

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:
March 1, 2006

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**Public Invited to Town Hall meeting March 9
Will discuss: Lacassine Pool Opening, Sabine Refuge and East Cove Still
Closed, Fish status**

Cameron Parish. - Hurricane damage remains widespread across the Southwest Louisiana Refuges and the hazards to human health and safety are many. To insure public safety, refuge managers have closed Sabine refuge and Cameron Prairie refuge's East Cove Unit to all recreational activities including fishing, crabbing, shrimping, hunting, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

“The Administration in mid-February asked the Congress for \$132 million, a portion of which will be used to help Sabine and our other refuges rebuild key facilities,” said Don Voros, Southwest Louisiana Refuges Complex manager. “We've got some serious challenges for sure, but we know there are still grave needs across the Gulf Coast our folks and many others are working hard to try to meet. Thousands of citizens are still reeling from the emotional trauma of losing loved ones, homes and cars. We are under no illusions about the breadth of need out there.”

“Even as nearly 50 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees in the southeast lost much, if not everything, as thousands of Americans did as well, our employees were out there almost immediately working to rescue fellow citizens, clearing roads and the like,” Voros went on to say.

“We know the first priority is people and their safety,” said Voros. “And as our folks across Louisiana pick up the pieces and begin putting their lives back together, we want to be ready for them when they once again have the time to come to our refuges to hunt, fish, crab, shrimp, hike, and watch wildlife.”

To learn more about what is happening on any of the Southwest National Wildlife Refuges, Cameron Prairie, Lacassine, or Sabine, the public is invited to a public meeting to be held Thursday, March 9th from 6 to 9 pm at the Contraband Room of the Lake Charles Civic Center to discuss the current status of the refuges, and the path to the future.

- Sabine National Wildlife Refuge and Cameron Prairie refuge's East Cove unit will remain closed to the public.
- Cameron Prairie Refuge's Visitor Center and Pintail Drive will re-open March 15th.
- Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge will open for fishing Wednesday, March 15th
- Status of fisheries of southwest Louisiana by LDWF Fisheries Biologist Bobby Reed
- Break out question and answer sessions with state and refuge officials.

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

A recent hazardous materials (HAZMAT) and debris assessment report by Nixon and Michel Research Planning Inc., commissioned by the Service, states: “Hurricane Rita’s passage deposited over 1,700 acres of debris piles, containing an estimated 7 million cubic meters of debris on Sabine National Wildlife Refuge. Nearly 1,400 potential HAZMAT items have been positively identified in and around these piles, with an additional unknown number undetected or not visible. These items are estimated to contain between 115,000 – 350,000 gallons of hazardous liquids and gases. It is likely that without addressing these issues, Sabine refuge will be at significant risk of chemical and physical damages for decades.”

Sabine National Wildlife Refuge will remain closed to the public until these containers are removed. Issues that need to be addressed include replacing damaged public restrooms, repairing bridges, graveling and leveling parking areas, clearing silt and debris away from boat ramps and fishing piers, securing water control structures, and removing hazardous materials and debris from marshes and waterways.

“The visitor center, offices, and the Pintail Drive were all damaged and require extensive repairs,” said Glenn Harris, Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge Manager. “The surge left large debris piles, including entire houses, littered throughout the marshes of both the Gibbstown and East Cove Units. Rita caused a 10,000-gallon oil release that we burned off in October. It also 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.

“The East Cove unit is closed to all recreational activities, including fishing, due to repairs that are needed to the sheet pile plugs,” Harris said. “When those repairs are completed, East Cove will be re-opened”

Although Cameron Prairie’s Visitor Center and Pintail Wildlife Drive will re-open March 15th, only light vehicle traffic will be allowed. No large trucks, RV’s or buses will be able to use the drive until it is completely repaired. Both the drive and the Visitor Center may have temporary closures throughout the year due to reconstruction.

“The Lacassine refuge marshes, including Lacassine Pool were most notably affected by the inundation of salt water and reduced dissolved oxygen levels,” said Larry Narcisse, Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge Manager. “In addition to the forceful surge damage throughout all of southwest Louisiana, the resulting salt water and reduced dissolved oxygen levels have damaged plant and animal life. Many species are intolerant to the highly saline water from the Gulf of Mexico and have perished. Dissolved oxygen levels were decreased or used up by the process of decay and the mixing of silt throughout the water.”

“Low dissolved oxygen levels are one of the most common causes of post-storm fish and crab kills,” continued Narcisse. “When oxygen levels get too low, fish and other species such as crabs and shrimp can’t get enough oxygen necessary for metabolism and they die.”

He went on to say that the Service pulled all the boards from the water control structures during December 2005 to flush out as much of the salt water as possible.

“Although rainfall has been low, water has been pushed out to the extent possible by north winds throughout the winter,” said Narcisse. “This action probably saved what fish remain in the Pool.” “We appreciate the assistance of Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) and local anglers who conducted some sampling to find out what was remaining in the Pool. The good news is - the anglers and LDWF biologist found and caught numerous bass during the February sample period, however, sunfish, crappie, and small bass were absent from the fish caught. Fish sampling results will be presented during the March 9th Public Meeting.”

Despite boards being placed back in the water control structures this week, the water levels will remain low until we receive significant rainfall. The Pool will open for fishing March 15th, despite these low water levels. Refuge officials remind anglers that surface drive motors 25 hp or less are permitted. They also recommend taking a push pole to help maneuver boats through shallow spots.

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 upcoming public meeting, any of the closures, or any of the planned openings, please call the Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters at 337-598-2216.