

Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge Hunt Plan

July 2020

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge
Lakeland, GA**

Submitted By:
Project Leader

Michael Lusk

Signature

July 16, 2020

Date

Concurrence:

Refuge
Supervisor

SARAH CLARDY

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Signature

July 28, 2020

Date

Approved:

Regional Chief,
National Wildlife
Refuge System

BRETT HUNTER

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Date

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BANKS LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE HUNT PLAN

I. Introduction

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

Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1985 pursuant to the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 for the protection and conservation of a unique environment as well as migratory and resident wildlife. The official purposes of the refuge are:

"... for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources ..." 16 U.S.C. Section 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. Section 742f (b)(1)
(Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956).

"... suitable for (1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species ..." 16 U.S.C. Section 460k-1 "... the Secretary ... may accept and use ... real ... property. Such acceptance may be accomplished under the terms and conditions of restrictive covenants imposed by donors ..." 16 U.S.C. Section 460k-2 (Refuge Recreation Act [16 U.S.C. Section 460k-460k-4], as amended).

The refuge lies in the Grand Bay–Banks Lake (GBBL) ecosystem, an area that comprises the second-largest freshwater wetland system in Georgia. The GBBL area contains a number of unique ecological systems that support a variety of plants and animals, including freshwater and terrestrial federally and state-listed species.

The refuge's most notable feature is Banks Lake, a shallow black water lake studded with cypress trees that supports many fish species, as well as other aquatic animals. Formed when the Carolina bay that makes up most of the refuge was dammed over 150 years ago, the refuge contains a variety of habitat types, including approximately 676 acres (273 ha) of cypress swamp, 582 acres (235 ha) of

freshwater marsh, and 634 acres (256 ha) of open water. Scattered through these wetland areas are scrub/shrub, evergreen forest wetlands, and mixed forest habitats. Upland areas make up a very small portion of the refuge's total acreage. Many species of plants, fish, and wildlife are found on the refuge, including state and federally listed species. The refuge's habitat management activities include water level management control and herbicidal spraying for aquatic vegetation control and occasional sport fish stocking in consultation with Georgia Division of Natural Resources.

Banks Lake NWR is a satellite refuge under the care and administration of Okefenokee NWR and is unfunded. Banks Lake NWR is located in Lakeland, GA, approximately 95 miles from Okefenokee NWR administration office. Typically, the Okefenokee NWR's refuge manager maintains contacts, works with local officials and adjacent landowners, and addresses management issues as they arise.

The mission of the NWRS, as outlined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (NWRSA), as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.), is to:

"... 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 National Wildlife Refuge System. Hunting has been prohibited since Banks Lake was set aside as a National Wildlife

Refuge.

The American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) is a conservation success story. Due to loss of habitat and unregulated market hunting, alligators were reduced to low numbers by the early 1900s, which contributed to their being listed as endangered in 1967. This protected status, combined with proactive management and law enforcement efforts by wildlife professionals, allowed alligator populations to rebound and they now flourish over most of their historic range. Alligator populations increased to the point that their protected status was down-listed in 1987 allowing greater flexibility to manage populations. The alligator now has a status of “threatened due to similarity of appearance” because of its likeness to other crocodilians worldwide that still receive protection.

In 2013, Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) began annual alligator surveys on Banks Lake NWR, water levels permitting. These surveys are conducted annually on two separate nights. The following table summarizes the results of these surveys.

Year	2013	2013	2014	2014	2015	2015	2016	2016	2017	2017
Survey Night	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
Length Class (ft)										
0-2	4	12	2	2	9	4	5	5	1	2
2-4	7	11	6	7	8	5	7	8	15	7
4-6	18	11	13	16	7	6	12	13	11	13
6-8	12	11	8	9	6	11	9	8	14	9
8-10	0	1	5	0	0	1	6	2	6	2
10-12	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Unknown	30	18	25	13	8	11	17	26	26	13
Total	71	64	60	47	38	38	56	62	75	46
Total known legal harvest size	30	23	27	25	13	18	27	23	33	24
Avg total nightly count = 56		Avg known legal nightly count = 24								

Due to increased information from alligator surveys and monitoring from Georgia DNR, the

process to allow alligator hunting on Banks Lake NWR was initiated in 2019. The alligator population in Georgia is one of many renewable natural resources that can sustain limited harvest in concert with biological monitoring and periodic evaluations. Allowing an alligator hunt on Banks Lake NWR will provide hunters additional opportunities where other public lands hunting opportunities are limited. Opening this hunt also supports the refuge's compliance with Secretarial Order 3356, "to support and expand hunting and fishing, enhance conservation stewardship, improve wildlife management, and increase outdoor recreation opportunities for all Americans".

II. Statement of Objectives

The objectives of an alligator hunting program on Banks Lake NWR are to provide:

- The public with a high quality recreational experience on more refuge lands and increase opportunities for hunters.
- Wildlife-dependent public recreation as mandated by and according to Service policy and supported by the Improvement Act of 1997.

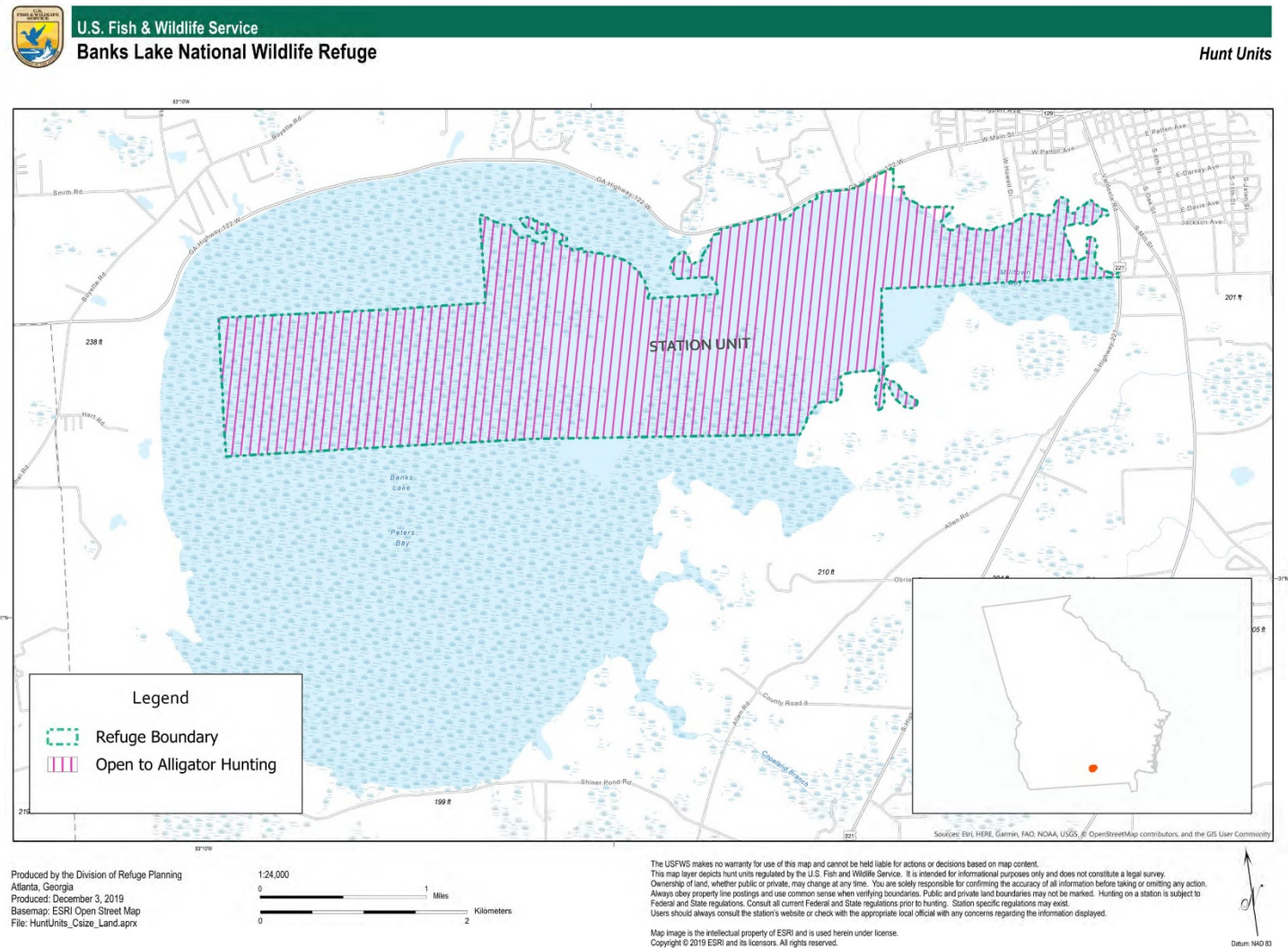
Although the refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) does not currently allow hunting, it does state that an alligator hunt will be evaluated depending on the population status (USFWS 2009). The CCP's larger goal is to provide opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation while still providing for optimum habitat and protection for endangered and threatened species. Fish and wildlife conservation will receive first priority in refuge management; wildlife-dependent recreation will be allowed and encouraged as long as it is compatible with, and does not detract from, the mission of the refuge or the purposes for which it was established.

III. Description of Hunting Program

A. Areas to be Opened to Hunting

Acreage of Banks Lake NWR designated on the following map will be open to alligator hunting.

Figure 1. Map of Hunt Area



B. Species to be Taken, Hunting periods, Hunting Access

Alligator: All State of Georgia Regulations will apply and the season will be limited to two three-day hunts within the state season. Hunters will access the lake using the refuge boat ramp.

