

**Public Access Plan for
Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge**

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Prepared by:
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is a 50,000 acre refuge established on the former military base known as Jefferson Proving Ground (JPG). The refuge was established in 2000 via a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the U.S. Army (Army) and U.S. Air Force (AF). The MOA allowed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to obtain a 25-year lease to administer the lands under the National Wildlife Refuge System. The primary purposes for this overlay NWR are derived from 2 specific acts:

- 1) The Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 [16 USC 742a-742j] as amended authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to acquire interests in property "...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources..."
- 2) The Endangered Species Act authorizes the Secretary of Interior to acquire interests in lands "to conserve fish, wildlife, and plants, including those which are listed as endangered or threatened..." [16 USC 1534].

The mission of Big Oaks NWR derives from these two purposes and is "to preserve, conserve, and restore biodiversity and biological integrity for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans." There is also a potential for limited public use in areas designated for such activities. This Public Access Plan (Plan) was developed to allow the Army to review and approve safety procedures prior to public use occurring on Big Oaks NWR. This Plan is in accordance with the terms and conditions of the MOA between the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Army, and Air Force (AF), and in the event of a conflict between the MOA and this Plan, the MOA shall be the controlling document.

Much of Big Oaks NWR contains unexploded ordnance (UXO), depleted uranium (DU), and other contaminants. The existence of these contaminants causes safety, management and funding concerns specific to Big Oaks NWR. The FWS accepts that there is no Army plan or budget authority to remove UXO in the Firing Range. However, the Army has agreed to make a good faith effort to request UXO removal in connection with Army Reserve and/or Army National Guard training exercises to support refuge operations. To facilitate the support process, the FWS will incorporate building designs that minimize ground disturbance and will provide the Army a minimum 2-year advance notice of their request to complete UXO removal. If the Army is not able to obtain UXO removal support as part of a training exercise, the FWS agrees to withdraw its request and terminate any plans/operations requiring non-emergency UXO support.

In the central portion of JPG is an active 1,033-acre AF training area known as Jefferson Range. Jefferson Range is composed of a 983-acre air-to-ground bombing and strafing range and a 50-acre Precision Guided Munitions (PGM) range. Indiana Air National Guard (INANG) currently operates this range through an agreement with the AF. Both the 983-acre range and the 50-acre range have associated safety fans that extend over a portion of the NWR (Fig. 1). A composite footprint of approximately 5,100 acres supports the primary target area and a composite footprint of approximately 14,860 acres supports the PGM target area. During flight operations no personnel other than INANG personnel will be allowed access inside the weapons footprints.

The use of both footprints will be coordinated with the Refuge Manager through monthly scheduling or as necessary to meet mission requirements. When not in use, FWS personnel will have access to the safety footprints. Safety fans and other closed areas will be barricaded as a precaution. The scheduling of public use on Big Oaks NWR that may conflict with INANG activities will be coordinated through periodic meetings between the Refuge Manager and the INANG Range Commander designed to eliminate conflicts and ensure safety.

In the event of an aircraft accident, the Jefferson Range Control Officer (RCO) will be the on-scene commander in charge until relieved by the appropriate military authority. Fire and medical support will be directed to the perimeter gate most advantageous to the crash site. Due to the dangers posed by military aircraft, no persons will be allowed access to a crash site until deemed appropriate by the on-scene official. The Jefferson Range Access Plan protocols concerning aircraft accidents will be adhered to by the FWS, and the Refuge Manager will coordinate and cooperatively work with the Jefferson RCO or other on-scene commander.

Safety Briefing Protocols

To ensure visitor safety, the Army will provide safety briefing materials that contain basic information on site history, the hazards of UXO, and the appropriate action when UXO or DU is encountered. The FWS will require all staff and visitors to undergo a safety briefing and will provide safety pamphlets containing this information and a map of Big Oaks NWR. FWS will also brief visitors on other hazards based on local site conditions. All Public Access Permits will be tracked by a permit number. An annual database will be maintained that records individual permit information (e.g., name, address, date of safety briefing, etc.). An annual fee, daily fee, or hunting fee will be charged for recreational use at Big Oaks NWR. Entrance fees will be waived for official duties conducted by contractors, FWS staff, AF staff, Army staff, and others designated by the Refuge Manager, but everyone will receive a safety briefing (INANG/AF visitors will receive briefings in accordance with the INANG/AF site access plan).

