

# **ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

## **Hunting and Public Use Plans**

**Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge**

**Fort McClellan, Calhoun County, Alabama**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

**December 26, 2003**

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## I. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to adopt interim Public Use and Hunting plans for Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). Proposed uses within these plans have been determined to be appropriate and compatible with the Refuge System and the purpose for which the refuge was established. The Refuge was created (May 2003) on a portion of Fort McClellan, which was closed in 1999 under the Base Realignment and Closure Act (Figure 1). The Refuge is currently closed to the public pending adoption of an interim Public Use Plan and an interim Hunting Plan by the Service.

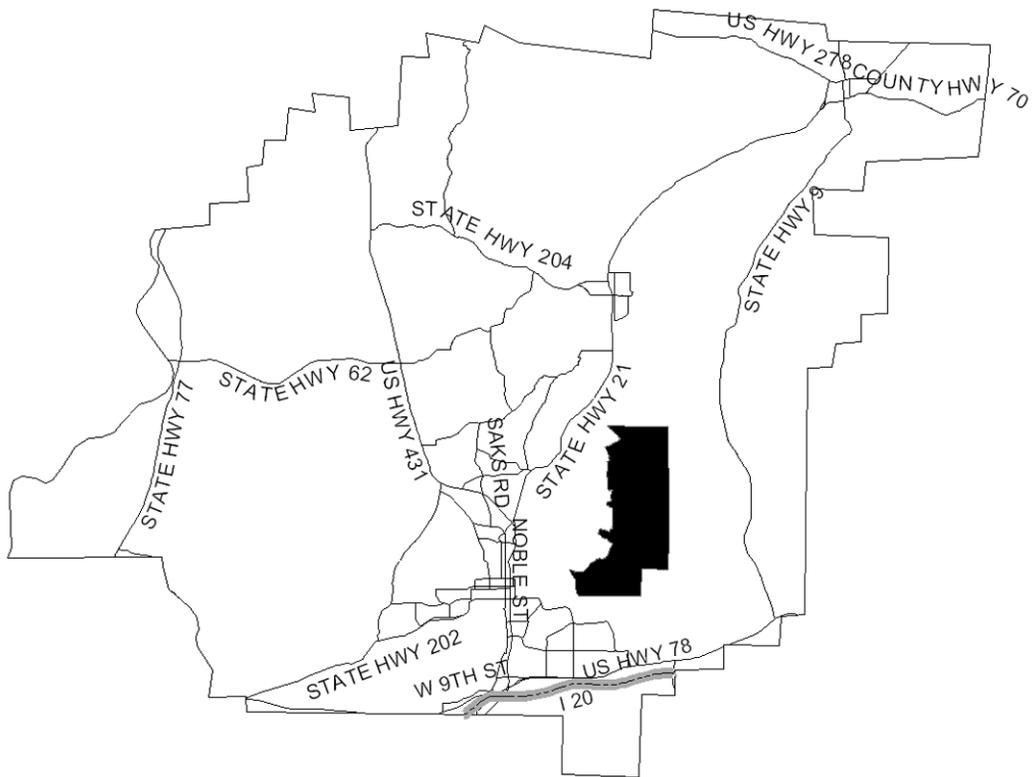
This document considers the proposed interim Public Use Plan and Hunting Plan and two alternatives to adoption of the proposed plans, and analyzes and compares the impacts that each alternative is likely to have on the human environment.

Historical use of Refuge lands for recreation and hunting was limited under Army ownership. While the Army maintained recreational facilities on Fort McClellan, these areas were outside of current Refuge boundaries. Refuge lands were primarily used for military training and firing ranges. Much of the area that now forms the refuge was within the boundaries of firing range safety fans. These areas were closed to both the public and trainers during the use of firing ranges. With eight small arms ranges firing into the face of Choccolocco Mountain, much of the area remained closed most of the time. Hunting was allowed under a controlled and restricted program.