C. Hunter Permit Requirements (if applicable)

Georgia's alligator hunting season has been designated as a quota hunt where a limited number of hunters are allowed to harvest one alligator (of 48 inches or greater length) each from a specified hunt zone. This allows the Georgia DNR to closely monitor the number of animals harvested. See "Hunter Permit Application and/or Registration Procedures" below.

Anyone hunting or assisting a Georgia DNR alligator permit holder must possess a valid Hunting License. Hunters age 15 and younger need not have a Hunting License. In order to hunt unsupervised, they must have a valid Hunter Education Certificate. An Alligator Harvest Permit must be in possession of a person in the hunting party.

D. Consultation and Coordination with the State

This hunt will only be operated and conducted in coordination with Georgia DNR, pending a Memorandum of Understanding between agencies. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will not dedicate any resources or employees towards the management of the hunt.

Georgia DNR has conducted alligator population surveys on Banks Lake NWR from 2013-2017. They will continue to provide alligator survey information to the Service to ensure a viable population of alligators.

Georgia DNR agrees that a refuge hunt plan will help meet State objectives. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Georgia DNR will continue to work together to ensure safe and enjoyable recreational hunting opportunities. Hunter participation and harvest data will be shared annually.

E. Law Enforcement

Enforcement of Refuge violations normally associated with management of a National Wildlife Refuge is the responsibility of commissioned Federal Wildlife Officers. Other refuge officers, Special Agents, State Rangers, and the local Sheriff's Department often assist the Okefenokee NWR full time Federal Wildlife Officer. Due to the location of Banks Lake NWR and the lack of resources at Okefenokee NWR, Georgia DNR will be the main law enforcement agency to safeguard hunters, visitors, and both game and nongame species.

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

- Refuge boundaries will be clearly posted;
- Georgia DNR Rangers will randomly check hunters for compliance with State Laws.

F. Funding and Staffing Requirements

Currently, Banks Lake NWR is an unfunded refuge. The staff at Okefenokee NWR manages Banks Lake NWR. All costs for the operation of Banks Lake NWR are derived from the Okefenokee NWR budget. However, as Georgia DNR is conducting all aspects of the hunt, there are minimal costs anticipated with this hunting opportunity.

IV. Conduct of the Hunting Program

A. Hunter Permit Application, Selection, and/or Registration Procedures

Hunters will apply online at www.gooutdoorsgeorgia.com. Hunters must be selected through the quota hunt application process. Only hunters selected for Zone 4 will be allowed to hunt at Banks Lake NWR. Application period is June 1–July 15. To be eligible for the drawing, alligator applications must be received no later than 11:59 p.m. EST on July 15.

B. Refuge-Specific Hunting Regulations

Alligator hunting on the Refuge will be the first two weekends in accordance with the state season.

C. Relevant State Regulations

Anyone hunting or assisting an alligator permit holder must possess a valid Hunting License. Hunters age 15 and younger need not have a Hunting License. In order to hunt unsupervised, they must have a valid Hunter Education Certificate. An Alligator Harvest Permit must be in possession of a person in the hunting party.

One alligator limit. Legal alligators must be greater than or equal to 48 inches in length as measured from end of the snout to tip of the tail.

Hunters may use hand-held ropes or snares, snatch hooks, harpoons, gigs or arrows with a restraining line attached. Legal alligators must be dispatched immediately upon capture by using a handgun or bangstick, or by severing the spinal cord with a sharp implement.

Legal hours are from sunset Friday and end at sunrise on Monday.

Dispatched alligators must be tagged with a Georgia DNR supplied temporary harvest tag before transporting. Temporary tags shall be locked through the skin of the carcass. The temporary tag shall remain attached to the alligator hide until the carcass is validated by Georgia DNR Game Management Section personnel and a CITES tag is issued.

All alligator carcasses or hides must be validated by taking it to a Georgia DNR Game Management office during normal business hours (Monday–Friday; 8:00 a.m.–4:30 p.m.) prior to October 15.

D. Other Refuge Rules and Regulations for Hunting

-
- Marking path or navigational routes is prohibited.
 - Use of airboats and jetskis is prohibited.
 - Overnight camping and fires are prohibited.
 - Feeding or harassing wildlife is prohibited.
 - Taking of any plants or other wildlife is prohibited.

V. Public Engagement

A. Outreach for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunting Program

The Refuge maintains a mailing list for a public informational bulletin to local newspapers, radio, and websites. Special announcements and articles may be released in conjunction with hunting seasons. In addition, information about the hunt will be available at the Banks Lake NWR website and the Georgia DNR website.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunting Program

Public comments are expected since hunting has not been previously allowed on Banks Lake NWR. In addition, due to the location of homes on the water and private docks being in the water, it is expected that homeowners may be concerned with hunting activities. Georgia DNR and Lanier County Commissioners support this hunting opportunity; however, all public output and comments will be taken into account by USFWS.

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

All hunting information will be available on Banks Lake NWR website, Georgia DNR website and published in the Georgia hunting regulations.

VI. Compatibility Determination

Hunting and all associated program activities in this plan are compatible with the purposes of the refuge.

Appendix A. References

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- Schultz, R.D., and M. Stock. 1993. Kentish plovers and tourist-competitors on sandy coasts? *Wader Study Group Bulletin* 68 (special issue): 83-92.

Thomas, V. G. 1983. Spring migration: the prelude to goose reproduction and a review of its implication. In Fourth Western Hemisphere Waterfowl and Waterbird Symposium, edited by H. Boyd. Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Wildlife Service.

University of Georgia. 2007. Georgia Land Use Trends. Access on December 13, 2019 at <http://narsal.uga.edu/glut/>.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2018. Population Trends. Access on November 15, 2019 at <https://www.census.gov>

White-Robinson, R. 1982. Inland and salt marsh feeding of wintering brant geese in Essex. Wildfowl 33:113-118.

Appendix B. Other Applicable Statues, Executive Orders & Regulations

STATUTES, EXECUTIVE ORDERS, AND REGULATIONS	
Cultural Resources American Indian Religious Freedom Act, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 1996 – 1996a; 43 CFR Part 7 Antiquities Act of 1906, 16 U.S.C. 431-433; 43 CFR Part 3 Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, 16 U.S.C. 470aa – 470mm; 18 CFR Part 1312; 32 CFR Part 229; 36 CFR Part 296; 43 CFR Part 7 National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 470-470x-6; 36 CFR Parts 60, 63, 78, 79, 800, 801, and 810 Paleontological Resources Protection Act, 16 U.S.C. 470aaa – 470aaa-11 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 25 U.S.C. 3001-3013; 43 CFR Part 10 Executive Order 11593 – Protection and Enhancement of the Cultural Environment, 36 Fed. Reg. 8921 (1971) Executive Order 13007 – Indian Sacred Sites, 61 Fed. Reg. 26771 (1996)	The preferred action includes no ground-disturbing activities, or other activities that might disturb undocumented paleontological, archaeological, or historic sites.
Fish & Wildlife Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 668-668c, 50 CFR 22 Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 1531-1544; 36 CFR Part 13; 50 CFR Parts 10, 17, 23, 81, 217, 222, 225, 402, and 450	Alligators are considered threatened by similarity of appearance with other crocodilians. However, no other species of crocodilian is present in the southeast Georgia.

Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, 16 U.S.C. 742 a-m Lacey Act, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 3371 et seq.; 15 CFR Parts 10, 11, 12, 14, 300, and 904 Migratory Bird Treaty Act, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 703-712; 50 CFR Parts 10, 12, 20, and 21 Executive Order 13186 – Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, 66 Fed. Reg. 3853 (2001)	
Natural Resources Clean Air Act, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 7401-7671q; 40 CFR Parts 23, 50, 51, 52, 58, 60, 61, 82, and 93; 48 CFR Part 23 Wilderness Act, 16 U.S.C. 1131 et seq. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, 16 U.S.C. 1271 et seq. Executive Order 13112 – Invasive Species, 64 Fed. Reg. 6183 (1999)	The preferred action will have negligible impacts to natural resources concerning these Acts.
Water Resources Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, 16 U.S.C. 1451 et seq.; 15 CFR Parts 923, 930, 933 Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 (commonly referred to as Clean Water Act), 33 U.S.C. 1251 et seq.; 33 CFR Parts 320-330; 40 CFR Parts 110, 112, 116, 117, 230-232, 323, and 328 Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899, as amended, 33 U.S.C. 401 et seq.; 33 CFR Parts 114, 115, 116, 321, 322, and 333 Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, 42 U.S.C. 300f et seq.; 40 CFR Parts 141-148	The preferred action will have negligible impacts to water resources concerning these Acts.

Executive Order 11988 – Floodplain Management, 42 Fed. Reg. 26951 (1977)	
Executive Order 11990 – Protection of Wetlands, 42 Fed. Reg. 26961 (1977)	

Appendix C. Intra-Service Section 7 Biological Evaluation

REGION 4

INTRA-SERVICE SECTION 7 BIOLOGICAL EVALUATION FORM

[Note: This form provides the outline of information needed for intra-Service consultation. If additional space is needed, attach additional sheets, or set up this form to accommodate your responses.]

Originating Person: Michael Lusk, Refuge Manager
Telephone Number: 912-496-7366 E-Mail: Michael_Lusk@fws.gov
Date: November 26, 2019

PROJECT NAME: American Alligator Hunting at Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge

- I. Service Program: Refuges
- II. State/Agency: Georgia / U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- III. Station Name: Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- IV. Description of Preferred Action:

The alligator population in Georgia is one of many renewable natural resources that can sustain limited harvest. Georgia's alligator hunting season has been designated as a quota hunt where a limited number of hunters are allowed to harvest one alligator (of 48 inches or greater length) each from a specified hunt zone. Banks Lake NWR is within Zone 4. This allows the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to closely monitor the number of animals harvested.

