

CRANE MEADOWS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

HUNTING CHAPTER of VISITOR SERVICES PLAN January, 2011

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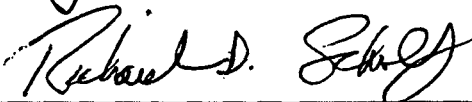
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I. INTRODUCTION

Crane Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is located in central Minnesota and falls within a transitional zone between tallgrass prairie and deciduous forest (Figure 1). Currently there are approximately 1,800 acres of land acquired within 13,540-acre acquisition area. Approximately 900 acres are owned and managed by the state of Minnesota, and the remaining land is privately owned. The area of the Refuge is a mosaic of open water, wetlands, floodplain forest, wet prairie, dry prairie, savanna, upland conifer and deciduous forest. The diversity of habitat is matched by a diversity of wildlife. It is the location of one of the largest most intact sedge meadow wetland complexes in the state and this area has been important to wildlife and people for thousands of years.

Hunting has been an expectation since Refuge establishment by the general public, state agencies and other interested parties. However, the distribution and amount of land in fee title has limited such opportunities. In 2011, Refuge management proposed to open hunting on the Refuge. This Hunting Chapter describes, in detail, these future hunting opportunities, how these hunts will be conducted, and conflict resolution with other management objectives.

Figure 1. Location of Crane Meadows NWR in Minnesota.



II. CONFORMANCE WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITY

The National Wildlife Refuge System includes federal lands managed primarily to provide habitat for a diversity of fish, wildlife and plant species. National wildlife refuges are established under many different authorities and funding sources for a variety of purposes.

Crane Meadows NWR was established in 1992 to conserve and protect the diminishing number of high quality wetlands that remain on the American landscape. The Refuge's establishing authorities and related purpose include:

Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956

"... 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)

Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986

"... the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions ..." 16 U.S.C. 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583

The ability to hunt on refuges is covered under the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act, 16 U.S.C 688dd (a) (2). This Act was amended in 1997 by the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57). In addition to fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation, hunting is one of six priority public uses that were identified in the Act (1997). The hunting program on the Refuge will conform to this statutory authority by the following legislation:

"...compatible wildlife-dependant recreation is a legitimate and appropriate general public use of the System, directly related to the mission of the System and the purposes of many refuges...." Public Law 105-57, 111 STAT.1254, Sec.5. (B) (National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997).

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed a strategic plan for implementing the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act called "Fulfilling the Promise" (USFWS, 1999). This plan clarifies the vision for the National Wildlife Refuge System and outlines strategies for improving delivery of the System's mission. This Hunt Plan is compatible with the priorities and strategies outlined in "Fulfilling the Promise".

Additional authority delegated by Congress, federal regulations, executive orders and several management plans, such as the 2010 Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP), guide the operation of the Refuge. Appendix F of the CCP contains a list of the key laws, orders and regulations that provide a framework for the proposed action.

Relationship to other plans and documents

In September of 2010 a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Crane Meadows National Wildlife Refuge was approved. The EA and CCP addressed future management of the Refuge, including visitor services. This Hunt Plan is a step down plan of the CCP, and as such, contains more detailed information describing the hunt program on the Refuge. This Hunt Plan will also be included as a chapter of the Visitor Services Plan upon its completion.

In January 2011 Refuge management proposed to add hunting as a priority public use on the Refuge. During this time, an Environmental Assessment was developed for the potential hunting opportunities. The hunting EA outlined 3 Alternatives which included:

- Alternative A: Current Direction (No Action) – No hunting on the Refuge
- Alternative B: Open Refuge to a Special Firearms Deer Hunt for Hunters with Disabilities
- Alternative C: Open Refuge to Firearms and Archery Deer Hunts and Spring Turkey Hunt for Youth and Persons with Disabilities (Preferred Alternative)

There were no findings of significant impact associated with opening the proposed hunts on the Refuge. This document describes the hunting program that was proposed in the Preferred Alternative outlined in the Environmental Assessment.

Upon completion and adoption of the Hunting Chapter, the Service will publish in the Federal Register a Proposed Rule that updates the hunting program on the Refuge. Following the comment period on the Proposed Rule, a determination will be made whether to implement Refuge hunting as outlined in this Hunting Chapter. Subsequently, a Final Rule will be published outlining hunting on the Refuge. An internally developed annual Hunting Proposal will be used to document how this Hunting Chapter guides the implementation of the Refuge's hunting programs.

III. STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

The broad goals of Crane Meadows NWR Hunting Program are as follows:

- Provide safe and enjoyable hunts that are compatible with the Refuge purpose.
- Provide quality hunting opportunities that minimize conflict with other public use activities.
- Provide opportunities to hunt wildlife species consistent with the laws and regulations of the State of Minnesota that do not adversely affect local or regional wildlife populations, and are consistent with the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act.
- Provide quality hunting opportunities for underserved audiences.

Goal: As an active partner in collaborative conservation, the Refuge will provide quality wildlife-dependent recreation, environmental education, and outreach to a diverse audience. These activities will preserve cultural resources and promote understanding, appreciation, and support for Crane Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, the National Wildlife Refuge System, and natural resource conservation.

Objective: Within 5 years of plan approval, work with partners to open managed white-tailed deer and turkey hunts on specified Refuge units for hunters with disabilities and for youth hunters.

