

MOUNTAIN LONGLEAF NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

PUBLIC USE PLAN

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM MISSION STATEMENT

“To administer a national net-work 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.”

MOUNTAIN LONGLEAF NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE MISSION STATEMENT

“To preserve, conserve, and restore biodiversity and biological integrity of the natural landscape and in particular the longleaf pine ecosystem while providing for compatible public uses.”

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Fort McClellan military training installation was closed September 1999, in accordance with the 1995 Base Realignment and Closure decision. The Bob Stump National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003, P.L. No. 107-314, authorized the transfer, to the administrative jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Interior, approximately 7,759 acres in order to establish Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge. P.L. No. 107-314 established that the primary purpose of Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge was to “enhance, manage, and protect the unique mountain longleaf pine ecosystem on the property.” On October 23, 2003, the Joint Powers Authority transferred an additional 1,257 acres to the Service bringing the total Refuge size to 9,016 acres.

Contaminants

Approximately 6,000 acres of Mountain Longleaf NWR are within areas closed because of unexploded ordnance (UXO), due to other environmental contaminant safety issues and/or inadequate infrastructure to support the use. The Army is currently in the process of identifying and characterizing the extent of contamination. Upon completion of these studies, the Army and the Fish and Wildlife Service will seek to reach agreement on the level of cleanup necessary to allow the Refuge to fulfill its primary purpose and allow expansion of public use into areas once contamination has been remediated. The remaining portions of the Refuge (~ 3,000 acres) are considered to have little or no UXO and environmental contaminants. These areas will be open to public use upon completion of this public use planning process.

Warning signs with the following wording, “Danger Unexploded Ordnance Keep Out” and/or “Area Beyond This Sign Closed - All Public Entry Prohibited”, identify lands within the Refuge closed to public use (Figure 1). These signs are posted around all areas suspected of containing UXO or environmental contaminants. The public is restricted from entering all areas bounded by these signs.

CONFORMANCE WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITY

Scope and Rationale

Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) has developed this Public Use Plan (Plan) to guide future public uses on the Refuge in a manner that allows us to fulfill the purpose for which the Refuge was established as well as to provide a public benefit. The draft of this Plan will allow the public to comment on the proposals presented within

the Plan and to influence any future changes. Once the Plan is adopted it will be the instrument that guides future decisions on public use at the Refuge.



Fig. 1 Closed Area Signs

Legal Mandates

Guidance for authorizing public uses on National Wildlife Refuges is provided in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (the Act) of 1997. The Act states, “compatible wildlife-dependent recreation is a legitimate and appropriate general public use of the System . . . through which the American public can develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife.” The Act recognizes that wildlife-dependent recreational uses involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation, when determined to be compatible, are legitimate and appropriate public uses of the Refuge System that should receive priority consideration in refuge planning and management. Other uses not listed as priority public uses may be allowed if they are determined to be appropriate and compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

According to the Act, when a wildlife-dependent recreational use is determined to be a compatible use and is not inconsistent with public safety, that activity should be facilitated. The term “compatible use” is defined as a wildlife-dependent recreational use or any other use of a refuge that, in the sound professional judgment of the Director, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the System or the purposes of the refuge. The US Fish and Wildlife Service’s Final Compatibility Policy Pursuant to the Act delegates the responsibility of determining compatibility to the Refuge Manager with concurrence by the Regional Office Supervisor.

The Bob Stump National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003, P.L. No. 107-314, authorized the transfer, to the administrative jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Interior, approximately 7,759 acres in order to establish Mountain Longleaf National

Wildlife Refuge. P.L. No. 107-314 established that the primary purpose of Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge was to “enhance, manage, and protect the unique mountain longleaf pine ecosystem on the property.” Additional management objectives given in P.L. No. 107-314 are to: 1) conserve and enhance populations of fish, wildlife, and plants in the refuge, including migratory birds and species that are threatened or endangered, with particular emphasis on the protection of the mountain longleaf pine plant ecosystem, 2) protect and enhance the quality of aquatic habitat in the refuge, 3) provide, in coordination with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the public with recreational opportunities, including hunting, fishing¹, wildlife observation and photography, 4) provide opportunities for scientific research and education on land use and environmental law.

On October 23, 2003 the Joint Powers Authority transferred 1,257 acres to the Department of the Interior. This transfer increased the size of the Refuge to 9,016 acres (Fig. 2) and provided additional acreage for habitat restoration, wildlife management activities and public use.