All portions of the Refuge covered by water would be open to hunting; however, hunting would be limited by accessibility.

All State of Georgia Regulations would apply and the season would be limited to the first two weekends within the state season, generally between mid-August and early October. Legal hours are from sunset Friday and end at sunrise on Monday. Hunters would access the lake using the Refuge boat ramp.

Hunters may use hand-held ropes or snares, snatch hooks, harpoons, gigs or arrows with a restraining line attached. Legal alligators must be dispatched immediately upon capture by using a handgun or bangstick, or by severing the spinal cord with a sharp implement.

V. Pertinent Species and Habitat:

A. Include species/habitat occurrence map:

Wood storks and Alligators use the wetland habitats of the swamp.

B. Complete the following table:

SPECIES/CRITICAL HABITAT	STATUS ¹
Wood stork	Threatened
American Alligator	Threatened due to similarity of appearance

¹STATUS: E=endangered, T=threatened, PE=proposed endangered, PT=proposed threatened, CH=critical habitat, PCH=proposed critical habitat, C=candidate species

VI. Location (see attached map):

A. Ecoregion Name: North Florida Ecosystem

B. County and State: Lanier County, Georgia

C. Section, township, and range (or UTM NAD 27 coordinates):
299,823.72 3,435,358.93

D. Distance (miles) and direction to nearest town: Lakeland, Georgia is within three miles of the refuge entrance.

E. Species/habitat occurrence:

Wood storks use the open shallow wetland habitats of the Banks Lake NWR for roosting and foraging.

American Alligators are found primarily around the edges of the lake. In 2013, Georgia DNR began annual alligator surveys on Banks Lake NWR, water levels permitting. These surveys are conducted annually on two separate nights. The following table summarizes the results of these surveys.

Alligator Surveys

	2013	2013	2014	2014	2015	2015	2016	2016	2017	2017
Survey Night	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
Length Class (ft)										
0-2	4	12	2	2	9	4	5	5	1	2
2-4	7	11	6	7	8	5	7	8	15	7
4-6	18	11	13	16	7	6	12	13	11	13

6-8	12	11	8	9	6	11	9	8	14	9
8-10	0	1	5	0	0	1	6	2	6	2
10-12	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Unknown	30	18	25	13	8	11	17	26	26	13
Total	71	64	60	47	38	38	56	62	75	46
Total known legal harvest size	30	23	27	25	13	18	27	23	33	24
Avg total nightly count = 56					Avg known legal nightly count = 24					

VII. Determination of Effects:

- A. Explanation of effects of the action on species and critical habitats in item V. B (attach additional pages as needed):

SPECIES/ CRITICAL HABITAT	IMPACTS TO SPECIES/CRITICAL HABITAT
Wood stork	No nesting colony of wood storks has been found at Banks Lake NWR and hunting would generally occur outside of the nesting season. Banks Lake is within 75 miles of several colonies in Georgia and north Florida. Wood storks may be disturbed from feeding areas and roost sites on occasion from hunting activity. This would be sporadic and no different than being disturbed by other recreational users.
American Alligator	The Georgia DNR has determined that the population of American Alligators can sustain limited harvest at Banks Lake NWR. Initially, greater numbers of hunters will hunt the refuge due to being a new area and easy access but with a limited number of large alligators, interest is expected to lessen, resulting in fewer alligators taken. Sightings may decrease as alligators become more wary of humans.

- B. Explanation of actions to be implemented to reduce adverse effects:

SPECIES/ CRITICAL HABITAT	ACTIONS TO MITIGATE/MINIMIZE IMPACTS
Wood Storks	The time and place of disturbance will be highly variable which will minimize the impacts. No mitigation is necessary.

SPECIES/ CRITICAL HABITAT	ACTIONS TO MITIGATE/MINIMIZE IMPACTS
American Alligator	The state will continue to monitor the population of alligators. Hunting can be adjusted if the population cannot sustain the harvest.

VIII. Effect Determination and Response Requested:

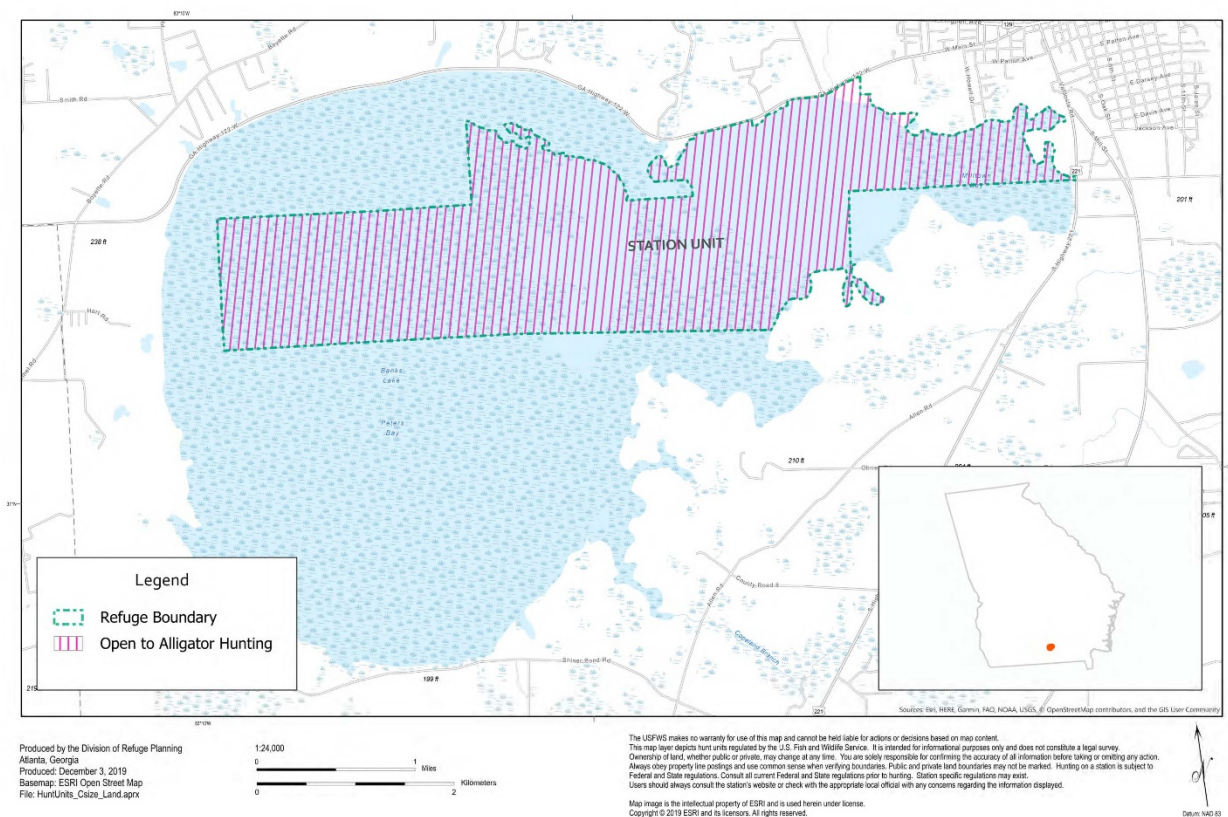
SPECIES/ CRITICAL HABITAT	DETERMINATION ¹				RESPONSE ¹ REQUESTED
	NE	NE	NA	AA	
Wood Stork			X		
American Alligator			X		

¹DETERMINATION/RESPONSE REQUESTED:

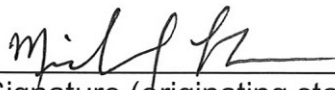
NE = no effect. This determination is appropriate when the proposed action will not directly, indirectly, or cumulatively impacted, either positively or negatively, any listed, proposed, candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat. Response Requested is optional but a "Concurrence" is recommended for a complete Administrative Record.

NA = not likely to adversely affect. This determination is appropriate when the proposed action is not likely to adversely impact any listed, proposed, candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat or there may be beneficial effects to these resources. Response Requested is a "Concurrence".

AA = likely to adversely affect. This determination is appropriate when the proposed action is likely to adversely impact any listed, proposed, candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat. Response Requested for listed species is "Formal Consultation". Response Requested for proposed or candidate species is "Conference".



PROJECT NAME: American Alligator Hunting at Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge


Signature (originating station)

11/26/2019
Date

Refuge Manager
Title

IX. Reviewing Ecological Services Office Evaluation:

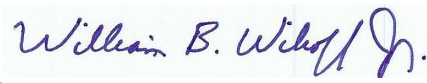
A. **Concurrence X** Nonconcurrence _____

B. Formal consultation required _____

C. Conference required _____

D. Informal conference required _____

E. Remarks (attach additional pages as needed):


Signature

May 5, 2020
Date

fish & wildlife biologist
Title

USFWS Georgia Ecological Services
Office

for Donald W. Imm, Ph.D., field supervisor

Appendix D. Compatibility Determination

Use: Hunting - Alligator

(a) *What is the use? Is it a priority public use?* The use being evaluated in this compatibility determination (CD) is hunting. The huntable species that inhabit the Refuge include alligators. Alligator hunting is being evaluated in order to expand the State hunts onto the Refuge. Hunting is a wildlife-dependent recreational activity designated as a priority public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) as established in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.