Rationale: Hunting is one of the six priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Service policy directs us to provide hunting opportunities when compatible with Refuge management, and offering this use was a long-term goal of the Refuge when it was established in 1992. Managed hunting programs help promote an understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management. Additionally, managed hunts on the Refuge provide a traditional recreational activity with no definable adverse impacts to the biological integrity or habitat sustainability of Refuge resources.

The limited size and distribution of current Service land ownership at the Refuge limits our ability to offer quality hunting experience opportunities, but management has long understood the demand for, and importance of providing this activity on the Refuge. By beginning with short-duration, assisted, managed hunts, Refuge staff can provide hunting opportunities in a controlled fashion, direct these activities to specific audiences, and adaptively evaluate the hunting program for expansion or reduction based on demand and program success.

Strategies:

1. Prepare and submit all materials required to open hunting as a use on the Refuge.
2. Partner with Minnesota DNR, Wheelin' Sportsmen, National Wild Turkey Foundation, Capable Partners, Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, Camp Ripley, Minnesota State Archery Association, local sportsmen's clubs, and/or others to conduct managed hunts.
3. Prepare the Headquarters, Sedge Meadow, and Platte River West Units for managed hunts.
4. Provide adequate boundary signage on all hunting areas.
5. As additional land is acquired, re-evaluate the areas that are available and safe for hunting with the ultimate goal of opening additional areas of the Refuge to hunting.
6. Increase law enforcement as the hunting program expands.
7. Manage hunts to minimize conflicts with other uses and resources.
8. Assist with hunter education.

9. Survey participants in specialized hunts.
10. Adhere to state regulations for hunting activities.
11. Further define Refuge management of the hunting program as a part of the visitor services step-down plan and complete it within 2 years of CCP approval.

IV. ASSESSMENT

Currently, wildlife population dynamics are annually evaluated by the State of Minnesota (MNDNR) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) as part of county, state, national or International wildlife population surveys. Specific monitoring efforts relative to this hunt plan include: population models that are primarily based on harvest statistics for turkey and deer, the Minnesota August Roadside Survey, and turkey observations from deer hunters (voluntary survey). These surveys combined with a winter severity index, and biological knowledge of individual species is used to regulate species hunted.

Minnesota's wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) population has continued to expand since the first successful reintroduction in southeastern Minnesota in the 1960's. Turkey hunting is allowed in the State of Minnesota by permit in both the spring and fall seasons. The MNDNR's 2011 management goal is to establish and maintain the spring wild turkey population at or above 75,000 in suitable habitats to maximize hunting and viewing opportunities. To meet this goal, the Long Range Plan for the Wild Turkey in Minnesota (MNDNR 2006) outlined actions for habitat management, hunting season management, population management, and information and education to ensure a successful management program. Following the 2008 Fall Wild Turkey Population Survey, the MNDNR found that the data suggest that turkey populations have increased since 2006, and that a comparison of the distribution of turkeys sighted by deer hunters during the fall 2006 versus 2008 suggest that the range of wild turkeys continues to expand in Minnesota (Dexter 2009).

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) represent one of the most important big game mammals in Minnesota. Viewed as being important by both hunters and non-hunters, deer pose serious socioeconomic and ecological challenges for wildlife managers, such as deer-vehicle collisions, crop depredation, and forest regeneration concerns (Dexter 2009). The MNDNR monitors the status of deer populations to determine the appropriate harvest levels. Deer densities are generally stable or near density goals throughout most of the Farmland Zone in 2009. Pre-fawn deer densities were high in the Cambridge DMU, which encompasses the Refuge. In central Minnesota, simulated deer densities indicate a slight increasing trend over the last couple years. Efforts to reduce deer in this area may be having an impact on the overall population. However, most managers and constituent groups indicate there are still too many deer in central Minnesota. Population density estimates in this area were 12-16 deer/square mile in 2009 (MN DNR 2010).

Suitable habitat exists on the Refuge lands to support hunting as proposed. The viability of the game species populations proposed to be hunted is not expected to be negatively affected by hunting according to State season guidelines.

V. DESCRIPTION OF THE HUNTING PROGRAM

Current opportunities

There are currently no hunting opportunities offered at Crane Meadows NWR. The limited size and distribution of current Service land ownership at the Refuge has limited our ability to offer quality hunting opportunities. However, because of the demand for, and importance of providing this activity on the Refuge, the Service proposed to open hunting to underserved audiences on the Refuge in 2011. By beginning with short-duration, assisted, managed hunts, Refuge staff can provide hunting opportunities in a controlled fashion, direct these activities to specific audiences, and adaptively evaluate the hunting program for expansion or reduction based on demand and program success. The section below describes the proposed special hunting opportunities for underserved audiences; these will be the first hunts offered on the Refuge since its inception.

