

2007 RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN,
FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT,
AND
COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

FOR
BIG BRANCH MARSH
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

US Fish and Wildlife Service
Lacombe, LA
May 2007

**RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN
BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex
St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana**

April 6, 2007

This is a revision of the original Recreational Hunting plan
for Big Branch Marsh dated March 5, 1996
Amended March 26, 1998

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BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex
St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana**

April 6, 2007

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2007 BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN

The original hunt plan for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was approved by signature of the Regional Director on March 5, 1996, and a subsequent amendment to the plan was approved by signature of the Regional Director on March 26, 1998. The approved plan and amendment identified and approved recreational hunting of big game (whitetail deer), migratory game birds (waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe), and upland game (squirrel, rabbit). This plan is revised and amended to include recreational hunting of rail, gallinule, and quail. All provisions of the Section 7, Environmental Assessment, Compatibility Determination, and other requirements of the original plan remain in affect and shall serve to cover this plan as amended. An additional Environmental Assessment is prepared and attached to this plan. Upon approval and signature, this plan as revised and amended along with the accompanying Environmental Assessment, shall serve as the 10 year review of the station hunt program for compatibility purposes.

I. Introduction

Created in 1994, Big Branch Marsh NWR is the 504th refuge established within the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). Big Branch Marsh NWR is one of eight refuges managed as part of the Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex. Prior to establishing the refuge, area wetlands were threatened by urban expansion from the city of New Orleans. Several local organizations, including Northshore Coastal Watch, St. Tammany Sportsman's League, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation supported and initiated the establishment of the refuge (USFWS 2000). These organizations lobbied local senators and congressmen to save the wetland areas which resulted in the establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR.

Public interest in the project and governmental support lead to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) authorizing the establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR on September 29, 1994 under the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986. The original acquisition boundary of the refuge included 12,000 acres of marshlands and forested wetlands between Cane Bayou on the west, Lake Pontchartrain on the south and the Southern Railroad trestle on the east. The initial acquisition occurred on October 13, 1994 when The Conservation Fund (TCF), with funding from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, donated 3,660 acres of wetlands. Subsequently, the refuge acquisition boundary went through two expansion phases. The first expansion proposal, approved in December 1996, consisted of 10,000 acres which included 3 expansion sites: Oak Harbor, a 2,931-acre tract, Fritchie Marsh covering 6,500 acres, and a 500-acre tract along the east side of Lacombe Bayou. The second expansion proposal was approved in April 1998 and included 1,770 acres of wetlands, hardwood ridges, and pine flatwoods adjacent to existing refuge lands. These small tracts of land also included the current 110-acre site for Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex headquarters. Additional acquisitions were made possible by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Land and Water Conservation Act funds, and donations from TCF. Currently, Big Branch Marsh NWR is

approximately 17,366 acres of fee title lands within the 24,000 acre acquisition boundary of marshlands and forested wetlands

The refuge is a mixture of marshes, pine islands, pine ridges, and hardwood hammocks and drains along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Lake Pontchartrain is a shallow, flat-bottomed, fresh to brackish water lake. The lake's water salinity varies widely dependent on rainfall and wind direction. Heavy rainfall will freshen the lake and its adjacent marshes, while drought and strong easterly winds will cause higher salinity water to move into the area. Salinity in the tidally influenced portions of the refuge has ranged from less than 5 ppt to over 20 ppt.

Its diverse habitats attract a wide variety of species of shorebirds, wading birds, neo-tropical migratory birds, and wintering waterfowl. Mammals common in the area include white-tailed deer, mink, nutria, raccoon, rabbits, squirrel, and river otter. The refuge also contains numerous estuaries, ponds, and bayous that provide critical spawning and nursery habitat for commercially important fish, shrimp, and crabs. It also supports a large and diverse recreational fishery for both saltwater and freshwater species. Species commonly caught include largemouth bass, catfish, bream, redfish, white trout, croaker, and speckled trout. Recreational crabbing is extremely popular and productive.

REFUGE PURPOSES: The purposes of the refuge were defined by the following authorities:

Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986, 16 USC 3901 (b):

- For the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.

North American Wetlands Conservation Act, 16 USC 4401 2(b):

- To protect, enhance, restore, and manage an appropriate distribution and diversity of wetland ecosystems and other habitats for migratory birds and other fish and wildlife in North America;
- To maintain current or improved distributions of migratory bird populations; and
- To sustain an abundance of waterfowl and other migratory birds consistent with the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the international obligations contained in the migratory bird treaties and conventions and other agreements with Canada, Mexico, and other countries.

The refuge purposes were further defined in the 1994 Final Land Protection Plan and two subsequent Supplemental Environmental Assessments (1996, 1998) for expansion of Big Branch Marsh NWR as the following management objectives:

- To provide habitat for a natural diversity of wildlife associated with Big Branch Marsh;
- To provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl;
- To provide nesting habitat for wood ducks;
- To provide habitat for non-game migratory birds; and

- To provide opportunities for public outdoor recreation, such as hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and environmental education and interpretation, whenever they are compatible with the purposes of the Refuge.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, H.R. 1420, signed into law on October 9, 1997 establishes hunting as one of the six primary public uses of national wildlife refuges. The Act states that these uses should be facilitated when ever they can so as long as they are compatible with the purpose of the refuge.

II. Conformance with Statutory Authorities

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended, and the Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, authorize public hunting on refuges where the hunting program is compatible with the major purposes for which the area was established. The establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR was authorized in 1994 by signature of the Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 4, by memorandum requesting the establishment of the refuge in order to preserve the habitats and associated wildlife in perpetuity for the benefit and use of the general public. The area has recreational value for both consumptive and nonconsumptive users. One of the stated objectives of the refuge is to provide ‘... opportunities for public outdoor recreation, such as hunting ...’ Hunting, as proposed, is compatible with the protection of refuge habitats and associated wildlife and will provide recreational opportunities for the public.

The Refuge Recreation Act requires that funds be available for the development, operation, and maintenance of hunting programs. Presently the refuge is funded and staffed at a sufficient level to administer the hunt program as proposed.

III. Statement of Objectives

The following have been established as the primary management objectives of Big Branch Marsh NWR:

- To provide habitat for a natural diversity of wildlife associated with Big Branch Marsh;
- To provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl;
- To provide nesting habitat for wood ducks;
- To provide habitat for non-game migratory birds; and
- To provide opportunities for public outdoor recreation, such as hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and environmental education and interpretation, whenever they are compatible with the purposes of the Refuge.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recognizes hunting as an acceptable, traditional, and legitimate form of wildlife oriented recreation. Within the context of the above stated objectives, the management objectives of the hunting program on the refuge will be to:

- Provide the public with a quality, wildlife oriented recreational opportunity;
- Provide for the utilization of a renewable resource by the public; and

- Maintain wildlife populations at sustainable levels and at levels compatible with the maintenance and protection of refuge habitats.

As proposed, the hunt program including cumulative effects of neighboring hunts on surrounding public lands should in no way conflict with the stated objectives of the refuge. Continuation of the hunt program will contribute to meeting the objective for public use. Restrictions on equipment, time, and place considerations should aid in preventing conflicts with nonconsumptive users and with refuge education and interpretation programs.

IV. Assessment

Hunting is proposed for:

1. Big Game
2. Migratory Game Birds
3. Upland Game

The following is an assessment of the hunting resource on the refuge

Big Game:

Big game, primarily consisting of white-tailed deer, is present refuge wide, primarily on the higher, forested areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents and hunting club members prior to the establishment of the refuge and have been sufficient to sustain a hunting program while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Competition between white-tailed deer and other species could potentially occur if population levels are allowed to expand beyond the carrying capacity of the available habitat. The hunt program should keep deer populations within acceptable levels. If deer numbers increase beyond acceptable levels, other harvest methods may be considered.

Competition exists between deer and feral hogs on the refuge. Feral hogs compete with deer and other wildlife species for available food resources. The taking of feral hogs may be permitted during the proposed deer hunt season in an effort to reduce and limit numbers of hogs present on the refuge. If feral hog numbers increase beyond acceptable levels, other control methods may be considered.

Migratory Game Birds:

Hunting is proposed for all migratory game birds, including waterfowl, within established Federal and State approved regulations.

Waterfowl: Waterfowl are present in the marshes and flooded woodlands of the refuge. The refuge currently supports a huntable population of waterfowl. While wood ducks and mottled ducks breed on the refuge and are present year round, the bulk of the waterfowl are represented by winter migrants. Waterfowl populations on refuge lands

fluctuate with habitat conditions in the marsh including changes in vegetation and water levels. Populations may also respond to hunting pressure and move to areas of lower disturbance/hunting pressure. The harvest of waterfowl on the refuge is not expected to reduce population levels below acceptable levels.

Coots, rails, gallinules: Coots, rails, and gallinules are present primarily in the marshes of the refuge. Statewide, populations of these species are considered adequate to support a recreational hunt program. Coots are winter migrants to the refuge while rails and gallinules breed on the refuge and are present year round. Harvest of these species on the refuge is largely incidental to the harvest of other species, primarily waterfowl. Hunting of rails and gallinules in the wiregrass marshes of the refuge is extremely difficult and they are not generally pursued by hunters. Populations of these species fluctuate with habitat conditions more so than hunting pressure. The harvest of these species is not expected to reduce population levels below acceptable levels.

Woodcock, Snipe: Migratory woodcock and snipe are present in the marshes and wet woodlands of the refuge during the fall and winter months. The refuge supports huntable populations of these species. Habitat management practices on the refuge including timber harvest and prescribed fire will benefit these species and it is expected that this management and the added protection afforded birds on the refuge will lead to increased populations on refuge lands. Hunting of woodcock and snipe in the thick wet cover they prefer is extremely difficult and they are not generally pursued by hunters. Populations of these species fluctuate with habitat conditions and weather more so than hunting pressure. The harvest of these species is not expected to reduce population levels below acceptable levels.

Upland Game:

Hunting is proposed for squirrel, rabbit, quail, and raccoon on refuge lands.

Squirrel: Squirrels are present on the forested areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Rabbit: Rabbits are present refuge wide. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Quail: Quail are present in small numbers on the forested and grassy upland areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a small harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Raccoon: Raccoons are present refuge wide. Raccoons are known predators of nesting birds, including wood ducks and mottled ducks, small mammals, and reptiles and amphibians. In large numbers they may have a significant impact on populations of other wildlife species. Numbers are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus. Populations of raccoons can be reduced and still maintain sustainable populations while also meeting refuge objectives for other wildlife species and refuge programs other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

V. Description of Hunting Program

- A. There are currently considered to be harvestable populations of all target species throughout the refuge.
- B. Hunting will be permitted in accordance with Federal regulations governing public use on National Wildlife Refuges as set forth in Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations. Hunting will be in accordance with applicable State of Louisiana regulations and other Federal laws regulating the take of wildlife, subject to the special conditions as published annually in the Code of Federal Regulations and outlined in annual Refuge Specific Hunting brochures which are available to the general public. Refuge specific hunting regulations allow for proper management of public lands and their resources. They also provide increased safety to refuge visitors.
- C. All lands currently owned and/or managed as a part of Big Branch Marsh NWR may be opened to the taking of all hunted species by the public with the following exceptions: 1) hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities; 2) hunting is prohibited on the grounds of the main administrative facility for the Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex, such grounds being separate from the main portion of the refuge and located at 61389 Hwy. 434, Lacombe, LA 70445, encompassing approximately 110 acres +/-.
- D. All future lands acquired and/or managed as part of Big Branch Marsh NWR through fee title purchase, donation, lease, management agreement, memorandum of understanding, or any other means may be opened at the time such document becomes effective to the taking of all hunted species by the public under the conditions of this hunt plan with the exception of any conditions, exclusions, or reservations contained in such document which may expressly prohibit such action.
- E. Waterfowl (ducks, geese) and coot hunting will be permitted until noon no more than four (4) days per week during the state waterfowl seasons, including early teal season, youth waterfowl hunt season, or other such special seasons which may be promulgated by law or statute. Specific days will be determined by refuge management and published in the refuge permit. The refuge shall be closed to waterfowl and coot hunting during that segment of the goose season that extends beyond the regular duck season.

- F. Other migratory game bird hunting will be permitted in accordance with State seasons, and bag limits. Use of firearms shall be restricted to shotguns only.
- G. Deer archery hunting will be permitted – state season. Firearms are prohibited. Use of dogs and/or driving of deer are prohibited.
- H. Upland game hunting will be permitted in accordance with state seasons. Use of firearms shall be restricted to shotguns only.
- I. All persons participating in refuge hunts shall be required to possess a refuge permit. Permits are primarily for the purpose of providing information on hunt specific regulations and other refuge specific regulations. Permits shall be available to all persons desiring to participate in refuge hunt programs. Should public demand become great enough that numbers must be restricted; a lottery permit system may be instituted in an effort to control numbers of hunters. In addition, consideration may be given to time and space scheduling and/or zoning.
- J. Annual meetings will be held with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to coordinate annual hunt proposals for refuge lands.
- K. Enforcement of refuge regulations is an essential element in protecting trust resources and in providing for a quality recreational opportunity. Periodic, random patrols of refuge lands will be conducted by refuge law enforcement personnel. In addition, harvest and public use data may be collected at various times within the refuge. Law enforcement personnel may also be available to respond to specific reports of suspected violations.
- L. Self clearing check stations may be established at key entrance points to refuge lands. The purpose of such check stations shall be for the collection of harvest and public use data. Hunters are encouraged to report harvest at these check stations. If deemed necessary by refuge management for the collection of such data, harvest reporting by hunters may be required.

VI. Measures Taken to Avoid Conflicts with Other Management Objectives

Biological Conflicts:

None of the lands open to hunting have been designated as critical habitat for any species listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. The red-cockaded woodpecker, southern bald eagle and American alligator are known to occur on the refuge. The potential does exist for conflicts between hunting programs and non-target wildlife. However, the expected level of disturbance is expected to be minimal and below that of similar non-refuge

lands. Refuge officers will make every effort to maximize protection of endangered species and other non-target wildlife. Restrictions on methods of hunting should aid in reducing incidental take of non-target species.

Refer to the Decision Document Package, Section 7 Evaluation.

Public Use Conflicts:

Sport fishing and hunting activities will overlap to some degree. No conflicts of consequence are expected between sport fishermen and deer and upland game hunters. Conflicts between sport fishermen and migratory bird hunters may arise but are expected to be minimal due to the dissimilar nature of these activities and the areas of the refuge where these activities may be expected to occur. It is expected that the majority of waterfowl hunting will occur in shallow marsh ponds not conducive to sport fishing due to their location (difficult to access by outboard powered boat) and water depth.

The demand for nonconsumptive wildlife oriented use on Big Branch Marsh NWR is expected to be high. Conflicts between hunters and nonconsumptive users may occur. Restrictions on hunting methods and restrictions on hunting near designated public use facilities and trails should aid in reducing potential conflicts. Should serious conflicts arise, considerations will be given to time and space scheduling and/or zoning.

The demand for consumptive uses is also expected to be high. While conflicts within user groups are expected to be minimal it may occur. Should serious conflicts arise within or between user groups, consideration will be given to limiting the number of users through a lottery permit system and through time and space scheduling and/or zoning.

Administrative Conflicts:

Administrative conflicts may arise from the need to conduct hunt programs simultaneously on several refuges within the Southeast Louisiana Refuges complex. Manpower and budgetary restrictions may lead to conflicts. Big Branch Marsh NWR is minimally funded and staffed and hunts must be administered utilizing current personnel and funds allocated to Southeast Louisiana Refuges. Refuge specific regulations will be made as simple as possible in order to minimize the personnel and funding needed to administer the hunt program. Assistance may be sought from other refuges and from state personnel if serious conflicts arise.

VII. Conduct of the Hunt

A. Refuge specific hunting regulations.

Hunting of white tail deer is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.
2. Deer may be taken with archery equipment only.
3. Portable stands only.
4. Stands may not be placed on refuge lands prior to 14 days before the start of the refuge deer season and must be removed within 14 days following the end of the refuge deer season.
5. The use of dogs and/or driving deer is prohibited.
6. No air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
7. Hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities.
8. Feral hogs may be taken during the refuge archery hunt.

Hunting of waterfowl and coots is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.
2. Waterfowl (ducks, geese) and coot hunting is permitted until noon no more than four (4) days per week during the state waterfowl seasons, including early teal season, youth waterfowl hunt season, or other such special seasons which may be promulgated by law or statute. Specific days to be determined by refuge management and published in the refuge permit. The refuge shall be closed to waterfowl and coot hunting during that segment of the goose season that extends beyond the regular duck season.
3. Federally permitted non-toxic shot only.
4. No air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
5. Temporary blinds only; blinds and decoys must be removed daily.
6. Retrievers are allowed.
7. Hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities.

Hunting of woodcock, snipe, rail, and gallinule is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.
2. Firearms restricted to the use of shotguns only.
3. Federally permitted non-toxic shot only.
4. Shot size #4 or smaller* (* smaller in this instance shall refer to physical size of the shot, not shot size designation).
5. No air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
6. Setters/retrievers are allowed.
7. Hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities.

Hunting of squirrel, rabbit, quail and raccoon is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.
2. Firearms restricted to the use of shotguns only.
3. Federally permitted non-toxic shot only.
4. Shot size #4 or smaller* (* smaller in this instance shall refer to physical size of the shot, not shot size designation).
5. No air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
6. The use of dogs shall be restricted to such time periods as may be designated by refuge management to minimize conflicts with other refuge programs. Such time periods to be printed in the refuge permit.
7. Hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunt.

The areas now included in Big Branch Marsh NWR have been popular hunting areas for many years. The refuge hunting program is designed to provide for the continued use of refuge lands within a framework designed to protect wildlife populations and

provide for public safety. The continuance of these traditional uses has been widely supported by the public both before and since the establishment of the refuge. It is expected that this support will continue.

C. Hunter application and registration procedures.

(Not applicable)

D. Description of hunter selection process.

(Not applicable)

E. Media selection for announcing and publicizing the hunt.

A list of media contacts is maintained in the refuge office. This list includes newspaper, radio, and television stations located in St. Tammany Parish, and the New Orleans metropolitan area. The media may be contacted when hunt dates and regulations are announced. Refuge permits and brochures will be printed and disseminated throughout the communities surrounding the refuge. Permits and brochures shall also be made available electronically via the refuge web page.

