

Compatibility Determination

Use: Recreational Hunting and Fishing

Primary Uses: Hunting (big game, waterfowl, other migratory birds, and upland game), fishing (general and other).

Supporting and Incidental Uses: Boating (motorized and non-motorized), snowmobiling, snowshoeing, firewood and natural resource gathering, camping, cross-country skiing, skijoring, dog sledding, pets, hiking and backpacking, picnicking, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, videography, fixed-wing aircraft landings, and swimming.

Refuge Name: Selawik National Wildlife Refuge

Establishment and Acquisition Authority: The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) established the 2.5-million-acre Selawik National Wildlife Refuge (Selawik refuge, refuge) as part of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuge System (Department of the Interior) on December 2, 1980.

Selawik Refuge Purposes: As stated in ANILCA Section 302 (7) (B), the purposes for which the Selawik Refuge was established and shall be managed include:

- (i) to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to, the Western Arctic caribou herd (including participation in coordinated ecological studies and management of these caribou), waterfowl, shorebirds and other migratory birds, and salmon and Sheefish;
- (ii) to fulfill international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats;
- (iii) to provide, in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in subparagraphs (i) and (ii), the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents; and
- (iv) to ensure, to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in subparagraph (i), water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge.

The purpose of the congressionally designated Selawik Wilderness Area is to secure an enduring resource of wilderness, protect and preserve the wilderness character of the area as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS), and administer the area for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave it unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as designated wilderness.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

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

Description of Uses

This description addresses recreational hunting and fishing as a compatible use on Federal lands within Selawik refuge. Recreational hunting and fishing were found to be compatible when the refuge was established in 1980 and in 1994, subject to reasonable regulation. The primary means of access for recreational hunting and fishing on the refuge is by fixed-wing aircraft on wheels or floats. The majority of visitors utilize commercial transporters. Other means of access include snowmobiles, motorboats, non-motorized boats, dog sled, skiing, skijoring, and snowshoeing. Associated activities such as camping, backpacking, hiking, berry picking, and other incidental uses are considered part of recreational hunting and recreational fishing. Recreational hunting and fishing may occur year round but typically take place in the fall on the major tributaries and large lakes in the middle and upper Selawik River drainage. Most recreational hunting is for caribou, moose, and black and brown bears, but incidental take of wolf, wolverine, small game, and waterfowl may occur in conjunction with big game hunts as allowed under State of Alaska hunting regulations (5 AAC). Recreational fishing on the refuge occurs in conjunction with big game hunting and river floating, with few visitors coming to the refuge only to fish. Sheefish, northern pike, and grayling are popular species for recreational anglers.

During the fall, when the refuge is most heavily used by recreational hunters and anglers, refuge staff coordinates the sharing of surveillance information between refuge law enforcement officers, the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Native villages, and Native Corporations having lands in and around the refuge. The number of recreational use-days for fishing, and small game and waterfowl hunting on the refuge is minimal. Levels of recreational hunting and fishing are estimated by staff observations and annual reports provided by air taxi operators, big game guides, and transporters who transport most recreational users to the refuge. It is estimated that less than 200 people annually participate in recreational hunting and fishing on the refuge. The average length of stay is 7 to 10 days, representing an estimated 1,400–2,000 user days a year for these activities on the refuge.

Availability of Resources

Adequate refuge personnel and base operational funds are available to manage recreational hunting and fishing activities at existing and projected levels. Management primarily includes the inventory and monitoring of fish and wildlife; research on harvested species; environmental education, such as steel shot clinics, culture and science camps, or other efforts aimed at improving public understanding of major conservation issues; and monitoring levels and locations of public use during law enforcement patrols.

Refuge staff members opportunistically conduct outreach to increase visitor awareness of the status of local fish and wildlife populations, the importance of knowing land ownership and regulatory boundaries, and how to minimize disruption of subsistence activities and other social conflicts. Refuge staff members spend considerable time participating in and supporting the regulatory development process with the Federal Subsistence Board, Alaska Migratory Bird Co-management Council, Regional Advisory Council (RAC), the GMU 23 Working Group, and the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group to ensure harvest levels are sustainable and user conflicts prevented or minimized.

Anticipated Impacts of Uses

Fish and wildlife harvested by recreational users at current and projected levels, in accordance with established State and Federal regulations pertaining to seasons, bag limits, and methods of harvest, are not expected to have long-term impacts on the overall populations of fish and wildlife

resources within the refuge. State and Federal biologists monitor fish and game populations, and State and Federal regulatory bodies continually respond to management needs by adopting regulations to ensure the continued health of fish and wildlife populations. The combination of Alaska State regulations (5AAC) and the Federal Subsistence regulations (50 CFR part 100) are intended to provide a sustainable harvest over the long term. It is possible that localized or short-term population reductions may occur due to unanticipated changes in physical condition of animals, environmental conditions, distribution, predation, and harvest pressure.

Refuge habitats will remain largely unaffected by the continuation of recreational hunting and fishing on refuge lands as outlined in the draft revised comprehensive conservation plan and environmental assessment. With access by boat or plane, there is a potential for introduction of invasive plant species or contamination from fuel spills. The use of airplanes on wheels usually takes place on gravel bars below mean high-water mark, which does not typically affect vegetation or fish habitat. Use of airplanes on skis or wheel-skis occurs with adequate snow cover to protect underlying vegetation. Some specific sites may receive repeated use for camping due to their accessibility. Firewood collecting and littering could be a problem at these locations, but they would be localized and easily monitored during regular refuge patrols.