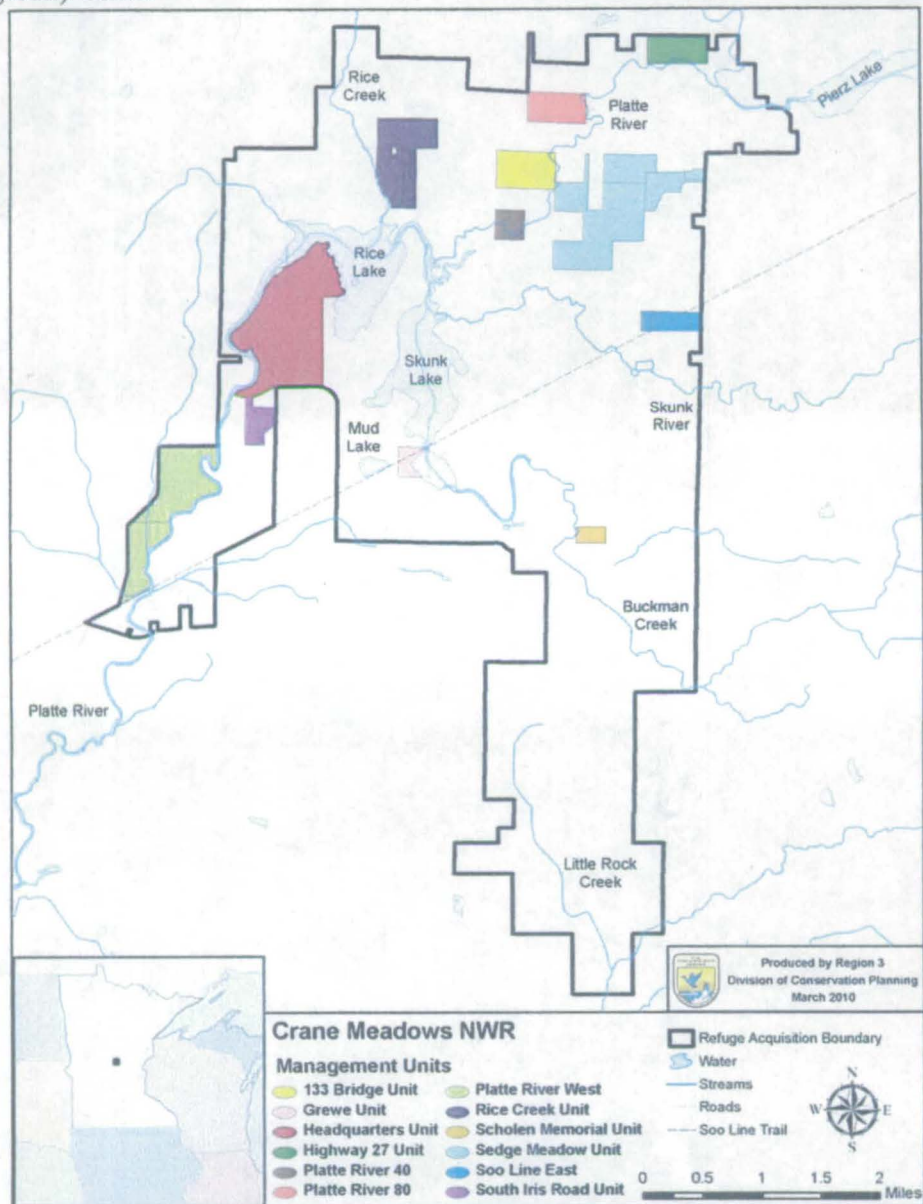
Opportunities for 2011 and Beyond

Hunting opportunities discussed in the 2011 EA outlined as the Preferred Alternative includes: opening select areas to white-tailed deer firearms and/or archery hunts, and spring turkey hunting for youth and persons with disabilities that are consistent with state seasons and regulations.

Turkey and deer hunting for underserved audiences will be permitted on the Refuge, but will be administratively limited to specific locations, designated ingress and egress routes, and number of people. These restrictions will help minimize disturbance both to flora and fauna and to limit disturbance to these localized areas designated for hunting. Seasons, bag limits, and regulations will be consistent with those set by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR).

The following areas will be considered designated hunting areas based on access, ability to manage, and boundary locations: the Headquarters, Sedge Meadow, and Platte River West Units (Figure 2). All or parts of the Refuge may be closed to hunting at any time if necessary for public safety, to provide wildlife sanctuary, burning, or for other reasons.

Figure 2. Crane Meadows NWR landownership and unit names and locations; designated hunting areas include: Headquarters (dark red), Sedge Meadow (light blue), and Platte River West (light green) Units.



Spring Turkey Hunt

Who: Youth and hunters with disabilities. The hunt will be offered to both special interest groups and will be determined by a first come, first serve basis through an application process with the intent to accommodate both interest groups. A maximum of 5 hunters plus one assistant per hunter per period will be allowed to participate.

What: Spring turkey hunt following State seasons and regulations. The Refuge will not offer a fall turkey hunt.

When: The spring season (regulated by the State, described above).

Where: Blind locations will be restricted to three Refuge Units (Headquarters, Sedge Meadow, and Platte River West).

How: Hunts will be administered by Refuge staff with the help of volunteers, MNDNR, and participating hunting organizations or clubs.

There are 8 spring hunting periods in the State of Minnesota, each lasting 5 days in length generally starting on the 2nd Wednesday of April. Turkey hunts for underserved audiences on the Refuge will coincide with these state seasons. A maximum of 5 disabled hunters and/or youth hunters per 5 day hunting period will be permitted and they must be accompanied by one non-hunting assistant or mentor per hunter. Thus, the maximum number of people during a given 5 day period will be 10. These limitations will minimize disturbance of habitat and other wildlife species. A maximum of 5 portable hunting blinds provided by the Refuge will be setup in advance and placement will be based on many factors including proximity to roads, accessibility, biological concerns, turkey sign and movement patterns, etc.

