

Compatibility Determination for Firewood Gathering for Personal Use at Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Use Category

Natural Resource Collection

Refuge Use Type

Plant gathering, non-commercial (firewood)

Refuge

Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Purposes and Establishing and Acquisition Authorities

National Wildlife Refuge System lands are managed consistent with a number of federal statutes, regulations, policies, and other guidance. The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended (16 United States Code [U.S.C.] 668dd–668ee) (Administration Act) is the core statute guiding management of the System.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law [P.L.] 105-57) made important amendments to the Administration Act, one of which was the mandate that a comprehensive conservation plan be completed for every unit of the System. Among other things, comprehensive conservation planning has required field stations to assess their current public use program and establish objectives for the future.

“...as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.” (Executive Order No. 7160, dated 1935)

“...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.” (Migratory Bird Conservation Act, February 18, 1929)

“...for any other management purposes, for migratory birds.” (Migratory Bird Conservation Act 16 U.S.C. 715d)

“...for public recreation on...developments adjacent to conservation areas in existence.” (Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 (16 USC 460K-K4))

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, otherwise known as 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 (Pub. L. 105-57; 111 Stat. 1252).

Description of Use

Is this an existing use?

No

What is the use?

Firewood gathering for personal use in areas where woody vegetation is being removed for habitat restoration within Lacreek NWR.

Is the use a priority public use?

No

Where would the use be conducted?

The Refuge is approximately 16,570 acres of native sandhills, sub-irrigated meadows, impounded freshwater marshes, and tall and mixed-grass prairie uplands. All of these acres are open to wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation. Approximately 1,200 acres are open to fishing and over 11,000 acres are open to hunting. This proposal is to allow the gathering of firewood for personal use. Current grassland management projects throughout the Refuge include creating tree piles that Refuge staff plan to burn. This use would allow the public to harvest and gather this wood for personal use only. This use will be allowed in specific areas depending on the time of year and current tree removal projects.

When would the use be conducted?

Refuge management considers gathering firewood for personal use a low priority public use. Therefore, this use will be allowed when it is clear that it will not have an impact on other priority public uses and/or impacts to wildlife or habitat. The time of day and year will be regulated and outlined in the special use permit.

How would the use be conducted?

Members of the public will apply for a special use permit outlining the quantity and type of wood they desire. Refuge staff may issue a permit with specific details on how, when and where this use may be implemented. Harvest methods include chainsaw or falling ax.

Why is this use being proposed or reevaluated?

Except for uses specifically authorized for a period longer than 10 years (such as rights-of-way), we will reevaluate compatibility determinations for all existing uses other than wildlife-dependent recreational uses when conditions under which the use is permitted change significantly, or if there is significant new information regarding the effects of the use, or at least every 10 years, whichever is earlier. Again, a refuge manager may reevaluate the compatibility of a use at any time.

The National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act identifies six priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses. These uses are hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation. As priority public uses on the NWRS, they receive priority consideration over other public uses in planning and management. Although gathering firewood is not a priority public use, it is being proposed to reduce the amount of woody vegetation to be burned by Refuge staff. This use may also foster an appreciation for Lacreek NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Other objectives for this proposed use at Lacreek NWR are:

- Provide an educational experience for a diverse audience through an outdoor program.
- Provide an opportunity for youth to engage in wildlife dependent recreation, instill a basic understanding of conservation measures, and the role of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in the conservation picture (i.e., requirements for grassland dependent migratory birds).
- Foster support and knowledge of Refuge goals and objectives by working in close association with the public.
- Provide special use permits for physically challenged outdoorsmen/women.

Availability of Resources

Resources involved in the administration and management of the use includes personnel time associated with administration and law enforcement.

No special equipment or facilities are necessary to support the use. Maintenance costs are not directly attributable to this incidental use on the Refuge. Minimal costs are associated with the use to monitor consequences of the public having access to the Refuge, such as degree of littering and vandalism. Plants and wildlife will be monitored to determine any impacts resulting from public use.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Potential impacts of a proposed use on the refuge's purposes and the Refuge System mission

The Refuge is open to other priority public uses such as hunting, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation. To safely provide both hunting and non-hunting recreational uses, the Refuge enforces a series of refuge-specific hunting regulations. Hunting is not allowed on certain units or is restricted by location, date, and methods of take. Likewise, gathering firewood will be limited to certain areas, dates, and times.

Short-term impacts

All public use poses the potential for impacts to wildlife and/or wildlife habitat. Refuge staff will continually monitor the gathering of firewood by the public. If it is deemed that this use is having an impact on wildlife or habitat then the use may be temporarily closed in specific areas to mitigate this disturbance. Conflicts may arise among public use groups, and these conflicts may be easily mitigated by limiting the gathering of firewood to certain areas, dates, and times. This use will be closed during the primary nesting season.

Long-term impacts

No long-term impacts are expected.

Public Review and Comment

Is the use compatible?

Yes

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

1. Lacreek NWR will monitor the gathering of firewood to determine whether the use is causing unacceptable disturbances to wildlife, habitat, or visitors engaging in wildlife-dependent uses. If the Refuge determines that such disturbances are occurring, the use may be temporarily discontinued in affected locations.

2. Firewood gathering will only be allowed from August 15 - March 15 of each year. This use will be closed during nesting season. Closures may occur as deemed appropriate.
3. Only dead standing or dead and down trees are allowed to be collected. Live standing trees are not allowed to be cut and gathered.
4. Firewood gathering is only allowed from 0900-1430 daily.
5. Firewood gathering is not allowed during the Refuge's two muzzleloader deer hunts. One hunt is in October and one hunt is in November of each year. These dates change annually and need to be referenced.
6. A special use permit will be issued with a map indicating the areas that are allowed for firewood gathering, and other relevant information.

Justification

The National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act identifies six priority wildlife-dependent recreational uses. These uses are hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation. As priority public uses on the NWRS, they receive priority consideration over other public uses in planning and management.

Lacreek NWR is implementing a grassland restoration program that involves the removal and piling of trees. Refuge staff will burn these tree piles as time and conditions allow. These tree piles may be harvested and used as firewood as an alternative. The gathering of firewood for personal use will not materially interfere with, or detract from, the mission of the Refuge System or the purpose for which the Refuge was established. Rather, public collection of firewood will reduce workloads for Refuge staff thus contributing to meeting Refuge purposes.