F. Description of hunter orientation, including pre-hunt scouting.

(Not applicable)

G. Hunter requirements.

- 1) Age – any hunter under 16 years of age must be accompanied by an adult 21 years of age or older.
- 2) Allowable equipment – **Deer:** may be taken only with the use of archery equipment complying with state regulations. Portable stands only. **Waterfowl and coots:** may be taken with shotguns and ammunition which comply with all state and federal regulations. Portable blinds and decoys allowed. Use of retrievers is allowed. **Other migratory birds and upland game:** may be taken only with the use of shotguns and ammunitions which comply with all state, federal, and refuge specific regulations. Use of dogs may be allowed.
- 3) Use of watercraft is allowed with the following exceptions: no air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
- 4) Use of open fires – the use of open fires is prohibited.
- 5) License and permits – all hunters will be required to possess and carry on their persons while hunting all appropriate state and federal licenses, stamps, and refuge permits.

- 6) Reporting harvest – all hunters are encouraged to report their harvest at such self clearing check stations as may be established or to the refuge office.
- 7) Hunter training and safety – all hunters are required to comply with state regulations dealing with the completion of a Hunter Safety Course. Archery hunters are encouraged to complete a certified bow hunter education course.

**Final Environmental Assessment for recreational sport hunting and the
2007 Recreational Hunt Plan**

On

**BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana**

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April 2007**

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BIG BRANCH MARSH

National Wildlife Refuge

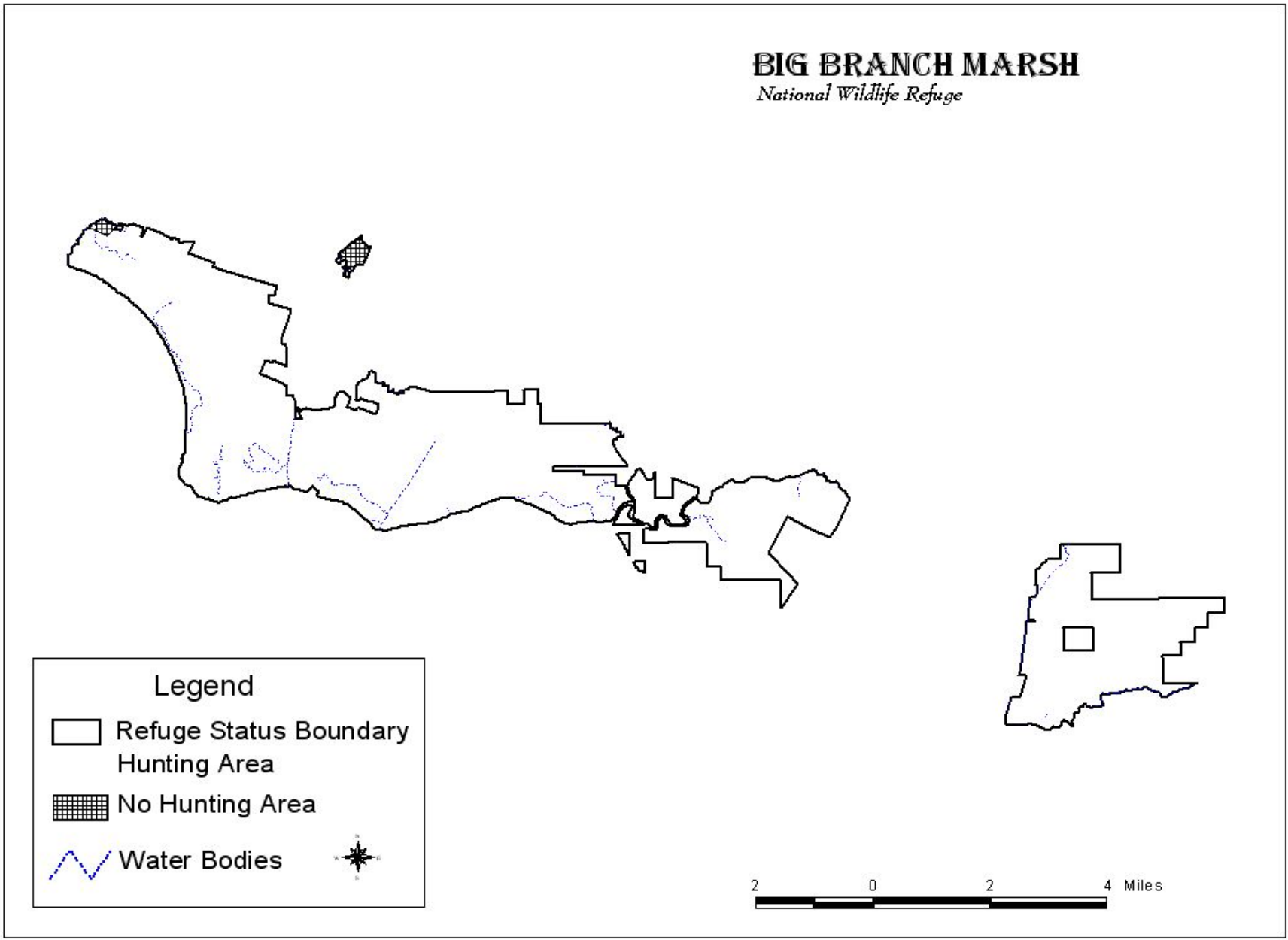


Figure 1. Areas open and closed to hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR

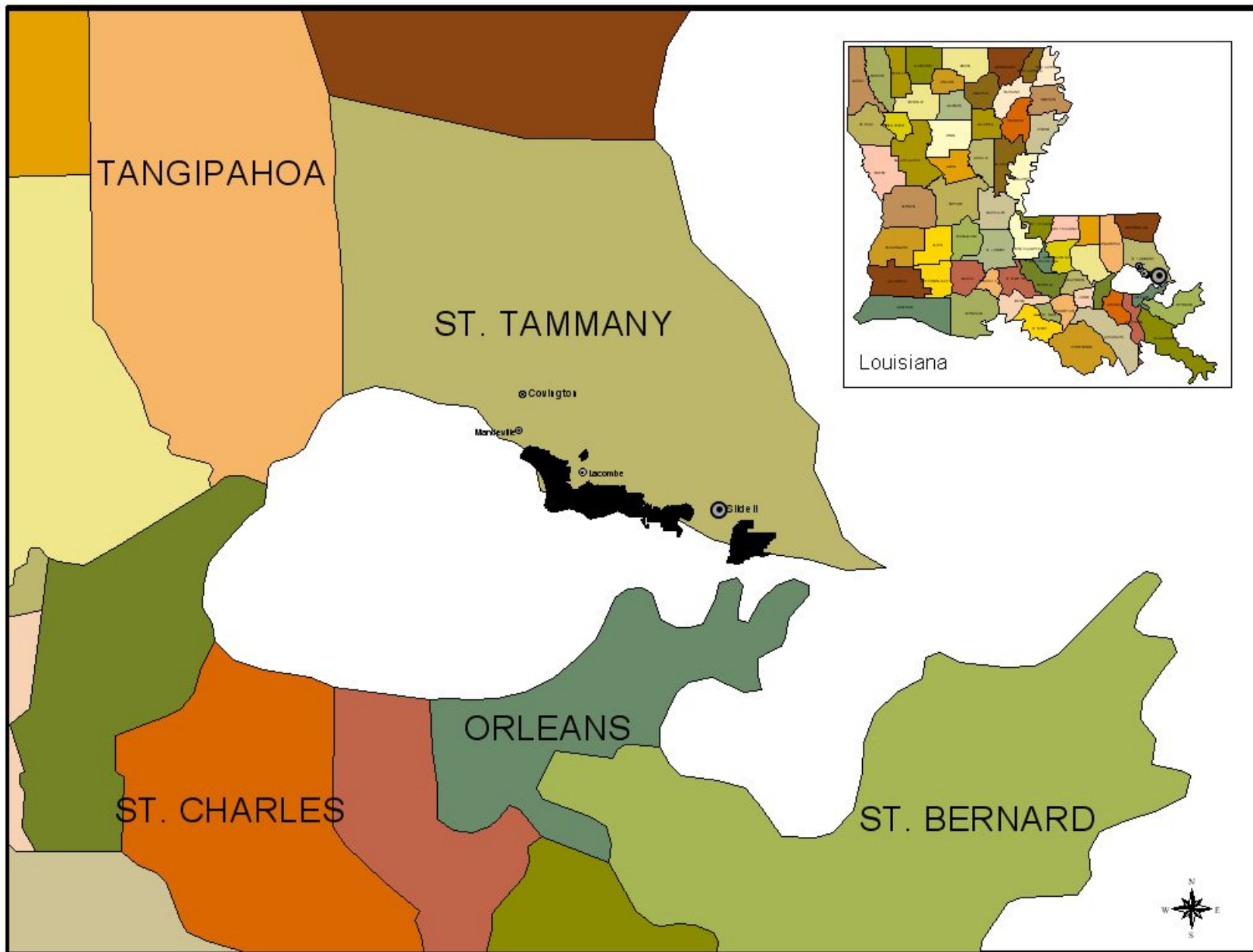


Figure 2. Location of Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

Chapter 1 Purpose and Need for Action

Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) developed environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at twenty-three national wildlife refuges located in the Southeast Region. The new environmental assessments, including this one, will address the cumulative impacts of hunting at all refuges which were named in or otherwise affected by the lawsuit. This document addresses the hunting programs at Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) concurs and fully supports the regulated consumptive public use of the natural resources associated with the Big Branch Marsh NWR. Refuge hunting is coordinated annually with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries through pre hunt planning meetings where hunt seasons and regulations are proposed to the state. Hunting opportunities provided on the refuge are a component of the state's wildlife management plans. Typically, the state annually asks the refuge to increase the huntable opportunities on the refuge.

Created in 1994, Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge is the 504th refuge established within the NWRs. Big Branch Marsh NWR is one of eight refuges managed as part of the Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex. Prior to establishing the refuge, area wetlands were threatened by urban expansion from the city of New Orleans. Several local organizations, including Northshore Coastal Watch, St. Tammany Sportsman's League, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation supported and initiated the establishment of the refuge (USFWS 2000). These organizations lobbied local senators and congressmen to save the wetland areas which resulted in the establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR.

Public interest in the project and governmental support lead to the Service authorizing the establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR on September 29, 1994 under the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986. The original acquisition boundary of the refuge included 12,000 acres of marshlands and forested wetlands between Cane Bayou on the west, Lake Pontchartrain on the south and the Southern Railroad trestle on the east. The initial acquisition occurred on October 13, 1994 when The Conservation Fund (TCF), with funding from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, donated 3,660 acres of wetlands. Subsequently, the refuge acquisition boundary went through two expansion phases. The first expansion proposal, approved in December 1996, consisted of 10,000 acres which included 3 expansion sites: Oak Harbor, a 2,931-acre tract, Fritchie Marsh covering 6,500 acres, and a 500-acre tract along the east side of Lacombe Bayou. The second expansion proposal was approved in April 1998 and included 1,770 acres of wetlands, hardwood ridges, and pine flatwoods adjacent to existing refuge lands. These small tracts of land also included the current 110-acre site for Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex headquarters. Additional acquisitions were made possible by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Land and Water Conservation Act funds, and donations from TCF. Currently, Big Branch Marsh NWR is approximately 17,366 acres of fee title lands within the 24,000 acre acquisition boundary of marshlands and forested wetlands. Boundaries of the approved acquisition are Cane Bayou on the west, Lake

Pontchartrain to the south, LA Highway 90 on the east, and an irregular boundary south of and generally paralleling LA Highway 190.

The federally legislated purposes for which Big Branch Marsh Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established are:

Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986, 16 USC 3901 (b):

- For the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.

North American Wetlands Conservation Act, 16 USC 4401 2(b):

- To protect, enhance, restore, and manage an appropriate distribution and diversity of wetland ecosystems and other habitats for migratory birds and other fish and wildlife in North America;
- To maintain current or improved distributions of migratory bird populations; and
- To sustain an abundance of waterfowl and other migratory birds consistent with the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the international obligations contained in the migratory bird treaties and conventions and other agreements with Canada, Mexico, and other countries.

The refuge purposes were further defined in the 1994 Final Land Protection Plan and two subsequent Supplemental Environmental Assessments (1996, 1998) for expansion of Big Branch Marsh NWR as the following management objectives:

- To provide habitat for a natural diversity of wildlife associated with Big Branch Marsh;
- To provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl;
- To provide nesting habitat for wood ducks;
- To provide habitat for non-game migratory birds; and
- To provide opportunities for public outdoor recreation, such as hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and environmental education and interpretation, whenever they are compatible with the purposes of the Refuge.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.) provides authority for the Service to manage the Refuge and its wildlife populations. In addition it declares that compatible wildlife-dependent public uses are legitimate and appropriate uses of the Refuge System that are to receive priority consideration in planning and management. There are six wildlife-dependent public uses: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation. It directs managers to increase recreational opportunities including hunting on National Wildlife Refuges when compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The purpose of this Environmental Assessment is to evaluate the feasibility of opening all lands on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge to hunting under conditions set forth in the refuges attached 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan and in accordance with state

regulations and refuge specific regulations and to open hunts of species listed in the 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan.

The proposed action of allowing hunting on the refuge through the 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge which would provide the public with a high quality recreational experience and provide the refuge with a wildlife management tool to promote the biological integrity of the refuge.

Chapter 2 Alternatives Including the Proposed Action

This chapter discusses the alternatives considered for hunting on big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. These alternatives are the 1) no action which continues with current management of the hunt program and 2) proposed action which implements the Refuge's attached 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan

2.1 No Action Alternative:

No Action: This alternative would result in setting aside Big Branch Marsh NWR essentially as a "wildlife sanctuary" with no provisions for the harvest of its wildlife. The FWS would prohibit the sport taking of all game species on all lands acquired in fee title or otherwise managed as a part of the refuge.

2.2 Proposed Action: 2007 Hunting Plan for Big Branch Marsh NWR

Proposed Action: Establishment of a recreational hunting program on refuge lands. Recreational hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR would be carried out in compliance with the refuge recreational hunt plan and in accordance with State, Federal, and special refuge regulations, and FWS policy and directives. All or parts of the refuge may be closed to hunting at any time if necessary for public safety, to provide wildlife sanctuary, or for administrative reasons.

Refer to 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan for Big Branch Marsh NWR for specific regulations.

Chapter 3 Affected Environments

GENERAL

Big Branch Marsh is the last undeveloped large natural area on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. It is unique because it is the only area in coastal Louisiana with an interface of sandy beaches, nearshore grass beds, marshes, hardwood hummocks, and pine ridges. Its overall fish and wildlife resources are substantial. The area's habitat for wading birds, neo-tropical migratory birds, and shorebirds is outstanding. The area provides good waterfowl habitat and is located within the Lower Mississippi River Watershed, a traditional waterfowl migration corridor.

3.1 Physical Environment

The climate in the area is humid and subtropical. The weather is dominated by the area's proximity to the Gulf of Mexico and daily weather patterns are influenced by Lake Pontchartrain. Average rainfall is approximately 63 inches. Summer months are characterized by afternoon thunderstorms, tropical storms, and the potential for hurricanes. Winters are mild with occasional nights in which the temperature drops below freezing.

Big Branch Marsh NWR is located within the Pontchartrain Basin in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. Sediments forming the Basin were deposited during the Pleistocene geologic epoch, approximately 1.5 million to 25 thousand years ago. At the end of the glacial period, a depositional land form, known as the Pleistocene prairie terrace was formed. The sediments found in the prairie terrace are more consolidated and formed the forested longleaf, loblolly, and slash pine and mixed pine-hardwood areas. Sediments forming the Basin consist of fine sands, silts, and silty clays in landforms, and largely sand in marine environments. One common component is that all sediments have high organic and water components.

About 18,000 years ago, the sea level rose and flooded the area. Approximately 6,000 years ago sea level rise slowed and a barrier beach system was created on the south shore forming the Pontchartrain embayment. Sediments deposited by the Mississippi River enclosed the embayment. Natural processes associated with deltaic development and abandonment eventually led to the development of Lakes Maurepas, Borgne, and Pontchartrain. Land subsidence, faulting, storm events, salt water intrusions, erosion, and sea level rise have been natural occurrences throughout the history of the Pontchartrain Basin. Beginning about 300 years ago, European settlers began to exert an ever increasing influence on the area. Development, river stabilization, levees, canals, roads, etc. have had an impact on the habitats and resources found in and around the refuge. These changes have been especially rapid within the last 100 years.

Urban development significantly changes hydrology. Natural landscapes allow water to slowly and gradually filter into the ground. However, surfaces associated with urban development are nonporous, causing water to accumulate above the surface and run off in large volumes. Areas that have not been susceptible to flooding are now experiencing increased volumes of faster moving water which causes erosion.

Water quality is reduced as a result of urban development. A variety of pollutants is contained in urban runoff. Pollutants include toxic chemicals from automobiles, sediments from new construction, oil, grease, nutrients and pesticides from garden, lawn, and road maintenance, bacteria from improperly managed sewage, and household debris.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina directly hit the area with the eye passing over the eastern sections of the refuge. The environment was drastically changed and will take years to recover; some areas were changed permanently. All forested areas were heavily damaged. Many trees were uprooted or broken. In some areas, tornadoes spawned by the hurricane left few trees standing where dense woods had existed. The storm surge and winds introduced salt water that was detrimental to freshwater vegetation. All refuge

marshlands experienced some sediment and vegetation movement, resulting in increased shallow ponding.

3.2 Vegetation

The refuge is comprised of approximately 18,600 acres of coastal marsh and pine forested wetlands. The coastal marsh consists of approximately 7,000 acres of vegetated marsh and 6,000 acres of open water. Marsh types vary from brackish to fresh depending on proximity to Lake Pontchartrain and are tidally influenced through numerous natural bayous and drainages and man-made canals. Dominant marsh vegetation includes wiregrass (*Spartina patens*), smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*), and various rushes (*Juncaceae* sp.). Interior marsh ponds and bayous compose open water habitat within the marsh system.

The transition from marsh to forested wetlands is distinct within the refuge. Pinelands along much of the marsh edge are prone to shallow flooding and support an understory of wiregrass.

Typically, vegetation above the five foot contour line is characteristic of pine flatwoods and savannahs found in the northern portions of the refuge. The predominate pine species are slash (*Pinus elliottii*) and loblolly (*Pinus taeda*), with few pockets of longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*). Within the approximately 5,000 acres of forested lands, habitats are predominately pine forest with hardwood hummocks and sumps scattered throughout. Hardwood forests and swamps are present along the major and minor drainages which bisect the refuge. Hardwoods areas are dominated by oaks (*Quercus* sp.), sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), and green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*).

