

Finding of No Significant Impact and Decision for Lower Rio Grande Valley and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuges Boca Chica Land Exchange

Lower Rio Grande Valley and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuges
Cameron County, Texas

NEPA Unique Identifier: 2025-0146895-NEPA-001

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will exchange 715 acres of Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge (LRGVNWR) lands for 683 acres of privately owned land held by the Space Exploration Technologies Corp. (SpaceX). The exchange will consolidate fragmented refuge holdings, reduce land use conflicts, and enhance long-term conservation of high-value habitats within the LRGVNWR and/or the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (LANWR). The Proposed Action was analyzed in the *Environmental Assessment for Lower Rio Grande Valley and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuges Boca Chica Land Exchange*, consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and hereby incorporated by reference.¹

Selected Action – Proposed Action (land exchange)

Under the Proposed Action, the Service will divest 715 acres of refuge land and acquire 683 acres of high-quality habitat currently owned by SpaceX. The acquired parcels include tidal marsh, saline prairie, thornscrub, coastal flats, wetland complexes, and shoreline habitat within approved refuge acquisition boundaries. Following acquisition, the Service will manage these parcels as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, implementing habitat restoration, wetland management, prescribed fire, invasive species control, threatened and endangered species conservation, cultural resources protection, and compatible wildlife-dependent recreation consistent with existing Comprehensive Conservation Plans.

The Proposed Action was selected because

- it best meets the purpose and need identified in the environmental assessment (EA), providing substantial long-term conservation value and improving landscape-scale habitat connectivity across refuges in South Texas;
- it provides a net conservation benefit, replacing fragmented, low- to medium-quality parcels with large, contiguous, high-quality habitat blocks more resilient to drought, flooding, storm events, and climate-driven shifts;
- it reduces edge effects, light and noise encroachment, and land use conflicts that currently diminish the conservation function of several LRGVNWR parcels;

¹ Lower Rio Grande Valley and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuges and SWCA Environmental Consultants. 2026. *Final Environmental Assessment Lower Rio Grande Valley and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuges Boca Chica Land Exchange*. 2025-0146895-NEPA-001. Boca Chica, Texas: U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 2 (Southwest Region).

- it is consistent with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act and supports the purposes for which LRGVNR and LANWR were established;
- it avoids conflicts with local, state, Tribal, or federal laws or policies;
- the Proposed Action can be implemented with enforceable cultural resource mitigation measures; and
- it advances the National Wildlife Refuge System's mission to conserve fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the benefit of present and future generations.

Other Alternatives Considered and Analyzed

Alternative B – No Action Alternative

Under the No Action alternative, the Service would retain all 715 acres proposed for divestiture, and SpaceX would retain 683 acres proposed for acquisition. Fragmentation, encroachment, and land use conflicts would persist. High-value habitat within the SpaceX parcels would remain vulnerable to private development, diminishing biological connectivity and long-term conservation value.

This alternative was not selected, because

- it would not achieve the Service's purpose and need to consolidate refuge lands and improve management of priority habitats;
- it would not address surrounding land-use conflicts or improve the refuge's ability to manage drought, flooding, extreme weather, or habitat fragmentation; and
- it would limit recovery opportunities for threatened and endangered species and would maintain degraded landscape connectivity between refuge units.

Summary of Effects of the Selected Action

An EA was prepared in accordance with NEPA to evaluate a reasonable range of alternatives, environmental impacts, and mitigation measures. The EA is incorporated by reference into this finding.

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

The Selected Action is expected to have predominantly beneficial effects on the natural and human environment. The EA provides detailed analysis of affected resources, including land use, cultural resources, threatened and endangered species, habitat and vegetation, mineral resources, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Resources such as wetlands, floodplains, air quality, fire, geology, soils, and contamination were reviewed and either found not to be substantially affected or were dismissed from further analysis.

- Land use: Consolidation of refuge parcels will reduce fragmentation, improve habitat connectivity, and enhance management efficiency across the LRGVNR and LANWR.
- Cultural resources: Transfer of certain parcels within the Palmito Ranch Battlefield National Historic Landmark constitutes an adverse effect under Section 106 of the

National Historic Preservation Act; however, enforceable mitigation measures within a Programmatic Agreement will preserve, interpret, and manage historic properties in perpetuity. A Programmatic Agreement between the Service, Texas Historical Commission, National Park Service, and SpaceX was signed on May 11, 2026.

- Threatened and endangered species: Acquired parcels contain high-quality habitat for piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*), red knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*), green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), Hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*), Leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), Loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*), northern aplomado falcon (*Falco femoralis septentrionalis*), and other listed species. The action may affect but is not likely to adversely affect listed species. Long-term effects would be beneficial.
- Mineral resources: Mineral potential is low to none, and the exchange will not meaningfully affect mineral resource availability or management.
- Other resources: No significant adverse effects are anticipated for water quality, public use, or socioeconomic conditions.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the Selected Action. These measures include the following:

- Establishment of a preservation area around White's Ranch with development limitations.
- Archaeological monitoring in loma areas during ground disturbance.
- Construction of a viewing platform and interpretive signage regarding the Palmito Ranch Battlefield.
- Use of refuge best management practices for restoration, invasive species control, hydrologic management, and fire operations on lands proposed for acquisition.

Documentation of Significance

The Service has determined that implementation of the Selected Action will not cause significant adverse impacts. Significance was evaluated in terms of context and intensity. Based on the analysis in the EA

- actions will not have significant adverse effects on public health or safety;
- no significant adverse effects on historic or cultural resources, Tribal sacred sites for federally recognized Tribes, or ecologically critical areas will occur when mitigation is applied;
- the action does not establish precedent for future significant actions;
- listed species and critical habitats have been addressed through Intra-Service Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultation;
- no adverse effects on designated wilderness or Research and Natural Areas will occur;
- no significant adverse effects on Tribal rights or trust resources will occur; and
- the project will not produce substantial adverse effects on wetlands or floodplains.

Public Involvement, State Coordination, and Tribal Consultation

The proposal has been coordinated with federal, state, local, and Tribal partners, including the Texas Historical Commission, National Park Service, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the International Boundary and Water Commission, and federally recognized Tribes. Agencies and Tribes participated in review of historic property identification, area of potential effects refinement, and development of mitigation measures.

The Draft EA was available for public comment from March 2, 2026, to March 31, 2026. During that period, more than 25,000 comments were received. A majority of the comments were form letters and were not unique. The majority of those comments were opposed to the Proposed Action, some recommended modifications or suggested different alternatives, and some comments were in favor.

Changes Incorporated Into the Final EA

The Final EA has been modified based on issues identified during the public comment period. These changes include the following:

- Expanded discussion of alternatives considered
- Additional details about the Biological Importance Score (BIS), including a supporting appendix
- Minor changes that reflect the modification of mitigation measures such as deed restrictions or development buffers
- Additional appendix with issues raised during the public comment period and the agency's response

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based on review and evaluation of the EA and associated documentation, the Service has determined that implementing the Boca Chica Land Exchange does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of NEPA. An Environmental Impact Statement is therefore not required.

Decision

The Service has decided to implement the Proposed Action as described. The action, including mitigation measures, will begin upon execution of the land exchange agreement. This action is consistent with the purposes of the refuges and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

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