

# Compatibility Determination

## Recreational Floating

Continue implementation of the 2005 Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge River Recreation Management Plan. Recreational floating will be permitted on a portion of the Niobrara River that flows through the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

## Refuge Use Category

Boating

## Refuge Use Type(s)

Boating (human-powered)

## Refuge

Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge

## Refuge Purpose(s) and Establishing and Acquisition Authority(ies)

“... a preserve and breeding ground for native birds.” (EOs 1461, 1642, 3256)

“...to effectuate further the purposes of the of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act...” (EO 7301)

## National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans (Pub. L. 105-57; 111 Stat. 1252).

## Description of Use

Is this an existing use?

Yes

What is the use?

River float trips by non-motorized vessels including canoes, kayaks, and tubes.

Is the use a priority public use?

No

Where would the use be conducted?

River floating is currently allowed on approximately 5 miles of the Niobrara River beginning at the Fort Niobrara Launch Area downstream to the east boundary of the Refuge. This stretch of river is characterized by steep bluffs and canyons, deciduous forest, pine forest, and open grasslands. Wildlife includes a variety of woodland and grassland species as well as common waterbirds such as kingfishers and great blue herons.

When would the use be conducted?

The use would be conducted during daylight hours throughout the year. Primary use will occur from July through September.

How would the use be conducted?

River recreation will be allowed by the public via self-guided efforts and by using commercial outfitters. Users will launch vessels at one of two launch sites. Launch areas are maintained with recreational fees collected from users and from commercial outfitter special use permit fees. The launch area has a gravel parking lot, 6 gravel boat launches, restrooms, an informational kiosk, and fee collection box. Approximately 5,000 visitors use the launch area annually.

All river floaters must wear a Refuge issued wrist band. The wrist band is either provided by an outfitter or is acquired at the launch site through a self-pay system.

A special use permit is required for outfitters to conduct commercial activities on the Refuge.

Why is this use being proposed or reevaluated?

This is an existing use that was previously evaluated in 2005 when the River Recreation Management Plan was approved. Reevaluation is due per policy 603 FW 2.11 H(2). 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. A refuge manager may reevaluate the compatibility of a use at any time.

### Availability of Resources

Multiple costs are associated with implementation of the River Recreation Plan. A special user fee for the public and commercial outfitters offsets Refuge costs to administer the use. Fees associated with the program have remained constant (\$1/wrist band) since 2005, and the program is not anticipated to be self-sustaining over the next decade. The station intends to initiate a fee increase process in 2022.

Table 1. Costs to Administer and Manage River Recreation Program

Category and Itemization	One-time Cost	Recurring Annual Expenses
Wrist bands/envelopes		\$1.5k
Staff time (LE, administration and management)		\$15k
Launch site maintenance		\$2k
Signs	\$5k (new signs)	
Total Expenses expected during the upcoming 10-year period	\$190k	
Anticipated revenues from outfitter SUPs and public wrist band sales during the upcoming 10-year period	\$95k (\$750/permittee/year x 10 permittees x 10 years + \$2,000 in wristbands/year x 10 years)	

### Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Potential impacts of a proposed use on the refuge's purpose(s) and the Refuge System mission

Any public use activity has the potential for impacts. However, the focus is to minimize any potential impacts to within acceptable limits. Through continued

implementation of the River Recreation Management Plan, recreational floating on the Refuge would not have detrimental impacts on threatened or endangered species, adversely affect cultural resources, or cause unacceptable disturbances to wildlife or wildlife habitat.

### Short-term impacts

Anderson (2003) found no clear effects of recreational disturbance to songbirds breeding on Fort Niobrara NWR. There was, however, negative short-term behavioral effects noted for various waterbirds. Waterbirds roosting or feeding in the river displayed a greater rate of flushing when exposed to noises associated with river recreation than waterbirds not exposed to recreational noises (Anderson 2003).

Waterbirds most susceptible to river recreation include herons, ducks, and shorebirds (Anderson 2003). A minimal number of these birds typically occupy the stretch of river where recreation occurs. Relatively fast currents, steep banks and minimal mudflat habitat minimizes waterbird use within this stretch of the river. Because of the minimal waterbird use within the recreation stretch of the river, disturbance related to river recreation is not anticipated to materially impact populations of these species.

River floating, as administered in the River Recreation Management Plan is not anticipated to affect threatened or endangered species. Whooping cranes, least terns and piping plovers utilize parts of the Niobrara River; however, habitat on this stretch of the river is not appropriate for these species. These species favor shallow water and mudflats, and this habitat is extremely limited in the floatable river stretch. These species are not anticipated to utilize the floatable stretch of the river even in the absence of a river float program.

### Long-term impacts

Continued implementation of the River Recreation Management Plan will result in continued loss of wildlife habitat at the launch areas (approximately 3 acres) and compromised wildlife habitat surrounding the launch areas (estimated 10 acres). Outside the launch areas, no long-term wildlife or habitat impacts are expected.

## Public Review and Comment

### Determination

Is the use compatible?

Yes

## **Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility**

1. River floating on the Refuge is only allowed downstream of Cornell Dam.
2. Recreational floating will be conducted in accordance with the 2005 River Recreation Management Plan.

## **Justification**

Based on available science and best professional judgement, river floating at Fort Niobrara NWR, in accordance with the stipulations provided here and conditions in the 2005 River Recreation Management Plan, would not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the Refuge. River floating at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge facilitates wildlife observation through which the public can develop an appreciation for the Refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

## Literature Cited/References

Anderson, C. D. 2003. Recreational pressure at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge: Potential impacts on avian use and seasonal productivity along the Niobrara River. Master's Thesis.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2005. Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge River Recreation Management Plan.