Vegetation and Land Use

This particular area of Louisiana is a unique botanical zone that contains a diverse combination of plant communities found in very few places. Grass beds along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain are the healthiest in the lake and consist of eelgrass, wigeon grass, and spike rush. Inland from the lake in the marsh there are three major plant zones. The first zone consists of wiregrass, *Paspalum* sp., rattlebox, Roseau, freshwater threesquare, and marsh elder which occur on a sandy beach fringing the lake.

The next inland plant zone is the brackish marsh zone. Here the water level is slightly above the marsh floor. Plants in this zone include wiregrass, brackish three-cornered grass, saltmarsh pluchea, saltmarsh aster, deerpea, and loosestrife. Hogcane dominates on the natural levees of the bayous and inlets.

The third zone is the intermediate marsh zone. The water level here is slightly below the marsh floor. The predominate plants are wiregrass, *Bacopa* sp., sedge, bulltongue, alligatorweed, black rush, sugarcane, plume grass, smartweed, fanwort, coontail, white waterlily, and spike rush.

Another plant zone outside the marsh areas is the upland zone and it consists of pine ridges and bottomland hardwood hummocks. The pine ridges are dominated by slash pine, live oak, wax myrtle, and sweetgum. The bottomland hardwood areas are dominated by bald cypress, black willow, red maple palmetto, green ash, and hackberry.

The upland areas have high pine site indexes and produce excellent stands of slash pine. Much of the original cypress was logged in the past.

3.3 Wildlife Resources

The refuge is a mixture of marshes, pine islands, pine ridges, and hardwood hammocks and drains along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Lake Pontchartrain is a shallow, flat-bottomed, fresh to brackish water lake. The lake's water salinity varies widely dependent on rainfall and wind direction. Heavy rainfall will freshen the lake and its adjacent marshes, while drought and strong easterly winds will cause higher salinity water to move into the area. Salinity in the tidally influenced portions of the refuge has ranged from less than 5 ppt to over 20 ppt.

Diverse habitat types within Big Branch Marsh NWR provide valuable habitat for numerous wildlife species. Refuge habitats attract 15 species of migratory waterfowl, 2 species of resident waterfowl, geese, shorebirds, wading birds, neotropical migratory birds, alligators, federally-listed RCW and bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), mammals, and other wildlife. Mammals common in the area include white-tailed deer, mink, nutria, raccoon, rabbits, squirrel, and river otter. The refuge ponds, bayous, estuaries, and the vegetated shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain provide spawning and nursery habitat for commercially important species of fish, crabs, and shrimp. Recreationally important fishes such as largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*), catfish (*Ictaluridae*), and sunfish (*Centrarchidae*) are also abundant within the waters of the refuge. Recreational crabbing is extremely popular and productive.

Numerous species of birds utilize Big Branch Marsh for nesting roosting, and feeding. Clapper rails can be found year-round, while Virginia rails and Sora rails are usual winter visitors. King rails and gallinules are found year-round in limited numbers. Seabird and wading birds include the black-crowned night heron; snowy and great egrets; great blue, green-backed and tri-colored herons; white ibis, American and least bitterns; royal, Caspian and least terns; herring and laughing gulls. Raptors include osprey and northern harriers. There is an active osprey nest within the proposed refuge. Shorebirds include various plovers, sandpipers, willet, black-necked stilt, American oystercatcher, and killdeer. The most common waterfowl species which winter in the area are gadwall, American wigeon, blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, mallard, northern pintail, American coot, northern shoveler, mottled duck, wood duck, ring-necked duck and lesser scaup. Mottled ducks and wood ducks are the only ducks which nest in the vicinity. Numbers of wintering waterfowl are substantial at times and are expected to benefit from the added protection from disturbance provided by the refuge. Historically, geese used the North shore, thus the name Goose Point, just to the west of the mouth of Bayou LaCombe.

The many ponds, lagoons, and nearshore grass beds provide good waterfowl habitat. The sandy beaches, marsh, and lagoons provide excellent habitat for shorebirds and wading birds. The pine ridges, hardwood hummocks, and bottomland hardwood swamps offer prime migration and breeding habitat for neotropical migratory birds. These ridges and swamps on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain offer the first significant landfall habitats for neotropical migratory birds after their trans-Gulf of Mexico migrations.

Game animals include white-tailed deer and swamp rabbit. Nutria, common muskrat, North American mink, northern raccoon, Virginia opossum, and river otter are the primary furbearers.

Historically, this area was known for its high quality fur, although the collapse of the fur market has substantially reduced this traditional activity. Alligators are still in demand and the refuge lands were leased for alligator hunting on an annual basis prior to acquisition. Non-game mammals include nine-banded armadillos, marsh rice rats and other small mammal species.

Species of concern and/or significance for management purposes occurring on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge are listed below. For a complete list of birds found on the refuge, contact refuge headquarters for a bird list.

Common Name

Scientific Name

Birds

Red-cockaded Woodpecker

Picoides borealis

Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Brown Pelican

Pelecanus occidentalis

Wood Duck

Aix sponsa

Gadwall

Anas strepera

American Widgeon

Anas americana

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Mottled Duck

Anas fulvigula

Blue-winged Teal

Anas discors

Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata

Northern Pintail

Anas acuta

Green-winged Teal

Anas crecca

Canvasback

Aythya valisineria

Redhead

Aythya americana

Ring-necked Duck

Aythya collaris

Greater Scaup

Aythya marila

Lesser Scaup

Aythya affinis

Common Goldeneye

Bucephala clangula

Bufflehead

Bucephala albeola

Hooded Merganser

Lophodytes cucullatus

Red-breasted Merganser

Mergus serrator

Ruddy Duck

Oxyura jamaicensis

American Swallow-tailed Kite

Elanoides forficatus

Mammals

White-tailed Deer
Nutria
Feral Hogs

Odocoileus virginianus
Myocastor coypus
Sus scrofa

Reptiles and Amphibians

American Alligator

Alligator mississippiensis

Fish

Gulf Sturgeon

Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi

Plant Communities

Pine Flatwoods
Pine Savannah
Fresh Marsh
Brackish Marsh
Intermediate Marsh
Submergent Vascular Vegetation
Bayhead Swamp (hardwood dominated drainage)

3.4 Threatened and Endangered Species

Endangered or threatened species that may use this area include the bald eagle, gulf sturgeon, brown pelican, West Indian Manatee, and red-cockaded woodpecker. Fountainbleu State Park, which lies adjacent to the western boundary of the refuge, has a long history of red-cockaded woodpecker use. Bald eagles are common winter residents and utilize the basin for foraging. Piping plovers migrate through this area in the spring and fall. Brown pelicans are found throughout the Lake Pontchartrain Basin and are increasing in numbers. Occasional manatees are spotted in the Lake Pontchartrain waters during warm months.

3.4.1 Red-cockaded Woodpecker

The red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) is confined to old pine stands in the southeastern United States. Because this species evolved in a fire-maintained ecosystem, these woodpeckers prefer open, park-like pine stands with no midstory and herbaceous groundcover. Red-cockaded woodpeckers (RCW) excavate only live pine trees that are usually 75 years old or greater. Habitat loss and then demographic isolation are the primary cause of their endangerment. Pine stands are on shorter rotations and fire has been excluded from most of the landscape causing RCW habitat to be scarce. The RCW Recovery Plan calls for growing season burns, pine basal areas of 40-70 sq. ft, the installation of artificial cavities, population monitoring, and the translocation of individuals to help increase genetic diversity and overcome demographic isolation (USFWS 2003).

Currently, there are 14 active groups of RCWs on big Branch Marsh NWR. When populations are this small and this isolated, any mortality of adults affects the population

greatly. Any population under 30 groups is not considered viable, or to be relatively safe from extirpation (USFWS 2003).

The refuge plans to increase the RCW population on pine lands that can be managed to improve RCW habitat. These lands comprise 4,709 acres of upland pine or pine/hardwood. Preliminary efforts aimed at increasing the woodpecker population have been slow. Burn units have been established and prescribed burning is accomplished when possible. Mechanical work has been conducted to remove dense understory vegetation in some areas. Recruitment clusters have been established by installing artificial cavities.

3.4.2 Bald Eagle

Many bald eagles are seen during the year, most of them during winter along the pine tree and marsh line. One nest on refuge and two nests off refuge were successful until Hurricane Katrina. Since then, the nest trees have died, but eagles have been found in the area and may re-nest.

3.5 Fishery Resources

The refuge ponds, bayous, estuaries, and the vegetated shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain provide spawning and nursery habitat for commercially important species of fish, crabs, and shrimp. Recreationally important fishes such as largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*), catfish (*Ictaluridae*), and sunfish (*Centrarchidae*) are also abundant within the waters of the refuge. Recreational crabbing is extremely popular and productive.

This entire area serves as an important nursery for fish, shrimp, and crabs and represents one of the better fish production areas on Lake Pontchartrain. The mix of brackish and fresh water provides habitat for many fresh and salt water fish. The fishery varies with the season and the accompanying salinity.

Anglers regularly catch largemouth bass, redfish, speckled trout, drum, catfish, and bream in the area's bayous and ponds. Recreational crabbing is very popular along State Highway 434 which parallels Bayou Lacombe through the marsh.

The threatened Gulf of Mexico sturgeon is anadromous, spending a portion of its life cycle in rivers and bays, and migrating between those areas and the Gulf of Mexico when mature. It is found in Lake Pontchartrain and could also use tributaries such as Bayou Lacombe, Bayou Liberty, Salt Bayou, or Bayou Bonfouca.

3.6 Cultural Resources

The body of federal historic preservation laws has grown dramatically since the enactment of the Antiquities Act of 1906. Several themes recur in these laws, their promulgating regulations, and more recent Executive Orders. They include: 1) each agency is to systematically inventory the historic properties on their holdings and to scientifically assess each property's eligibility for the National Register of Historic

Places; 2) federal agencies are to consider the impacts to cultural resources during the agencies= management activities and seek to avoid or mitigate adverse impacts; 3) the protection of cultural resources from looting and vandalism are to be accomplished through a mix of informed management, law enforcement efforts, and public education; and 4) the increasing role of consultation with groups, such as Native American tribes, in addressing how a project or management activity may impact specific archaeological sites and landscapes deemed important to those groups. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, like other federal agencies, are legally mandated to inventory, assess, and protect cultural resources located on those lands that the agency owns, manages, or controls. The Service’s cultural resource policy is delineated in 614 FW 1-5 and 126 FW 1-3. In the FWS’s Southeast Region, the cultural resource review and compliance process is initiated by contacting the Regional Historic Preservation Officer/Regional Archaeologist (RHPO/RA). The RHPO/RA will determine whether the proposed undertaking has the potential to impact cultural resources, identify the “area of potential effect,” determine the appropriate level of scientific investigation necessary to ensure legal compliance, and initiates consultation with the pertinent State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and federally recognized Tribes.

None of the refuge sites covered by this assessment are known to be eligible for inclusion on the *National Register of Historic Places* at this time and they will not be designated as scientific sites. The Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 specifically prohibits making available to the general public the location of any archaeological site, if such notification may create a risk of harm to the site.

3.7 Socio Economic

In St. Tammany Parish, wetlands and forested lands are being converted to subdivisions, shopping centers, and business complexes at a rapid rate. St. Tammany is the fifth largest parish in Louisiana in population, with the 2005 population estimated at 220,295 and has been the fastest growing parish since the 1970s. The influx of people looking for higher ground after Hurricane Katrina increased this fast-paced trend. The economy is primarily retail trade, health care, and professional, scientific, and technical services. Residents of the parish are employed in jobs ranging from agriculture to space technology. The median household income in 1999 was \$55,346. The population growth can be attributed to the parish’s proximity to New Orleans, low business costs, good school system, labor availability, and a strong medical community.

The refuge, with an estimated 49,300 visitors in 2005, provides an important source of recreation in the parish. Most visitors are interested in wildlife observation, fishing, and hunting. Many people are also interested in environmental education and interpretive programs, and wildlife photography.

Table 1. Demographics of St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, based on U.S. Census 2000 data and the Louisiana Recovery Authority.

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Households</i>	<i>Families</i>	<i>Housing Units</i>	<i>Median Annual Household Income (\$)</i>

St. Tammany	191,268 Post Katrina 220,600	69,253	52,701	75,398	\$47,883
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St. Tammany Parish has experienced tremendous population growth in recent years. There has been a 50 percent increase in rural growth during the last decade alone. This continuing growth results in a high demand for outdoor recreational opportunities on public lands, including Big Branch Marsh NWR.

Businesses along US Highway 190 between Mandeville and Slidell consist primarily of small family owned stores, restaurants, and small commercial enterprises. In addition, there are several commercial and recreational fishing camps and marinas along Bayou Bonfouca and Bayou Liberty.

Many area residents enjoy a suburban lifestyle that includes frequent recreational use of the abundant natural resources of the area. A high percentage of the households enjoy hunting, fishing and boating for both sport and subsistence. The bayous and lakes are available to the public and fishing, shrimping, and water sports are popular uses of these waterways. Refuge lands have not been available for public use. Prior to acquisition, most of the marsh land was leased for duck hunting and the pine ridges and hardwood hummocks were leased for deer hunting.

North Shore residents also participate in many forms of non-consumptive outdoor recreation. Biking, hiking, camping, bird watching, canoeing, and other outdoor sports are popular. Recently, the old Gulf Mobile and Ohio railroad right-of-way north of the refuge boundary was converted into a bike path.

Chapter 4 Environmental Consequences

This chapter describes the foreseeable environmental consequences of implementing the two management alternatives in Chapter 2. When detailed information is available, a scientific and analytic comparison between alternatives and their anticipated consequences is presented, which is described as “impacts” or “effects.” When detailed information is not available, those comparisons are based on the professional judgment and experience of refuge staff and Service and State biologists.

4.1 Effects Common to all Alternatives

“Cumulative Impacts” refers to effects on the environment resulting from incremental consequences of the proposed action when added to other past, present, and reasonable foreseeable future actions, regardless of who takes these actions whether on same lands or nearby lands. Cumulative impacts can result from minor actions collectively becoming numerous and significant over a period of time. The cumulative actions of both alternatives are discussed in terms of human health of low-income populations, public health and safety, refuge physical environment, cultural resources, refuge

facilities, habitat, hunted wildlife, non-hunted wildlife, wildlife dependant recreation, and endangered and threatened species.

4.1.1 Environmental Justice (Human health – low income)

Executive Order 12898 “Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations” was signed by President Bill Clinton on February 11, 1994, to focus federal attention on the environmental and human health conditions of minority and low-income populations with the goal of achieving environmental protection for all communities. The Order directed federal agencies to develop environmental justice strategies to aid in identifying and addressing disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income populations. The Order is also intended to promote nondiscrimination in federal programs substantially affecting human health and the environment, and to provide minority and low-income communities access to public information and participation in matters relating to human health or the environment. The mission of the Fish and Wildlife Service is to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife resources and their habitats for the continuing benefits of the American people. The environmental justice strategy of the Fish and Wildlife Service fulfills this mission by ensuring all segments of the human population have equal access to the refuges wildlife resources.

This assessment has not identified any adverse or beneficial effects for either alternative unique to minority or low-income populations in the affected area. Neither alternative will disproportionately place any adverse environmental, economic, social, nor health impacts on minority or low-income populations.

4.1.2 Public Health and Safety

Each alternative would have similar effects or minimal to negligible effects on human health and safety. No rifle hunting will be allowed on the refuge because of the urban interface of the refuge with neighbors. Special regulations will be implemented as described in the hunt plan to provide safety to people; For example, no hunt zones in high public use areas and no hunting within a public parking area or pipeline. The public already hunts more liberally through surrounding areas on private lands and on the Adjacent Pearl River Wildlife Management Area. However, Fountainbleu State Park, a neighbor on the western border of the refuge does not allow hunting. Total hunting pressure should change little in the area whether the refuge is closed to hunting or open entirely as described in the 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan.

4.1.3 Refuge Physical Environment

Impacts of each alternative on the refuge physical environment would have similar minimal to negligible effects. Some disturbance to surface soils, topography, and vegetation would occur in areas selected for hunting; however effects would be minimal. Hunting would benefit vegetation as it is used to keep many resident wildlife populations in balance with the habitat’s carrying capacity. The refuge would also control access to minimize habitat degradation.

Impacts to the natural hydrology would have negligible effects. The refuge expects impacts to air and water quality to be minimal and only due to refuge visitors' automobile and off-road vehicle emissions and run-off from road and trail sides. The effect of these refuge-related activities on overall air and water quality in the region are anticipated to be relatively negligible. Existing State water quality criteria and use classifications are adequate to achieve desired on-refuge conditions; thus, implementation of the proposed action would not impact adjacent landowners or users beyond the constraints already implemented under existing State standards and laws.

Impacts associated with solitude are expected to be minimal given time and space zone management techniques, such as seasonal access and area closures, used to avoid conflicts among user groups.

4.1.4. Cultural Resources

Indigenous Native Americans were present in the area dating back to 1800 B.C. The original inhabitants were nomadic hunters, which later gave way to more sedentary mound building cultures. Muskegon peoples were firmly established in the area, including the Bayougoula tribe which resided along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain and survived on seafood harvested from the lakes, the Acolapissa which lived along the Pearl River, the Houma which was the most dominant tribe, and the Chitimacha. Tribes who migrated to or through St. Tammany were the Biloxi, Kiasata, and Choctaw. No organized cultural resource surveys have taken place on the refuge. There are no known mounds, but several middens are located along waterways.

As European exploration occurred, the French were the first to claim the area, and the native tribes began to migrate west away from the intrusion. The French concluded that the land of St. Tammany Parish was too low, the water too brackish to drink, and mosquitoes were too bad to accommodate further settlement. By the 1700s, the forested north shore of Lake Pontchartrain was used to supply the emerging city of New Orleans with meat and naval stores of tar, pitch, turpentine and resin. The first significant European settlement on the north shore occurred during the British occupation through land grants. Britain's claim to the area was transferred to Spain after their loss in the American Revolution, and Spain continued to offer land grants. American control was exerted in the early 1800s. St. Tammany Parish's history was greatly influenced by the abundant sources of water and the navigable waterways. After the Civil War, the economy flourished as New Orleanians traveled to the north shore for fresh air. A resort community built up as people flocked across Lake Pontchartrain to escape epidemics such as yellow fever and to sample the artesian water with legendary healing powers. Natural resources of the area, timber and bricks, porcelain and glass made from the clay and sandy soils, became important trade items with the advent of the rail system. The north and south shores of Lake Pontchartrain were linked by bridges causing thousands of New Orleanians to relocate to St. Tammany Parish and commute into the city.

