

Sabine National Wildlife Refuge

Hurricane Rita Clean-up Questions and Answers

Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, national wildlife refuges including Sabine, Big Branch Marsh, Bayou Sauvage, and Delta have been grappling with hazardous materials issues. Sabine National Wildlife Refuge, which encompasses more than 125,000 acres of marshland, has the most significant impacts.

What is the problem at Sabine National Wildlife Refuge?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Sabine National Wildlife Refuge received the brunt of Hurricane Rita's storm surge, which carried with it tons of debris onto the refuge. The debris came from the remnants of beach communities as well as oil and gas facilities. It contains a mix of natural vegetation, construction debris, household items and an unknown amount of hazardous material. The impact is still being determined, but clean-up will be a huge challenge with submerged tanks and massive debris fields. A total of 32,000 acres have been impacted. This includes: 1,700 acres of debris piles, seven million cubic meters of debris, and nearly 1,400 potential hazmat items positively identified. Estimates range from 115,000 to 350,000 gallons of hazardous liquids and gases.

What is the Service doing to fix it?

The Service and the Department of the Interior are exploring every option to remove hazardous debris, including working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Defense and other federal agencies to assist with cleanup. We closed the refuge to the public for safety reasons. We are working with local and state

government planning teams to become involved in their broad restoration initiatives. We are also working with the Coastal America Partnership Program to see if we can obtain assistance from the Department of Defense.

With the large amounts of dangerous materials in the water and on land, physical safety needs to be addressed immediately. The Service commissioned a detailed study by Research Planning, Inc. in January 2006 entitled "Assessment of Hazardous Materials and Debris from Hurricane Rita in the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge" that provided enhanced detail of the extent of the problem. Additional surveys are needed to identify submerged items. This will help the Service develop a plan for their removal. After the tanks are removed, a long-term monitoring program of any remaining debris piles will be needed.

What is it going to cost?

The Service estimates that the funding included in the Administration's supplemental request will allow for the removal of the hazardous materials.

How will the Service pay for it?

We anticipate using some of the funds requested by the Administration in a supplemental currently pending before the Congress.

How long will it take?

We do not know at this juncture.

What is the extent of the damage?

Sabine NWR remains closed to the public and is not expected to reopen soon. Without removing the tanks, the refuge may pose a significant risk of chemical and physical damage for decades. Some short-term damages



Sabine NWR September 27, 2005

photo: USFWS

have been addressed such as visible oil spills. One such spill was intentionally burned on-site to limit impacts to migratory birds.

What was the justification for closing Sabine NWR and how long will it remain closed?

The facilities at Sabine NWR were devastated from Hurricane Rita. Five of eight buildings were immediately condemned and required demolition. The remaining three buildings need extensive repairs before they can be occupied. All public-use facilities received major damage and will require repairs before they can be reopened. The interior marshes of the refuge were inundated with debris, including hazardous/industrial waste and household debris. These conditions represent a significant risk to health and human safety requiring the Service to restrict refuge access to the public.