Deer Hunt

Who: Youth and hunters with disabilities for archery or firearms. The hunt will be offered to either special interest group and will be determined by a first come first serve basis through an application process with the intent to accommodate both interest groups. A maximum of 15 hunters will be allowed to participate.

What: A 3 day white-tailed deer hunt starting on a Friday and finishing on Sunday. Hunters will abide by state rules and regulations. The preceding Thursday will be orientation and briefing for hunters, as well as their assistants.

When: The deer hunt will be conducted during early fall; either the first or second weekend in October. The final dates will be decided as a collaborative effort with the MNDNR and participating hunting organizations or clubs.

Where: As directed by the CCP, the hunting area will be restricted to 3 Refuge Units (Headquarters, Sedge Meadow, and Platte River West).

How: Hunts will be administered by Refuge staff with the help from volunteers, MNDNR, and participating hunting organizations or clubs.

Consultation and Coordination with the State

Crane Meadows will conduct hunting programs within the framework of state and federal regulations. All authorized hunts are at least as restrictive as the State of Minnesota. By maintaining hunting regulations that are as, or more, restrictive than the state, individual refuges ensure that they are maintaining seasons which are supportive of management on a local and regional basis. The EA associated with this Hunting Chapter and the Preferred Alternative discussed in that document, has been reviewed and is supported by the MNDNR. The Refuge has moved forward with developing this Hunting Chapter based upon earlier formal coordination with the MNDNR as well as the intervening informal discussions. The results of this coordination are reflected in this Chapter. Crane Meadows NWR will continue to consult and coordinate with the MNDNR annually to maintain regulations and programs that are consistent with the state; as well as to monitor populations of game species and set harvest goals.

Methods of Control and Enforcement

The enforcement of Refuge and State hunting regulations, trespass and other public use violations normally associated with management of a National Wildlife Refuge is the responsibility of commissioned Refuge Law Enforcement Officers. The Law Enforcement Officer of the Refuge will cooperate with, and is assisted, by state, county and city police officers as well as state conservation officers. The procedures used for obtaining law enforcement assistance are based on the legal jurisdiction where incidents occur. The Refuge regularly meets with the various state, city and county law enforcement agencies to develop agreements and strategies to ensure law enforcement operations are performed as safely and efficiently as possible. The Refuge also uses non-law enforcement staff to manage hunting activities. Refuge staff will administer the hunting program in coordination with the MNDNR, local hunting clubs or chapters, and other organizations interested in assisting with specialty hunts. The Refuge Law Enforcement Officer will provide assistance to ensure participants comply with federal, state, and refuge specific laws and regulations. Youth hunters must be accompanied by a mentor and hunters with disabilities must be accompanied by an assistant.

Funding and Staffing Requirements

These events will require a great deal of coordination and collaboration with partners and local hunters. No current staff time is allocated for coordinating hunting activities, but it is anticipated that a considerable amount of time and financial resources will be required to host these managed hunts. A great deal of time would be required to make initial contacts, write grants, and coordinate activities with partners and other contributing groups. Scouting and setup activities would follow, as well as coordinating logistics such as transportation of hunters to and from blinds. It is estimated that at least 160 hours of prep time would be required to conduct the first special hunt, and that planning would begin a minimum of one year in advance of the event. Once established, it is assumed that planning and setup for successive hunts would be less labor intensive.

A small amount of road maintenance, mowing, and other upkeep will need to be performed, but are funded as part of regular Refuge management activities. Based on a review of the Refuge

budget there is currently enough funding to ensure compatibility and to administer and manage the use. Law enforcement is a primary tool necessary to ensure proper and safe administration of this use. There is a Law Enforcement Officer stationed for the Sherburne-Crane Meadows Complex. The Refuge will also work with the Minnesota DNR to ensure that conservation officers are aware of this use on the Refuge, and are available to assist with law enforcement as a part of their routine duties.

VI. MEASURES TO BE TAKEN TO AVOID CONFLICTS WITH OTHER MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Biological Conflicts

The Refuge avoids conflict related to biological resources by adopting the “wildlife first” principle explicitly stated in the Improvement Act. Conserving and restoring habitat for the benefit of wildlife species is an integral part of any long-range plan for national wildlife refuges. Thus, any public use activity deemed compatible should have no or minimal disturbance to habitat, wildlife, or the biological objectives of the Refuge. The Environmental Assessment that was developed for the hunting program in 2011 discusses potential impacts to habitat, game species populations, other wildlife, migratory birds, and threatened and endangered species. The assessment concluded that impacts of the current hunting program and the hunting opportunities outlined in the Preferred Alternative will be non-existent, minimal, or temporary for all biological entities.

Staff monitors species population trends to ensure that target species can be hunted at the Refuge without adversely affecting the species. These monitoring activities include direct observation of populations, consultation with state and Service species specialists, and review of current species survey information and research. In addition, the Refuge will limit or exclude hunting activities on portions of the Refuge. Areas of the Refuge that are not hunted provide sanctuary for wildlife species. If conflicts were to arise between the hunting program and the integrity of any biological entity on the Refuge or management activities that were biologically related, hunts will be delayed until resolution.