A former Catholic seminary and high school in Lacombe now serves as the administrative headquarters of the Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex. The Southeast

Louisiana Refuge Complex headquarters site, referred to as Bayou Lacombe Centre, includes historic buildings and gardens and poses a unique opportunity for restoration. Under each alternative, hunting, regardless of method or species targeted, is a consumptive activity that does not pose any threat to historic properties on and/or near the Refuge.

4.1.5 Impacts to Refuge Facilities (roads, trails, parking lots)

No Action Alternative

Additional damage to roads and trails due to hunter use during wet weather periods would not occur; however, other users would still be using roads, thereby necessitating periodic maintenance. Additionally, costs associated with an expanded hunting program in the form of road maintenance, instructional sign needs, and law enforcement would not be applicable.

Proposed Action Alternative

The Service defines facilities as: “Real property that serves a particular function(s) such as buildings, roads, utilities, water control structures, raceways, etc.” Under the proposed action those facilities most utilized by hunters are: roads, parking lots, trails and boat launching ramps with minor utilization of a few buildings such as rest-rooms and designated check stations. Maintenance or improvement of existing facilities (i.e. parking areas, roads, trails, boat ramps and buildings) will cause minimal short term impacts to localized soils and waters, and, may cause some wildlife disturbances and damage to vegetation. The facility maintenance and improvement activities described are periodically conducted to accommodate daily refuge management operations and general public uses such as wildlife observation and photography. These activities will be conducted at times (seasonal and/or daily) to cause the least amount of disturbance to wildlife. During times when roads are impassible due to flood events or other natural causes those roads, parking lots, trails and boat ramps impacted by the event will be closed to vehicular use.

Additional damage to roads and trails due to hunter use during wet weather periods might occur. The current refuge hunt program on 14,000 acres for the past nine years has shown these impacts to be minimal. There would be some costs associated with a hunting program in the form of road and trail maintenance, instructional sign needs, and law enforcement. These costs should be minimal relative to total refuge operations and maintenance costs and would not diminish resources dedicated to other refuge management programs.

Maintenance or improvement of existing facilities (i.e. parking areas, roads, trails, and boat ramps) will cause minimal short term impacts to localized soils and waters and may cause some wildlife disturbances and damage to vegetation.

4.1.6 Impacts to Habitat

No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, the refuge would not be opened to any hunting. When deer are overpopulated, they over browse their habitat, which can change the structure and plant composition of a forest. Young tree seedlings (1-9 years old) can be killed by over browsing. Damage includes erosion along waterways and wetlands and the loss of native plants.

Although hunters would not be traversing across the refuge, which could cause damage to individual plants by trampling vegetation, non-consumptive users would still be able to walk throughout the area.

Proposed Action Alternative

The biological integrity of the refuge would be protected under this alternative, and the refuge purpose of conserving wetlands for wildlife would be achieved. The hunting of whitetail deer, migratory game birds (waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe), and upland game (squirrel, rabbit, rail, gallinule, quail, and raccoon) would positively impact wildlife habitat by promoting plant health and diversity, reducing overpopulation which destroys vegetation and compacts soils, and increasing tree seedling survival.

The additional acreage would be utilized more by the public (hunters) than previously which might cause increased trampling of vegetation. Impacts to vegetation should be minor. Hunter density is estimated to be an average of 1 hunter/1,000 acres throughout the hunting season. Refuge-regulations would not permit the use of ATVs off of designated trails. Vehicles would be confined to existing roads and parking lots.

4.1.7 Impacts to Hunted Wildlife

No Action Alternative

Additional mortality of individual hunted animals would not occur under this alternative. Disturbance by hunters to hunted wildlife would not occur; however, other public uses that cause disturbance, such as wildlife observation and photography, would still be permitted and would likely increase to levels of hunters if no hunting is allowed.

Whitetail deer, migratory game birds (waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, rail, gallinule) and upland game (squirrel, rabbit, quail, and raccoon) populations could exceed the habitat's carrying capacity in the area not opened to hunting. The likelihood of starvation and diseases, such as bluetongue and EHD in deer and distemper and rabies in raccoon, would increase as would vehicle-deer collisions. There would be no positive or negative impact on waterfowl populations. Compared to the preferred alternative, the area would be a waterfowl sanctuary.

Proposed Action Alternative

Additional mortality of individual hunted animals would occur under this alternative, estimated by the refuge to be a maximum of 50 deer, 1,000 ducks and coots, 200 squirrel, and 5 white-fronted geese annually. Estimates for other hunted species (woodcock,

snipe, rabbit, rail, gallinule, quail, and raccoon) would be less than 20 individuals per species based on observations from law enforcement compliance checks. Most waterfowl in the area migrate to the neighboring Pearl River Management Area or the sanctuary refuge of Bayou Sauvage NWR. Hunting causes some disturbance to not only the species being hunted but other game species as well. However, refuge regulations would minimize incidental disturbance.

Hunting of deer and raccoon would help maintain their populations at or below carrying-capacity. The likelihood of starvation and diseases, such as bluetongue and EHD in deer and distemper and rabies in raccoon, would be decreased as would deer-vehicle collisions. Hunting of squirrel, woodcock, rabbit and quail would have limited adverse impact on these species.

While managed hunting opportunities result in both short and long term impacts to individual animals, effects at the population level are usually negligible. Small game animal populations are capable of sustaining harvest because of their short reproduction cycles. Hunting regulations for both endemic and migratory game species are based on specific state-wide and nation-wide harvest objectives. Migratory bird regulations are established at the federal level each year following a series of meetings involving both state and federal biologists. Harvest guidelines are based on population survey and habitat condition data. Refuge hunting programs are always within these regulations. As currently proposed, the known and anticipated levels of disturbance of allowing hunting are considered minimal and well within the tolerance level of known wildlife species and populations present on the refuge. All hunting activities would be conducted with the constraints of sound biological principles and refuge-specific regulations established to restrict illegal or questionable activities. Monitoring activities through wildlife inventories and assessments of public use levels and activities would be utilized, and public use programs would be adjusted as needed to limit disturbance.

Implementation of an effective law enforcement program and development of site specific refuge regulations that are reviewed annually should minimize most incidental take problems.

4.1.8 Impacts to Non-hunted Wildlife

No Action Alternative

Predator species may become overpopulated, depredating turtle, and songbird nests at high rates. For example, In North Louisiana, research conducted on one population of alligator snapping turtles has shown that raccoons are responsible for depredating 93% of turtle nests (USFWS 2002). Under this alternative, feral hog populations would increase dramatically. Non-native hogs are predators of small mammals and deer fawns as well as ground-nesting birds.

Increased disturbance to non-hunted wildlife would not occur in the refuge; however, non-consumptive users would still be permitted to access this land, which might cause disturbance to wildlife.

Proposed Action Alternative

Populations of wildlife predators would be decreased through hunting under this alternative. Depredation rates of songbirds, turkeys, turtles and their nests would decrease. Feral hog populations would be reduced thereby decreasing predation of deer fawns, turkeys and small mammals.

Disturbance to non-hunted wildlife would increase slightly. However, significant disturbance would be unlikely for the following reasons. Small mammals, including bats, are inactive during winter when hunting season occurs and are nocturnal. Both of these qualities make hunter interactions with small mammals very rare. Hibernation or torpor by cold-blood reptiles and amphibians also limits their activity during the hunting season when temperatures are low. Hunters would rarely encounter reptiles and amphibians during most of the hunting season. Invertebrates are also not active during cold weather and would have few interactions with hunters during the hunting season. The refuge has estimated current hunter density on peak days to be no more than 1 hunter per 100 acres. During the vast majority of the hunting season, hunter density is much lower (1 hunter/1,000 acres). Refuge regulations further mitigate possible disturbance by hunters to non-hunted wildlife. Vehicles are restricted to roads and the harassment or taking of any wildlife other than the game species legal for the season is not permitted. Disturbance to the daily wintering activities, such as feeding and resting, of birds might occur, but would be transitory as hunters traverse habitat. Disturbance to birds by hunters would probably be commensurate with that caused by non-consumptive users.

4.1.9 Impacts to Endangered and Threatened Species

No Action Alternative

If hunting is not allowed, non-consumptive users are expected to increase. Because current public use levels on the refuge would remain the same, there would be no increased chance of cumulatively affecting threatened and endangered species.

Proposed Action Alternative

A potential disadvantage of this alternative is its effect on threatened and endangered species on the refuge such as the bald eagle and red-cockaded woodpecker. However, a Section 7 Evaluation associated with this assessment was conducted, and it was determined that the proposed action is not likely to cumulatively affect these species (Refer to 2007 Section 7 Evaluation for Recreational Hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR). Direct effects to endangered species would be through human/wildlife contact. Public contact and interest in endangered species on the refuge are mainly through non consumptive uses and would remain the same in either alternative.

4.1.10 Impacts to Wildlife Dependant Recreation

No Action Alternative

The public would not have the opportunity to harvest a renewable resource, participate in wildlife-oriented recreation that is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established, have an increased awareness of Big Branch Marsh NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System; nor would the Service be meeting public use demand. Public relations would not be enhanced with the local community. Under this alternative, youth would be unable to experience hunting.

Proposed Action Alternative

As public use levels expand across time, unanticipated conflicts between user groups may occur. Experience has proven that time and space zoning (e.g., establishment of separate use areas, use periods, and restrictions on the number of users) is an effective tool in eliminating conflicts between user groups. Squirrel and rabbit hunters would not be able to use dogs until after the last deer gun hunt to ensure conflicts do not arise. Conflicts between hunters and non-consumptive users might occur but would be mitigated by time (non-hunting season) and space zoning. The refuge would focus non-consumptive use (mainly bird watching and other wildlife viewing) in the small but high public use areas that are closed to hunting.

The public would be allowed to harvest a renewable resource, and the refuge would be promoting a wildlife-oriented recreational opportunity that is compatible with the purpose for which the refuge was established. The public would have an increased awareness of Big Branch Marsh NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System and public demand for more hunting would be met. The public would also have the opportunity to harvest a renewable resource in a traditional manner, which is culturally important to the local community. This alternative would also allow the public to enjoy hunting at no or little cost in a region where private land is leased for hunting, often costing a person \$300-\$2000/year for membership. This alternative would allow youth the opportunity to experience a wildlife-dependant recreation, instill an appreciation for and understanding of wildlife, the natural world and the environment and promote a land ethic and environmental awareness.

4.2 Cumulative Impacts Analysis

4.2.1 Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of Proposed Action on Wildlife Species.

Recreational hunting, a wildlife-dependent activity, has been identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 as a priority public use, provided it is compatible with the purpose for which the refuge was established. This use was emphasized in the 1994 Final Land Protection Plan and two subsequent Supplemental Environmental Assessments (1996, 1998) by being stated as a management objective of Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

All hunts fall within the framework of Louisiana's open seasons and follow state

regulations. Refuge-specific regulations are reviewed annually and incorporated into the refuge hunting permit. Hunters are required to possess refuge permits while hunting on the refuge. The entire refuge is open to hunting with the exception of areas posted with “No Hunting Zone” signs or so designated in the hunting permit. Currently, Southeast Louisiana Refuges headquarters (Lacombe Centre) and the Lemieux Road environmental education site is closed to hunting.

While managed hunting opportunities result in both short and long term impacts to individual animals, effects at the population level are usually negligible. Small game animal populations on the refuge are capable of sustaining harvest because of their short reproduction cycles. Hunting regulations for both endemic and migratory game species are based on specific state-wide and nation-wide harvest objectives. Migratory bird regulations are established at the federal level each year following a series of meetings involving both state and federal biologists. Harvest guidelines are based on population survey and habitat condition data. Refuge hunting programs are always within these regulations. As currently proposed, the known and anticipated levels of disturbance of allowing hunting are considered minimal and well within the tolerance level of known wildlife species and populations present on the refuge. All hunting activities would be conducted with the constraints of sound biological principles and refuge-specific regulations established to restrict illegal or questionable activities. The benefits that hunting brings to each refuge improves the entire refuge system's available habitat and native wildlife populations and thus provides the public generally with more valuable and diverse refuge recreational opportunities of all kinds. Monitoring activities through wildlife inventories and assessments of public use levels and activities would be utilized, and public use programs would be adjusted as needed to limit disturbance. Implementation of an effective law enforcement program and development of site specific refuge regulations that are reviewed annually should minimize most incidental take problems.

4.2.1.1 Migratory Birds

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, **working with partners**, annually prescribe frameworks, or outer limits, for dates and times when hunting may occur and the number of birds that may be taken and possessed. These frameworks are necessary to allow State selections of season and limits for recreation and sustenance; aid Federal, State, and tribal governments in the management of migratory game birds; and permit harvests at levels compatible with population status and habitat conditions. Because the Migratory Bird Treaty Act stipulates that all hunting seasons for migratory game birds are closed unless specifically opened by the Secretary of the Interior, the Service annually promulgates regulations (50 CFR Part 20) establishing the frameworks from which States may select season dates, bag limits, shooting hours, and other options for the each migratory bird hunting season. The frameworks are essentially permissive in that hunting of migratory birds would not be permitted without them. Thus, in effect, Federal annual regulations both allow and limit the hunting of migratory birds.

Migratory game birds are those bird species so designated in conventions between the United States and several foreign nations for the protection and management of these birds. Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 703-712), the Secretary of the

Interior is authorized to determine when "hunting, taking, capture, killing, possession, sale, purchase, shipment, transportation, carriage, or export of any ... bird, or any part, nest, or egg" of migratory game birds can take place, and to adopt regulations for this purpose. These regulations are written after giving due regard to "the zones of temperature and to the distribution, abundance, economic value, breeding habits, and times and lines of migratory flight of such birds, and are updated annually (16 U.S.C. 704(a)). This responsibility has been delegated to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the lead federal agency for managing and conserving migratory birds in the United States. Acknowledging regional differences in hunting conditions, the Service has administratively divided the nation into four Flyways for the primary purpose of managing migratory game birds. Each Flyway (Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific) has a Flyway Council, a formal organization generally composed of one member from each State and Province in that Flyway. Big Branch Marsh NWR is within the Mississippi Flyway. The control/reduction of hunted populations on the refuge, concomitant with similar wildlife management efforts on refuges throughout the National Wildlife Refuge System, conserves the cumulative health of the habitat of the flyway in which the refuge is located and the migratory birds that utilize that flyway.

The process for adopting migratory game bird hunting regulations, located in 50 CFR part 20, is constrained by three primary factors. Legal and administrative considerations dictate how long the rule making process will last. Most importantly, however, the biological cycle of migratory game birds controls the timing of data-gathering activities and thus the dates on which these results are available for consideration and deliberation. The process of adopting migratory game bird hunting regulations includes two separate regulations-development schedules, based on "early" and "late" hunting season regulations. Early hunting seasons pertain to all migratory game bird species in Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands; migratory game birds other than waterfowl (e.g., coots, woodcock, snipe, rail, and gallinule, etc.); and special early waterfowl seasons, such as teal or resident Canada geese. Early hunting seasons generally begin prior to October 1. Late hunting seasons generally start on or after October 1 and include most waterfowl seasons not already established. There are basically no differences in the processes for establishing either early or late hunting seasons. For each cycle, Service biologists and others gather, analyze, and interpret biological survey data and provide this information to all those involved in the process through a series of published status reports and presentations to Flyway Councils and other interested parties (USFWS 2006).

Under the proposed action, Big Branch Marsh NWR estimates a maximum additional 1,000 ducks, and 5 white-fronted geese would be harvested each year. This harvest impact represents 0.1%, and <0.03%, respectively of Louisiana's four-year average harvest of 921,990 ducks, and 72,611 white-fronted geese (USFWS 2005). Because the Service is required to take abundance of migratory birds and other factors in to consideration, the Service undertakes a number of surveys throughout the year in conjunction with the Canadian Wildlife Service, State and Provincial wildlife-management agencies, and others. To determine the appropriate frameworks for each species, the Service considers factors such as population size and trend, geographical distribution, annual breeding effort, the condition of breeding and wintering habitat, the number of hunters, and the anticipated harvest. After frameworks are established for

season lengths, bag limits, and areas for migratory game bird hunting, migratory game bird management becomes a cooperative effort of State and Federal Governments. After Service establishment of final frameworks for hunting seasons, the States may select season dates, bag limits, and other regulatory options for the hunting seasons. States may always be more conservative in their selections than the Federal frameworks but never more liberal. Season dates and bag limits for National Wildlife Refuges open to hunting are never longer or larger than the State regulations. In fact, based upon the findings of an environmental assessment developed when a National Wildlife Refuge opens a new hunting activity, season dates and bag limits may be more restrictive than the State allows. At Big Branch Marsh NWR, season length is more restrictive for waterfowl than the State allows and hunting of doves is not allowed. Waterfowl hunting is only allowed until noon and only for four days each week during the season, **which is more restrictive than regulations set forth by Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF).**

NEPA considerations by the Service for hunted migratory game bird species are addressed by the programmatic document, “Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement: Issuance of Annual Regulations Permitting the Sport Hunting of Migratory Birds (FSES 88– 14),” filed with the Environmental Protection Agency on June 9, 1988. We published Notice of Availability in the Federal Register on June 16, 1988 (53 FR 22582), and our Record of Decision on August 18, 1988 (53 FR 31341). Annual NEPA considerations for waterfowl hunting frameworks are covered under a separate Environmental Assessment, “Duck Hunting Regulations for 2006-07,” and an August 24, 2006, Finding of No Significant Impact. Further, in a notice published in the September 8, 2005, Federal Register (70 FR 53376), the Service announced its intent to develop a new Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the migratory bird hunting program. Public scoping meetings were held in the spring of 2006, as announced in a March 9, 2006, Federal Register notice (71 FR 12216). More information may be obtained from: Chief, Division of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, MS MBSP-4107-ARLSQ, 1849 C Street, NWR, Washington, DC 20240.