(b) *Where would the use be conducted?* All portions of the Refuge covered by water are being proposed for alligator hunting.

The refuge boundary that facilitates hunting can be found on refuge website maps:
https://www.fws.gov/refuge/banks_lake/.

(c) *When would the use be conducted?* Hunting will be allowed in accordance with all applicable federal and state regulations. Hunting will occur within the hunting season framework established by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Federal regulations in 50 CFR pertaining to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as well as existing Refuge-specific regulations will apply. However, the Refuge Manager may, upon annual review of the hunting program and in coordination with the DNR, impose further restrictions on hunting, recommend that the Refuge be closed to hunting, or further liberalize hunting regulations within the limits of state seasons and regulations, or as otherwise approved by DNR. The Refuge Manager may restrict hunting opportunities if it conflicts with other, higher priority Refuge programs or endangers Refuge resources or public safety. Legal hours are from sunset Friday and end at sunrise on Monday. This use could be suspended or terminated at any time at the discretion of the Refuge Manager for Refuge management, safety, or other reasons.

Alligator hunting on the Refuge will be limited to the first two weekends in accordance with the state season. Hunters must apply for the Georgia alligator quota hunt at www.gohuntgeorgia.com and have all applicable state licenses. The refuge will be open to hunters drawn for Zone 04. Hunt days and hours may be further restricted on the Refuge and are subject to change for management purposes.

All hunts and quotas are subject to change depending on wildlife species population survey results, hunter success rates, environmental conditions, conflicting management activities (prescribed burns, low water levels, exotic plant removal, etc.), and/or staffing. Maintaining flexibility for hunts allows the Refuge to provide a limited, but quality hunt. Annual hunt dates will be announced through the Georgia DNR's hunting regulations and/or on the Refuge's website.

-
- (d) *How would the use be conducted?*** Hunting will be subject to federal, state, and Refuge-specific regulations and occur within the State season framework, unless otherwise approved by Georgia DNR. Bag limits and methods of take will coincide with Georgia DNR guidelines (to the greatest extent possible) and will be coordinated with Georgia DNR. The permit system and quotas are subject to change annually at the discretion of the Refuge Manager, for the purposes of management and sustainability.

Alligator hunting is permitted in designated hunt areas by permit only. Hunters must apply at www.gohuntgeorgia.com between June 1 and July 15 to be drawn for the alligator quota hunt. Hunters will access Banks Lake by the refuge boat ramp. Hunters may use hand-held ropes or snares, snatch hooks, harpoons, gigs or arrows with a restraining line attached. Legal alligators must be dispatched immediately upon capture by using a handgun or bangstick, or by severing the spinal cord with a sharp implement. Dispatched alligators must be tagged with a Georgia DNR-supplied temporary harvest tag before transporting. Temporary tags shall be locked through the skin of the carcass. The temporary tag shall remain attached to the alligator hide until the carcass is validated by Georgia DNR Wildlife Resources Division, Game Management Section personnel and a CITES tag is issued. Temporary and CITES tags may be used only once. The possession of any alligator hide not tagged is prohibited.

Main entrance to the Refuge and the boat ramp is located at 307 GA-122, Lakeland, GA 31635. The use of airboats and jet skis is restricted on the refuge. Refer to the annual Georgia DNR hunting regulations or www.gohuntgeorgia.com, or the Banks Lake website for current regulations on hunting within the Refuge.

- (e) *Why is this use being proposed?*** In addition to hunting being one of the priority public uses, on September 15, 2017, the Secretary of the Interior signed Secretarial Order 3356 with specific directives “to support and expand hunting and fishing, enhance conservation stewardship, improve wildlife management, and increase outdoor recreation opportunities for all Americans” (DOI 2017). New uses and expansion of existing uses are being evaluated that may foster positive stakeholder/refuge relations. Hunting as an approved use at the Refuge is being evaluated in order to allow alligator hunting. Since the previous analysis, environmental conditions have not changed substantially. The Service provides the public with opportunities to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation to appreciate the value of and need for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation. Furthermore, hunting is a management tool to maintain wildlife populations at acceptable levels.

Availability of Resources:

Resources involved in the administration and management of the use – Banks Lake NWR is managed from Okefenokee NWR, which is approximately 95 miles away. Banks Lake is currently unstaffed and unfunded. At current staffing levels, the Refuge does not have sufficient resources for managing expected levels of participation in these various types of hunts. Okefenokee NWR management has collaborated with Georgia DNR to conduct every aspect of the hunt from the quota drawing to the enforcement.

Special equipment, facilities, or improvements necessary to support the use – Existing facilities that support this use include a boat ramp, boat dock, and parking lot. No additional facilities are proposed

to support this use.

Maintenance costs – Maintenance associated with this use is already being performed by staff and/or Lanier County throughout the year, during the normal course of their duties. Examples include: mowing, trail maintenance, signage, parking areas, structure maintenance (boat ramps, fishing piers), and trash removal. This use should not incur any additional maintenance needs; however, it may influence the timing of when and how often maintenance should be performed.

Monitoring costs – Okefenokee NWR staff and Federal Wildlife Officers will monitor effects of and compliance with current operations during the normal course of their duties. Any issues that arise from the alligator hunt will be forwarded to Georgia DNR. Georgia DNR will continue to monitor the alligator population with surveys and regular patrols by Conservation Rangers for compliance. Costs for the Georgia DNR surveys and law enforcement patrols will be covered by Georgia DNR.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Although hunting causes mortality and temporary disturbance to wildlife, harvesting populations within the carrying capacity of existing habitat ensures long-term health and survival of the species. Hunting, and its associated activities, can result in positive or negative impacts to wildlife and other Refuge resources. With proper management and monitoring, hunting (as proposed for the Refuge) is expected to cause only minor negative impacts. A positive effect of the Refuge hunting program will be the provision of additional wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, a better appreciation and more complete understanding of the wildlife and habitats associated with the Refuge, and an opportunity to utilize a sustainable, renewable resource. This can translate into more widespread and stronger support for the Refuge, the NWRS, and the Service (Waters 2010).

By using the Georgia DNR quota system, a limited numbers of hunters are selected for Zone 4 each year. Alligator permits available each year allow a specific number of alligators to be harvested within a zone. Increasing public access for alligator hunting can be expected to have moderately beneficial impacts to the overall health of alligator populations and their distribution over the Refuge. Furthermore, increasing access for alligator hunters can be expected to have a minor beneficial impact to fishermen. By allowing alligator hunters to access the refuge, the hunters will be able harvest some of the larger alligators. This can not only create a friendlier environment for anglers, but also allow an increased number of juvenile alligators to reach adulthood, potentially increasing the population. Collectively, these actions aid in maintaining a sustainable alligator hunt on the Refuge. Some disturbance to surface soils, topography, and vegetation will occur in areas selected for hunting; however, effects will be minimal. Negligible impacts to the natural hydrology of the Refuge are also expected. The Refuge expects impacts to air and water quality to be minimal and result only from Refuge visitors' boat emissions. No long-term or cumulative impacts are anticipated as a result of hunting alligators as proposed on the Refuge.

Potential impacts associated with hunting include direct mortality, short-term changes in game species distribution and abundance, and disturbance (to target and non-target species).

Increased access for hunting has the potential to cause various levels of impacts to public safety. The Refuge is open during the hunting season to other priority public uses such as fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and canoeing and kayaking. To safely provide both hunting and non-hunting recreational uses, hunting will be restricted to two three-day weekends within the State

alligator season. Conflicts between mixed user groups might occur, but will be mitigated by time (non-hunting season) and law enforcement patrols. Conflicts between consumptive users, such as disruption of or hunting too close to other hunters, may also occur.

Other potential safety impacts include hunters becoming injured, or stuck on the lake due to numerous submerged cypress stumps and knees. Response will be coordinated through Lanier County and DNR. These circumstances are true for most natural areas and should be expected by hunters. These potential impacts can be mitigated by hunters having a general knowledge of the lake and cell phone to call for assistance. General warning or caution statements may also be made available on the Refuge website.

Refuge management activities can be accomplished without conflicting with hunting activities since the hunt will occur Friday through Sunday. A slight increase in gas emissions may occur due to the increase in boat traffic but additional boat traffic is expected to be minimal. However, no significant biological or ecological impacts are anticipated as a result, despite other priority public uses occurring via vehicular or boat traffic on the Refuge for decades. This use should not result in long-term impacts that adversely affect the purposes for which the Refuge was established.

Determination (check one below):

_____ Use is Compatible

 √ Use is Compatible with Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility: The below stipulations are recommended in order for hunting each species to be compatible in the most liberal circumstances. Slight modifications and further restrictions may be implemented for sustainability. Final stipulations will be found in the CFR.

Applicable for All Hunting

- Persons possessing, transporting, or carrying firearms on national wildlife refuges must comply with all provisions of Federal, State, and local law.
- Airboats and jetskis are not permitted on Banks Lake.
- Taking of any plants or other wildlife is prohibited.