Entry Procedures

Visitors will check-in and undergo an appropriate safety briefing at the refuge office (presently in Building 125) and be issued a Public Access Permit. Upon each visit, refuge visitors will exchange their Permit for a daily pass which must be kept on them at all times while on the refuge. The visitor will then be given directions to the access gate controlled by a gate attendant. The gate attendant will confirm the date and location on the daily pass. The gate location will be the primary access point for unescorted FWS visitors and is located adjacent to Gate 1a on the East Perimeter Road (Gate "1b"; Fig. 2). An additional gate staffed by a gate attendant will be used during deer and turkey hunting days (Gate 19b). Visitor check-out will also occur at the refuge office. INANG/AF visitors will be checked-in and out in accordance with the INANG/AF site access plan.

Types of Public Use

The FWS will provide staffing at a level consistent with the safe operation of the refuge. With the expectation of limited or no UXO cleanup in the future, public use levels will be limited to

hunting, fishing, edible mushroom and berry collecting, wildlife observation and photography, and guided tours (Table 1). Activities not covered within the Plan will not be allowed unless first reviewed and approved by the Army and declared compatible by the FWS.

Access

All public activities on the refuge will be controlled and limited within 2 zones identified in consultation with the Army. These areas are 1) Limited Day Use Recreation and 2) Special Control Hunt Zones; a third zone would have no public access and would be considered closed to all types of entry except on established roads or under emergency conditions (Fig. 1). The Limited Day Use Zone will be used for hunting (squirrel, deer, and turkey), fishing (Old Timbers Lake), limited opportunities for wildlife observation and photography, guided (accompanied by FWS staff or other designated personnel) environmental education and interpretative tours and collecting (edible mushrooms, berries, and shed deer antlers). The Special Control Hunt Zone will have public access during a squirrel, deer and turkey hunting season and limited guided tours. Collecting for edible mushrooms and berries, and shed deer antlers can occur in hunting areas when visitors have been granted access during specific hunting seasons. All of these recreational units were previously used in the Army recreation program (Fig. 1).

Public use areas are delineated by maps and by signs placed on their boundaries as required by NWR policies. Recreational opportunities during posted hours and periods will be available to the general public provided they have completed all necessary safety requirements, possess proper state licenses, appropriate permits for lottery seasons, and there are areas/staff available for the requested activity. Unescorted access will be limited to April through November (Table 1). Recreation units have maximum capacity limits at any one time for all visitor activities (Table 1, Fig. 1). Guided tours oriented toward environmental education, wildlife observation, interpretation, and the unique history of the property will be scheduled and completed without exposing the public participants to undue risk.

Protocols on How Public Use will be Monitored, Limited, and Controlled

Public access will be limited to specific days of the week and by seasonal periods (e.g., deer, squirrel, and turkey seasons) (Table 1). The Army and the FWS will periodically reevaluate public access to determine if different limits are more appropriate.

The standard protocol for public access will be a check-in/check-out procedure to specific areas (e.g., Area 1, see Fig. 1) for those members of the public that have undergone a safety briefing. They will be allowed in areas identified as suitable for that type of activity (e.g., deer hunting in a Special Control Hunt Area; fishing in Old Timbers Lake). Information on types and locations of public use will be compiled in an annual report that is distributed to the Army, INANG and the FWS Region 3 Office.

INANG has installed road barricades on the East and West Perimeter Roads and the FWS has placed closed area signs on these barricades to limit public access into interior areas of the refuge (Fig. 2). A total of 19 barricades have been placed around the periphery of the southern Special Control Hunt Zone. These barricades are located at the point where all interior roads leave the East and West Perimeter Roads. Other than during the limited deer and turkey hunts, certain

barricade gates remain closed and locked at all times (Fig 2). FWS controls access into these areas during the annual turkey and deer hunts with the previously described protocols. Besides these hunt periods, only INANG and FWS personnel or required contractors are allowed access to these interior areas and the safety fan footprints. Closed area signs have been placed alternating with the warning signs placed by the Army for closed access areas, especially for those areas adjacent to recreation units. Signs have been placed on existing structures (i.e., fence posts, buildings, etc.), live trees, or on posts with weighted bases to avoid ground intrusion of sign posts.

As described in the MOA, the FWS will work closely with INANG/AF on controlling visitor access and monitoring refuge visitors. The AF (via INANG) has the responsibility for maintaining the perimeter fence and overall site security at JPG. The FWS will notify the AF (via INANG) of any damage to the perimeter fence in a timely manner.