Although woodcock are showing declines in numbers on their breeding grounds, habitat loss is considered to be the culprit, not hunting. This assertion was tested in a study conducted by the U.S. Geological Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in 2005 (McAuley *et al.* 2005). Results showed no significant differences in woodcock survival between hunted and non-hunted areas. Furthermore, the authors concluded that hunting was not having a considerable impact on woodcock numbers in the Northeast (McAuley *et al.* 2005).

An estimated 24,000 woodcock were harvested in the 2005/06 season in the state of Louisiana. Louisiana’s harvest of 24,000 woodcock represented 0.5% of the estimated 4.6 million North American woodcock population. Limited woodcock habitat exists during most of the hunting season because tidal flooding inundates the refuge. During extremely dry years, when more woodcock habitat becomes available, they may experience higher harvest rates. With such relatively few woodcock being currently

harvested on the refuge, the opening to hunting as stated in the proposed action should have no adverse cumulative effects on their local, regional or flyway populations.

4.2.1.2 Resident Big Game

4.2.1.2.1 Deer

Deer hunting does not have regional population impacts due to restricted home ranges. The average home range of a male deer in Mississippi is $1,511 \pm 571$ S.D hectares. (Mott *et al.* 1985). Therefore, only local impacts occur. The Louisiana Dept of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) recorded deer harvest rates on lands on a 25,000-acre management area from 1993-2003. An average of 213 deer per year was harvested during the 10-year period. Average weights of deer and lactation rates of females remained stable throughout (LDWF 2003).

Harvest and survey data confirm that decades of deer hunting on surrounding private lands (using bait and a longer season) have not had a local cumulative adverse effect on the deer population. LDWF estimate 209,200 deer were harvested throughout the state in 2005/06. The average annual statewide harvest since 1995 is 234,000 deer. The refuge estimates an additional maximum 25 deer would be harvested under the proposed action, representing only 0.01% of the long-term average state harvest. Archery hunting deer on 18,000 acres of refuge lands should not have cumulative impacts on the deer herd.

White-tailed deer is present refuge wide, primarily on the higher, forested areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents and hunting club members prior to the establishment of the refuge and have been sufficient to sustain a hunting program while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations. Since refuge hunting of deer under the hunting plan will be less than hunting allowed as private lands prior to refuge establishment, the cumulative impacts will be lessened.

Competition between white-tailed deer and other species could potentially occur if population levels are allowed to expand beyond the carrying capacity of the available habitat. The hunt program should keep deer populations within acceptable levels. If deer numbers increase beyond acceptable levels, other harvest methods may be considered.

4.2.1.2.2 Feral Hogs and Nutria

Feral hogs are an extremely invasive, introduced, non-native species and are not considered a game species by the State of Louisiana. Hunting of feral hogs provides the refuge with another management tool in reducing this detrimental species, and at the same time, is widely enjoyed by local hunters. No bag limits are established for feral hogs.

Cumulative effects to an exotic, invasive species should not be of concern because the refuge would like to extirpate this species on refuge lands. Hunting of hogs is not considered detrimental to the biological integrity of the refuge, is not likely to create

conflict with other public uses and is within the wildlife dependant public uses to be given priority consideration. Since hogs are exotic, they are a priority species for refuge management only in terms of their cumulative impacts on refuge biota and need for eradication. They are a popular game species though, and the public interest would best be served by allowing this activity on the refuge. However, even with hunting, feral hogs are likely to always be present because they are prolific breeders.

Since competition exists between deer and feral hogs on the refuge for available food resources, the taking of feral hogs may be permitted during the proposed deer hunt season in an effort to reduce and limit numbers of hogs present on the refuge. If feral hog numbers increase beyond acceptable levels, other control methods may be considered.

Trapping is employed to prevent or reduce refuge habitat damage and targets nutria, an exotic species. Nutria, native to South America, were imported for fur farms in the early 1900's. When the fur farming industry collapsed after World War II, many were released or weren't recaptured after escaping. The descendents established themselves in the marshes and have adapted well to the semi-aquatic environment. Since nutria are almost exclusively vegetarians and can eat 2.5 to 3.5 pounds of food daily, they can be very detrimental to marsh vegetation where large populations exist. Their burrows can also damage levees and banks. They are in direct competition with the native muskrat for habitat and resources. Trapping nutria will be allowed under Special Use Permits that designate locations and methods for removing nutria. Trappers are encouraged to participate in the Coastwide Nutria Control Program administered by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

The Special Use Permit system allows the refuge manager to specifically regulate locations and methods for nutria removal. Areas will be well marked and traps will not be set in areas with high use by other visitors. Disturbance to non-target wildlife will be occasional, temporary and isolated to small geographic areas. Positive impacts will be the control of an exotic species and reducing damage to refuge resources.

4.2.1.3 Upland/Small Game: (squirrel, rabbit, quail, and raccoon)

Squirrels, rabbit, quail, and raccoon cannot be affected regionally by refuge hunting because of their limited home ranges. Only local effects will be discussed. Raccoon are hunted primarily at night. Hunting helps regulate raccoon populations; however, unless the popularity of this type of hunting increases, raccoon numbers will always be higher than desired. When these species become extremely overabundant, diseases such as distemper and rabies reduce the populations. However, waiting for disease outbreak to regulate their numbers can be a human health hazard. Cumulative adverse impacts to raccoon are unlikely considering they reproduce quickly, are difficult to hunt due to their nocturnal habits, and are not as popular for hunting as other game species.

Studies have been conducted within and outside of Louisiana to determine the effects of hunting on the population dynamics of small game. Results from studies have consistently shown that small game, such as rabbits and squirrels, are not affected by hunting, but rather are limited by food resources. The refuge consulted with biologists at the Louisiana Dept of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) in association with this assessment

on the cumulative impacts of hunting on rabbits and squirrel. The statewide Louisiana harvest for 2005/06 was estimated at 1,253,900. On Big Branch Marsh NWR, from 2001-2004, hunter harvest data reports indicated a peak of 73 squirrels/season, representing 0.006% of the state's harvest. LDWF estimated 255,200 rabbits killed by hunters in the 2005/06 season. Under the proposed action, the refuge estimates a maximum additional 20 rabbits would be harvested, representing only 0.008% of the statewide harvest. Gray squirrels, fox squirrels, eastern cottontails, and swamp rabbits are prolific breeders and their populations have never been threatened by hunting in Louisiana even prior to the passing of hunting regulations as we know them today. Numbers of squirrels and rabbits have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Quail are non-migratory and therefore are not regionally affected by hunting. Only local effects will be discussed. The early successional grassy habitat that quail favor is not abundant on the refuge; therefore, quail hunting is limited. Studies by the LDWF indicate that a harvest of <30% in the southeast should be sustainable. Quail are present in small numbers on the forested and grassy upland areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a small harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Raccoons are present refuge wide. Raccoons are known predators of nesting birds, including wood ducks and mottled ducks, small mammals, and reptiles and amphibians. In large numbers they may have a significant impact on populations of other wildlife species. Numbers are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus. Populations of raccoons can be reduced and still maintain sustainable populations while also meeting refuge objectives for other wildlife species and refuge programs other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

4.2.1.4 Non-hunted Wildlife

Non-hunted wildlife would include non-hunted migratory birds such as songbirds, wading birds, raptors, and woodpeckers; small mammals such as voles, moles, mice, shrews, and bats; reptiles and amphibians such as snakes, skinks, turtles, lizards, salamanders, frogs and toads; and invertebrates such as butterflies, moths, other insects and spiders. Except for migratory birds and some species of migratory bats, butterflies and moths, these species have very limited home ranges and hunting could not affect their populations regionally; thus, only local effects will be discussed.

Disturbance to non-hunted migratory birds could have regional, local, and flyway effects. Regional and flyway effects would not be applicable to species that do not migrate such as most woodpeckers, and some songbirds including cardinals, titmice, wrens, chickadees, etc. The cumulative effects of disturbance to non-hunted migratory birds under the proposed action are expected to be negligible for the following reasons.

Hunting season would not coincide with the nesting season. Long-term future impacts that could occur if reproduction was reduced by hunting are not relevant for this reason. Disturbance to the daily wintering activities, such as feeding and resting, of birds might occur. Disturbance to birds by hunters would probably be commensurate with that caused by non-consumptive users.

The cumulative effects of disturbance to non-hunted migratory birds under the proposed action are expected to be negligible for the following reasons; Small mammals, including bats, are inactive during winter when hunting season occurs and are nocturnal. Both of these qualities make hunter interactions with small mammals very rare. Hibernation or torpor by cold-blood reptiles and amphibians also limits their activity during the hunting season when temperatures are low. Hunters would rarely encounter reptiles and amphibians during most of the hunting season. Encounters with reptiles and amphibians in the early fall are few and should not have cumulative effects on reptile and amphibian populations. Invertebrates are also not active during cold weather and would have few interactions with hunters during the hunting season. The refuge has estimated current hunter density on peak days to be no more than 1 hunter per 100 acres. During the vast majority of the hunting season, hunter density is much lower (1 hunter/1,000 acres). Refuge regulations further mitigate possible disturbance by hunters to non-hunted wildlife. Vehicles are restricted to roads and the harassment or taking of any wildlife other than the game species legal for the season is not permitted.

Although ingestion of lead-shot by non-hunted wildlife could be a cumulative impact, it is not relevant to National Wildlife Refuges because the use of lead shot would not be permitted on any refuge for any type of hunting.

Some species of bats, butterflies and moths are migratory. Cumulative effects to these species at the “flyway” level should be negligible. These species are in torpor or have completely passed through Louisiana by peak hunting season in Nov-Jan. Some hunting occurs during September and October when these species are migrating; however, hunter interaction would be commensurate with that of non-consumptive users.

4.2.1.5 Endangered Species

Endangered and threatened species that utilize the refuge are red-cockaded woodpecker, bald eagle, Manatee, Gulf sturgeon, and the brown pelican. A Section 7 Evaluation was conducted in association with this assessment for opening hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR. It was determined that the proposed alternative would not likely cumulatively affect these endangered species. Hunting will not occur in March is during the RCW nesting season.

Bald eagles currently winter in areas that are open to waterfowl, deer, and small/upland game hunting without noticeable adverse effects. Actually, in the past few years, the number of bald eagles wintering on the refuge has increased. The nest on the refuge has been successful most years and eagles have returned after Hurricane Katrina destroyed it in 2005.

Manatees, Gulf sturgeon and brown pelicans habitats exist outside of the areas hunted for huntable populations and are not expected to be affected by hunting on Big branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

Refer to the Section 7 Evaluation for the 2007 Recreational Hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR for more information.

4.2.2 Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of Proposed Action on Refuge Programs, Facilities, and Cultural Resources.

4.2.2.1 Wildlife-Dependant Recreation

As public use levels expand across time, unanticipated conflicts between user groups may occur. The Refuge's visitor use programs would be adjusted as needed to eliminate or minimize each problem and provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities. Experience has proven that time and space zoning (e.g., establishment of separate use areas, use periods, and restrictions on the number of users) is an effective tool in eliminating conflicts between user groups.

The level of recreation use and ground-based disturbance from visitors would be largely concentrated at trails and the Refuge's office and maintenance areas. This, combined with the addition of increased hunting opportunity, could have a cumulative effect on nesting bird populations. However, the hunting season is during the winter and not during most birds' nesting period. It is unlikely that bald eagles would establish nests near developed facilities or during the hunting season.

The opportunities for hunting would be created under the proposed action. Hunting would be used to keep the deer herd and other resident wildlife in balance with the habitat's carrying capacity, resulting in long-term positive impacts on wildlife habitat.

The refuge would control access under this alternative to minimize wildlife disturbance and habitat degradation, while allowing current and proposed compatible wildlife-dependent recreation. Bayou Sauvage NWR, A nearby refuge is a waterfowl sanctuary and is closed to all hunting to minimize disturbance to wintering waterfowl.

4.2.2.2 Refuge Facilities

The Service defines facilities as: "Real property that serves a particular function(s) such as buildings, roads, utilities, water control structures, raceways, etc." Under the proposed action those facilities most utilized by hunters are: roads, parking lots, trails and boat launching ramps. Maintenance or improvement of existing facilities (i.e. parking areas, roads, trails, and boat ramps) will cause minimal short term impacts to localized soils and waters and may cause some wildlife disturbances and damage to vegetation. The facility maintenance and improvement activities described are periodically conducted to accommodate daily refuge management operations and general public uses such as wildlife observation and photography. These activities will be conducted at times (seasonal and/or daily) to cause the least amount of disturbance to wildlife. All disturbed sites will be restored to as natural a condition as possible. During times when roads are

impassible due to flood events or other natural causes those roads, parking lots, trails and boat ramps impacted by the event will be closed to vehicular use.

4.2.2.3 Cultural Resources

Hunting, regardless of method or species targeted, is a consumptive activity that does not pose any threat to historic properties on and/or near the Refuge. In fact, hunting meets only one of the two criteria used to identify an “undertaking” that triggers a federal agency’s need to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. These criteria, which are delineated in 36 CFR Part 800, state:

- 1- An undertaking is any project, activity, or program that can alter the character or use of an archaeological or historic site located within the “area of potential effect;” and
- 2- The project, activity, or program must also be either funded, sponsored, performed, licenses, or have received assistance from the agency.

Consultation with the pertinent State Historic Preservation Office and federally recognized Tribes are, therefore, not required.

4.2.2.4 Anticipated Impacts of Proposed Hunt on Refuge Environment and Community.

The refuge expects no sizeable adverse impacts of the proposed action on the refuge environment which consists of soils, vegetation, air quality, water quality and solitude. Some disturbance to surface soils and vegetation would occur in areas selected for hunting; however impacts would be minimal. Hunting would benefit vegetation as it is used to keep many resident wildlife populations in balance with the habitat’s carrying capacity. The refuge would also control access to minimize habitat degradation.

The refuge expects impacts to air and water quality to be minimal and only due to refuge visitors’ automobile and off-road vehicle emissions and run-off on road and trail sides. The effect of these refuge-related activities, as well as other management activities, on overall air and water quality in the region are anticipated to be relatively negligible, compared to the contributions of industrial centers, power plants, and non-refuge vehicle traffic. Existing State water quality criteria and use classifications are adequate to achieve desired on-refuge conditions; thus, implementation of the proposed action would not impact adjacent landowners or users beyond the constraints already implemented under existing State standards and laws.

Impacts associated with solitude are expected to be minimal given time and space zone management techniques, such as seasonal access and area closures, used to avoid conflicts among user groups.

The refuge would work closely with State, Federal, and private partners to minimize

impacts to adjacent lands and its associated natural resources; however, no indirect or direct impacts are anticipated. The newly opened hunts would result in a net gain of public hunting opportunities positively impacting the general public, nearby residents, and refuge visitors. The refuge expects increased visitation and tourism to bring additional revenues to local communities but not a significant increase in overall revenue in any area.

4.2.2.5 Other Past, Present, Proposed, and Reasonably Foreseeable Hunts and Anticipated Impacts

Cumulative effects on the environment result from incremental effects of a proposed action when these are added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. While cumulative effects may result from individually minor actions, they may, viewed as a whole, become substantial over time. The proposed hunt plan has been designed so as to be sustainable through time given relatively stable conditions. Changes in refuge conditions, such as sizeable increases in refuge acreage beyond the current approved refuge acquisition boundary or public use, are likely to change the anticipated impacts of the current plan and would trigger a new hunt planning environmental assessment process.

The implementation of any of the proposed actions described in this assessment includes actions relating to the refuge hunt program (see 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan for Big Branch Marsh NWR). These actions would have both direct and indirect effects (e.g., new site inclusion would result in increased public use, thus increasing vehicular traffic, disturbance, etc); however, the cumulative effects of these actions are not expected to be substantial.

The past refuge hunting program has been very similar to the proposed action in season lengths, species hunted, and bag limits. Changes to the hunt program in the past decade have been made to open hunting on more land within the refuge. These lands were usually those that had been recently acquired. The refuge does not foresee any changes to the proposed action in the way of increasing the intensity of hunting in the future.

4.2.2.6 Anticipated Impacts if Individual Hunts are Allowed to Accumulate

National Wildlife Refuges, including Big Branch Marsh NWR, conduct hunting programs within the framework of State and Federal regulations. Big Branch Marsh NWR is at least as restrictive as the State of Louisiana for deer, squirrel, rabbit, quail, woodcock, gallinule, rail, and snipe and in many cases more restrictive for waterfowl, raccoon, and coots. By maintaining hunting regulations that are as, or more, restrictive than the State, individual refuges ensure that they are maintaining seasons which are supportive of management on a more regional basis. The proposed hunt plan has been reviewed and is supported by the Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries. Additionally, refuges coordinate with LDWF annually to maintain regulations and programs that are consistent with the State management program.

Chapter 5 Consultation and Coordination with Others

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) concurs and fully supports the regulated consumptive public use of the natural resources associated with the Big Branch Marsh NWR. Refuge hunting is coordinated annually with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries through pre hunt planning meetings where hunt seasons and regulations are proposed to the state. Hunting opportunities provided on the refuge are a component of the state's wildlife management plans. The Fish and Wildlife Service also provided an in depth review by the Regional Office personnel and staff biologists.

On August 16, 1995 a public hearing was held at the Bayou LaCombe Junior High School, LaCombe, Louisiana. The purpose of this hearing was to obtain public input into the feasibility and/or need for various public use programs on Big Branch Marsh NWR. The comments received at the hearing were overwhelmingly in favor of allowing some form of recreational hunting and fishing on refuge lands. Additional comments have been received from the League of Women Voters of St. Tammany, the Big Branch Civic Association, The Louisiana Bowhunters Association, St. Tammany Sportsman's League, and various individuals in support of some type of recreational hunting program.

This environmental assessment has received input from refuge personnel, the general public, and other agencies.

A draft of this document is made available for public review. Availability of the document was advertised in local newspapers and copies were placed in local public libraries (See Appendix B). Comments were made a part of this document after a one month comment period.

Appendix A: Literature References

- Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries. 2003. Deer harvest summary 1994-2003: Georgia Pacific Wildlife Management Area. Technical Report, District II, Monroe, Louisiana.
- Mott, S.E., R.L. Tucker, D.C. Guynn, H.A. Jacobson. 1985. Use of Mississippi bottomland hardwoods by white-tailed deer. Proceedings of the Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies 39: 403-411.
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- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2002 Alligator Snapping Turtle Nest Survey at Black Bayou Lake NWR, Monroe, Louisiana.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2003 Recovery plan for the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*): second revision. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Atlanta, GA. 296 pp.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2005, Waterfowl harvest and population survey data: Estimates of U.S. harvest, hunting activity, and success derived from the state-federal cooperative harvest information program. Division of Migratory Bird Management, Columbia, Missouri, 92 pp.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2006, Waterfowl population status, 2006. Division of Migratory Bird Management, Laurel, Maryland, 60 pp.