Relationship to Other Plans

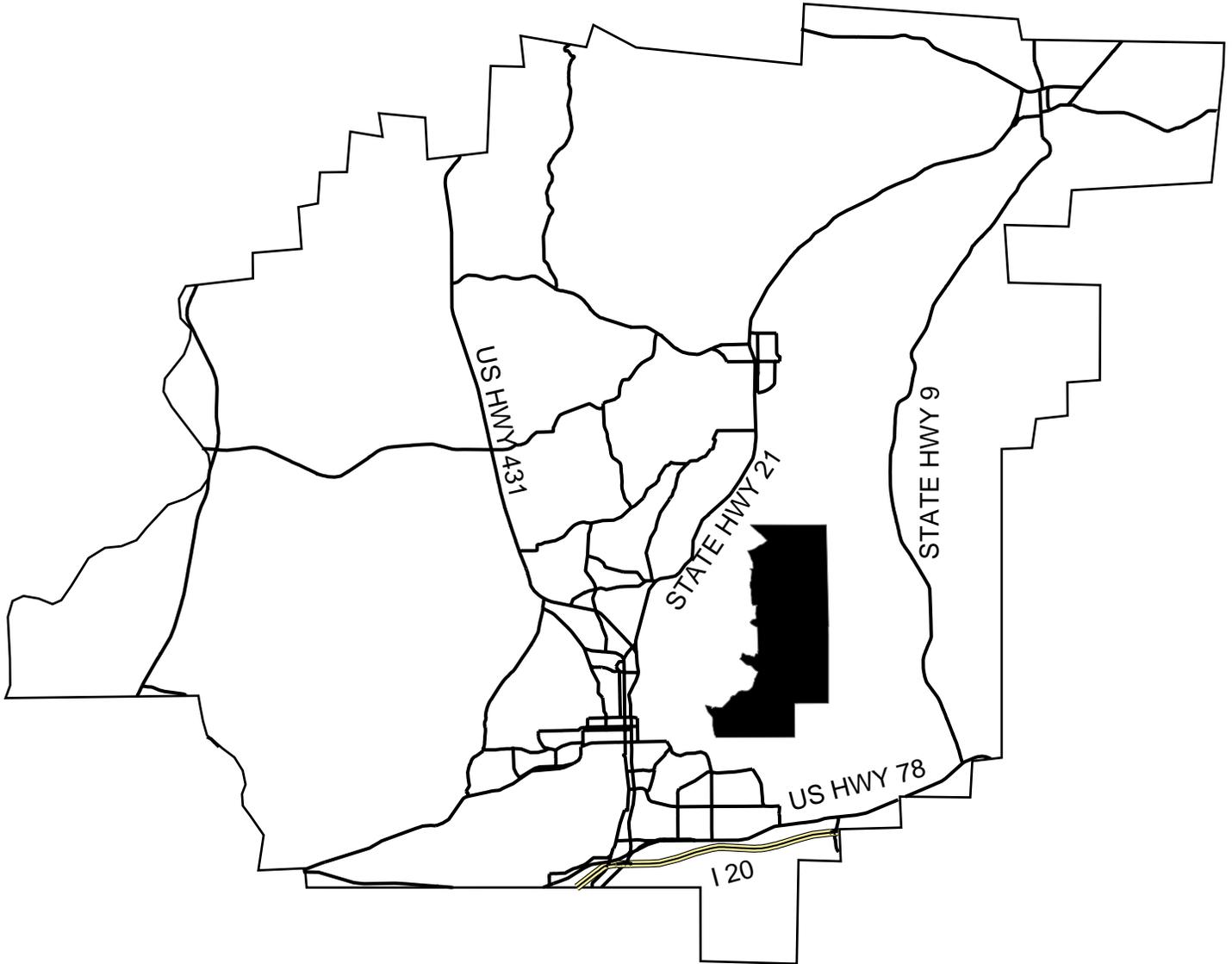
Concurrent with the development of this Public Use Plan, the Refuge is developing a Hunting Plan that will outline the Refuge’s proposed hunting program. The Hunting Plan will provide more complete guidance as to the activities, timing and location of any hunting on the Refuge.

Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge completed compatibility determinations on uses proposed within this document. All uses proposed are deemed compatible with the mission of Mountain Longleaf NWR. These uses, which include hunting, wildlife viewing, photography, interpretation, and environmental education, will be presented in this Draft Public Use Plan to solicit public comments. A list and detailed description of the public uses proposed for the Refuge is provided in this document. Compatibility determinations must be prepared for all uses proposed on a refuge, therefore, any additional public uses identified during the public review of this document or any uses identified in the future will need to have compatibility determinations completed prior to any further action being taken.

The Hunting and Public Use Plans are considered interim planning documents. All refuges are required to develop a Comprehensive Conservation Plan that will describe the desired future conditions of a refuge and provide long-range guidance and management

¹ Providing fishing opportunities was included as a management objective within the legislation establishing Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge and was identified as a compatible public use within the Environmental Assessment prepared for the establishment of the refuge. The two lakes identified in the Environmental Assessment as being appropriate for fishing were not included within the legislated acreage that established the refuge nor are they included within the current acquisition boundaries of the refuge, therefore, fishing is no longer a compatible use on the refuge.

Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge



Legend

-  Roads
-  I 20
-  Refuge
-  Calhoun County



FIG. 2 LOCATION OF THE REFUGE

direction to achieve refuge purposes; help fulfill the National Wildlife Refuge System mission; maintain and, where appropriate, restore the ecological integrity of each refuge and the Refuge System and help meet other mandates. The Hunting and Public Use Plans currently being developed are considered “step-down” management plans of this future Comprehensive Conservation Plan and will be incorporated and amended as necessary as the Refuge develops its Comprehensive Conservation Plan as required within 15 years of establishment.

The Refuge consulted with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources during the drafting of this Plan. Their ideas and suggestions were incorporated into this document prior to this public review. Any proposed changes to the document that result from the public review will also be approved by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources prior to finalizing the Plan.

STATEMENT OF REFUGE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The Bob Stump National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003, P.L. No. 107-314, authorized the transfer, to the administrative jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Interior, approximately 7,759 acres in order to establish the Refuge. P.L. No. 107-314 established that the primary purpose of Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge was to “enhance, manage, and protect the unique mountain longleaf pine ecosystem on the property.” Additional management objectives given in P.L. No. 107-314 are to: 1) conserve and enhance populations of fish, wildlife, and plants in the refuge, including migratory birds and species that are threatened or endangered, with particular emphasis on the protection of the mountain longleaf pine plant ecosystem, 2) protect and enhance the quality of aquatic habitat in the refuge, 3) provide, in coordination with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the public with recreational opportunities, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, 4) provide opportunities for scientific research and education on land use and environmental law.

ASSESSMENT

The term “compatible use” is defined as a wildlife-dependent recreational use or any other use of a refuge that, in the sound professional judgment of the Director, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the System or the purposes of the refuge. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is “to administer a national net-work 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.” No uses will be allowed on the Refuge that are determined to not be compatible with purpose for which the refuge was established or the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PUBLIC USE PROGRAM

Most Refuge management activities (restoration, public use, monitoring and research) will provide an opportunity for public participation and to teach/encourage environmental stewardship. Programs and activities will be developed to create in our visitors:

- Awareness and ecological understanding of the Refuge and adjacent landscape.
- Knowledge of how humans affect the natural system.
- Understanding of the value of mountain longleaf pine habitat for wildlife.
- Recognition of wildlife values in general.

Compatible Public Use

As previously stated, the term “compatible use” is defined as a wildlife-dependent recreational use or any other use of a refuge that, in the sound professional judgment of the Director, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the System or the purposes of the refuge. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System 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.”

The Service has responsibility for the protection and management of fish, wildlife and the habitats upon which they depend. Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge is a special place where the Service will maintain and enhance the mountain longleaf pine ecosystem for wildlife. In fulfilling our resource responsibilities, however, we also will provide the public with opportunities to enjoy and learn about wildlife and opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation so long as they do not materially interfere with our habitat and wildlife conservation activities and do not pose a hazard to the public’s safety.

This section describes uses that we determined to be compatible with the goals of the Refuge and provides guidelines and plans for facilities and activities (see also attached Compatibility Determinations). Specific locations of facilities, except in a few instances, are not yet known. As funding becomes available, facilities will be developed to aid in the management of the Refuge including the support of public use.