The FWS will not tolerate individuals who violate safety regulations. For this reason, anyone who does not comply with safety regulations will forfeit his/her refuge access privileges as determined by the Refuge Manager or by a court of law. The FWS will also continue access restrictions imposed by the Army to specific individuals because of documented safety violations.

Enforcement of refuge trespass and other public use violations is the primary responsibility of commissioned Refuge Law Enforcement Officers and cooperatively by Indiana Conservation Officers and other law enforcement agencies. General trespass, poaching, and other violations are cooperatively enforced by these agencies. The FWS has met with local law enforcement agencies and developed coordinated law enforcement strategies (these strategies have been in place since June 3, 2000) that are coordinated with the INANG. Procedures for obtaining law enforcement assistance are based on the legal jurisdiction where the incident occurs (e.g., in Ripley County the Ripley County Communication Supervisor is contacted, likewise, in Jefferson or Jennings Counties the appropriate Communication Radio Dispatch Centers are contacted). For emergency response situations, the cooperating agency coordinates activities with a 24 hr point of contact (POC) listed in Attachment 1a. Refuge officers and Indiana Conservation Officers also cooperatively enforce the speed limits along the east perimeter and throughout the refuge.

Fire suppression capabilities have been developed at Big Oaks NWR using refuge staff and through Volunteer Fire Department cooperative agreements. Big Oaks NWR has wildland fire fighting capabilities; therefore local volunteer fire departments will be used only after coordinating with the POC and if there is imminent danger to life or property outside the perimeter fence. All fire suppression personnel have been instructed to not leave roadways and to follow other Army safety directives.

Key Control

The INANG has changed all locks on the perimeter fence and has issued an appropriate number of perimeter and interior gate keys to the FWS for official use. These keys are controlled in accordance with standard lock and key control protocols (ANG 181st FW Instruction 32-1003).

All keys are signed for on the Jefferson Range key control log. The FWS inventories these keys quarterly in accordance with key control protocols. The FWS coordinates distribution of keys with law enforcement and emergency response agencies. The FWS is responsible for the control of these keys. The party responsible for missing keys shall bear the cost for the re-coring of locks as applicable. The Jefferson Range Commander has the ultimate responsibility for lock and key control on the range and refuge.

Use of Refuge by Old Timber's Lodge Guests

The refuge will allow Old Timbers Lodge guests access to refuge recreational activities on days/times those activities are available to the general public. Old Timbers Lodge guests must obtain a valid Big Oaks NWR Public Access Permit to participate in these activities and these guests must participate in a refuge safety briefing. While on the refuge, all rules and regulations of the refuge will apply to Old Timbers Lodge guests.

Old Timbers Lodge guests must check-in and check-out at the refuge office to participate in recreational opportunities (e.g., fishing at Old Timbers Lake). If guests do not check-in, especially for fishing at Old Timbers Lake, they cannot be guaranteed the opportunity to participate in the recreational activity. For permitted deer, turkey, or squirrel hunts, Old Timbers Lodge guests must either have a valid state lottery permit for the specific hunt or participate in a reserved hunt drawing during the hunting season at the refuge office.

Table 1. Public use limits for hunting and fishing on Big Oaks NWR ^a.

Activity	Description of where use will occur	Maximum one-time capacity	When allowed
Deer Hunting	See Public Access Map	500	November (6 days archery and 9 days gun)
Spring Turkey Hunting	See Public Access Map	220	April – May (15 days)
Fall Turkey Hunting	See Public Access Map (concomitant with the deer archery season)	500	October (14 Days)
Squirrel Hunting	See Public Access Map	72	Mid-August through November; 5-10 days per month
Fishing	Max. 30 boats on Old Timbers Lake. No fishing allowed on any other body of water.	200 ^{bc}	5 - 10 days per month; April through October
Collecting (mushrooms, berries, and shed deer antlers)	Max number of persons/area given on Public Access Map for areas designated for collecting same as turkey hunting.	2 ^d	5 – 10 days per month; April through November
Wildlife Observation and Photography	½ of the number persons/area given on Public Access Map; only within Limited Day Use Zone	80 ^b	5 - 10 days per month; April through November
Guided tours (interpretation and environmental education)	Dependent on conveyances available and activity. By definition, accompanied by FWS staff.	50	By reservation

^a Based on staff and available funds

^b Based on available parking for special events

^c Special event one-time capacity

^d Collecting may occur in Special Control hunt areas during Turkey hunting or same areas designated for squirrel hunting on the Public Use Map.

Attachment 1a

24 Hour Contact List

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