Spring turkey hunting has the most potential for conflicting with biological resources because the proposed turkey hunt will coincide with part of the nesting and breeding season (i.e. “sanctuary time”) of many wildlife species. For this reason, the proposed hunt will be limited in time, number of participants, and locations. For example, three active Bald Eagle nests are known to occur within the acquisition boundary of the Refuge, but the spring turkey hunt will not be conducted near nesting eagles. In general, due to the dispersed and stealthy nature of turkey hunting, it presents minimal conflicts with other wildlife in the spring.

Public Use Conflicts

In an effort to avoid conflicts with non-hunting priority recreational uses as outlined in the Improvement Act, and for safety, the Refuge enforce a series of Refuge-specific hunting regulations. Hunting is either not allowed on certain units or is restricted by location or methods. Hunts on units open to hunting will be administered in such a way to avoid conflict with any

non-consumptive uses and to provide safety for all users. The boundaries of all lands owned by the Service are posted with Refuge boundary signs. Areas administratively closed to hunting are clearly marked with "No Hunting Zone" or "Area Beyond This Sign Closed" signs.

Administrative Conflicts

Refuge management activities can be accomplished without conflict with hunting activities through the use of administratively closed areas, timing of hunts, and methods of hunt. The most potential for conflict with management activities occurs during the spring and fall prescribed fire season. Hunting will be planned to not conflict with prescribed burning needs.

VII. CONDUCT OF THE HUNT

Hunting Regulations

All hunting on the Refuge will be consistent with state and federal laws and regulations and those pertaining to all National Wildlife Refuge System lands. Regulations specific to hunting on National Wildlife Refuges are found in 50 CFR 32.2 and are as follows:

The following provisions shall apply to each person while engaged in public hunting on areas of the National Wildlife Refuge System:

- (a) Each person shall secure and possess the required State license.
- (b) Each person 16 years of age and older shall secure and possess a Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp while hunting migratory waterfowl.
- (c) Each person shall comply with the applicable provisions of Federal law and regulations including this subchapter and the current Federal Migratory Bird Regulations.
- (d) Each person shall comply with the applicable provisions of the laws and regulations of the State wherein any area is located unless further restricted by Federal law or regulation.
- (e) Each person shall comply with the terms and conditions authorizing access or use of wildlife refuges, including the terms and conditions under which hunting permits are issued.
- (f) Each person must comply with the provisions of any refuge-specific regulations governing hunting on the wildlife refuge area. Regulations, special conditions, and maps of the hunting areas for a particular wildlife refuge are available at that area's headquarters. In addition, refuge-specific hunting regulations for migratory game bird, upland game, and big game hunting appear in §§32.20 through 32.72.
- (g) The use of any drug on any arrow for bow hunting on national wildlife refuges is prohibited. Archers may not have arrows employing such drugs in their possession on any national wildlife refuge.
- (h) The unauthorized distribution of bait and the hunting over bait is prohibited on wildlife refuge areas. (Baiting is authorized in accordance with State regulations on national wildlife refuges in Alaska).
- (i) The use of nails, wire, screws or bolts to attach a stand to a tree, or hunting from a tree into which a metal object has been driven to support a hunter is prohibited on wildlife refuge areas.
- (j) The use or possession of alcoholic beverages while hunting is prohibited.

(k) You may possess only approved nontoxic shot while in the field, which we identify in 50 CFR 20.21(j), while on Waterfowl Production Areas, or on certain other areas of the National Wildlife Refuge System as delineated on maps, leaflets and/or signs, available at each refuge headquarters or posted at each refuge, or as stated in refuge-specific regulations. Where we allow turkey and deer hunting, you may use slugs and shot containing lead to hunt these species unless prohibited by refuge-specific regulations and/or State

Other regulations related to activities typically associated with hunting and found elsewhere in 50 CFR follow (in plain language) also apply to all National Wildlife Refuges.

- Public access, including hunting, is prohibited in administratively closed areas (50 CFR 26.21). (Examples of signs posted on administratively closed areas at the Crane Meadows National Wildlife Refuge include “Area Beyond This Sign Closed” or “No Hunting Zone.”)
- Public access, including hunting, is allowed only in designated areas (50 CFR 26.21).
- No motorized vehicles are allowed within the hunting units except at designated parking areas or by Special Use Permit (50 CFR 27.31).
- Target shooting is prohibited (50 CFR 27.42, 27.43).

The regulations, as they are published in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), are official notification to the public. Copies of the CFR can be found in libraries and on the internet. Hunting regulations specific to Crane Meadows NWR are found in the Code of Federal Regulations: Section 32.42 Minnesota; Draft for Crane Meadows National Wildlife Refuge

A. Migratory Game Bird Hunting. [Reserved]

B. Upland Game Hunting. [Reserved]

C. Big Game Hunting.

We allow hunting of white-tailed deer and turkey on designated areas of the refuge in accordance with State regulations subject to the following conditions:

Add text for conditions C.1. – C.10. to read:

C.1. We allow archery deer hunting for youth hunters and firearms deer hunting for persons with disabilities.