Appendix B: Public Distribution and Comment

News Releases:

SPORTS BRIEFS

Times - Picayune - New Orleans, La.

Date:

Mar 11, 2007

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21

Section:

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Abstract (Document Summary)

A draft recreational hunting plan, environmental assessment and compatability determination for hunting on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in St. Tammany Parish are available for public review at the Slidell, Lacombe and Mandeville branches of the St. Tammany Parish Library. The comment period will extend until April 5.

Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at 23 national wildlife refuges in the Southeast Region to address cumulative impacts of hunting. Under the proposed action, hunting of deer, rabbits, squirrel, quail, and migratory birds such as waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, gallinule and rails would occur. Hunting would be carried out in accordance with Federal and State of Louisiana regulations, and refuge-specific regulations.

The Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge currently contains more than 17,000 acres. The refuge lies along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain between Cane Bayou west of Lacombe to U.S. 90 east of the Fritchie Marsh. Visitors can currently enjoy fishing, wildlife observation, photography and environmental education.

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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Seeks Comments on Draft Recreational Hunting Plan, Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 2, 2007

Contacts:

Daniel Breaux, Refuge Manager, 985-882-2030
Tom MacKenzie, 404/679-7291

[U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#) Seeks Comments on Draft Recreational Hunting Plan, Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination for [Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge](#)

A draft Recreational Hunting Plan and Environmental Assessment for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in St. Tammany Parish is available for public review on March 5, 2007. The comment period will extend until April 5, 2007.

The plan describes two alternatives for hunting on the refuge: (1) the no action alternative would not allow hunting and (2) the proposed action would open the refuge to hunting of up to all species listed and regulations described in the 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan. Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) developed environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at twenty-three national wildlife refuges located in the Southeast Region to address cumulative impacts of hunting. Under the proposed action, hunting of deer, rabbits, squirrel, quail, and migratory birds such as waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, gallinule, and rails would occur. Hunting would be carried out in accordance with Federal and State of Louisiana regulations, and refuge-specific regulations.

Copies of the plan can be reviewed on the refuge web site at: <http://www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/> and at the following libraries:

St. Tammany Parish:
Slidell Branch: 555 Robert Blvd.
Lacombe Branch: 28027 Hwy 190
Mandeville Branch: 845 Gerard St.

Written comments or questions can be directed to Daniel Breaux, Refuge Manager, at 61389 Hwy 434, Lacombe, LA 70445; (985) 882-2030. Email comments can be provided to the following address: Daniel_Breaux@fws.gov.

The Big branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge is currently over 17,000 acres and is located in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. The refuge lies along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain between Cane

Bayou west of Lacombe to Hwy 90 east of the Fritchie marsh. Hunting is proposed for the refuge but visitors can currently enjoy fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94 million acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

For more information about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, visit our home page at <http://www.fws.gov/southeast> or <http://www.fws.gov/>.

NOTE: You can view our releases or subscribe to receive them -- via e-mail -- at the Service's Southeast Regional home page at <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/news>. Our national home page is at: <http://news.fws.gov/newsreleases/>. Atlanta, GA 30345, Phone: 404/679-7289 Fax: 404/679-7286

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Friday, March 09, 2007

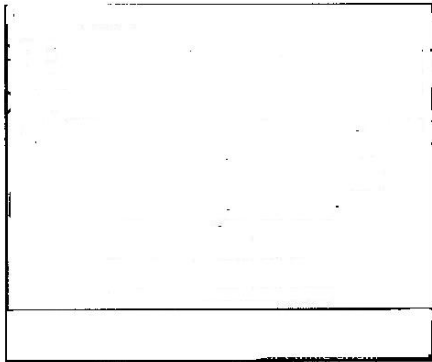
WEIGH IN ON HUNTING

A draft recreational hunting plan, environmental assessment and compatability determination for hunting on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in St. Tammany Parish are available for public review at the Slidell, Lacombe and Mandeville branches of the St. Tammany Parish Library. The comment period will extend until April 5.

The environmental assessment describes two alternatives for hunting on the refuge: the no action alternative would not allow hunting, and the proposed action would open the refuge to hunting of up to all species listed and regulations described in the 2007 recreational hunting plan.

Advertisement

CONTINUE STORY



Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife

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The Times

Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at 23 national wildlife refuges in the Southeast Region to address cumulative impacts of hunting. Under the proposed action, hunting of deer, rabbits, squirrel, quail, and migratory birds such as waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, gallinule and rails would occur. Hunting would be carried out in accordance with Federal and State of Louisiana regulations, and refuge-specific regulations.

Copies of the plans also can be reviewed on the refuge Web site at www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/.

Written comments or questions can be directed to Daniel Breaux, refuge manager, at 61389 Louisiana 434, Lacombe, LA 70445; (985) 882-2030. E-mail comments can be provided to Daniel_Breaux@fws.gov.

The Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge currently contains more than 17,000 acres. The refuge lies along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain between Cane Bayou west of Lacombe to U.S. 90 east of the Fritchie Marsh. Visitors can currently enjoy fishing, wildlife observation, photography and environmental education.

CHAMPIONSHIP BOWLING

The Northshore USBC Bowling Association will hold its annual championship tournament today, Friday and Saturday at Tiffany Sports Center in Mandeville.

Fee is \$23 per event per bowler for team, doubles or singles events.

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Beware of mistruths

"The Fund for Animals is unalterably opposed to the recreational killing of wildlife. Besides being a piteously, unfair and cruel slaughter of innocent animals, sport hunting is also ecologically destructive. Despite claims to the contrary, hunters take a heavy toll on endangered and threatened animals." — *Fund for Animals Position Statement.*

Sound like any of your hunting buddies? Didn't think so. But spreading mistruths to potential donors has always been modus operandi for the animal rights crowd. They are also real big on using their donors' cash to file frivolous lawsuits that suck up money. If it had not been needed to finance court battles, it certainly could have been better spent on sound, scientific-based programs to benefit wildlife. Their latest project to protect the rights of animals is to ban hunting on National Wildlife Refuges, including one right



DON DUBUC
Louisiana Outdoors

here in our back yard. That's right. Hunting on the popular Big Branch National Wildlife Refuge is under attack. Their lawsuit filed in 2003 contends the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did not conduct environmental assessments to determine if the "cumulative impact of hunting" on NWRs might be negative. But Big Branch and most refuges have more-limited seasons than surrounding private lands. Most refuges limit weapons use and won't allow hunters to employ

practices hunters use on adjacent private lands.

While it should be obvious that since hunting on Big Branch NWR is at least, if not more restrictive, than on adjacent private or state lands it can't possibly be detrimental to wildlife. An expensive and exhaustive process has to be conducted to provide data for the court to make a ruling. Based on the evidence presented the fate of public hunting on millions of acres of federally-owned lands hangs in the balance.

Hunting on federal refuges only requires a free refuge permit and a hunting license, but it does come at a price, a price hunters have been more than willing to pay for decades through special taxes on hunting equipment and licenses. Hunting federal refuges also calls for paying close attention to special regulations not required of private or state lands. Areas like Big Branch NWR are treasures. They represent some of the last remaining wild areas in the country and provide hunters a place to be active participants. For those who can't afford to hunt in private clubs, it provides the last remaining opportunity to continue a freedom and a tradition as old as this nation.

Because licenses are required for NWRs, hunters and fishermen are the only users who are charged a fee. Not hikers, photographers, birdwatchers, canoeists or anyone else who enjoys the tranquility of these wild places. Even though a huge portion of Big Branch and other NWRs were paid for by the sales of duck stamps (which are mandatory for anyone who hunts waterfowl) the animal rights crowd wants to take hunting rights away. I'd call that stealing.

I'm optimistic the USFWS assessments will demonstrate a good case for hunting to continue. But it will take more and it has to come from hunters. The public is being asked to comment on this issue and if the only comments are from the anti-hunting side, why

organizations offer



Sportsmen's Paradise lost? In response to a lawsuit filed by the Fund For Animals, public comment is sought by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on the issue of hunting on Big Branch and many other National Wildlife Refuges. (Photo by Don Dubuc)

should hunting be allowed if the perception is that no one cares? That's why hunters need to be heard loud and clear and make our comments count. The decision will not be made on numbers alone as in an election. Hunters and those who may not hunt themselves, but support hunting, need to tell the Fish and Wildlife Service why hunting should be continued. As a hunter, you need to explain how hunting affects you, the community and how it will affect the local economy. Tell them hunting is a tool for managing healthy game populations and that it provides the funds for programs that benefit wild game and by preserving their habitat

too, non-game birds and animals. Other user groups enjoy refuges paid in large part by sportsmen. Tell them you will have nowhere else to hunt in an area where trees are being cut and blacktop roads and buildings replace forests at one of the fastest rates in the country. Tell them Big Branch NWR, as a unique slice of rare habitat consisting of piney woods, mixed hardwoods, cypress swamp and brackish marshes, offers hunting opportunities found in very few places. Tell them it's a good place to introduce children to hunting as opposed to their hanging out on the street. Be sure to tell them what a wonderful place Big Branch NWR

is to hunt even if you kill nothing but time. If you don't, you may never get another chance. The antis have spoken, now it's our turn. Direct your comments to Daniel Breaux, Refuge Manager, 61389 Louisiana Highway 434, Lacombe, LA 70445 or email them to: Daniel_Breaux@fws.gov.

Don Dubuc, a regular contributor to St. Tammany News, is host of "Outdoors with Don Dubuc Radio" heard Saturdays from 5-7 a.m. on WWL 870 AM and the Louisiana Network stations and "Outdoors with Don Dubuc" television, which airs on Tuesdays at 10 p.m. and Wednesday at 6 p.m. on WGNO ABC 26.

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UPDATED: 11 :32 p.m. CDT, March 29, 2007



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- 2 New Orleans cops fired for misconduct [10:45 p.m. CT](#)
- City to unveil targets for redevelopment [10:42 p.m. CT](#)
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NOTES

Sunday, March 25, 2007

By Bob Marshall

Hunting suit at Big Branch

In response to a lawsuit by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been required to complete a draft Recreational Hunting Plan, draft Environmental Assessment, and Computability Determination for hunting on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in St. Tammany Parish. The Environmental Assessment describes two alternatives for hunting on the refuge: the "no action alternative" which would ban hunting, and the "proposed action" which would keep the refuge open to hunting. Public comment is open until April 7. Copies of the plans can be reviewed on the refuge Web site at:

www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/ and at the following St. Tammany Parish libraries, 555 Robert Boulevard, Slidell; 28027 U.S. 190, Lacombe, and 845 Gerard Street, Mandeville. Written comments or questions can be directed to Daniel Breaux, Refuge Manager, 61389 Louisiana 434, Lacombe, 70445; (985) 882-2030. E-mail Daniel_Breaux@fws.gov.

Grand Isle birding

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Public Notices:



Public Notice

Department of the Interior / U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southeast Louisiana Refuges
61389 Hwy. 434, Lacombe, LA 70445
(985) 882-2000 Fax (985) 882-9133

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Seeks Comments on Draft Recreational Hunting Plan, Draft Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

A draft Recreational Hunting Plan, draft Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination for hunting on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge is available for public review. The comment period will end on April 5, 2007.

The Environmental Assessment describes two alternatives for hunting on the refuge: (1) the **no action** alternative would not allow hunting and (2) the **proposed action** would open the refuge to hunting of up to all species listed and regulations described in the 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan. Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed an environmental assessment to address cumulative impacts of hunting. Under the proposed action, hunting of deer, rabbits, squirrel, quail, and migratory birds such as waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, gallinule, and rails would occur. Hunting would be carried out in accordance with Federal and State of Louisiana regulations, and refuge-specific regulations.

Copies of the plans can be reviewed on the refuge web site at:
[Http://www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/](http://www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/) and at the following libraries:

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#

The above public notice was posted at the following locations in Lacombe, Louisiana on 3/8/2007:

Russell's Quick Stop
True Value Hardware
Mike's Seafood
Muller Drugs
CharLou's
Mickey's Chevron
Lacombe branch of St. Tammany parish Library
Minnie's Discount Station
Lloyd's Bayou Bargains
Alice's Restaurant
Bayou Lacombe Stop

Public Comments Received:

We received twenty-nine comments on our draft EA titled Draft Environmental Assessment for recreational sport hunting and the 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, that was available for public comment from March 5th to April 5th, 2007. Twenty seven of these comments were in support of the Service's preferred Alternative in the draft EA. Two comments were in opposition to the preferred Alternative.

Comments were incorporated into the EA where appropriate. The Fish and Wildlife Service's reply to the opposition to the preferred alternative are listed below:

We are proud of the more than 300 world-class hunting programs on national wildlife refuges that fulfill the Refuge Improvement Act's mandate to provide opportunities for compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation to Americans. The decades-old hunting program is also a fulfillment of America's deeply rooted outdoor heritage that has, at its very core, the conservation mission that is the foundation of the Refuge System and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Big Branch March Refuge has been open to hunting since its establishment. The refuge's purposes for which it was established was to include opening the refuge to consumptive and non consumptive use of the refuge. The lands were purchased from willing sellers who impressed on the Service to continue allowing some form of hunting on the lands.

In addition to its recreational value, hunting gives resource managers an important tool in controlling populations of some species that might otherwise exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat.

In 1966 and again in 1997, Congress expressly recognized the legitimacy of hunting on units of the refuge system and directed the Service to facilitate these opportunities whenever they are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

The Service currently considers hunting impacts through required refuge plans and environmental assessments, as well as annual national migratory bird population and harvest studies. In response to an opposition to hunting, the refuge is considering closing to hunting parts of the highly used boardwalk and trail along the Boy Scout Road area for non consumptive wildlife use, just as it already has areas along Lemieux Road and at the headquarters site.

List of comments received:

Comment

We received a letter from the Humane Society of the United States that contained general comments of disagreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service related to hunting on the National Wildlife Refuge System as a whole and containing elements related to litigation filed in 2003 by the Fund for Animals against the Service. These generalized comments were not specific to this draft EA and are noted but not responded to here.

Comment

It is my understanding that an "animal rights" group has sued to end public hunting on the Big Branch NWR. Although I no longer hunt, I understand that the funds to maintain Big Branch as well as other game management areas comes mostly from hunter-paid license fees and taxes on ammunition.

Hunters provide a way to control animal populations for more effective management, rather than allowing over population to spread disease and starvation. Many youngsters are introduced to the joys of the great outdoors by being taking on hunting trips. And, although not every hunting trip results in the taking of game, they learn to use and enjoy the outdoors responsibly and can increase their use to other forms of outdoor recreation in the off season, such as camping, hiking, fishing, bird watching and the like.

Please add my name to the list of those who OPPOSE ending hunting in Big Branch NWR.

Comment

We saw the article about Big Branch in the St. Tammany News and wanted to give our input. The outdoors has always been a big part of our family. Our 2 sons grew up in this area and have a great appreciation and love for hunting and fishing. Even though they live in other areas part of the year, when they do come home they can't wait to go fishing and hunting. If these areas are taken away, they won't have such a nice place to go that is close to home and inexpensive. We believe that these type of places encourage good healthy outdoor activities for all ages. Kids especially need to be exposed to the "basics" of life. I have heard our sons commenting that when they have kids they will do the same outdoor kinda stuff. They feel they grew up in a great area and it would be a shame if others miss out on the same kind of opportunity.

Comment

My husband and I are retired and living in Slidell. Many times we have gone on walks along Boy Scout road, taking in the serene scenery and indulging in one of our favorite pastimes, bird watching. When I read that opening up Big Branch to hunters is now

being considered, I was appalled! It seems that the whole purpose of a refuge is to provide a haven for animals, not to kill them! Nature lovers like ourselves will be subjected to the sound of gunfire and I fear that what is now a peaceful sanctuary will be gone forever. Please don't let this happen.

Comment

I wanted to voice my strong opposition to closing hunting in the Big Branch Refuge. I just saw where there is a proposal to close hunting in this beautiful National Wildlife Refuge and there are numerous dedicated outdoorsmen and women that routinely pursue waterfowl, deer, and hogs and squirrels in Big Branch. If there is any way to prevent such closure, please advise at your earliest convenience. I will be more than glad to forward similar sentiments from the numerous duck hunters that are hunting partners of mine. I hope we can preserve our hunting privileges in this wonderful National Wildlife Refuge. You may contact me via e-mail, voice mail. Thanks in advance.

Comment

I want to thank you for everything that you and your staff have done to try and retain the hunting privileges that we have on Big Branch. If there is anything I can do to help, just ask.

Comment

Please add my name to the list that supports keeping hunting as a much needed activity on NWRs. I support the proposed action option.

Comment

I have read the Environmental Assessment and fully support your "proposed action" that would continue recreational hunting.

I strongly disagree with the "no action alternative" that would eliminate hunting, and actually damage the wildlife and land of the Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

Please let me know if I can voice my opinion in any other arena.

Comment

I have been hunting ducks at Big Branch Marsh (Goose Point) for 55 years. My dad first took me hunting there when I was 10 years old and I have been hunting there ever since. He is now deceased and I still use his Browning 16 gauge shotgun. I have never heard of the Fund for Animals. It would be a shame to cancel such a long-standing tradition of hunting at Big Branch because of a lawsuit by some unknown organization.

Big Branch Marsh is not the greatest place in the world to hunt ducks. In fact the last five years have been pretty poor. But I love paddling a pirogue in the dark before sunrise, watching the shooting stars, listening to the sounds of the marsh awakening. I love

sitting in a duck blind, drinking coffee, watching the sunrise, blowing a duck call, hopefully enticing a duck or two to come in over the decoys.

Please allow this tradition to continue at Big Branch, for us and our kids and grand kids.

Comment

I live in Metairie, La and Big Branch NWR is one of my favorite places to duck hunt.

Comment

Please consider my comments for the public record and include them in any FWS deliberations.

I am opposed to closing the NWR to hunting as the Fund for Animals lawsuit is attempting to do.

Use of the area for hunting recreation is a state tradition and a valuable use of renewable wildlife resources. Hunting is a key scientific management tool used to assure the health of the entire resource.