During base closure, the potential hazards of unexploded ordnance (UXO) were identified as a risk to public safety, and the entire area that eventually became the Refuge was closed to both public use and hunting in 1999. The Army initiated a program of sampling and studying the geographical distribution and risk level of UXO/environmental contamination. As of November 2003, Army was able to characterize 3345 acres of the total 9016 acre Refuge as safe for public use (Figure 2). The 3345 acres are considered free of UXO contamination, and are identified by Army and Service as "Public Access" lands that could possibly be opened for public uses "during daylight hours". The proposed interim Public Use and Hunting plans would guide implementation of this possibility.

The proposed interim Public Use and Hunting plans must ensure the public a reasonable degree of protection from the hazards associated with unintentional or illegal access to UXO contaminated study areas. Such areas are designated "No Public Access" or "Potential UXO Areas," but are in close proximity or adjacent to lands under consideration for public access. The Army and the Service share responsibility for access-related public safety. The Army is and will in the future provide safety related pamphlets and brochures for distribution to public users. They have also undertaken a community outreach education program on UXO safety in the local area.

# Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge

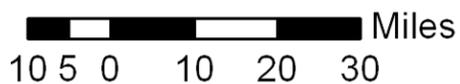


## Alabama Locale

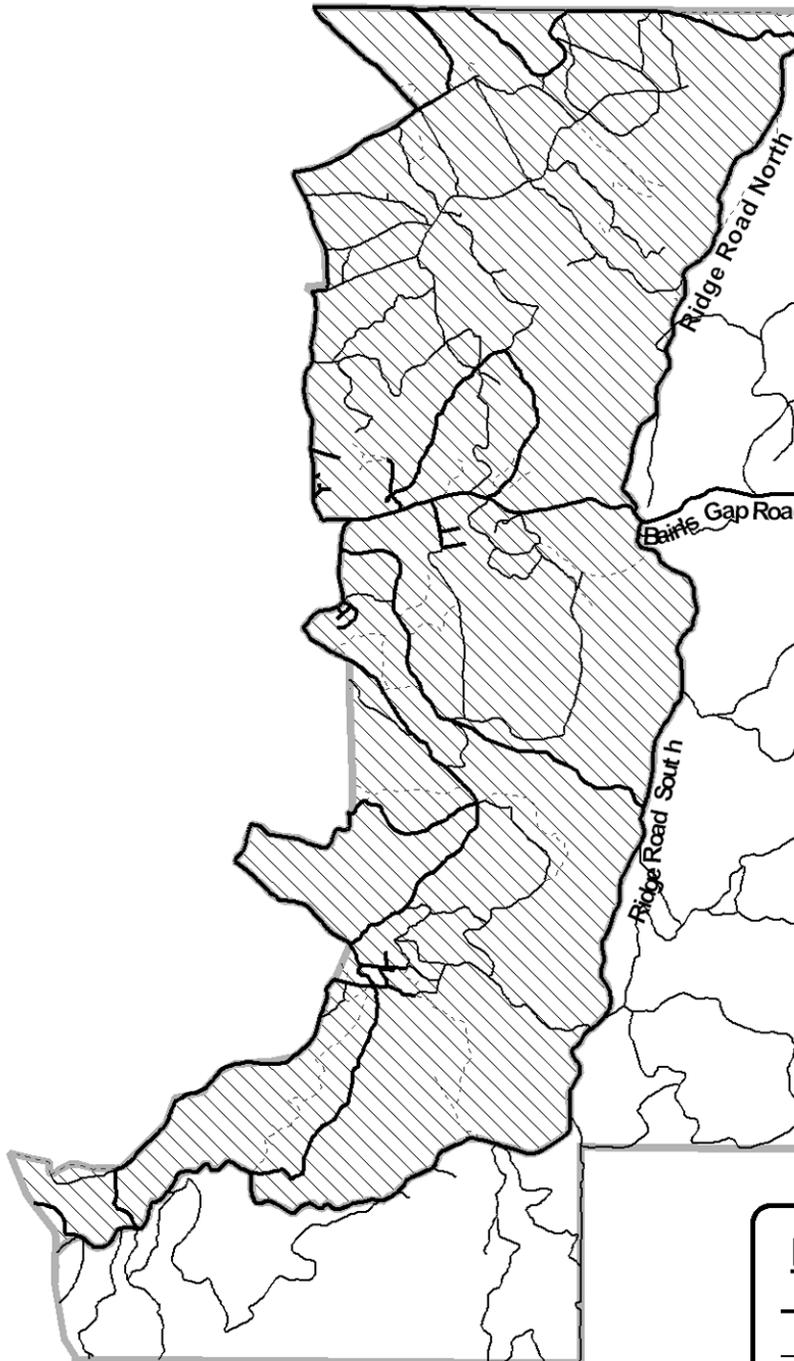


### REFUGE LOCATION

-  I-20
-  ROADS
-  REFUGE
-  CALHOUN COUNTY



# Public Access



←  
**East Gate Entrance**

## REFUGE ROADS

- Main Road
- Secondary Road
- - - Trails
-  Closed
-  Public Access Area



Purposes for which the Refuge was established include (1) preserve and enhance the natural mountain longleaf pine ecosystem in the Fort McClellan Main Post area; (2) help perpetuate the neotropical migratory bird resource; (3) preserve the natural diversity and abundance of flora and fauna, with special emphasis on threatened and endangered species; (4) provide compatible wildlife dependant recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation; and (5) promote an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology. Analysis of alternatives considered the primary purposes of the Refuge along with environmental and social/cultural consequences related to implementing these programs.

Wildlife-dependant recreational uses, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education, are identified as priority uses in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. These potential uses were reviewed and considered for compatibility during development of the proposed interim Public Use and Hunting plans.