Priority Wildlife-Dependent Public Uses

The National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 (PL 105-57) states that there are 6 wildlife dependent public uses that, when determined to be compatible, are to be the priority public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System. These uses are hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Five of these uses have been determined to be compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established. Only 1 (fishing) was determined to be not compatible with the refuge and is explained in a footnote on page 4 and in the attached compatibility determination. Since these 6 uses are the priority public uses of the Refuge System they will be considered first prior to other uses that may be wildlife dependent.

Wildlife Observation and Photography

Wildlife observation generally needs few facilities. Access, observation points, and a minimum number of directional signs will be sufficient. There is an element of pleasure in discovering the environment on one's own; too many signs and labels can detract. All Refuge lands will be open to wildlife observation, unless closed for public safety or wildlife conservation reasons. If any parcels of Refuge land are closed, the Service will notify the public and clearly mark where the closed areas are. The areas of the Refuge that are currently closed to all public uses are shown in Figure 3.

Interpretive programming and special event planning will be designed to help visitors develop their observation skills. This could include bird watching classes, raptor identification, and native plant identification. These programs will be designed to also demonstrate responsible actions toward our natural resources and other users. Currently the Refuge has only 2 staff members. Staff-led interpretive programs will be limited and the Refuge will depend on volunteers and partners to accomplish these tasks.

The Service does not anticipate establishing special blinds for wildlife viewing, but if a need is identified and is compatible, blinds will be considered.

Wildlife photography will be allowed within designated public use areas of the refuge. The Service may issue special use permits to individuals who wish to set up temporary blinds for wildlife photography or to individuals who are professional photographers and wish to use photos taken on the Refuge for commercial purposes. Permit conditions will minimize wildlife and habitat disturbance that might result from this activity and may allow use of professional photographs taken on the Refuge in Refuge exhibits.

Hunting

Hunting provides the public with wildlife-oriented recreation opportunities. Refuge policies and programs will be developed to provide visitors with an high-quality hunting