Temporary displacement and or disturbance to wildlife can occur with any form of motorized transport (Bouffard 1982; Calef et al. 1976; Ward et al. 1994). An increase in visitors engaged in this activity or a change in the current distribution pattern of recreational hunting and fishing on the refuge could interfere with users engaged in subsistence activities. Commercial permit holders who transport recreational users are encouraged to share refuge information packets designed to minimize these impacts with their clients. All pilots flying into the refuge to hunt big game are required to take a State of Alaska approved education course (5 AAC 92.003). This program is designed to minimize conflicts between local subsistence hunters and visiting hunters in GMU 23. Anticipated and unanticipated impacts to anadromous fish and resident fish and wildlife populations can be mitigated through further restriction on methods, means, seasons of harvest, and bag limits by the Alaska Boards of Fisheries and Game and Federal Subsistence Board.

Public Review and Comment

Public comments were solicited concurrently with the revision of the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (USFWS 2010). Public comments on compatibility determinations were accepted during the public review period for the draft plan and announced in the Federal Register. The public comment period was October 21, 2010 to March 15, 2011, which provided 145 days for public review. We mailed the full draft plan and a summary to the individuals and organizations on our mailing list. We invited public comments through an advertisement in a local newspaper and attended city council meetings in Selawik and Noorvik to receive comments on the draft plan. Planning team members met with the Citizen's Advisory Commission on Federal Areas to discuss the issues at Selawik refuge and alternatives that were proposed in the draft plan. The draft compatibility determinations were posted on the Service's Region 7 Web page.

We received no comments on the draft of this compatibility determination. One individual asked for the Service's definition of the "general public" as it pertains to hunting. Several reviewers expressed opposition to hunting in general. One individual mentioned that new regulations needed to be established and enforced regarding the removal of killed game.

Refuge Determination (check one below)

Use is not compatible

Use is compatible

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

Recreational hunters and anglers on the Selawik refuge lands will be required to comply with any regulations in place such as seasonal closures for resource protection.

The Selawik Fishery Management Plan (1993) will be used to identify specific management actions to ensure that recreational fishing and related activities continue to remain compatible with refuge purposes. Permit conditions for commercial transporters and guides include stipulations to minimize associated impacts of recreational hunting and fishing.

Justification

All refuge lands within the boundary of the Selawik refuge are open to public access. The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (as amended by the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997) identifies recreational hunting and fishing as two of six priority public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The law states "when managed in accordance with principles of sound fish and wildlife management, administration of this use has been and is expected to continue to be generally compatible and that priority public uses should receive enhanced consideration over other public uses in refuge planning and management." The law also directs the Service to provide increased opportunities for families to experience compatible wildlife-dependent recreation particularly opportunities for parents and their children to safely engage in traditional outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing.

Means of access by airplanes, motorboats, snowmobiles, and non-motorized means for traditional activities, as provided by ANILCA and as currently regulated by the Service, have not materially interfered with or detracted from refuge purposes. Should motorized transportation grow to levels where it interferes with refuge purposes, staff would work with hunters and State of Alaska to address impacts and resolve compatibility concerns. Recreational hunting and fishing are activities that Congress intended to preserve when the refuge was established by ANILCA. Recreational hunting and fishing on the Selawik refuge provides the public with quality, safe, and unique opportunities found few places elsewhere in the world. To ensure sustainability of harvest of wildlife resources both the Federal Subsistence Board and State Board of Game regularly adopt regulations in response to wildlife population levels and management needs. These regulations provide adequate protection for fish and wildlife resources on refuge lands and other refuge purposes. After fully considering the impacts of these activities, as described previously in the "Anticipated Impacts" section of this document, it is my determination that recreational hunting and recreational fishing within the refuge do not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes of the refuge or mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Supporting Documents

Bouffard, S. 1982. Wildlife values versus human recreation: Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference 47: 553-558.

Calef, G. W., E. A. DeBock, and G. M. Lortie. 1976. The reaction of barren-ground caribou to aircraft. Arctic 29(4): 201-212.

Miller, M. W. 1994. Route selection to minimize helicopter disturbance of molting Pacific black brant: A simulation. Arctic 47: 341-349.

Ward, D. H., R. A. Stehn, D. V. Derksen. 1994. Response of staging brant to disturbance at the Izembek Lagoon, Alaska. Wildlife Society Bulletin 22: 220-228.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1993. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge Fishery Management Plan. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Kotzebue, Alaska. 47 pp.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Wilderness Review and Environmental Impact Statement. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska. 378 pp.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987. Record of Decision: Selawik National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness Review, and Wild River Plan. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska. 15 pp.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. Draft Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, AK. 285 pp (plus ten appendices).

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. Final Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, AK.

Refuge Determination

Refuge Manager/
Project Leader Approval:


Lee Anne Ayres

14 July 2011
Date

Concurrence

Regional Chief
National Wildlife
Refuge System:


Mitch Ellis

7-20-2011
Date

Mandatory 15-Year Re-evaluation Date (for priority public uses): 2026

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision

- Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Memorandum
- Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Memorandum
- Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact
- Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision