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” (National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997). National wildlife refuges provide important habitat for native plants and many species of mammals, birds, fish, insects, amphibians, and reptiles. They also play a vital role in preserving endangered and threatened species. Refuges offer a wide variety of wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities and many have visitor centers, wildlife trails, and environmental education programs. Nationwide, about 30 million visitors annually hunt, fish, observe and photograph wildlife, or participate in educational and interpretive activities on refuges.

The historical background and description of natural and cultural resources on the Refuge can be found in the Final Environmental Assessment (EA) for Proposed Establishment of Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge (USFWS 2003).

## **II. ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION**

The assessment of possible interim public use and hunting options was evaluated through the following three alternatives.

Alternative 1 (No Action - No Public Use or Hunting Programs)

Alternative 2 (Accompanied Public Use and No Hunting)

Alternative 3 (Preferred Alternative – Implementation of proposed interim Public Use Plan and proposed interim Hunting Plans)

### ***A. Alternative 1: No Action – No Public Use and No Hunting***

Under this alternative, the Refuge remains closed to the public and management is limited to the maintenance, management and restoration of the mountain longleaf pine forest communities. Only Service personnel that have been thoroughly briefed on UXO hazards will be permitted access. This alternative represents existing baseline conditions and the continuation of prohibiting public use and hunting opportunities on the area. This alternative represents the most economical alternative for public access during the interim period of UXO/environmental characterization and remediation.

### ***B. Alternative 2: Accompanied Public Access and No Hunting***

Under this alternative, the Service will provide accompanied access to individuals and groups interested in visiting the Refuge. Hunting will not be allowed because hunters could not be directly supervised and controlled during their visits. Anticipated public uses are limited to wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation. All visitors will be accompanied by a Service employee that has been thoroughly briefed on UXO hazards on the Refuge. This alternative represents the second most economical public access option during the UXO/environmental characterization and remediation.

Only 3345 acres of the total 9016 acre Refuge will be open for public use (Figure 2). All access would be along existing paved and gravel roads. Foot traffic will be allowed on dirt roads and trails. No additional facilities or construction will occur for this interim public use proposal. Accompanied visitors will be allowed access off existing roads and trails within the 3345 acre area.