MOUNTAIN LONGLEAF NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

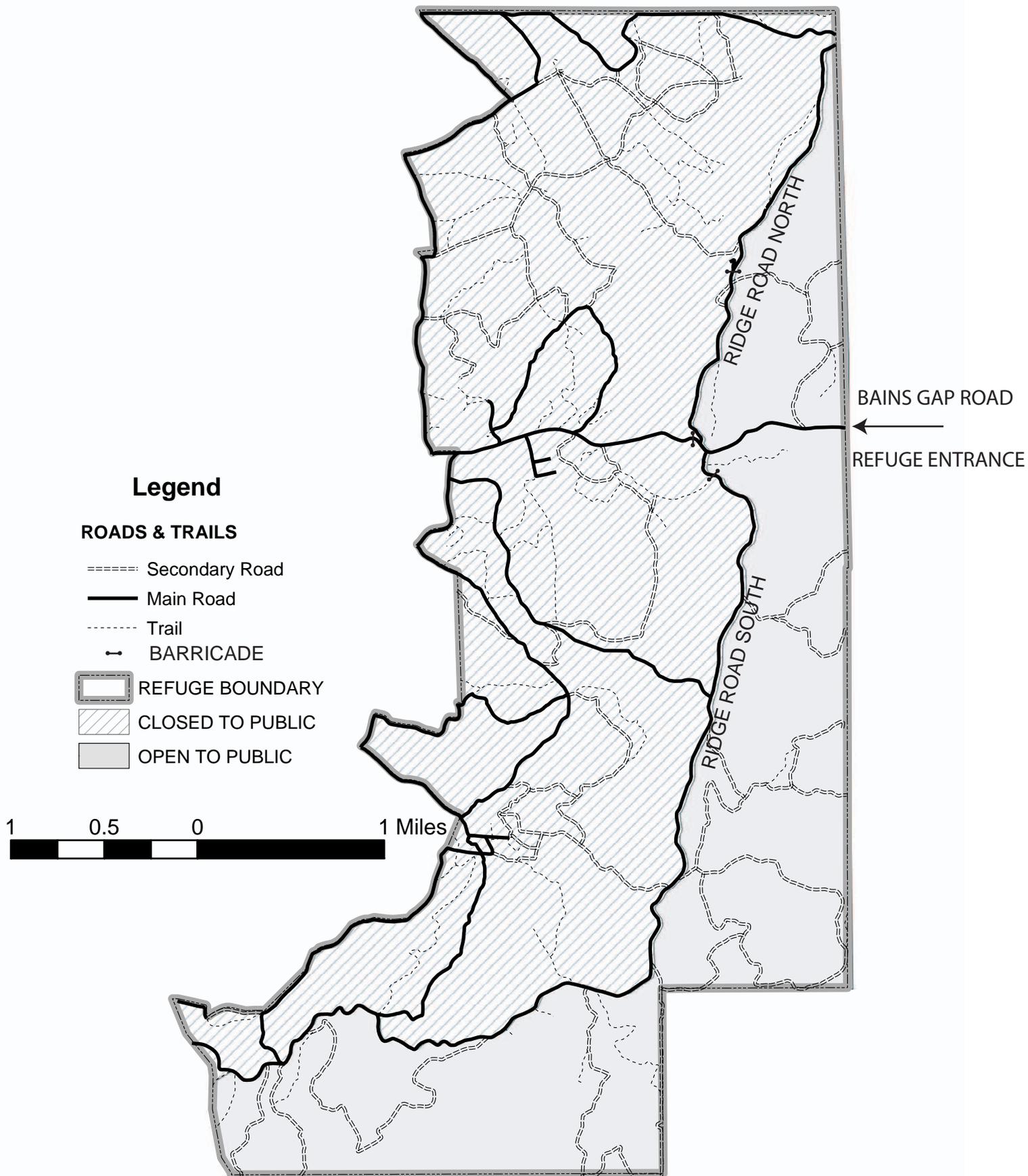


FIG. 3 PUBLIC ACCESS AREAS

experience. Concurrent with the release of this Public Use Plan the Refuge, working with the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, will release a Hunting Plan for public comment. Recreation and environmental education will be joined with hunter skills education programs designed to assist the hunting public in the development of safe and effective hunting skills and environmental stewardship value. Hunters will be required to follow all Federal, State and refuge-specific laws and regulations.

Ground or elevated blinds may be used if they do not damage live vegetation and are completely removed from the property each day at the close of the hunting hours. Ground blinds may not be constructed from vegetation from on the property but must be transported to the site by the hunter.

To ensure the safety of residences and businesses adjacent to the refuge, archery-only weapon areas will be established within those areas of the refuge that are within the Anniston city limits and zoned to preclude discharge of firearms. In addition, safety zones will be established that are consistent with the State of Alabama's Wildlife Management Area regulations. Wildlife Management Area regulations prohibit the discharge of firearms within 150 yards of any dwelling and within 100 yards of any road.

Environmental Education and Interpretation

Everything the Service does in relation to the Refuge (management, restoration, public use, monitoring and research) will be viewed as an opportunity to provide public participation and teach/encourage environmental stewardship. Programs and activities will be developed to create in our visitors:

- Awareness and ecological understanding of the Refuge and adjacent landscape.
- Knowledge of how humans affect the natural system.
- Understanding of the value of habitat for fish and wildlife.
- Recognition of fish and wildlife values in general.

Environmental education and interpretation play a critical role in encouraging environmental stewardship. The future of fish and wildlife is best assured by raising the public's awareness and understanding of wildlife conservation. The Refuge can be a place where visitors can see for themselves the connections between people and wildlife, habitat, and land management. The Refuge can be a place where people learn basic outdoor skills or see first-hand how they can restore and sustain wildlife habitat on their own land. Education and interpretation programs on the Refuge, therefore, must encompass a broad range of needs and outcomes.

To move toward fulfilling this broad range of needs, the Service will seek partners and volunteers to aid the current 2-person staff to fulfill this critical function.

Other Non-priority Uses

Wild Food Gathering

Wild food gathering including the picking of berries and other natural fleshy fruits that are used by humans for sustenance will be allowed.

Bicycling

Bicycling has been determined to be compatible only if conducted on roads open to vehicle traffic. Bicycling on the refuge is meant to be used as a mode of transportation to access sites available to other vehicles.

Activities Determined to Not be Compatible Uses

The following activities have been determined to not be compatible with the purpose for which the refuge was established or insufficient resources are available to make these activities compatible. This determination is documented in the Compatibility Determinations included in Appendix A of this document. Any activities not listed within this document are considered to not be compatible until evaluated in a Compatibility Determination.

Fishing

No fishing will be allowed on the Refuge as there are no permanent bodies of water capable of supporting this use. See footnote on page 5.

Horseback Riding

Horseback riding will not be allowed on the Refuge during this plan period. The steepness of the slopes and the high erosion tendencies of the soils on the refuge make this use impracticable for the current plan period.