Alligator

- Anyone hunting or assisting an alligator permit holder must possess a valid Hunting License. Hunters age 15 and younger need not have a Hunting License. In order to hunt unsupervised they must have a valid Hunter Education Certificate. An Alligator Harvest Permit must be in possession of a person in the hunting party.
- One (1) alligator limit. Legal alligators must be greater than or equal to 48 inches in length as measured from end of the snout to tip of the tail.
- Hunters may use hand-held ropes or snares, snatch hooks, harpoons, gigs or arrows with a restraining line attached. Legal alligators must be dispatched immediately upon capture by using a handgun or bangstick, or by severing the spinal cord with a sharp implement.
- Dispatched alligators must be tagged with a Georgia DNR-supplied temporary harvest tag before transporting. Temporary tags shall be locked through the skin of the carcass. The temporary tag shall remain attached to the alligator hide until the carcass is validated by

Georgia DNR Wildlife Resources Division, Game Management Section personnel and a CITES tag is issued. Temporary and CITES tags may be used only once. The possession of any alligator hide not tagged is prohibited.

Justification: The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 identified hunting as one of the six priority, wildlife-dependent recreational uses to receive enhanced consideration over other public uses in planning and management. The Service attempts to provide opportunities for this use in the NWRS where compatible. Managing wildlife has always been a priority since refuge establishment in 1985. Continuing to offer and expand hunting opportunities (where possible and compatible) supports the Service's goal of Connecting People with Nature in addition to multiple objectives and strategies stated in the Refuge's CCP. Hunting allows visitors to enjoy the outdoors and connect with nature in a natural setting, which is not only healthy mentally and physically, but can build a life-long appreciation for wildlife and their habitats. When wildlife populations are managed carefully and monitored, allowing hunting on the Refuge will not materially detract from or interfere with the purposes for establishment of the Refuge and the mission of the NWRS. This CD is based on best available science and sound professional judgement.

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision: *Place a √ in appropriate space.*

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

Approval of Compatibility Determination

Refuge Manager/Project Leader

Michael Lusk

July 16, 2020

Signature

Date

Refuge Supervisor
Area 3, Southeast Region

SARAH
CLARDY

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July 28, 2020

Signature

Date

Regional Compatibility
Coordinator, Southeast Region

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Date: 2020.07.29 13:17:39

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Date

David Viker, Regional Refuge Chief
National Wildlife Refuge System
Southeast Region

BRETT
HUNTER

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HUNTER
Date: 2020.07.30 14:14:02
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Signature

Date

References:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). 2009. Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Atlanta, GA.

Waters, G., B. Bond, J. W. Bowers, D. Mixon, I. B. Parnell, and B. Rutledge. 2010. Georgia's alligator management plan. Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Atlanta.

Mandatory 15-year Re-evaluation Date: 2035 July 30

Appendix E. Environmental Assessment

Cost for Developing this Environmental Assessment- \$12,000

Environmental Assessment for Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge Hunt Plan

Introduction

This Environmental Assessment (EA) is being prepared to evaluate the effects associated with this preferred action and complies with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR 1500-1509) and Department of the Interior (43 CFR 46; 516 DM 8) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (550 FW 3) regulations and policies. NEPA requires examination of the effects of preferred actions on the natural and human environment.

Proposed Action

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to open hunting opportunities for alligators on the Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The alligator hunting will open up all portions of the Refuge covered by water. All or parts of the Refuge may be closed to hunting at any time if necessary for public safety, biological or habitat management, or administrative reason including trends of declining alligator populations.

This proposed action is often iterative and evolves over time as the agency refines its proposal and learns more from the public, tribes, and other agencies. Therefore, the final proposed action may be different from the original. The final decision on the proposed action will be made at the conclusion of the public comment period for the EA. The Service cannot open a refuge to hunting and/or fishing until a final rule has been published in the Federal Register formally opening the refuge to hunting and/or fishing.

Background

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

Banks Lake Refuge was established in 1985 pursuant to the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 for the protection and conservation of a unique environment as well as migratory and resident wildlife. The official purposes of the refuge are:

"... for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources ..." 16 U.S.C. Section 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. Section 742f (b)(1) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956).

"... suitable for (1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, (2) the protection of natural resources, (3) the conservation of endangered species or threatened species ..." 16 U.S.C. Section 460k-1 "... the Secretary ... may accept and use ... real ... property. Such acceptance may be accomplished under the terms and conditions of restrictive covenants imposed by donors ..." 16 U.S.C. Section 460k-2 (Refuge Recreation Act [16 U.S.C. Section 460k-460k-4], as amended).

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

"... 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 National Wildlife Refuge System. Hunting has been prohibited since Banks Lake was set aside as a National Wildlife Refuge. However due to increased information from alligator surveys and monitoring from Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the process to allow alligator hunting on Banks Lake NWR was initiated in 2019.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this proposed action is to provide compatible wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities on Refuge. The need of the proposed action is to meet the Service's priorities and

mandates as outlined by the NWRSA to “recognize compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses as the priority general uses of the NWR” and “ensure that opportunities are provided within the NWR for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses.” 16 U.S.C. 668dd(a)(4)).

While wildlife is first priority in refuge management, wildlife-dependent recreational uses or other uses may be allowed after they have been determined appropriate and compatible by the Refuge Manager. There are six priority wildlife-dependent public uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation. These uses are dependent upon healthy fish and wildlife populations and are to receive enhanced consideration over other public uses in planning and management. The Refuge will rely on coordination with the Georgia DNR to manage hunting opportunities to the extent practicable to promote quality-hunting programs.

The purpose of this Environmental Assessment is to introduce American alligator hunting at the Refuge. This will be the first hunting activity allowed on the refuge.

The proposed action is to implement the Hunt Plan that includes an American alligator hunt for the Refuge.

Alternatives Considered

This Chapter discusses the alternatives considered for hunting on the Refuge. The alternatives include 1) no action- alligator hunt will not be implemented on the Refuge, and 2) preferred action- implement an alligator hunt on the Refuge.

Alternative A – No Action

The refuge will not implement the Hunt Plan. Opportunities to create a new outdoor recreation experience by adding alligator hunting will be lost and hunters will pursue these species off-refuge.

Alternative B – Preferred Action- Implement the Hunt Plan

The refuge has prepared a hunt plan, which is presented in this document as the Preferred Action Alternative.

Under the Preferred Action Alternative, all acreage of the Refuge will be open to alligator hunting. All State of Georgia Regulations will apply and the season will be limited to the first two weekend hunts within the State season. This hunt will be operated and conducted in coordination with Georgia DNR.

Mitigation Measures to Avoid Conflicts:

This alternative will open the Refuge to alligator hunting opportunities as described in the Hunt Plan. This action will attract hunters currently not using the Refuge, thus affording an opportunity for the Refuge to engage new segments of the public to promote natural resources conservation, environmental education and natural resources stewardship. Opportunities to create additional outdoor recreation experiences will be consistent with goals and priority uses identified by the National

Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 and Secretarial Orders 3347 and 3356.

The Refuge Manager may establish specific regulations if conflicts with other wildlife dependent recreation priorities occurs. Permanent or periodic hunting closures of the Refuge may be necessary if the Refuge Manager determines that there is specific habitat, wildlife protection and/or public safety requirements. The need to implement mitigation measures will be evaluated annually. All hunting will be conducted in accordance with all applicable State regulations. Coordination with the public and Refuge stakeholders will promote continuity and understanding of Refuge and Service resource goals and objectives, and will help assure that the decision-making process takes into account all interests.

The Refuge minimizes conflict related to biological resources by adopting a “wildlife first” principle explicitly stated in the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. The Georgia DNR monitors species population trends to ensure that target species can be hunted on the Refuge.

The Refuge could limit or exclude hunting activities on portions of the Refuge to avoid conflicts related to biological resources, such as eagles and threatened or endangered species. Most hunting on the Refuge occurs outside the period when eagle populations are high and nests are active. A Section 7 Biological Evaluation associated with this assessment was conducted, and it was determined that the preferred action is not likely to adversely affect these species (Appendix G).

The refuge will be closed during the hunts to avoid conflict with non-hunting Refuge visitors. This alternative offers increased opportunities for public hunting/fishing and fulfills the Service’s mandate under the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. The Service has determined that the hunt plan is compatible with the purposes of the Refuge and the mission of the NWRS.

Affected Environment

Banks Lake NWR is part of the Peninsular Florida ecosystem, one of the Service’s 52 designated ecosystems and watersheds (USFWS 2009). The refuge lies in the northern portion of this ecosystem and in an area of Georgia that has dramatically changed through historical land use practices, and more recently, development. The refuge is important in a regional ecosystem context because it protects important aquatic and wetland habitats that are declining regionally (Dahl 2006). Furthermore, it is located adjacent to Moody Air Force Base and The Nature Conservancy property, effectively producing a large, relatively unfragmented area of land that will be managed to maintain biological integrity and ecosystem function. Together with other federal and state lands, such a network of conservation lands can help mitigate the effects of habitat loss, provide protection, and serve as wildlife corridors. In addition, vegetated areas of the refuge reduce sedimentation and improve water quality downstream. Another benefit of forested wetlands is that they can function as water retention areas and minimize flood damage during times of excessive rainfall. Furthermore, wetlands provide a valuable habitat for birds and other wildlife

County Demographics and Economic Indicators

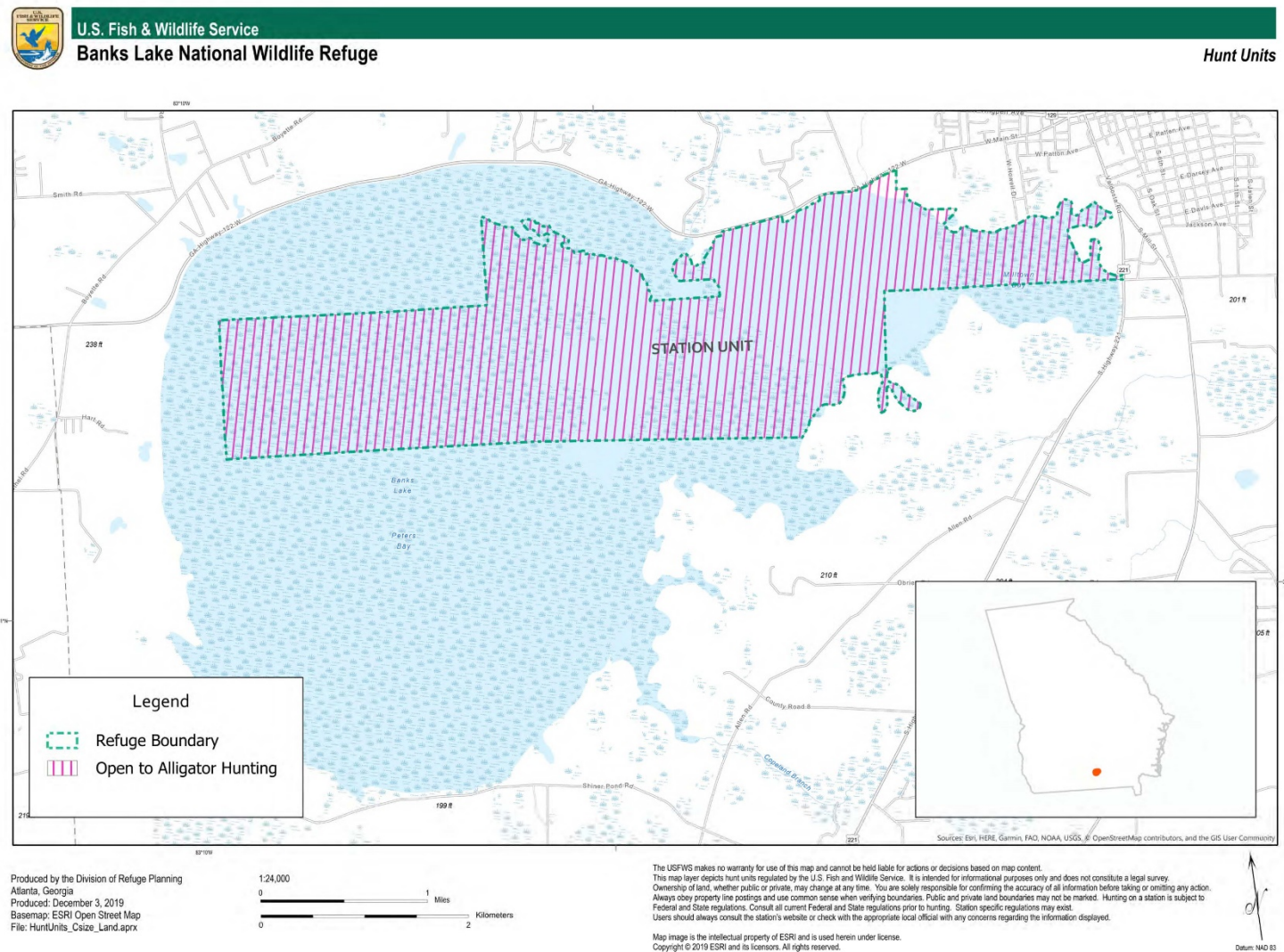
In 2018, there were 10,340 people in Lanier County. The median income for a household in the

county was \$31,109, less than the median annual income of \$57,652 across the United States. About 20.5% of the population were below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Major economic activities include health care and social assistance, manufacturing, construction, retail, accommodation/food services, agriculture, and forestry (Georgia Department of Labor 2019). Land use is primarily evergreen forest, forested wetland, agriculture, clearcut, and urban (University of Georgia 2007).

The counties bordering Lanier County have similar demographics and densities. Major economic activities vary between some of the counties. Atkinson, Berrien and Clinch counties have mostly agriculture and forestry, wood manufacturing, retail, health care and accommodation/food service sector jobs. Echols County industries are mostly related to agriculture and forestry. Lowndes County has the most diverse industries, including agriculture, forestry, textiles, wood/paper production, chemical manufacturing, plastics/rubber manufacturing, furniture, retail as well as technical and professional services (Georgia Department of Labor 2019). Land use among the neighboring counties is similar, with evergreen forests comprising the largest component (range: 30-50%), except for Berrien County, where agricultural lands are the largest component (35%). Next, forested wetlands are the major land use type (range: 15-35%), followed by clearcut or sparse areas (range: 10-15%) and urban lands comprising 10% or the land in each of these counties (University of Georgia 2007).

Banks Lake is primarily a freshwater wetland system. The refuge consists of approximately 5.56 square miles in Lanier County, Georgia (Figure 1).

Figure 2.. Location Map of Banks Lake NWR



Tables 1-6 provides additional, brief descriptions of each resource affected by the preferred action.

For more information regarding the affected environment, please see section II of the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan, which can be found here:

<https://ecos.fws.gov/ServCat/Reference/Profile/20314>.

Environmental Consequences

This section analyzes the environmental consequences of the action on each affected resource, including direct and indirect effects. This EA only includes the written analyses of the environmental consequences on a resource when the impacts on that resource could be more than negligible and therefore considered an "affected resource". Any resources that will not be more than negligibly impacted by the action have been dismissed from further analyses.

Tables 1-5 provide:

A brief description of the affected resources in the preferred action area;
Impacts of the preferred action and any alternatives on those resources, including direct and indirect effects.

Table 6 provides a brief description of the cumulative impacts.

Impact Types:

Direct effects are those which are caused by the action and occur at the same time and place.

Indirect effects are those which are caused by the action and are later in time or farther removed in distance, but are still reasonably foreseeable.

Cumulative impacts result from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such other actions.

Impacts Analysis

Impacts to geology, soils, water resources, wetlands, and wilderness are negligible and not further analyzed in the following table.

Table 1. Affected Natural Resources and Anticipated Impacts

NATURAL RESOURCES	

AFFECTED RESOURCE	ANTICIPATED DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS
American Alligator Hunting alligators on Banks Lake has never been permitted based on the lack of population data. Since 2013, Georgia DNR has conducted annual population surveys. The data indicates there is an average of 24 legal harvest-size alligators with an average of 8 harvest-size alligators per mile.	Alternative A: The no action alternative will not allow alligator hunting on the Refuge. This may result in an increased alligator population, which could reduce foraging opportunities and increase human/alligator conflicts. Alternative B: The hunt impacts are assumed to be minimal due to the small amount of hunters anticipated to participate in the hunt on the refuge. Georgia DNR will manage the hunt and issues 85 permits for a ten county area with a one alligator limit per permittee. Historically, Zone 4 has reported the least amount of alligators taken with tags going unfulfilled. The estimated amount of hunters and alligators harvested on the refuge is 10-20 per year. Georgia DNR survey data, from 2013 to present, suggests Banks Lake NWR currently supports an average of 24 legal harvest-size (48 inches) alligators with an average of 8 harvest-size alligators per mile. The hunt may improve foraging for smaller alligators by reducing competition. The hunt may also reduce nuisance alligators or lessen human/alligator conflicts (GADNR 2019).
Other Wildlife and Aquatic Species The refuge supports a diversity of wildlife species including game and nongame species, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates, which are important contributors to the overall biodiversity on the refuge. A species list of Refuge Biota is provided in Appendix J of the 2006 Comprehensive Conservation Plan.	Alternative A: No change to current management. Alternative B: Short-term direct effects of hunting include mortality, wounding, and disturbance of target and non-target species (De Long 2002). Hunting can alter behavior (e.g., foraging time), population structure, general health (e.g., weight loss), and distribution patterns of all wildlife within the hunt area (Owens 1977, Raveling 1979, White-Robinson 1982, Thomas 1983, Bartelt 1987, Madsen 1985, Cole and Knight 1990). The level of disturbance associated with hunting can be high due to the loud noises produced by guns and the rapid movement of hunters within the hunt area. Disturbance to wildlife can cause shifts in habitat use, abandonment of habitat, increased energy demands on affected wildlife, changes in nesting and reproductive success, and singing behavior (Knight and Cole 1990, Miller et al. 1998, Shulz and Stock 1993, Gill et al. 1996, Arrese 1987, Gill et al. 2001). Mitigation measures to reduce impacts will be implemented

	through timing and seasonality. Long-term impacts are not anticipated; however, plants and wildlife will be monitored by Georgia DNR and Refuge staff to ensure that no significant damage will occur in public use areas.
Threatened and Endangered Species and Other Special Status Species Wood Stork The current population of adult birds is difficult to estimate, since not all nest each year. Presently, the wood stork breeding population is believed to be greater than 8,000 nesting pairs (16,000 breeding adults). Nesting has been restricted to Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, however they may have formerly bred in most of the southeastern United States and Texas.	Alternative A: No change from current management. Alternative B: In north and central Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, wood storks lay eggs from March to late May, with fledging occurring in July and August. Alligator season usually begins in mid- August. Therefore, there is no impact to the wood stork habitat and nesting season.
Vegetation Cypress-Gum Swamp, Open Water, Herbaceous Marsh, Scrub/Shrub, Evergreen Forested wetland, Mixed Forest, Clear-cut Wetland, Pine Plantation	Alternative A: Hunting will not be implemented and impacts are negligible. Alternative B: The refuge will be open to hunting up to six days of the State season. Negligible effect expected to vegetation from trampling by hunters, because of the low number of users and days of use expected.

