

# Memo

**Date:** May 5, 2020  
**To:** Devens Enterprise Commission  
**From:** Neil Angus, AICP CEP, LEED AP  
**RE:** Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge Hunt Plan Amendment

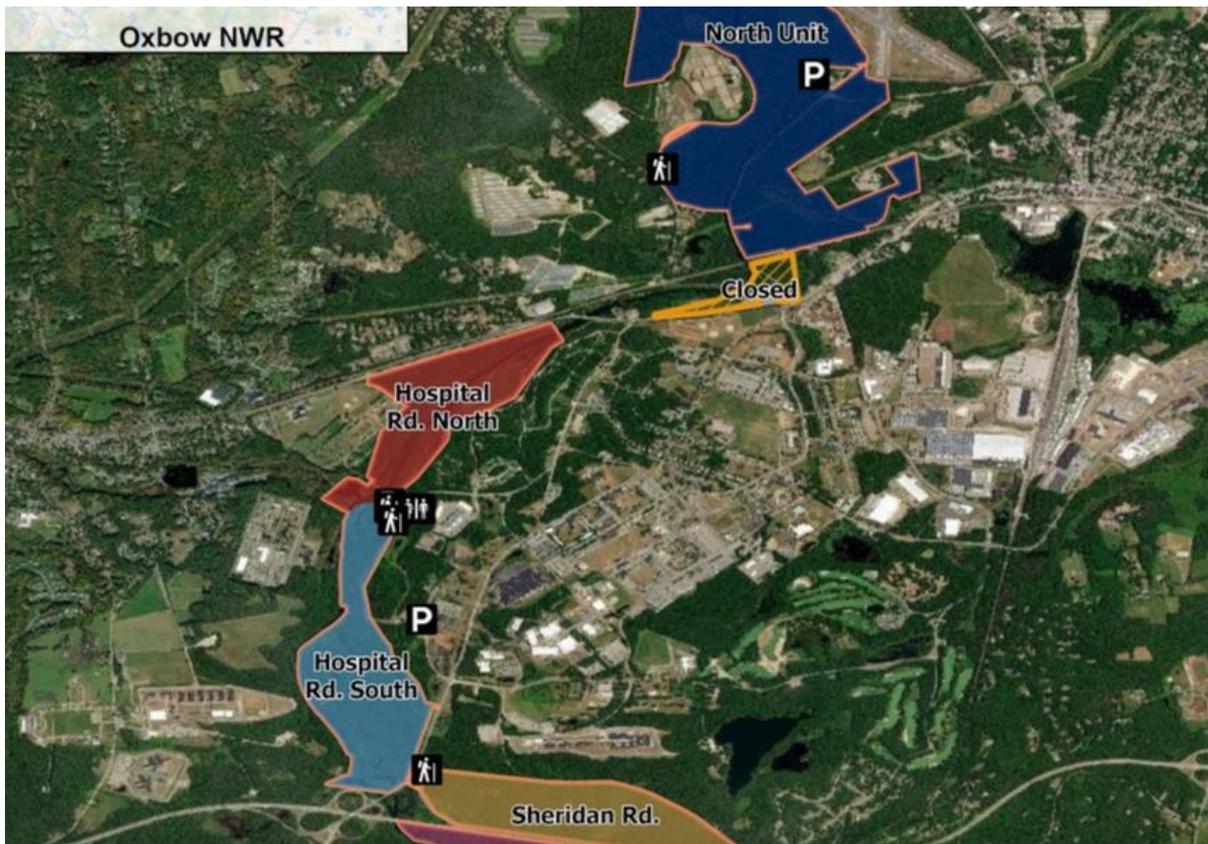
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The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is proposing to expand hunting opportunities at several refuges in Massachusetts, including the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR). They currently allow limited hunting as it is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established and acquired (hunting, environmental education, interpretation, fishing, and wildlife viewing). Part of USFWS order is to work with state, tribal, and territorial natural resources agencies to improve access to hunting and fishing opportunities.

Summary of proposed hunting changes at Oxbow NWR:

- Expand opportunities for big game, upland game, and migratory bird hunting on refuge lands.
- Open 128 additional acres to hunting.