C.2. We allow turkey hunting for youth hunters and persons with disabilities during the State spring turkey season.

C.3. The construction or use of permanent blinds, platforms or ladders is not permitted.

C.4. All stands must be removed from the refuge at the end of each day's hunt.

C.5. You must dismantle hunting blinds, platforms, and ladders made from natural vegetation at the end of each day.

C.6. We prohibit the possession of hunting firearms or archery equipment on areas closed to white-tailed deer or turkey hunting.

C.7. We prohibit deer pushes or deer drives in the areas closed to deer hunting.

C.8. We prohibit entry to hunting areas earlier than 2 hours before legal shooting hours.

C.9. We prohibit camping.

C.10. Turkey hunters may possess only approved nontoxic shot while in the field.

C.11. Hunting weapons must be unloaded and cased, or broken down, when being transported on Refuge roads.

Special Hunts

A special hunt is an activity focused on certain populations of hunters to provide them with additional opportunities or methods of hunting through a Refuge sponsored program or partners agreement. The populations targeted for these hunts are youth hunters and hunters with disabilities or other underserved hunter populations. The goal of special hunts is to provide quality recreational hunting experiences that may be limited or not available for these underserved hunting populations within the structure of general public hunting. All special hunts require Refuge specific authorization and are conducted within the framework of the state seasons and regulations for the species proposed to be hunted. Special hunts on the Refuge will include deer (firearms and archery) and spring turkey for youth hunters and persons with disabilities. These special hunts were proposed by Refuge management in 2011 (details of these hunts are described in the "Opportunities for 2011 and Beyond" section).

Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunt

A positive reaction is anticipated by the public to opening hunting on the Refuge as discussed in this Hunt Plan. In general, a hunting program at the Refuge is supported by the public and the opportunity to hunt has been an expectation since Refuge establishment in 1992.

Hunter Application and Registration

There are application and registration processes associated with the youth hunts and hunts for persons with disabilities that are coordinated by refuge partners. The Refuge issues a SUP to an organization such as Capable Partners, Wheelin' Sportsman or other groups that assist with these types of hunts annually to enable them to coordinate accessible hunting activities on the Refuge. Applications are for the turkey and deer hunting programs for youth and hunters with disabilities. All interested parties will be sent a letter notifying them of the available hunts prior to the season and then are selected on a first come first serve basis. For the hunts that designed for hunters with disabilities priority will be given to mobility impaired hunters. Should the Refuge implement other application or registration procedures, it will use the Office of Management and Budget approved forms.

Hunter Selection

Seasons for youth and persons with disabilities will be determined by a first come first serve basis through the application process described above. It is the Refuge's intent to accommodate both interest groups and collaborate with partners and participating hunting organization to administer special hunts including hunter selection.

Announcing and Publicizing the Hunts

A News Release will be sent out prior to each hunt every year to a multi media market. Hunting opportunities will also be advertised through groups such as the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, the National Turkey Federation and other disabled and youth hunter organizations.

Hunting Orientation and Safety

The Refuge requires no specific orientation or safety training for hunters participating in general hunting activities. The State of Minnesota has established hunter education and safety training requirements that have been in effect for several years. These apply to all hunters in Minnesota, including those that hunt the Refuge. Hunter orientation to Refuge lands and areas open to hunting are provided directly on the Refuge through the use of signs, brochures, flyers, maps, trail guides and the internet. Participants in special hunts receive orientation and safety training as part of those programs.

Entry and Access Procedures

Walking is the preferred method of travel to access hunting locations; however, other methods of transportation maybe more practical depending on accessibility and the ability of the hunter. Special access accommodations for persons with disabilities will be allowed on a situation basis and approved when reservations are made; but these accommodations will have restrictions to limit adverse impacts to Refuge habitats. All hunters will use permanent blinds set up by Refuge personnel or use portable blinds in pre-approved locations.

Ingress and egress points will also be restricted to control access by hunters and their assistants to minimize habitat degradation. The Platte River West and Sedge Meadows unit are accessible by county roads. The Headquarters Unit has a 3.5 mile trail, with roads and firebreak network already established and these will be used for ingress and egress routes. Wheeled carts and sleds will be permitted in the select areas for hunting, for hauling deer out. No ATVs, OHVs or snowmobiles are permitted on the Refuge.

Hunter Requirements

Hunters must comply with federal, state, and Refuge specific rules and regulations including licensing, registration of game, bag limits, etc.. A hunter participating in a special hunt for persons with a physical disability must have a verified statement of the disability by a licensed physician or must be participating in a program for hunters with disabilities sponsored by a nonprofit organization. Hunters with disabilities possessing a MNDNR issued permit exempting

them from particular state regulations based upon their disability will be eligible to apply for Refuge specific authorization to participate in accessible hunting opportunities on the Refuge. Youth hunters must be of legal age set by the state, to participate in a special youth hunt on the Refuge. Youth hunters must be accompanied by a mentor and persons with disabilities must be accompanied by an assistant.

The Refuge does not routinely require hunters to report on hunting activities or harvest separately from that already required by the state of Minnesota. Minnesota reporting requirements include the Migratory Bird Harvest Information Program (HIP), and turkey and deer registration. Should an additional reporting program be implemented, the Refuge will use the appropriate form approved by the Office of Management and Budget. All hunters and their belongings must leave with the hunter each day. Also, hunters on the Refuge are expected to be ethical hunters and respect other hunters, non-consumptive users, wildlife species, and the environment while on Refuge lands.

