regulations for 6 months out of the year.

The law enforcement staffing at the complex has been downsized during recent years. At Leslie Canyon and San Bernardino NWRs, the number of officers has gone from three plus a dual function to one single officer. The single officer has responsibility for significant international border issues along with endangered species and common public use issues. Law enforcement coverage will be strained with greatly increasing public hunting opportunities on both refuges. Due to this refuge hunting on both refuges will have some limitations and restrictions when compared to state hunting. To meet the objective of providing productive hunts and to maintain resource protection it is important to balance opportunity with other refuge objectives.

IV. Conduct of the Hunting Program

A. Hunter Permit Application, Selection, and/or Registration Procedures (if applicable)

All hunters need to possess a valid hunt or combination hunt and fish license, plus any required hunt permit-tags, non-permit-tags, or stamps. Hunters should contact the Arizona Game and Fish Department for fees, additional regulations, and application forms that may apply.

B. Refuge-Specific Hunting Regulations

Listed below are refuge-specific regulations that pertain to hunting on Leslie Canyon NWR as of the date of this plan. These regulations may be modified as conditions change or if refuge expansion continues/occurs.

Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge –

(h) Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge –

(1) Migratory game bird hunting. We allow hunting of mourning, white-winged, and Eurasian

collared-dove on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

- (i) We prohibit the use of dogs.
- (ii) We prohibit falconry.
- (iii) We prohibit pneumatic weapons.

(2) Upland game hunting. We allow hunting of Gambel's and scaled quail, cottontail, black-tailed jackrabbit, gray fox, coati, badger, striped, hooded, spotted, and hog-nosed skunks, bobcat, raccoon, ring-tailed cat and coyote on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

- (i) The conditions set forth at paragraph (1)(i)-(iii) of this section apply.
- (ii) We prohibit night hunting.

(3) (iii) Hunting of these species will only be allowed when their state season dates overlap Big game hunting. We allow hunting of mule deer, white-tailed deer, javelina, and black bear on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

- (i) The conditions set forth at paragraph (h)(2)(i)- and (ii) of this section apply.
- (ii) Hunting of black bear will only be allowed when their state season dates overlap with a general or archery state deer and/or javelina hunt season..

C. Relevant State Regulations

Hunter Education – Hunter education is not mandated in Arizona, with one exception for youth ages 10 through 13, who are required to have a valid hunter education certification from Arizona or other approved program to participate in a big game hunt (AZGFD).

Arizona Revised Statutes (ARS) R12-4-304 (Lawful Methods for Taking Mammals, Birds, and Reptiles)

R12-4-216 (Crossbow Permit)

Arizona Game and Fish Commission Orders (COs) which further specify lawful methods of take for a species or species group, and seasons.

Arizona Game and Fish information can be found at: <https://www.azgfd.com/Hunting/>

D. Other Refuge Rules and Regulations for Hunting

- Reporting Harvest – If need arises to collect specific management information in relation to harvest rates, amount of public use, or impact of hunting on resident wildlife population, special regulations may require that a refuge permit be obtained to participate in the activity. This will be determined on an annual basis.
- Firearms – Any discharge of a firearm except to take legal game is not permitted. Target practice or shooting at random is not permitted.
- Trapping – This method of take is prohibited.
- Blinds, Stands, etc. – Pits, feeders, permanent blinds and stands; trail or scouting cameras; and baiting are prohibited.
- Alcohol – The use or possession of alcoholic beverages while hunting is prohibited.
- Camping – Overnight camping is prohibited.
- Fires on the refuge – Open fires are not permitted on refuge.

- Littering is prohibited.

V. Public Engagement

A. Outreach for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunting Program

Throughout this planning process the refuge supervisor for Arizona met with, in person or by telephone, the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) on several occasions. Key meetings occurred on May 17, 2019, September 13, 2019, and October 2, 2019. AZGFD supports the proposed action and requests further regulatory alignment outside the scope of this effort. Cooperation between the AZGFD, FWS, and LCNWR has resulted in many positive and mutually beneficial outcomes.

The refuge posted a public scoping on the refuge website for a 30-day public scoping period from September 27th 2019 to October 28th 2019. The refuge received one letter from public scoping, voicing support of the proposal and approval to open the area for hunting.

Additionally, on March 27th 2020 the refuge posted a public notice on the refuge website for a 30-day public notice period. Furthermore, on April 9th 2020 the Service published the draft 2020–2021 Refuge-Specific Hunting and Sport Fishing Regulations in the Federal Register for a 60-day period (closing one June 8th 2020). The Service received requests to extend the public comment period which was granted to coincide with the Federal Register period. The refuge environmental assessment and compatibility determination were added to the Federal Register docket.

Four comments were received in objection to the proposed rule, and concerns were expressed regarding visitor safety, species and habitat health, and analysis in the environmental assessment. Three comments were received voicing approval to the proposed rule. Recommendations on furthering expansion were included within the supportive public input. These comments are addressed in the Finding Of No Significant Impact.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunting Program

It is anticipated that the public reaction to the availability of hunting opportunities on Leslie Canyon NWR will be mostly favorable. Over the years the state has asked about deer hunting in LCNWR and during LE contacts hunters have asked about hunting deer in LCNWR. Knowledge of the general area and how much private land is around the area with restricted access lends to the assumption that hunters would favor more land being open for hunting with less restrictions.