The additional 128 acres being proposed to be added to allow hunting on is the Hospital Road North Parcel (red on the map below):



The main concern with adding this parcel to the allowable hunting area is its proximity to several populated areas, including Grant Road Housing (Phase 3), Shirley Commons, and the Ayer-Shirley Middle School. All hunters are

still required to follow the 500ft setbacks per Massachusetts hunting regulations for occupied dwellings and 100ft setbacks for roads however the existing and proposed development in this area raises the question of public safety and potential conflicts between recreation and hunting.

The proposed changes also include expanding hunting in the ONWR to include additional species such as bear, coyote, and fox. The chart below summarizes the proposed changes (C= Current and X= Proposed) It also proposes to allow more shotgun hunting than previously allowed (majority of hunting was bow-hunting in the Devens portion of the ONWR).

In addition to hunting, the USFWS manages refuges to provide for environmental education, interpretation, fishing, and wildlife viewing. Recreational activities and nature-based tourism is abundant in the areas surrounding the Hospital Road

Hunt Unit C= Currently Opened X= New Opportunity		Acres	Bear	Deer	Turkey	Coyote	Fox	Grouse	Rabbit	Snipe	Squirrel	Waterfowl	Woodcock
On Map as North Unit (proposing to merge) Total acres = 392	Bishop Road	234	X	C	C	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
	Walker Rd	158	X	C	C	X	X	C	C		C	X	C
Hospital Road North (Archery Only)		128	X	X	X	X	X						
Hospital Road South		169	X	C	C	X	X	C	C		C	X	
Sheridan Rd		142	X	C	C	X	X	C	C		C		C
Still River Depot Area (Archery Only)		126	X	C	C	X	X						
On Map as Route 2 South (proposing to merge) Total acres = 714	Waterfowl Area	466	X	C	C	X	X	C	C	C	C	C	C
	Route 2 South	248	X	C	C	X	X	C	C	C	C	X	C
<b>Total Acres</b>		<b>1671</b>	<b>1671</b>	<b>1671</b>	<b>1671</b>	<b>1671</b>	<b>1671</b>	<b>1417</b>	<b>1417</b>	<b>714</b>	<b>1417</b>	<b>1275</b>	<b>1248</b>

North parcel, The Bill Ashe Visitor facility is a regional draw that attracts many visitors for hiking, meetings, and educational classes. The canoe launch is also well utilized. Hunters are currently able to park in this area and travel south to utilize large, contiguous portions of the refuge. The Hospital Road North portion by comparison, is smaller and abuts a residential neighborhood to the east, a Village Growth district with a low-income senior housing complex and public school to the west, and an active street to the north (Route 2A). The Plan indicates that hunters comprise 0.2% of the refuge users. Expanding hunting to the Hospital Road North parcel would seem to be counterproductive by benefiting an extremely small segment of the population and conflicting with a much larger, more diverse population.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act requires that refuges develop Comprehensive Conservation Plans for management of resources. This plan recommends that wildlife management should be based on population studies and ecological assessments. The Environmental Assessment for these proposed changes indicates that roughly 10 coyotes and foxes would be killed by hunters across three refuges (Oxbow, Assabet, Great Meadows). While this is a relatively small number, coyotes are predators and help to naturally control the deer population which is a growing concern in parts of MA. Black bears have been seen in Devens although sightings have been few. The bear population does not appear to be causing any public safety or environmental concerns.

A full summary of the Hunting Plan changes is available to view at:

<https://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/Assabet%20River,%20Great%20Meadows,%20and%20Oxbow%20NWR%20Hunt%20Plan%20Proposal%20Summary.pdf> . There is also an FAQ on Hunting in the Oxbow NWR: [https://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/Eastern%20MA%20NWR%20Complex%20Hunt%20Proposal%20FAQ\\_04.22.2020.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/Eastern%20MA%20NWR%20Complex%20Hunt%20Proposal%20FAQ_04.22.2020.pdf) .

USFWS is seeking public comment on the proposed hunt plan expansion. Written comments can be submitted to the refuge by mail (Attn: Hunt Plan, Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge, 73 Weir Hill Road, Sudbury, MA 01776) or by email at [fw5rw\\_emnwr@fws.gov](mailto:fw5rw_emnwr@fws.gov) postmarked by May 22, 2020. **If the DEC is in agreement with the above comments, Staff will forward them to USFWS on behalf of the Commission.**