### ***C. Alternative 3: Preferred Alternative – Implementation of proposed interim Public Use and Hunting Plans***

Under the preferred alternative, the Service will allow priority public uses to include hunting, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Fishing opportunities are not available on the Refuge. Only 3345 acres of the total 9016 acre Refuge will be open for public use and hunting (Figure 2). The hunting program will be operated in cooperation with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Access will be along existing paved, gravel and dirt roads. No additional facilities or construction will occur for this interim public use and hunting alternative. Visitors will be allowed access off existing roads and trails within the 3345 acre area. Gates will be closed at dusk and access will be restricted during nighttime hours.

Public use, other than hunting, will be allowed throughout the year. Only Bains Gap Road and Ridge Road will be opened to motorized vehicles. The only direct access into the Refuge will be through the Bains Gap Road East Gate. This gate will be opened at dawn and closed at dusk, limiting public access into the refuge to daylight hours. A security gate across Bains Gap Road west of the gap will restrict travel to the west. The Ridge Road will be open north of Bains Gap to Moorman Hill, while the road will be gated to motorized vehicles just south of Bains Gap. Security gates will restrict access to all roads leading off these two ungated roads. Foot traffic will be allowed on all lands within the public use area (Figure 2). Safety brochures and information on UXO hazard will be available to visitors at the Refuge Headquarters and information kiosks on the Refuge.

Alternative 3 (implementation of public use and hunting plans) was selected as the preferred alternative. Both legislation and comments solicited for the Refuge Establishment EA (USFWS 2003) supported a public use and hunting program on the Refuge. As additional acreage is identified by the Army as safe for public use, future additions to the public use area will be evaluated.

### **III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

This section describes the environment that is affected by the alternatives. A detailed description of the natural, social and cultural environment on the Refuge can be found in the Refuge EA (USFWS 2003). The following sections provide an overview of resources located on the 3345 acre area (Figure 2) that will be open for public use and hunting.

#### **A. General**

The Refuge is located just north of the city of Anniston in Calhoun County, Alabama. Birmingham, Alabama is 65 miles to the west; Atlanta, Georgia is 85 miles to the east; and Chattanooga, Tennessee is 125 miles to the northeast (Figure 1).

#### **B. Vegetation**

The Refuge was established to protect and manage one of the finest remaining examples of mountain longleaf pine forest. This forest type is primarily within restricted areas of the Refuge on the west and south facing slopes of Choccolocco Mountain. The 3345 acre designated public access area (Figure 2) is located along the north south ridge of Choccolocco Mountain. While longleaf pine forms isolated stands or a component of forests in this area, most forests of higher elevation ridges and eastern mountain slopes are dominated by Virginia pine and oak/hickory hardwood forests. In

general, mountain longleaf pine rarely is a conspicuous component of the forest above an elevation of 1800 feet.

### **C. *Wildlife Resources***

The Refuge contains a rich diversity of wildlife and habitat types. Lands designated for potential public use primarily include shallow rocky high elevation soils and steep slopes. While carrying capacity of these lands is somewhat lower than western sections of the Refuge, habitat is available for white-tailed deer, turkey and gray and fox squirrels. Other game species such as morning dove, bobwhite and rabbits are more common in lower elevations on the Refuge that currently are restricted for public use.

Most Refuge areas including designated public use lands are covered by a relatively unfragmented forested landscape. Fort McClellan and now Refuge forests have been identified as important habitat for forest interior and neotropical migratory nesting birds (Soehren 1995; Webb 1996). Studies on Fort McClellan demonstrated that core areas of unfragmented forest support many neotropical nesting birds that are absent from forest edge areas and small forest fragments (Soehren 1995). Forest interior nesting birds recorded in these interior forests included yellow-billed cuckoo, red-eyed vireo, black-and-white warbler, worm-eating warbler, ovenbird, Kentucky warbler, and scarlet tanager. Further studies on the cause for population declines within fragmented landscapes on Fort McClellan used artificial nests to evaluate the type and distribution of nest predation as a possible cause for the decline of forest interior birds (Keyser 1998). This study indicated that nest predation by large predators, those animals more closely associated with forest edge, increased as forest fragment size decreased. Conclusions of previous studies indicate that activities that create forest openings, forest edge or permanently clear timber within unfragmented forest could adversely affect neotropical migratory nesting birds (Soehren 1995; Webb 1996).

