



News Release

Public Affairs Office
PO Box 1306
Albuquerque, NM 87103
505/248-6911
505/248-6915 (Fax)

Southwest Region (Arizona • New Mexico • Oklahoma • Texas) <http://southwest.fws.gov>

For Release: April 20, 2009

Contacts: Jon Brock, Refuge Manager (580) 626-4794
Becky Wolff, Outdoor Recreation Planner (580) 626-4794

CRYSTAL DIG AREA REOPENS: April 25, 2009

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is pleased to announce the re-opening of the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge Selenite Crystal Dig Area. The area will open to digging at 8:00am on Saturday, April 25. The Crystal Dig Area has been closed to the public since April of 2007, when vials from Chemical Agent Identification Sets were found in the area by a boy scout. The vials were used to train troops during World War II to recognize chemical agents. The vials contained diluted mustard, lewisite, chlorpicrin, and undiluted phosgene.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducted a remedial investigation of the entire dig area. A total of 171 intact vials were found and removed as well as incendiary bomblets and other metal debris. The final report from the Corps of Engineers recommends the use of educational materials to warn the public of potential hazards. The report states: "it is unlikely that munitions and explosives of concern (MEC) or Chemical Agent Identification Sets (CAIS) remain at the project site. It can not be stated with certainty, however, that no MEC or CAIS remain."

The educational materials will include two signs at the Crystal Dig Area, insert in the Selenite Crystal brochure, and information on the Salt Plains NWR web site. This information will depict munitions and chemical vials which have been found in the Dig Area and actions to take by visitors if any more are found. The area will not re-open until April 25 to allow the Refuge to produce and display the educational materials.

During World War II, 18,030 acres of the Salt Plains NWR was transferred to the Department of War to be used as a bombing and strafing range. It was used to train troops from 1942 until 1946 when it was returned to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The MEC and CAIS were likely buried in the area during that time.

The Crystal Dig Area has been a popular destination for school groups, scouts, tourists, birders, and rock hounds for many years. An estimated 30,000 visitors were at the area annually to dig for the selenite crystal with its unique hour glass inclusion. This is the only known site where these crystals are found. The selenite crystal is designated as the Oklahoma State Crystal. The re-opening will coincide with the annual Birding and Heritage Festival held in Alfalfa County.

The Selenite Crystal Dig Area is located on the salt flats of Salt Plains NWR. The salt flats provide important habitat for nesting and migrating shorebirds including interior least terns and snowy plovers. Recent surveys indicate that Salt Plains NWR is the most important area in the United States for snowy plovers.

Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and contains over 540 Refuges throughout the United States.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

- <http://www.southwest.fws.gov> -