C. How Hunters Would be Informed of Relevant Rules and Regulations

General information regarding the hunting program and other public use can be obtained by contacting the Leslie Canyon NWR, at P.O. Box 3509 Douglas, Arizona 85607. Phone: 520/364-2104, Fax: 520/364-2130. Website: https://www.fws.gov/refuge/leslie_canyon/
Getting to refuge headquarters: From Douglas, Arizona, take Highway 191 north to mile marker 11, about 1/4 mile north of the milepost take paved road to the west for 1 mile to refuge office. The refuge can provide brochures, maps and a copy of the most recent State, Federal and refuge rules and regulations.

VI. Compatibility Determination

A compatibility determination has been completed in conjunction with this hunt plan and the Environmental Assessment. Hunting and all associated program activities in this plan have been found compatible with the purposes of the refuge.

References

AZGFDa. 2019. Hunting in Arizona, Hunting overview. Retrieved from
<https://www.azgfd.com/hunting/overview/>

AZGFDb. 2019. Hunting Seasons, Season Dates, Rules and Regulations for Hunting in Arizona.
Retrieved from <https://www.azgfd.com/hunting/regulations/>

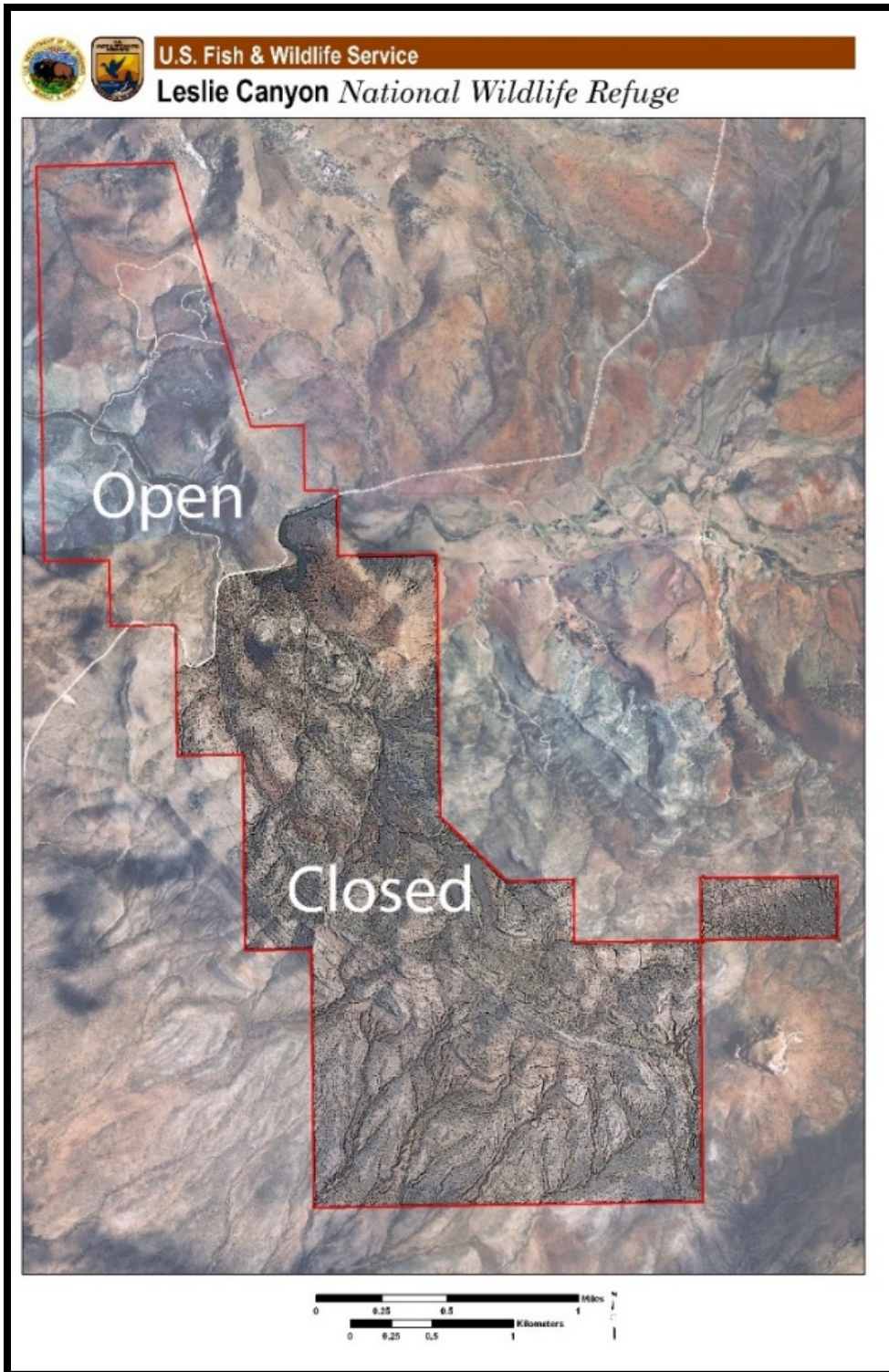


Figure 1. Leslie Canyon NWR Open Hunting Area



Figure 2. State Hunting Unit 30A