Comment

I've hunted the area of Goose point for years since I was 8 years old. The area is well respected. I was upset that someone wants to take it (hunting) away from us. If I can help to keep hunting, let me know. I duck hunt. I've contacted Bobby Jindal to give him my opinion.

Comment

I have read the Environmental Assessment and fully support your "proposed action" that would continue recreational hunting.

I strongly disagree with the "no action alternative" that would eliminate hunting, and actually damage the wildlife and land of the Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

Please let me know if I can voice my opinion in any other arena.

Comment

Please oppose Senate Bill 34 and keep the "Big Branch" NWR open to hunting..... Thanks

Comment

Please consider my comments to be for public record. Hunting is a tradition and valuable management tool at "Big Branch" NWR. It must be continued as it has in the past. Please stop any and all hunting bans at "Big Branch" MWR.

Comment

Please consider my comments to be for the public record.

Hunting is a tradition and a valuable scientific resource management tool at Big Branch NWR.

It must be continued as it has in the past.

Comment

Thank you for your efforts on Big Branch NWR.

Our extended family in excess of 25 people are **in favor of continued hunting** on Big Branch NWR.

The hunting community provides financial and overall support to the maintenance of established NWR's and purchase of new ones. It is important to have this type of family recreation near the Mandeville, Slidell and Covington area.

Comment

Please do not take away my ability to hunt on Big Branch NWR!!!!!!!!!!!!

Comment

My name is (blank) and a long time resident of St. Tammany Parish. I would like to go on record that I would like to be able to continue hunting the Big Branch Marsh, there are very few places that a Northshore resident can continue to hunt.

Comment

After reading Bob Marshall's article about the above mentioned lawsuit, I have spent the last two weeks looking over the online copy of the "Revised Hunting Plan & Environmental Assessment". Although a bit dry, I have to admit that I learned a few things about Big Branch NWR that I did not know.

I have hunted waterfowl at Big Branch since you sponsored the first lottery weekend and have enjoyed many hours on the marsh. As with any waterfowl venture during the past few years, some hunts have been good and some very lean but at least the opportunity to enjoy a hunt was there. As I am retired, my fixed income does not afford me the luxury of expensive leases and clubs. Public hunting opportunities like Big Branch are my lifeline to a sport that I have enjoyed my entire life.

All this having been said, I would whole heartedly support the "proposed action" which would keep the refuge open to hunting. If I can be of any help in this matter, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Comment

Please do not let this lawsuit happen. Keep the Preserve open to hunters. People need to stop humanizing animals.

Comment

I write to you today hoping you will make a decision that is in our children's future. I am **for** hunting on the Big Branch Wildlife preserve. I am pleased to have the opportunity to go hunting in Louisiana rather than leaving this beautiful State to hunt elsewhere. Archery hunting is a beautiful and mystical experience. If we loose this land to hunt, we are only contributing to the loss of our heritage in Louisiana. Please do not be scared by these lawsuits. I hope you give me the opportunity to bring my children in the great outdoors like my father did for me. Thank you for your time.

Comment

I have been a resident of Slidell, LA since 2001 and have enjoyed hunting on Big Branch since that time. I have even paid and participated in the lottery hunts that were going on at that time. If there is anything I can do to show my support for the "proposed action" please let me know. I have been priced out of duck leases and enjoy spending my time at Big Branch.

Comment

Safari Club International and Safari Club International Foundation ("SCI and SCIF") appreciate the opportunity to provide our comments on the draft Sport Hunting Plan and Environmental Assessment ("Hunt Plan and EA") for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. We applaud the Service's recognition of hunting as a priority use of the unit and an essential wildlife management tool, both for the refuge and for the areas surrounding the refuge.

Safari Club International, a nonprofit IRC § 501(c)(4) corporation, has approximately 53,000 members worldwide, many of whom hunt on refuges throughout the National Wildlife Refuge system. SCI's missions include the conservation of wildlife, protection of the hunter, and education of the public concerning hunting and its use as a conservation tool. Safari Club International Foundation is a nonprofit IRC § 501(c)(3) corporation. Its missions include the conservation of wildlife, education of the public concerning hunting and its use as a conservation tool, and humanitarian services. More specifically, the conservation mission of SCIF is: (a) to support the conservation of the various species and populations of game animals and other wildlife and the habitats on which they depend; and (b) to demonstrate the importance of hunting as a conservation and management tool in the development, funding and operation of wildlife conservation programs. SCI and SCIF participated as Defendant-Intervenors in the ongoing litigation

in support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act in refuge planning.

At the outset, SCI and SCIF wish to commend the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ("FWS") and the refuge personnel specifically for the efficient and comprehensive manner with which they have examined and reported the effects of hunting on the refuge and on the areas beyond the refuge boundaries that are affected or potentially affected by hunting or the absence of hunting on the refuge.

The draft Hunt Plan and EA make clear that hunting big game, migratory game birds and upland game on the refuge is not only compatible with the purpose for which Big Branch Marsh NWR was established, but actually assists the FWS in carrying out the refuge's purpose to "preserve the habitats and associated wildlife in perpetuity for the benefit and use of the general public." As the draft Hunt Plan and EA note, "hunting would benefit vegetation as it is used to keep many resident wildlife populations in balance with the habitat's carrying capacity." The draft Hunt Plan and EA recognize that sport hunting the populations of white-tailed deer, feral hogs, nutria, migratory game birds, squirrel, rabbit, rail, gallinule, quail, and raccoon promotes plant health and diversity, by reducing overpopulations of species that destroy vegetation and compact soils and increase seedling survival. The planning documents also correctly note that the population management and reduction tools offered by hunting can prevent starvation and diseases that spread not only through the hunted species populations but to other refuge wildlife as well. The draft EA also remarks on the fact that hunting controls predator populations that are likely to prey on songbirds, turkeys, turtles, fawns and small mammals

The draft Hunt Plan and EA do an excellent job of assessing the cumulative impact that hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR will have on the surrounding and/or interrelated areas that include the refuge lands. SCI and SCIF are pleased that the refuge has clearly documented the extensive cumulative research and analysis that the FWS conducts on migratory bird hunting and its flyway-wide and national environmental effects both on species and habitat. SCI and SCIF have a few additional recommendations on how the FWS can enhance its cumulative analysis of the impact of hunting opportunities. We suggest that the draft Hunt Plan and EA feature more prominently the refuge's consultation with the state fish and game agency. We recommend that, in addition to noting the state's concurrence with the draft Hunt Plan, that the draft Hunt Plan and EA include the state agency's input about how hunting on the refuge assists with and/or is an element of the state's efforts to manage state wildlife populations. The fact that the hunting opportunities provided on the refuge are a component of the state's wildlife management is an essential part of the cumulative impact of the refuge hunting program.

Big Branch Marsh NWR's draft EA also provides some important evidence about woodcock numbers and the potential impact of hunting on population numbers. More specifically, the authors of the draft planning documents indicate that habitat loss, not hunting, has had the most profound impact on woodcock numbers. Further, the authors note no differences in woodcock survival rates between hunted and non-hunted areas. Consequently, it would seem that hunting on refuges where woodcocks are found, because of the benefits that hunting brings to the plant health and diversity of the area, could prove to be essential, rather than detrimental, to woodcock survival.

SCI and SCIF also note that the draft Hunt Plan and EA's cumulative analysis appears to focus on the detrimental cumulative effects of hunting, as opposed to the beneficial ones. We recommend that the FWS add to its cumulative analysis an explanation of how the control and/or reduction of hunted populations, considered collectively with similar wildlife management efforts on numerous refuges throughout the National Wildlife Refuge system, conserves the cumulative health of the habitat of the flyway in which the refuge is located and the migratory birds that utilize that flyway. In addition, the benefits that hunting brings to each refuge improves the entire refuge system's available habitat and native wildlife populations and thus provides the public generally with more valuable and diverse refuge recreational opportunities of all kinds.

FWS reply:

The Service agrees with these recommendations from the Safari Club International and has made modifications to the EA accordingly. Refuge hunting is coordinated annually with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries through pre hunt planning meetings where hunt seasons and regulations are proposed to the state. Hunting opportunities provided on the refuge are a component of the state's wildlife management plans. Typically, the state annually asks the refuge to increase the huntable opportunities on the refuge.

Comment

These are my thoughts and opinions on Big Branch Marsh Refuge. I have been hunting the Goose Point and surrounding area since 1981, well before it was a federal refuge. I was a school boy duck and deer hunting. The area has always had a good number of game. Since it has become a federal refuge, I think the game population has increased. Our refuge systems have a tighter limit and regulations problem than the state regulated areas around it. I think it has worked out better than pre refuge days especially on duck hunting with the rest days during each week. Our refuge lands are funded by a lot of dollars generated by us hunters. In a way we kind of own these federal lands. Animal population control is a growing issue in St. Tammany Parish with all the development forcing animals into smaller areas. Hunting is the best tool for controlling animals that could become overpopulated and starve or die from disease. If hunting was stopped we would lose the funding needed to maintain and expand the federal refuge system. The animal rights groups talk the talk but they don't walk the walk, the hunters put out the money to better wildlife habitat and restore troubled animal populations and protect wetlands. Our state agencies set season and bag limits based on what will benefit the wildlife to keep them healthy and under control: and our federal refuges take it even further, with tighter regulations and some areas like Big Branch certain closed days for rest periods. Keep Big Branch opened for hunting and keep up the good work managing our game and patrolling the area.

Comment

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Comment

I have a MS Degree in Zoology from LSU and have 26 years of experience in environmental assessment, planning and compliance in the Federal Government. Upon review of the Draft Environmental Assessment for recreational sport hunting on Big Branch National Refuge, I find that the adverse impacts to native wildlife and other recreational uses in the refuge to be negligible. In addition, the reduction of feral hog populations have and would continue to be a significant beneficial impact. It is my hope that sport hunting will continue.

Comment

I am writing to you voicing my opposition to the law suit filed by "Fund for Animals". This frivolous law suit is aimed at undermining the management criteria set in place by professionals like you, years ago, to regulate the wildlife and fisheries in the Big Branch Wildlife Management Area. I am also sure these activists are trying this slight of hand in all other federal and state WMA where hunters are involved.

I am grateful to the State of Louisiana and to the Federal Wildlife and Fisheries for providing the Big Branch Wildlife Management Area for our enjoyment year round. It is through your efforts that my father and I and numerous friends have enjoyed the BBWMA for well over 15 years. It is our choice to go out in sunny, rainy or freezing weather to hunt and fish. We enjoy hunting and fishing, and preparing what we are allowed to take by law. We take our responsibility for the fish and game we are allowed to harvest very seriously and respect all life. I resent activist organizations like "Fund for Animals" for trying to take away a freedom that is already regulated, by a technicality.

Also, I would like to ask if anyone of the "Fund for Animals" activist organization has even seen the BBWMA? My guess is that they haven't.

Please feel free to call me if you have any questions or need any additional information. Hunter and Fisher for life!

Comment

I am in support of your preferred alternative.

End of public comments:

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION MEMORANDUM

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and have determined that the action of:

BIG BRANCH MARSH NWR 2007 RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN

- is a categorical exclusion as provided by 516 DM 6 Appendix 1. No further documentation will be made.
- is found not to have significant environmental effects as determined by the attached Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact.
- is found to have special environmental conditions as described in the attached Environmental Assessment. The attached Finding of No Significant Impact will not be final nor any actions taken pending a 30_day period for public review [40 CFR 1501.4(e) (2)].
- is found to have significant effects, and therefore a "Notice of Intent" will be published in the Federal Register to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement before the project is considered further.
- is denied because of environmental damage, Service policy, or mandate.
- is an emergency situation. Only those actions necessary to control the immediate impacts of the emergency will be taken. Other related actions remain subject to NEPA review.

Other supporting documents:

Environmental Assessment
Finding of No Significant Impact

<u>Ken Litzenberger</u> Ken Litzenberger, Project Leader	<u>4/4/07</u> Date
<u>Kelly Purkey</u> Kelly Purkey, Acting Refuge Supervisor, Area I	<u>4/11/07</u> Date
<u>[Signature]</u> Regional Environmental Coordinator	<u>4/19/07</u> Date
<u>[Signature]</u> Jon Andrew, Refuge Chief, Region 4	<u>4/20/07</u> Date
<u>[Signature]</u> Regional Director, Southeast Region	<u>4/23/07</u> Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

for

BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service propose to protect and manage certain fish and wildlife resources in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, through the implementation of the 2007 hunt plan on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. The Service has analyzed the following alternatives to the proposal in an Environmental Assessment (copy attached):

Alternative 1: No Action:

This alternative would result in setting aside Big Branch Marsh NWR essentially as a “wildlife sanctuary” with no provisions for the harvest of its wildlife. The FWS would prohibit the sport taking of all game species on all lands acquired in fee title or otherwise managed as a part of the refuge.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action:

Establishment of a recreational hunting program on refuge lands. Recreational hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR would be carried out in compliance with the refuge recreational hunt plan and in accordance with State, Federal, and special refuge regulations, and FWS policy and directives. All or parts of the refuge may be closed to hunting at any time if necessary for public safety, to provide wildlife sanctuary, or for administrative reasons.
(Preferred Alternative)

The preferred alternative was selected over the other alternative because world-class hunting programs on national wildlife refuges fulfill the Refuge Improvement Act’s mandate to provide opportunities for compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation to Americans. The decades-old hunting program is also a fulfillment of America’s deeply rooted outdoor heritage that has, at its very core, the conservation mission that is the foundation of the Refuge System and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Big Branch March Refuge has been open to hunting since it’s establishment and the refuge’s purposes for which it was established was to include opening the refuge to consumptive and non consumptive use of the refuge.

In addition to its recreational value, hunting gives resource managers an important tool in controlling populations of some species that might otherwise exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat.

In 1966 and again in 1997, Congress expressly recognized the legitimacy of hunting on units of the refuge system and directed the Service to facilitate these opportunities which is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social and economic effects: See Environmental Assessment, page 19.

Because the project does not have any adverse effects, measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have not been incorporated into the proposal.

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted include:

All affected landowners
Congressional representatives
Interested citizens and organizations
Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Copies of the Environmental Assessment are available by contacting:

Daniel Breaux
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
61389 Hwy 434
Lacombe, LA 70445
985-882-2000

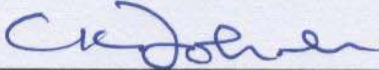
Therefore, it is my determination that the proposal does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of Section 102(2) (c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. This determination is based on the following factors (40 CFR 1508.27):

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered and this action will not have a significant effect on the socio economic human environment (EA, page 27).
2. The action will not have a significant effect on human health and safety (EA, page 28).
3. The project will not significantly affect any unique characteristics of the Refuge Physical Environment (EA, page 29).
4. The action will not significantly affect any site listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources (EA, page 29).

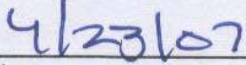
5. The action does not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks to Refuge Habitat (EA, page 31).
6. The action will not lead to a violation of federal, state, or local laws imposed for the protection of Non-hunted Wildlife (EA, page 33).
7. The action will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration of Wildlife Dependant Recreation (EA, page 34).
8. The action is not likely to adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or their habitats (Section 7 Consultation, and EA 34).
9. There will be no cumulatively significant impacts on the environment (EA, page 35).

References:

Final Environmental Assessment and 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan of Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region, Atlanta, Georgia.



Sam D. Hamilton
Regional Director



Date

Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge Compatibility Determination

Refuge Name: Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

Date Established: September 29, 1994

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities: Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986, 16 U.S.C. §3901 (b); North American Wetlands Conservation Act, 16 U.S.C. §4401 2(b)

Refuge Purpose: The purpose of the refuge as defined by the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986, 16 U.S.C. §3901 (b) is “For the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.”

The purpose of the refuge as defined by the North American Conservation Act, 16 U.S.C. §4401 2(b) is “To protect, enhance, restore, and manage an appropriate distribution and diversity of wetland ecosystems and other habitats for migratory bird and other fish and wildlife in North America; to maintain current or improved distributions of migratory bird populations; and, to sustain an abundance of waterfowl and other migratory birds consistent with the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the international obligations contained in the migratory bird treaties and conventions and other agreements with Canada, Mexico, and other countries.”

The refuge purposes were further defined in the 1994 Final Land Protection Plan and two subsequent Supplemental Environmental Assessments (1996, 1998) for expansion of Big Branch Marsh NWR as the following: to provide habitat for natural diversity of wildlife associated with Big Branch Marsh; to provide wintering habitat for migratory birds; to provide nesting habitat for wood ducks; to provide habitat for non-game migratory birds; and, to provide opportunities for public outdoor recreation such as hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and environmental education and interpretation, whenever they are compatible with the purposes of the refuge.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

The mission of the Refuge System, as defined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, is:

... to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Other Applicable Laws, Regulations, and Policies:

Antiquities Act of 1906 (34 Stat. 225)

Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (15 U.S.C. 703-711; 40 Stat. 755)

Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 (16 U.S.C. 715r; 45 Stat. 1222)

Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act of 1934 (16 U.S.C. 718-178h; 48 Stat. 451)
Criminal Code Provisions of 1940 (18 U.S.C. 41)
Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 668-668d; 54 Stat. 250)
Refuge Trespass Act of June 25, 1948 (18 U.S.C. 41; 62 Stat. 686)
Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742a-742j; 70 Stat. 1119)
Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 (16 U.S.C. 460k-460k-4; 76 Stat. 653)
Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1131; 78 Stat. 890)
Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965
National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470, et seq.; 80 Stat. 915)
National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 668dd, 668ee; 80 Stat. 927)
National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, NEPA (42 U.S.C. 4321, et seq; 83 Stat. 852)
Use of Off-Road Vehicles on Public Lands (Executive Order 11644, as amended by Executive Order 10989)
Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq; 87 Stat. 884)
Refuge Revenue Sharing Act of 1935, as amended in 1978 (16 U.S.C. 715s; 92 Stat. 1319)
National Wildlife Refuge Regulations for the Most Recent Fiscal Year (50 CFR Subchapter C; 43 CFR 3101.3-3)
Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 (S.B. 740)
North American Wetlands Conservation Act of 1990
Food Security Act (Farm Bill) of 1990 as amended (HR 2100)
The Property Clause of The U.S. Constitution Article IV 3, Clause 2
The Commerce Clause of The U.S. Constitution Article 1, Section 8
The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57, USC668dd)
Executive Order 12996, Management and General public Use of the National Wildlife Refuge System. March 25, 1996
Title 50, Code of Federal Regulations, Parts 25-33
Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979
Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990

Compatibility determinations for each description listed are considered separately. Although, for brevity, the preceding sections from “Uses” through “Other Applicable Laws, Regulations and Policies” are only written once within the plan, they are part of each descriptive use and become part of that compatibility determination if considered outside of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Description of Use: Recreational Hunting

Recreational hunting, a wildlife-dependent activity, has been identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 as a priority public use, provided it is compatible with the purpose for which the refuge was established. This use was emphasized in the 1994 Final Land Protection Plan and two subsequent Supplemental Environmental Assessments (1996, 1998) by being stated as a management objective of Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

Recreational hunting of white-tailed deer with bow and arrow, migratory game birds, small game, and upland game is allowed on the refuge. Hunters are also allowed to take feral hogs with bow and arrow during archery deer season. While hunting is the biggest public use on the refuge, hunting pressure is not heavy at this time. In fact, a lottery waterfowl hunt in force for several years was discontinued because it was no longer needed to regulate the number of hunters.