Table 2. Affected Visitor Use and Experience and Anticipated Impacts

VISITOR USE AND EXPERIENCE	
	ANTICIPATED DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS

AFFECTED RESOURCE	
The refuge is open to multiple public uses, include all six of the wildlife-dependent recreation uses; hunting and fishing, interpretation and environmental education, wildlife photography and observation. The refuge hosts an average of 20,000 recreational visits each year.	Alternative A and B All other public uses on the refuge will not change and will continue to be managed as described in current plans. Alternative B: Conflicts between hunting and non-hunting recreational users will be minimal due to the administration by Georgia DNR.

Table 3. Affected Cultural Resources and Anticipated Impacts of the Alternatives

CULTURAL RESOURCES	
AFFECTED RESOURCE	ANTICIPATED DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS
Cultural Resources See 2009 CCP for more information.	Alternative A and B: Neither of these alternatives will have impacts to cultural resources. No buildings or structures exist on-site listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Hunting is not expected to cause ground disturbance. Any activity that might cause an effect to a historic property will be subject to a case-by-case Section 106 review.

Table 4. Affected Refuge Management and Operations and Anticipated Impacts

REFUGE MANAGEMENT & OPERATIONS	
AFFECTED RESOURCE	ANTICIPATED DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS

Land Use: The refuge provides valuable habitat for migratory birds as well as numerous species of resident mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. The predominant land uses are associated with refuge management actions that support the refuge's mission for the conservation of wildlife and provide recreational opportunities. Efforts are made to balance competing demands for natural resources, wildlife, and the public. Refuge management has made significant progress in implementing planned activities over the years since establishment. Refuge planning and management, however, are a continual work in progress and evolve over time, depending on feedback and monitoring as well as changing values, needs, and priorities in wildlife management at the refuge, regional, and national scale. The refuge's comprehensive conservation plan provides direction for refuge habitat management programs, visitor services activities, and wildlife management programs.	Alternative A: No change from current management. Alternative B: The refuge will continue to engage in current management activities during the hunt to ensure the refuge meets its other management objectives.. Impacts will be minimized by ensuring hunters, cooperators, visitors and partners are aware of each other's activities and timed to minimize conflict when possible. Management activities can generally be separated by time or area during the hunts.
Administration	Alternative A:

The costs of administering and enforcing the refuge's hunting program will be done through Georgia DNR. Ongoing coordination and communication between refuge staff and law enforcement officers is conducted throughout the year.	No additional increase in costs for administration, law enforcement, biological monitoring and research, or annual maintenance is anticipated. Alternative B: A minor increase in annual Law Enforcement and Visitor Services is anticipated.
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Table 5. Affected Socioeconomics and Anticipated Impacts

SOCIOECONOMICS	
AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT	ANTICIPATED DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS
Local and regional economies The refuge is located approximately two miles from the city of Lakeland, Georgia. Major economic activities include construction, manufacturing (furniture), retail, accommodation/food services, agriculture, and forestry (Georgia Department of Labor 2006). Land use is primarily evergreen forest, forested wetland, agriculture, clearcut, and urban (University of Georgia 2007). Refuge visitation averages 20,000 visitors annually.	Alternative A: There will be no additional impact to the local economy beyond continued revenue generated from existing opportunities. Alternative B: We anticipate an increase in visitation and expenditure for the additional species proposed. This will result in a minor impact to the local economy.
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE	
Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-	Alternative A and B: The Service has not identified any potential high and adverse environmental or human health impacts from this preferred action or any of the alternatives. The Service has

Income Populations, requires all Federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice into their missions by identifying and addressing disproportionately high or adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs and policies on minorities and low-income populations and communities.	identified no minority or low-income communities within the impact area. Minority or low income communities will not be disproportionately affected by any impacts from this preferred action or any of the alternatives.
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Cumulative Impact Analysis

Cumulative impacts are defined as “the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such other actions” (40 CFR 1508.7).

For more information on the national cumulative impacts of the Service’s hunting and fishing program on the National Wildlife Refuge System, see 2020-21 Cumulative Impacts Report.

No cumulative impacts are not anticipated; however, plants and wildlife will be monitored by Refuge staff and Georgia DNR staff to ensure that no significant damage will occur in public use areas. Hunting conducted in accordance with State and federal regulations is not expected to adversely affect wildlife populations that occur on the refuge and likely assists in maintaining the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the refuge. Hunting is a closely monitored tool that effectively regulates wildlife populations.

Table 6. Anticipated Cumulative Impacts

Other Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Activity Impacting Affected Environment	Descriptions of Anticipated Cumulative Impacts
Hunting Hunting has not been allowed on Banks Lake NWR previously. As surveys from Georgia DNR became available, we are evaluating alligator hunting on the refuge per State regulations.	Alternative A: The preferred action will have no impacts on the environment or other hunting opportunities locally, regionally or nationally, as there is no increased opportunity. Alternative B: The preferred action will have minor impacts on the environment of other hunting opportunities locally, regionally, or at the national level. The Service does not believe that increasing hunting opportunities on our land will

	decrease hunting opportunities on other lands near the Refuge. Because trends of the number of hunters participating in the sport is declining, we believe providing additional opportunities will potentially increase the numbers of hunters that utilize public land for hunting recreation. Private land hunting will not be impacted by the use of public land for hunting.
Resident Wildlife Refuges conduct hunting within the framework of State and Federal regulations. Population estimates of huntable species are developed by Georgia DNR. Hunting frameworks and take limits are set based upon these estimates. The Refuge hunting program rules will be the same as, or more restrictive than, State regulations. By maintaining hunting regulations that are the same as or more restrictive than the State, individual refuges ensure that they are maintaining seasons which are supportive of management on a more local basis. Such an approach also provides consistency with large-scale population status and objectives. The Refuge consistently coordinates with the State about the hunting program. Wildlife management of populations is important to ensure the health of the ecosystem and the Refuge's hunt program provides minor, additional beneficial impacts to the cumulative impacts of wildlife management in the State.	Alternative A: Hunting will not be implemented; therefore, no cumulative impacts are expected. Alternative B: The Refuge will continue to support substantial resident wildlife populations that will be at or above the habitat's carrying capacity under both Alternatives. So, even at the local level, the refuge only adds slightly to cumulative impacts on the resident wildlife, and a negligible amount to regional and statewide populations.

Mitigation Measures

To minimize adverse effects of disturbance on other wildlife species as well as in some cases for public safety, the Refuge will be closed to non-hunting visitors during the hunts. Alligator hunts will occur outside of wood stork nesting season. Hunts will be limited to six days of the State season.

Monitoring

Continued annual biological monitoring of both resident and migratory wildlife and their habitats is done on the refuge in conjunction with our State partners. In addition, the station will stay apprised on the status of threatened and endangered species on the refuge through consultation and local monitoring.

Summary of Analysis

The purpose of this EA is to briefly provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

Alternative A – No Action Alternative

As described above, Alternative A will not implement an alligator hunt at Banks Lake NWR.

Alternative B – preferred Action Alternative

As described above, this alternative will open the Refuge to alligator hunting. This opportunity is likely to attract more hunters, potentially increasing to conflicts with other users. We believe that these conflicts can be easily mitigated by limiting the hunt to up to six days out of the State alligator season. There is not likely to be an adverse effect on endangered or threatened species. Effects on wildlife and habitat at a local level will be positive overall, but these effects will be negligible at any larger scale. The local populations of the hunted species under this proposal will potentially be managed at levels more favorable for the species overall health. Predation by the hunted species will be reduced and this will have positive impacts to some non-hunted wildlife.

This alternative helps meet the purpose and needs of the Service as described above, because it provides additional wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities on the Refuge meeting the Service's priorities and mandates. This alternative also helps align Service regulations with State regulations in an effort to making hunting more accessible by the American public. The Service

has determined that the preferred action is compatible with the purposes of Banks Lake Refuge and the mission of the NWRS. The Compatibility Determination is attached.

List of Preparers and Coordination

List of Preparers

Michael Lusk, Refuge Manager
Sarah Clardy, Asst. Refuge Manager
Pamela Garrison, Senior FWO
Susan Heisey, Supervisory Park Ranger
Sara Aicher, Supervisory Biologist
Laura Housh, Natural Resource Planner

State Coordination

In addition to coordinating with local Georgia DNR staff, the Service sent a State Coordination letter announcing the proposed hunt packages in the State of Georgia in the winter of 2019.

Tribal Consultation

The listed Tribal entities were invited to comment on the scoping for the proposed hunt, no comments have been received to date.

Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Okmulgee, Oklahoma
Thlopthlocco Tribal Town, Okemah, Oklahoma
Alabama-Quassarte Tribal Town, Wetumka, Oklahoma
Poarch Band of Creek Indians of Alabama, Atmore, Alabama
Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, Wewoka, Oklahoma
Seminole Tribe of Florida, Hollywood, Florida
Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, Miami, Florida

Public Outreach

Public scoping was conducted from September 20 to October 20, 2019 and the Refuge received 18 written comments via email and mail and forty-two comments on our official social media account. In March 2020, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published the draft Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge. The draft Hunt Plan and EA proposed opening the Refuge for alligator hunting. On March 23, 2020, we distributed an information bulletin to news organizations and partners through an email to the availability of the hunt plan. The hunt plan was uploaded onto the refuge website. The local public comment period was from March 23, 2020 until April 20, 2020. A total of three

individuals shared comments through email correspondence. This document addresses the substantive comments and provides our responses to them.

Appendix F. Summary of Public Comments and Service Responses

Introduction

In March 2020, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published the draft Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge. The draft Hunt Plan and EA proposed opening the Refuge for alligator hunting.