### **D. *Endangered Species***

Endangered/threatened species, along with rare biota and ecologically important or sensitive natural communities, were inventoried by the Army on Fort McClellan (Garland 1996). With the decision to close Fort McClellan in 1995, the Army prepared and submitted a Biological Assessment (BA) to the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service on endangered and threatened species listed under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (USCOE 1998). The BA identified area streams as foraging habitat for the endangered gray bat and the historical presence of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) in pine forests within the mountains. Streams within the Refuge however were considered low quality foraging habitat and provide little or no value to foraging gray bats (*Myotis grisescens*). The red-cockaded woodpecker historically was found within refuge forests but has not been recorded on refuge lands since 1968 (Summerour 1992). With restoration efforts and improving habitat, woodpeckers could

be relocated or pioneer to the Refuge from existing clusters in the adjacent Talladega National Forest.

A single Candidate Species, white-fringeless orchid (*Platanthera integrilabia*) has been recorded on Refuge lands. This orchid has been found in spring seepages in the upper reaches of North Branch Cane Creek and Cave Creek. Both areas are outside of public use areas on lands restricted because of potential contamination by unexploded ordnance (UXO). Potential habitat for this orchid includes all perennial seepages on the Refuge. Studies commissioned by the Army, identified 23 potential seepages which are high priority locations for finding the orchid (Whetstone et al. 1998). Generally, most of these seepage areas are found along the mountain base where infiltration waters from precipitation come to the ground surface. Few are located on the mountain ridge or upper slopes that are designated for public use.

Studies undertaken by The Nature Conservancy (ANHP 1994; Garland 1996), recorded 18 animals (mostly caddisflies) and 7 plants that are included on Natural Heritage Program tracking lists. Four additional species, Appalachian cottontail (*Sylvilagus obscurus*), Diane butterfly (*Speyeria diane*), Carlson's caddisfly (*Polycentropus carlsoni*) and Fraser's Loosestrife (*Lysimachia fraseri*) were formerly Candidate 2 species and are now referred to as Species of Concern. With the exception of Appalachian Cottontail, all are associated with springs or seepage areas. The Appalachian cottontail is suspected to inhabit high elevation areas along Choccolocco Mountain with previous studies collecting juvenile animals believed to be this species (Webb 1996b). This northern cottontail is known to inhabit the Talladega Mountains and would be expected to occur on the Refuge.

## **E. Wetlands**

Steep mountain ridges and slopes limit the types and extent of wetlands on the Refuge. Springs and associated seepages comprise the only wetland type that can be found on Refuge lands. Most, but not all, are located along the base of Choccolocco Mountain. While some are seasonal, the larger more significant wetlands are perennial and up to 7 acres in size. They are located at springs and associated seeps along streams flowing from upland areas. Studies commissioned by the Army identified 23 areas on the Refuge that meet the jurisdictional definition of wetlands in the 1987 Army Corps Manual.

## **D. Fishery Resources**

No recreational fishery resources exist on the refuge. All streams within the refuge boundaries are small perennial or ephemeral streams that are unable to support fishing.

## ***E. Socioeconomic and Land Use Conditions***

The general socioeconomic conditions of Anniston, Fort McClellan and Calhoun County are described in the Refuge Establishment EA (USFWS 2003).

## ***F. Hunting***

Early hunting and wildlife management records for Fort McClellan are unavailable. It appears that guidance on wildlife management was first provided by the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service in 1952 followed by the first cooperative management plan with the Alabama Department of Conservation (ADC) in 1964. Dr. Charles W. Summerour of Jacksonville State University prepared the first detailed wildlife management plan in 1967. In 1982, the Army hired a full-time wildlife biologist to manage the program. The Cooperative Plan with ADC first prepared in 1964 was subsequently revised in 1980, 1987, 1991 and 1998. The only significant change to this plan has been the inclusion of Fort McClellan as a participant in Alabama's Deer Management Program (Reisz Engineering and Gene Stout Associates 1998). All hunting on Fort McClellan was discontinued by the Army in 1999 because of safety issues related to potential UXO contamination.

