

News Release

**Department of the Interior / U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge
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For Immediate Release:
November 3, 2005

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Rita Shuts down Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Complex to All Recreational Uses Including Hunting

Cameron Parish—The 184,000 acre Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which includes, Cameron Prairie, Lacassine, and Sabine National Wildlife Refuges, was ravished by Rita. The damages are widespread across the Refuges and the hazards to human health and safety are many. It is for this reason that refuge managers have closed the National Wildlife Refuges in Southwest Louisiana to all recreational uses including hunting.

According to Sabine National Wildlife Refuge Manager, Terry Delaine, “storm surge damaged access bridges, removed recreational facilities, severely damaged all buildings and other structures, removed and moved marsh vegetation, and left thousands of acres of debris strewn across the hunting and fishing areas throughout the refuge. Over five miles of Central Canal, the main access canal into Sabine refuge, has been filled in with debris.”

Also at Sabine, the Environmental Protection Agency is using the West Cove Recreational Area parking lots as sorting sites for hazardous materials being collected throughout Cameron Parish. Utility companies are using the Hog Island Gully Recreational Area parking lots as staging sites as they work to restore power and phones to the parish. Oil and gas companies are also using the refuge to stage their marsh clean up operations.

Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge Manager, Glenn Harris, reported that “The visitor center, offices, and the Pintail Drive were all damaged and require extensive repairs. The surge left large debris piles, including entire houses, littered throughout the marshes of both the Gibbstown and East Cove Units. Additionally, it caused a 10,000-gallon oil release and washed out protection levees along the eastern edge of Calcasieu

Lake within the Cameron Creole Watershed Project.” There have been quite a few inquiries about whether or not the Grand Bayou Boat Bay is opened for people to fish in East Cove. Harris said “The East Cove unit is closed to all recreational activities, including fishing at this time.”

Larry Narcisse, Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge Manager, said “the Lacassine refuge marshes, including Lacassine Pool were most notably affected by the lack of dissolved oxygen, inundation by salt water, and hazardous debris scattered throughout the marshlands.”

The debris piles throughout the refuges include everything picked up from ravaged residences and more. Examples include hazardous material containers, tractor-trailer trucks, tanks, houses, trees, washers, refrigerators, buckets, coolers, dolls, dead animals, etc.

In addition to the forceful surge damage throughout all of southwest Louisiana, the resulting salt water and reduced dissolved oxygen levels have also detrimentally impacted plant and animal life. Plant and animal species intolerant to the highly saline water from the Gulf of Mexico have perished. Dissolved oxygen levels in the water have been decreased or used up by the mixing of detritus throughout the water and the process of decaying vegetation and wildlife. This is one of the most common causes of post-storm fish and crab kills. When oxygen levels get too low, fish and other species like crabs and shrimp, are unable to obtain the required amount of oxygen necessary for metabolism and they die.

In addition to all the noted damages above, Refuge Biologist, Steve Reagan said “the lack of rainfall, although good for our blue tarped roofs, is adding insult to injury when it comes to the marsh vegetation. The marsh grasses, many of which are important duck and goose foods, need fresh water to flush out or dilute the high salinities so they can at least save their root systems. If the high salinity areas do not freshen up soon enough, we may lose hundreds, if not thousands of acres of additional marsh over the next few months.”

Refuge employees are working with state and other federal agencies to efficiently and effectively clean up the refuges to make them safe for public enjoyment once again. Plans to repair and rebuild refuge infrastructure are ongoing. When areas are made safe, they will be re-opened to the public. If you have any questions or concerns about the refuges please call 337-598-2216.