MEASURES TAKEN TO AVOID CONFLICTS WITH OTHER MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

People visiting the Refuge will expect:

- Easily understood signs, directions, and rules.
- Wildlife in natural settings.
- Safety and good access.

A clear system of welcome and orientation signs will allow visitors to know where to go, what recreation, interpretation and education opportunities are available, any limits on uses, and how to make the best use of their time while visiting the Refuge.

Visitor orientation will be provided directly on the Refuge and through the use of signs, brochures, flyers, maps, and trail guides to direct visitors. Outlets off the Refuge that would be a source of information may include local media, sporting goods stores, chamber of commerce offices, tourism offices, and the Internet.

The boundary of all lands owned by the Service will be marked with Refuge boundary signs.

HOW PUBLIC USE WILL BE CONDUCTED

Safety

To ensure visitor safety, the Service agreed to several Land Use Controls proposed by the US Army. All restrictions from these Land Use Controls were considered when drafting this document. In addition, the Army will provide safety-briefing materials that contain basic information on site history, UXO hazards, and the appropriate action to be taken if UXO items are encountered. Safety brochures describing and depicting hazards will be available at the Refuge headquarters and information kiosks on the Refuge. The Service will provide maps detailing areas of the Refuge that are closed for safety and resource management.

Entry Access/Procedures

Public entry into the Refuge initially will only be possible through the east gate (Fig. 3) on Bains Gap Road during daylight hours only. Due to ongoing UXO and contaminant remediation on the western portions of the Refuge we will not allow access through those closed areas of the Refuge until clean-up has been completed. Existing gates within the Refuge restrict access to UXO/environmental contaminated lands. The Army will remain responsible for securing, locking and maintaining these gates. As described in the MOA, the FWS will work closely with the Army in controlling visitor access and monitoring Refuge visitors. The Army will be responsible for maintaining Army-erected signage, fencing, gates and barricades necessary to ensure public safety within lands potentially or known to contain UXO/environmental contamination. The FWS will notify the Army of any damage to these safety features in a timely manner.

Law Enforcement

Enforcement of Refuge trespass and other public use violations normally associated with management of a National Wildlife Refuge will be the responsibility of commissioned Refuge Law Enforcement Officers and cooperatively by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and other city and county law enforcement agencies. General trespass, poaching, and other violations will be cooperatively enforced by these agencies. Procedures for obtaining law enforcement assistance will be based on legal jurisdiction where the incident occurs. In the City of Anniston the Anniston Police Department would be contacted if needed, while the Calhoun County Sheriff would be contacted if needed for assistance within the Refuge outside of the city limits.

The FWS will meet with local law enforcement agencies and develop coordinated law enforcement strategies. Strategies that involve restricted access lands within the Refuge will be further coordinated with the Army. Enforcement of safety restrictions related to UXO/environmental contamination remains the responsibility of the Army.

Community Involvement

The success of the Refuge will not only be measured by the ecological restoration and enhancement of the mountain longleaf pine ecosystem, but also by our effectiveness in working with other agencies and individuals to preserve and enhance the biodiversity in Alabama. The local community must view the Refuge as a positive economic benefit to the community and as a good neighbor.

Many public use activities will be done cooperatively with partners and with the use of volunteers. Activities such as outdoor skills education programs, and bird watching clinics and events are examples of public use activities that can be run cooperatively with the help of others.

Many refuges across the country have the privilege of working cooperatively with a non-profit community support group, which can support the Refuge through volunteer hours, outreach, advocacy, and funding. The Service welcomes the opportunity to continue to work with partners and other groups. Whether or not partnerships are formalized, the Service and its partners will continue to work under the principles of trust, respect, and open communications.

The Service, on Refuge lands and those of willing private landowners, will be restoring mountain longleaf pine habitats at the Refuge, recreating wetlands on the landscape, and improving degraded habitats. The Service will work cooperatively with interested individuals and organizations to assist with this work.

The public has skills and interests that complement those within the Service. By assisting Refuge staff to restore and reconstruct natural communities, people can develop new skills and stewardship ethics through positive environmental action. By participating, the

public can enjoy the overall success of the project and feel that they are contributing to the larger good.

The growing interest in ecological restoration and reconstruction within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service represents a significant paradigm shift for the agency. The emphasis on public involvement in the process of ecological restoration also represents a paradigm shift for land management agencies, especially the Service. The public can be involved in restoration activities on the Refuge and the Service will look for opportunities to fulfill this promise.