On March 23, 2020, we distributed an information bulletin to news organizations and partners through an email to the availability of the hunt plan. The hunt plan was uploaded onto the refuge website. The local public comment period was from March 23, 2020 until April 20, 2020. A total of three individuals shared comments through email correspondence. This document addresses the substantive comments and provides our responses to them. The Service's responses to comments received through the Federal Register rulemaking process were published in the final rule in the Federal Register

Comment: Opposition to all hunting on NWRs.

Service Response: Hunting is a priority public use under the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. In March 2017, Secretarial Order 3347 was signed stating the Department of the Interior is entrusted with overseeing Federal lands for the benefit of current and future generations. This includes advancing conservation stewardship and increasing outdoor recreation opportunities, including hunting and fishing, for all Americans. In September of 2017, Secretarial Order 3356 titled "Hunting, Fishing, Recreational shooting, and Wildlife Conservation Opportunities and Coordination with States, Tribes, and Territories," built on Secretarial Order 3347. This order included specific directives for Department of the Interior agencies to implement that will increase access for hunting and fishing. This Order continues the Department'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.

Comment: Instead of allowing limited hunting, open the refuge to state alligator season until 10 alligators have been taken.

Service Response: In consultation with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and based on the available alligator population survey data, Banks Lake NWR was recommended to be open to hunting during the first two weekends of the season, which would be the most efficient way to manage a limited hunt in the refuge. Identifying limited hunt dates also assure hunters that have been drawn for Zone 4 the opportunity to hunt on the refuge without concern of reaching limits early.

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Comment: Opening the refuge to duck hunting.

Service Response: At this time, the refuge does not have sufficient population data to support a waterfowl hunt. As an unfunded and unstaffed refuge and, the personnel from Okefenokee NWR have not been able to conduct regular waterfowl surveys and only have anecdotal information on the populations that exist there. Due to reduced staffing, the refuge does not anticipate being able to conduct waterfowl surveys on Banks Lake NWR.

Appendix G. Finding of No Significant Impact

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT AND DECISION TO OPEN ALLIGATOR HUNTING ON BANKS LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

BANKS LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE *Lakeland, Georgia*

The Service is opening opportunities for American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) on the Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge in accordance with the refuge's Hunt Plan and Environmental Assessment (2020). Currently, the entire refuge is open to fishing, but not hunting. Under this proposal, the entire refuge will be open for alligator hunting.

Selected Action

Alternative A—Proposed Action Alternative:

Under the Proposed Action Alternative, all acreage of the Refuge will be open to alligator hunting. All State of Georgia Regulations would apply and the season would be limited to the first two weekend hunts within the State season. This hunt would be operated and conducted in coordination with Georgia DNR.

This alternative would open the refuge to alligator hunting opportunities. This action would attract hunters currently not using the refuge, thus affording an opportunity for the refuge to engage new segments of the public to promote natural resources conservation, environmental education and natural resources stewardship. Opportunities to create additional outdoor recreation experiences would be consistent with goals and priority uses identified by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (NWRSA) and Secretarial Orders 3347 and 3356.

This alternative was selected over the other alternatives because:

- It would provide a quality recreational experience to the general public while maintaining a healthy and sustainable population;
- It would meet the intent of the NWRSA and Secretarial Order 3356;
- It offers the best opportunity for public hunting that would result in a minimal impact on physical and biological resources;
- It would provide a wildlife-dependent recreational opportunity;
- Allow the public to harvest a renewable resource;
- Increase awareness of the Banks Lake NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System in

- general;
- It would meet public demand.

Other Alternatives Considered and Analyzed

Alternative B—No Action Alternative

The refuge would not implement the Hunt Plan. Opportunities to create a new outdoor recreation experience by adding alligator hunting would be lost and hunters would pursue these species off refuge.

This alternative was not selected because:

- It would not fulfill the intent of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan;
- It would not meet the aspects of Secretarial Order 3356;
- It would not provide the public with opportunities to hunt species already open to hunting by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Summary of Effects of the Selected Action

An Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide decision-making framework that 1) explored a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives, 2) evaluated potential issues and impacts to the refuge, resources and values, and 3) identified mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts. The EA evaluated the effects associated with the proposed action. It is incorporated as part of this finding.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects:

- We anticipate an increase in visitation and expenditure for the additional species proposed. This will result in a minor impact to the local economy.
- The proposed hunt impacts are assumed to be minimal due to the small amount of hunters anticipated to participate in the hunt on the refuge. Georgia DNR will manage the hunt and issues 85 permits for a ten county area with a one alligator limit per permittee. Historically, Zone 4 has reported the least amount of alligators taken with tags going unfulfilled. The estimated amount of hunters and alligators harvested on the refuge is 10-20 per year.
- There will be no impacts to cultural resources. No buildings or structures exist on-site listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Hunting is not expected to cause ground disturbance.

- All other public uses on the refuge will not change and would continue to be managed as described in current plans.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the selected action. These measures include:

- Any activity that might cause an effect to a historic property will be subject to a case-by-case Section 106 review.
- The Service has not identified any potential high and adverse environmental or human health impacts from this proposed action or any of the alternatives. The Service has identified no minority or low-income communities within the impact area. Minority or low-income communities will not be disproportionately affected by any impacts from this proposed action.
- The refuge will continue to engage in current management activities during the hunt to ensure the refuge meets its other management objectives. Impacts will be minimized by ensuring hunters, cooperators, visitors and partners are aware of each other's activities and timed to minimize conflict when possible. Management activities can generally be separated by time or area during the hunts.
- Conflicts between hunting and non-hunting recreational users will be minimal due to the administration by Georgia DNR.
- The refuge will be open to hunting up to six days of the State season. Negligible effect expected to vegetation from trampling by hunters, because of the low number of users and days of use expected.

While refuges, by their nature, are unique areas protected for conservation of fish, wildlife and habitat, the proposed action will not have a significant impact on refuge resources and uses for several reasons:

- Georgia DNR survey data, from 2013 to present, suggests Banks Lake NWR currently supports an average of 24 legal harvest-size (48 inches) alligators with an average of 8 harvest-size alligators per mile. The hunt may improve foraging for smaller alligators by reducing competition. The hunt may also reduce nuisance alligators or lessen human/alligator conflicts.
- The Service works closely with the State to ensure that additional species harvested on a refuge are within the limits set by the State to ensure healthy populations of the species for present and future generations of Americans.
- The action will result in beneficial impacts to the human environment, including the biodiversity and ecological integrity of the refuge, as well as the wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities and socioeconomics of the local economy, with only negligible adverse impacts to the human environment as discussed above.
- In north and central Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, wood storks lay eggs from March to late May, with fledging occurring in July and August. Alligator season usually

begins in mid- August. Therefore, there is no impact to the wood stork habitat and nesting season.

- The adverse direct and indirect effects of the proposed action on air, water, soil, habitat, wildlife, aesthetic/visual resources, and wilderness values are expected to be minor and short-term. The benefits to long-term ecosystem health that these efforts will accomplish far outweigh any of the short-term adverse impacts discussed in this document;
- The NWRS uses an adaptive management approach to all wildlife management on refuges, monitoring and re-evaluating the hunting and fishing opportunities on the refuge on an annual basis to ensure that the hunting and fishing programs continue to contribute to the biodiversity and ecosystem health of the refuge and these opportunities do not contribute to any cumulative impacts to habitat or wildlife from climate change, population growth and development, or local, State, or regional wildlife management;
- The action, along with proposed mitigation measures, will ensure that there is low danger to the health and safety of refuge staff, visitors, and the hunters/fishers themselves;
- The action is not in an ecologically sensitive area;
- The action will not impact any threatened or endangered species; or any Federally-designated critical habitat;
- The action will not impact any cultural or historical resources;
- The action will not impact any wilderness areas;
- There is no scientific controversy over the impacts of this action and the impacts of the proposed action are relatively certain;
- The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988 because the activity will only occur in areas already open to public use and fishing.

Public Review

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted include:

In addition to coordinating with local Georgia DNR staff, the Service sent a State Coordination letter announcing the proposed hunt packages in the State of Georgia in the winter of 2019.

The listed Tribal entities were invited to comment on the scoping for the proposed hunt, no comments were received.

1. Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Okmulgee, Oklahoma
2. Thlopthlocco Tribal Town, Okemah, Oklahoma
3. Alabama-Quassarte Tribal Town, Wetumka, Oklahoma
4. Poarch Band of Creek Indians of Alabama, Atmore, Alabama
5. Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, Wewoka, Oklahoma
6. Seminole Tribe of Florida, Hollywood, Florida
7. Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, Miami, Florida

The Service put the Hunt Plan and EA out for two 30-day public review and comment periods. The local comment period ran from March 23 – April 20, 2020. The national comment period ran from April 9 – June 8, 2020. The Service received three comments on the draft Hunt Plan and EA. One of the comments wanted to ban all hunting on National Wildlife Refuges, and the other two comments asked for expanded hunting. Hunting is consistent with the NWR SAA and Secretarial Orders 3347 and 3356. The expanded hunting requests were either not allowable under state law or could not be supported with biological data.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based upon a review and evaluation of the information contained in the EA as well as other documents and actions of record affiliated with this proposal, the Service has determined that the proposal to implement alligator hunting on the Banks Lake NWR does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102 (2) (c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required.

Decision

The Service has decided to open Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge to alligator hunting.

This action is compatible with the purposed of the refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. See attached Compatibility Determination (Appendix D).

The action is consistent with applicable laws and policies.

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Date: 2020.07.30 14:16:11 -04'00'

David Viker

Date

Regional Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System