VIII. REFERENCES

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COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Hunting

Refuge Name: Crane Meadows NWR

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

- Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742f(a)(4)) & (16 U.S.C. 742f(b)(1))
- Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 (16 U.S.C. 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583)

Refuge Purpose(s):

Crane Meadows National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1992...

- "... 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)
- "... the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions ..." 16 U.S.C. 3901(b), 100 Stat. 3583 (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986)

National Wildlife System Mission:

The National Wildlife Refuge System mission is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee).

Description of Use:

What is the use? Hunting of game is an activity conducted by the public under regulation authority of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Under the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 hunting is a priority public use. The Refuge plans to open hunting as a public use within the 15-year life of the CCP, however at this stage in the Refuge's development, the hunting opportunity will take the form of special, managed hunting events for white-tailed deer and turkey.

Where is the use conducted? Refuge hunting areas must meet minimum size criteria in order to offer quality hunting experience opportunities, and must have enforceable boundaries. Within the existing Refuge landholdings, special, managed hunting events will occur primarily on the Headquarters Unit of the Refuge until additional lands are acquired in fee-title by the Refuge to

create hunting areas of sufficient size. The west, north, and most of the east sides of the Headquarters Unit are bound by water features, and the south side is bound by Iris Road, simplifying containment of the activity. The Platte River West and Sedge Meadow Units may also be opened in the future as resources allow. Similar to the Headquarters Unit, the Platte River West Unit is bound by natural water features or roads on nearly all sides. In the future it is expected that hunting will be opened on these additional portions of the Refuge, and ultimately Refuge-wide upon full acquisition.

When is the use conducted? Special, managed hunting events for persons with disabilities and for youth will be scheduled at a time coordinated with, and agreed upon by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR). There are eight spring turkey hunting periods in the state of Minnesota, each lasting 5 days in length generally starting on the second Wednesday of April. Where possible, managed turkey hunts on the Refuge will coincide with these state seasons and managed deer hunting events will coincide with the state gun deer season in November and December. Typically, deer hunts for persons with disabilities are conducted earlier than the normal Minnesota deer hunting season to coincide with warmer temperatures. The Refuge staff will work with other FWS stations, Camp Ripley, the Minnesota DNR, the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, organizations devoted to persons with disabilities, as well as other groups to determine the type of hunt, timing, location, and resources needed to conduct a quality hunt.

How is the use conducted? Special, managed white-tailed deer and turkey hunting events will occur in collaboration with partners such as Minnesota DNR, Wheelin' Sportsmen, National Wild Turkey Foundation, Capable Partners, Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, Pheasants Forever, Camp Ripley, Minnesota State Archery Association, local sportsmen's clubs, and others. These events will require a substantial amount of coordination and support from volunteers, but these efforts will allow the Refuge to open hunting as a use on the Refuge in a controlled and manageable way despite minimal landholdings. They will also allow the Refuge to tailor these events to reach target audiences, including hunters with disabilities and youth hunters. Hunting at Crane Meadows NWR will adhere to the hunting step-down management plan, which will be completed within 2 years of CCP approval and will provide further details for hunting on the Refuge. All hunting activities follow applicable state regulations, except where the Refuge administers further restrictions to ensure a quality hunt and visitor and staff safety.

Why is the use being proposed? Hunting is a priority general public use of the Refuge System that is also an important wildlife management tool. The Service recognizes hunting as a healthy, traditional outdoor pastime, deeply rooted in the American heritage. Hunting can instill a unique understanding and appreciation of wildlife, their behavior, and their habitat needs. Hunting programs can promote understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management on lands and waters in the Refuge System. A substantial portion of land within the Refuge acquisition boundary is already currently utilized for hunting, including land owned and managed by the Minnesota DNR in wildlife management areas, by private hunting clubs, and by private landowners. Hunting was discussed during initial planning events for the establishment of Crane Meadows NWR, and has been a desired activity on the Refuge ever since.

Availability of Resources:

These events will require a great deal of coordination and collaboration with partners and local hunters. No current staff time is allocated for coordinating hunting activities, but it is anticipated that a considerable amount of time and financial resources will be required to host these managed hunts. A great deal of time would be required to make initial contacts, write grants, and coordinate activities with partners and other contributing groups. Scouting and setup activities would follow, as well as coordinating logistics such as transportation of hunters to and from blinds. It is estimated that at least 160 hours of preparation time would be required to conduct the first special hunt, and that planning would begin a minimum of one year in advance of the event. Once established, it is assumed that planning and setup for successive hunts would be less labor intensive.