All hunts fall within the framework of Louisiana's open seasons and follow state regulations. Refuge-specific regulations are reviewed annually and incorporated into the refuge hunting permit. Hunters are required to possess refuge permits while hunting on the refuge. The entire refuge is open to hunting with the exception of areas posted with "No Hunting Zone" signs or so designated in the hunting permit. Currently, Southeast Louisiana Refuges headquarters (Lacombe Centre) and the Lemieux Road environmental education site is closed to hunting.

Waterfowl (ducks and geese) and coots may be hunted during the State season on Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday until noon. Squirrels and rabbits may be hunted during the State season using only shotguns with non-toxic shot and dogs may be used only after the close of the State gun deer season. Woodcock, snipe, and quail may be hunted during the State season using non-toxic shot and recognized breeds of setters or retrievers. Gallinules and rails may be hunted during the State season with non-toxic shot. White-tailed deer harvest is limited to an archery season following the State season and regulations. No commercial hunting activities, including guiding or participating in a guided hunt, are permitted. Harvest information is gathered by a voluntary self-check form contained in the hunting permit.

Availability of Resources: Funding for the hunt program is supported by annual operation and maintenance funds. Costs include permit printing, administration, monitoring the activity, and maintaining access points with safe parking areas.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use: While managed hunting opportunities result in both short and long term impacts to individual animals, effects at the population level are usually negligible. Small game animal populations are capable of sustaining harvest because of their short reproduction cycles. Hunting regulations for both endemic and migratory game species are based on specific state-wide and nation-wide harvest objectives. Migratory bird regulations are established at the federal level each year following a series of meetings involving both state and federal biologists. Harvest guidelines are based on population survey and habitat condition data. Refuge hunting programs are always within these regulations. As currently proposed, the known and anticipated levels of disturbance of allowing hunting are considered minimal and well within the tolerance level of known wildlife species and populations present on the refuge. All hunting activities would be conducted with the constraints of sound biological principles and refuge-specific regulations established to restrict illegal or questionable activities. Monitoring activities through wildlife inventories and assessments of public use levels and activities would be utilized, and public use programs would be adjusted as needed to limit disturbance. Implementation of an effective law enforcement program and development of site specific refuge regulations that are reviewed annually should minimize most incidental take problems.

Public Review and Comment: This compatibility determination was provided for public review and comment during a 30 day comment period from March 5th to April 5th, 2007. A news release was issued and published in the Sports Brief of the Slidell Picayune newspaper on March 11, 2007 and in the Sports Briefs section of the Times Picayune on March 9th, 2007. Copies of the plan were available for review on the refuge web site between March 3rd and April 5th at: [Http://www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/](http://www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/), and at the following libraries in St. Tammany Parish: Slidell Branch: 555 Robert Boulevard, Lacombe Branch: 28027 Hwy 190, and the Mandeville Branch: 845 Gerard Street. There were no comments made to this compatibility determination.

Determination (check one below):

Use is Not Compatible

Use is Compatible with Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

- a. Hunting seasons and bag limits are established annually as agreed upon during the annual hunt coordination meeting with Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries personnel.
- b. All hunters are required to possess a signed refuge hunting permit while participating in refuge hunts. State hunting regulations apply unless otherwise listed in the permit.
- c. Non-toxic shot must be used.

Justification: The 1997 National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act identified hunting as one of the priority public uses on national wildlife refuges, where compatible with refuge purposes. This use is legitimate and appropriate, and is dependent upon healthy wildlife populations. Offering recreational hunting is in compliance with refuge goals, is a management objective for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, and furthers the goals and missions of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Description: *Place an X in appropriate space.*

- Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Statement
- Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Statement
- Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact
- Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-evaluation Date: _____

Approval of Compatibility Determinations

The signature of approval is for all compatibility determinations considered within the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. If one of the descriptive uses is considered for compatibility outside of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan, the approval signature becomes part of that determination.

Refuge Manager: Ken Lizenberger 4/4/07
(Signature/Date)

Regional Compatibility Coordinator: [Signature] 4/11/07
(Signature/Date)

Refuge Supervisor: [Signature] 4/16/07
(Signature/Date)

Regional Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System, Southeast Region: [Signature] 4/16/07
(Signature/Date)

Appropriate Use Determination

Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge Appropriate Use Determination

An appropriate use determination is the initial decision process a refuge manager follows when first considering whether or not to allow a proposed use on a refuge. The refuge manager must find a use is appropriate before undertaking a compatibility review of the use. This process clarifies and expands on the compatibility determination process, by describing when refuge managers should deny a proposed use without determining compatibility. If we find a proposed use is not appropriate, we will not allow the use and will not prepare a compatibility determination.

Except for the uses noted below, the refuge manager must decide if a new or existing use is an appropriate refuge use. If an existing use is not appropriate, the refuge manager will eliminate or modify the use as expeditiously as practicable. If a new use is not appropriate, the refuge manager will deny the use without determining compatibility. Uses that have been administratively determined to be appropriate are:

- Six wildlife-dependent recreational uses - As defined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act), the six wildlife-dependent recreational uses (hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation) are determined to be appropriate. However, the refuge manager must still determine if these uses are compatible.
- Take of fish and wildlife under State regulations - States have regulations concerning take of wildlife that includes hunting, fishing, and trapping. We consider take of wildlife under such regulations appropriate. However, the refuge manager must determine if the activity is compatible before allowing it on a refuge.

Statutory Authorities for this policy:

National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, 16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee (Administration Act). This law provides the authority for establishing policies and regulations governing refuge uses, including the authority to prohibit certain harmful activities. The Administration Act does not authorize any particular use, but rather authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to allow uses only when they are compatible and “under such regulations as he may prescribe.” This law specifically identifies certain public uses that, when compatible, are legitimate and appropriate uses within the Refuge System. The law states “. . . it is the policy of the United States that . . . compatible wildlife-dependent recreation is a legitimate and appropriate general public use of the System . . . compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are the priority general public uses of the System and shall receive priority consideration in refuge planning and management; and . . . when the Secretary determines that a proposed wildlife-dependent recreational use is a compatible use within a refuge, that activity should be facilitated . . .

the Secretary shall . . . ensure that priority general public uses of the System receive enhanced consideration over other general public uses in planning and management within the System . . .” The law also states “[i]n administering the System, the Secretary is authorized to take the following actions: . . . [i]ssue regulations to carry out this Act.” This policy implements the standards set in the Administration Act by providing enhanced consideration of priority general public uses and ensuring other public uses do not interfere with our ability to provide quality, wildlife-dependent recreational uses.

Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, 16 U.S.C. 460k (Recreation Act). This law authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to “. . . administer such areas [of the System] or parts thereof for public recreation when in his judgment public recreation can be an appropriate incidental or secondary use.” While the Recreation Act authorizes us to allow public recreation in areas of the Refuge System when the use is an “appropriate incidental or secondary use,” the Improvement Act provides the Refuge System mission and includes specific directives and a clear hierarchy of public uses on the Refuge System.

Other Statutes that Establish Refuges, including the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) (16 U.S.C. 410hh - 410hh-5, 460 mm - 460mm-4, 539-539e, and 3101 - 3233; 43 U.S.C. 1631 et seq.).

Executive Orders. We must comply with Executive Order (E.O.) 11644 when allowing use of off-highway vehicles on refuges. This order requires that we: designate areas as open or closed to off-highway vehicles in order to protect refuge resources, promote safety, and minimize conflict among the various refuge users; monitor the effects of these uses once they are allowed; and amend or rescind any area designation as necessary based on the information gathered. Furthermore, E.O. 11989 requires us to close areas to off highway vehicles when we determine that the use causes or will cause considerable adverse effects on the soil, vegetation, wildlife, habitat, or cultural or historic resources. Statutes, such as ANILCA, take precedence over Executive orders.

Definitions:

Appropriate Use

A proposed or existing use on a refuge that meets at least one of the following four conditions.

- 1) The use is a wildlife-dependent recreational use as identified in the Improvement Act.
- 2) The use contributes to fulfilling the refuge purpose(s), the Refuge System mission, or goals or objectives described in a refuge management plan approved after October 9, 1997, the date the Improvement Act was signed into law.
- 3) The use involves the take of fish and wildlife under State regulations.
- 4) The use has been found to be appropriate as specified in section 1.11.

Native American. American Indians in the conterminous United States and Alaska Natives (including Aleuts, Eskimos, and Indians) who are members of federally recognized tribes.

Priority General Public Use. A compatible wildlife-dependent recreational use of a refuge involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, or environmental education and interpretation.

Quality. The criteria used to determine a quality recreational experience include:

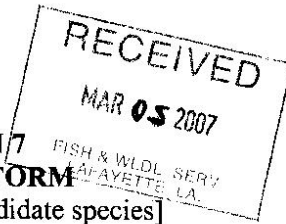
- Promotes safety of participants, other visitors, and facilities.
- Promotes compliance with applicable laws and regulations and responsible behavior.
- Minimizes or eliminates conflicts with fish and wildlife population or habitat goals or objectives in a plan approved after 1997.
- Minimizes or eliminates conflicts with other compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.
- Minimizes conflicts with neighboring landowners.
- Promotes accessibility and availability to a broad spectrum of the American people.
- Promotes resource stewardship and conservation.
- Promotes public understanding and increases public appreciation of America's natural resources and our role in managing and protecting these resources.
- Provides reliable/reasonable opportunities to experience wildlife.
- Uses facilities that are accessible and blend into the natural setting.
- Uses visitor satisfaction to help define and evaluate programs.

Wildlife-Dependent Recreational Use. As defined by the Improvement Act, a use of a refuge involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, or environmental education and interpretation.

Findings of Appropriateness of a Refuge Use for camping, use of off-road vehicles, and horseback riding were found not to be appropriate uses on Big Branch Marsh NWR and were not analyzed for compatibility; bicycling on designated trails, forest management, trapping (nutria), and mosquito control were found to be appropriate on Big Branch Marsh NWR.

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**SOUTHEAST REGION
INTRA-SERVICE SECTION 7
BIOLOGICAL EVALUATION FORM**
[Federally endangered, threatened, and candidate species]



Originating Person: Daniel Breaux
Telephone Number: 985-882-2030 **E-Mail:** Daniel_breaux@fws.gov
Date: February 28, 2007

PROJECT NAME (Grant Title/Number): Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge 2007
Recreational Hunting Plan

- I. Service Program:**
- Ecological Services
 - Federal Aid
 - Clean Vessel Act
 - Coastal Wetlands
 - Endangered Species Section 6
 - Partners for Fish and Wildlife
 - Sport Fish Restoration
 - Wildlife Restoration
 - Fisheries
 - Refuges/Wildlife

II. State/Agency:

III. Station Name: Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

IV. Description of Proposed Action (attach additional pages as needed):

Establishment of a recreational hunting program on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Recreational hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR would be carried out in compliance with the refuge recreational hunt plan and in accordance with State, Federal, and special refuge regulations, and FWS policy and directives. All or parts of the refuge may be closed to hunting at any time if necessary for public safety, to provide wildlife sanctuary, or for administrative reasons.

V. Pertinent Species and Habitat:

Big Branch Marsh is the last undeveloped large natural area on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. It is unique because it is the only area in coastal Louisiana with an interface of sandy beaches, nearshore grass beds, marshes, hardwood hummocks, and pine ridges. Its overall fish and wildlife resources are substantial. The areas habitat for wading birds, neo-tropical

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migratory birds, and shorebirds is outstanding. The area provides good waterfowl habitat and is located within the Lower Mississippi River Watershed, a traditional waterfowl migration corridor.

A. Include species/habitat occurrence map:

A small red-cockaded woodpecker population resides within the forested area of the refuge. At present, fourteen to nineteen clusters are active with most of them supporting a potential breeding pair with helpers. Hurricane Katrina eliminated a few birds, but the population should rebound with the increase in insects in response to the dead and downed trees. In the Red-cockaded Woodpecker Recovery Plan this population is the sole group occurring in the Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes Eco-region, and is considered a significant support population for recoverable populations.

Bald eagles occur on the refuge from fall until early summer, and usually nest within the refuge and adjacent lands. The nest is constructed in tall pines along the tree line, which abruptly changes to marsh surrounding Lake Pontchartrain, their feeding grounds.

Waters of the refuge are within the designated critical habitat for the Gulf sturgeon. Research has shown that juveniles and subadults use Lake Pontchartrain as wintering habitat. Records in Lake Pontchartrain show concentrations near Bayou Lacombe and Goose Point.

Although neither species breeds in the area, brown pelicans are commonly seen feeding in refuge waters and an occasional West Indian manatee is sighted during the summer

B. Complete the following table:

Table 1. Listed/proposed species/critical habitat that occur or may occur within the project area:

SPECIES/CRITICAL HABITAT	STATUS ¹
Red-cockaded Woodpecker	Endangered
Bald Eagle	Threatened
West Indian manatee	Endangered
Brown Pelican	Endangered
Gulf Sturgeon / CH	Threatened, CH

¹STATUS: E=endangered, T=threatened, PE=proposed endangered, PT=proposed threatened, CH=critical habitat,

VI. Location

A. Ecoregion Number and Name: Lower Mississippi Eco-System

B. County and State: St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana

C. Section, township, and range (or latitude and longitude):

Many sections in Townships 8, 9, and 10 south, Ranges 12, 13, 14 and 15 east

D. Distance (miles) and direction to nearest town: 2 miles South of Lacombe, Louisiana and within the city Limits of Slidell, Louisiana.

E. Species/habitat occurrence:

Red-cockaded woodpeckers are year round residents of the refuge’s forested habitat.

Bald eagles occur on the refuge during winter months and nest in the tree line bordering the marshes of Lake Pontchartrain.

Gulf sturgeon winter in Lake Pontchartrain, brown pelicans use the refuge waters year round as a feeding area, and West Indian manatees are occasionally sighted in Lake Pontchartrain and canals in the summer.

VII. Determination of Effects:

A. Explanation of effects of the action on species and critical habitats in item V. B (attach additional pages as needed):

Table 2. Project impacts to listed/proposed species/critical habitat.

SPECIES/ CRITICAL HABITAT	IMPACTS TO SPECIES/CRITICAL HABITAT
Red-cockaded Woodpecker	No negative impacts; provide support to other populations
Bald Eagle	No negative impacts; provide habitat protection
Gulf Sturgeon	No negative impacts; provide habitat protection
Brown Pelican	No negative impacts; provide habitat protection
West Indian Manatee	No negative impacts; provide habitat protection

SPECIES/ CRITICAL HABITAT	IMPACTS TO SPECIES/CRITICAL HABITAT

B. Explanation of actions to be implemented to reduce adverse effects:

Table 3. Conservation measures proposed to minimize or eliminate adverse impacts to proposed/listed species, critical habitat.

SPECIES/ CRITICAL HABITAT	ACTIONS TO MINIMIZE IMPACTS
Red-cockaded Woodpecker	Monitor refuge population, provide protection and more suitable habitat in growing urban environment
Bald Eagle	Monitor nesting, provide protection and more suitable habitat in growing urban environment
Gulf Sturgeon	Continue to monitor for occurrence and any problems
Brown Pelican	Continue to monitor
West Indian Manatee	Monitor and report any problems

VIII. Effect Determination and Response Requested:

Table 4. The effect determination and response requested for impacts to each proposed/listed species/critical habitat.

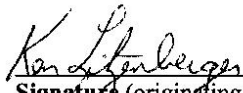
SPECIES/ CRITICAL HABITAT	DETERMINATION ¹			RESPONSE ¹ REQUESTED
	NE	NA	AA	
Red-cockaded Woodpecker		X		concurrence
Bald Eagle		X		concurrence
Gulf Sturgeon		X		concurrence
Brown Pelican		X		concurrence
West Indian Manatee		X		concurrence

¹DETERMINATION/RESPONSE REQUESTED:

NE = no effect. This determination is appropriate when the proposed action will not directly, indirectly, or cumulatively impact, either positively or negatively, any listed, proposed, candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat. Response Requested is optional but a "Concurrence" is recommended for a complete Administrative Record.

NA = not likely to adversely affect. This determination is appropriate when the proposed action is not likely to adversely impact any listed, proposed, candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat or there may be beneficial effects to these resources. Response Requested is a "Concurrence".

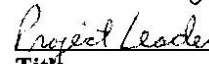
AA = likely to adversely affect. This determination is appropriate when the proposed action is likely to adversely impact any listed, proposed, candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat. Response Requested for listed species is "Formal Consultation". Response Requested for proposed or candidate species is "Conference".



 Signature (originating station)

3/1/7

 date



 Title

If the project description changes or incidental take exceeds that which has been exempted under section 9 of the Act, then the Ecological Services Field Office must be contacted.

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IX. Reviewing Ecological Services Office Evaluation:

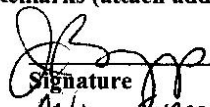
A. Concurrence Non-concurrence _____

B. Formal consultation required _____

C. Conference required _____

D. Informal conference required _____

E. Remarks (attach additional pages as needed):

	_____	3/5/07
Signature		date
Acting Supervisor	_____	LFO
Title		office

E. Remarks:

According to Section 4.3.1.5 (page 41 of Hunt Plan)
Grey straggle^(CH) manatees and brown pelicans do not occur in
the areas to be hunted. Hunting will not occur
during the red-cockaded woodpecker nesting season.
Therefore we concur with the NLAA determination.