## ***G. Cultural Resources***

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, and Section 14 of the Archaeological Resources Protection Act require the Service to evaluate the effects of any of its actions on cultural resources (historic, architectural and archaeological) that are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The Army contracted an archaeological survey of the entire military installation, including the Refuge lands. Seventeen of the historic properties identified on the Refuge are eligible for the NRHP.

## **IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

This section analyzes and discusses the potential impacts of the three alternatives described in Section II.

Minimal or no adverse effects are anticipated under any of the three alternatives. While the Preferred Alternative (Implementation of proposed interim Public Use and Hunting plans) will increase human activity on the Refuge, none of the proposed activities are ground intrusive or physically disturbing to the local environment. Impacts associated with all alternatives fall within the range of historical impacts. The No Action Alternative, or baseline condition, has only been in place since 1999. The historical and long-term use of the site prior to 1999 was as a firing range and impact fan, with some limited

public access and hunting. Resumption of public use and hunting after a four year hiatus will not set precedent, or create direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to fish and wildlife resources.

There is an increased risk of inadvertent or illegal entry from public use areas into restricted areas under the Preferred Alternative. With unaccompanied access individuals and the Refuge must be monitored and patrolled to a greater extent than under the No Action Alternative and the Accompanied Public Access and No Hunting Alternative. This increased risk, however can be minimized through the use of law enforcement, signage, brochures and outreach programs that will be provided to the public and are outlined in the plans.

Motorized access to the refuge for hunting will use existing paved, gravel and dirt roads. Refuge trails will be limited to foot travel. Motorized access for public use during other times of the year would be limited to paved and gravel roads. Because the majority of the Refuge contains slopes greater than 40 percent, erosion and sedimentation from activities that damage or reduce ground cover are significant environmental issues. Existing roadways and trails will be utilized for Refuge access until detailed analysis is completed and appropriate designs are considered for any future access requirements.

Alternatives A (No Action) and B (Accompanied Public Use and No Hunting) did not provide the optimum uses as directed in the legislative transfer of lands, public comments for the Refuge EA, and concluded through refuge compatibility determinations. The preferred alternative (Implementation of Hunting and Public Use Plans) provides opportunities for both public use and hunting. As the level and extent of UXO contamination is better understood and characterized, the scope of restrictions is expected to be reduced. Eventual remediation of these lands could potentially remove most or all land use restrictions at some future time. During the interim period of UXO/Environmental characterization and remediation, land use restrictions can be expected to guide the extent of public use and access on the Refuge.

## **V. INFORMATION ON PREPARERS**

This document was prepared by Bill Garland, USFWS, Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge, Fort McClellan, Alabama

## **VI. SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION**

As previously described, the Service proposes to implement a controlled program for hunting and public use on the Refuge. Details of these programs are provided in the

proposed "Public Use Plan" and the proposed "Hunting Plan". An analysis of three alternatives related to public use and hunting included:

Alternative A: No Action (No public use or hunting)

Alternative B: Accompanied Public Access and No Hunting (Refuge closed to public and access only allowed when accompanied by employee)

Alternative C: Preferred Alternative (Implementation of Hunting and Public Use Plans)

An analysis of potential environmental and cultural resource impacts from the three alternatives concluded no significant adverse impacts are anticipated under any alternative. Legislation and Refuge compatibility determinations however support the Preferred Alternative (Implementation of Hunting and Public Use Plans). While the Preferred Alternative provides opportunities and programs supported by the Service, the extent of these programs during the interim period of environmental/UXO remediation depends more on safety considerations and the land use restrictions imposed on the Service by the Army. The Preferred Alternative represents the greatest degree of hunting and public use that can currently be provided on the Refuge.

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