A small amount of road maintenance, mowing, and other upkeep will need to be performed, but are funded as part of regular Refuge management activities. Based on a review of the Refuge budget there is currently enough funding to ensure compatibility and to administer and manage the use. Law enforcement is a primary tool necessary to ensure proper and safe administration of this use, and although there is no Law Enforcement Officer stationed at the Refuge, law enforcement services are available through the Service's Regional Law Enforcement Program. The Refuge will work with the Minnesota DNR to ensure that conservation officers are aware of this use on the Refuge, and are available to assist with law enforcement as a part of their routine duties.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Short-term impacts: Providing carefully planned and managed hunting events with restrictions that limit access to specific Refuge locations will generally minimize disturbance to wildlife populations, the environment, and non-consumptive users. Although hunting causes mortality of target species, harvesting populations to the carrying capacity of existing habitat and only taking the harvestable surplus ensures long-term health and survival of game species, populations, and their associated ecosystem. The presence and activity of hunters may cause temporary disturbance to other wildlife in the area, but there are no foreseeable detrimental impacts to these species. Concerns are primarily centered on the possibility of impacting non-target species that are sensitive to disturbance; especially during spring turkey hunting when most animals are breeding or nesting. Non-hunting public uses may be temporarily disrupted or postponed during specialized hunts. Visitor safety and law enforcement issues are the priority when designing and planning all hunting activities on refuges. Vehicle traffic will increase slightly during the hunting events, and the sound of gun shots will temporarily reduce the serenity for the non-hunting public. Loss of plants from foot traffic is minor, or temporary. Soil and plant disturbance may occur in ingress and egress routes, but will be minor and temporary because of the limited and controlled use associated with the managed hunts.

Long-term impacts: No detrimental long-term impacts from hunting are anticipated as long as wildlife populations are monitored through the Refuge biological program or by state officials. Long-term beneficial impacts of this use would be the ability to manage targeted wildlife populations to levels that reflect the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. When deer populations

become over-abundant they can have profound negative impacts on their environment through herbivory thereby directly and indirectly affecting other native plants and wildlife species.

Cumulative impacts: There are no anticipated cumulative impacts. Harvest on the Refuge would be very limited and would fall within the state's population management goals which are based on the best available information.

All hunts would follow all applicable laws, regulations and policies; including title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations, the National Wildlife Refuge System Manual, the mission and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the purposes, goals, and objectives of Crane Meadows NWR. Operating this activity does not hinder the Refuge's ability to meet habitat goals, provides for the safety of the area's citizens, and supports several of the primary objectives of the Refuge. The Environmental Assessment for the Draft CCP for Crane Meadows NWR contains a more detailed discussion of the anticipated impacts of hunting on the Refuge.

Public Review and Comment:

This compatibility determination is part of the Draft CCP and EA for Crane Meadows NWR. Public notification and review includes a notice of availability published in the Federal Register, 30-day comment period, local media announcements, and a public meeting at the Refuge. Comments received and agency responses will be included in the final CCP.

Determination:

☐ Use is not compatible.

☒ Use is compatible with the following stipulations.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

To ensure compatibility with National Wildlife Refuge System and Crane Meadows NWR goals and objectives the activity can only occur under the following stipulations:

1. Hunting will only occur on the Refuge during special, managed hunting events, and will adhere to the Refuge's hunting step-down management plan.
2. Appropriate state hunting licenses and antlerless harvest permits (for deer) are required. Deer and turkeys harvested must be registered at MNDNR check stations in accordance with state regulations. All state hunting regulations apply unless otherwise stated in the Refuge hunt plan and state regulations.
3. Hunting will only occur within designated areas on the Refuge that meet minimum size requirements and have enforceable boundaries. These areas may include, but are not limited to the following Refuge Units: Headquarters, Platte River West, and Sedge Meadows.
4. Use of motorized vehicles is limited to maintained roads and parking areas. Exceptions would be allowed as a means to provide access to hunters with disabilities, but only under the review of the Refuge Manager.

5. This use is subject to modification if on-site monitoring by Refuge personnel or other authorized personnel results in unanticipated negative impacts to public safety, wildlife species, or their habitats.
6. Camping, overnight use, and fires are prohibited.

Justification:

This use has been determined compatible provided the above stipulations are implemented. This use is being permitted because it is a priority public use and will not diminish the primary purposes of the Refuge. This use will meet the mission of the NWRS by providing renewable resources for the benefit of the American public while conserving fish, wildlife, and plant resources on Refuge lands.

Hunting is one of the six priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Service policy directs us to provide hunting opportunities when compatible with Refuge management, and offering this use was a long-term goal of the Refuge when it was established in 1992. Managed hunting programs help promote an understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management. Additionally, managed hunts on the Refuge provide a traditional recreational activity with no definable adverse impacts to the biological integrity or habitat sustainability of Refuge resources. The limited size and distribution of current Service land ownership at the Refuge continues to limit our ability to offer quality hunting experience opportunities, but management has long understood the demand for, and importance of providing this activity on the Refuge. By beginning with short-duration, assisted, managed hunts, Refuge staff can provide hunting opportunities in a controlled fashion, direct these activities to specific audiences, and adaptively evaluate the hunting program for expansion or reduction based on demand and program success.

Without a deer hunting program as a management tool, this species could adversely affect plant communities and hence alter ecological diversity and succession. Excessive herbivory by deer populations could result in significant negative impacts to plant and animal communities, including those of special concern, or of Service trust responsibility. This impact has been well documented and accepted through research. Hunting is also an effective management tool to keep turkey populations within ecosystem limits.

Refuge Manager: Ame Jittauer 8/25/10
Signature Date

Concurrence:

Regional Chief: Rick Schuff 9/14/10
Signature Date

Mandatory 10 or 15 year Re-evaluation Date: 2025