

News Release

Department of the Interior / U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge
1428 Highway 27
Bell City LA 70630-9618

For Immediate Release

Management of the Lacassine Pool –Saving a Marsh and the Fish and Wildlife Resources That Use It.

Misinformation surrounding the work being conducted on at the Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge's (NWR) Lacassine Pool (Pool) has spread throughout the community. Contrary to local rumors and news reports, there are no plans for the Refuge to drain the pool or breach any dikes. However, the refuge staff has initiated a short-term tactical restoration program to begin restoring the Pool by repairing the southeast water control structure, refurbishing the southwest dike, maintaining the three spillways at full pool and continuing to prescribe burn on a regular basis. In 2006, the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) plans refurbishing the north spillway. This following explanation should help the public better understand what is actually occurring and how it will benefit both migratory birds and the fisheries resource in the future.

The Pool is referred to by biologists as a closed aquatic ecosystem. This means there are no tidal influences or flushing activities to aid in dispersing the tons of dead plant material which are generated each year within the Pool. It is filled by rainfall. When constructed in the early 1940's the Pool was designed to be managed at approximately 4 feet Mean Sea Level (MSL). It was also recognized that there are deeper areas (lakes) within the Pool that reach 7 feet in depth when the three spillways are set approximately 4 feet MSL.

Over time, dead plant material has accumulated and altered the entire aquatic community. Grasses have thrived and in some areas woody vegetation has begun to grow. If this continues without some form of intervention the pool will gradually fill in and be taken over by undesirable plants.. Without some form of intervention the Pool will continue to fill in, be taken over by undesirable plants, open water areas will disappear and the utilization of the area by migratory birds will significantly diminish. In addition the excellent fisheries resource that has developed through appropriate water management from the early 1940's until 1992 will be lost to future generations that would have enjoyed these magnificent resources. Many local residents have observed these events happening over the years and have voiced their concerns.

In 1992, the refuge manager experimented by raising the water level by approximately 1 to 1.5 feet (we have been using the number 14 inches) to see if the vegetation which was choking out the boat passageways and the open water areas of the pool would be drowned out. It is unclear at this time if the five foot plus level was ever attained for any length of time because of the poor condition that the southwest spillway was in, and because the southeast dike had subsided and was leaking. After several years the refuge staff discovered that the higher water level did not help and actually may have contributed to the problem. Also the elevated water level was putting pressure on the dikes which were not designed to hold water at that higher elevation.

During the summer of 2004 the Lacassine Refuge staff initiated a short term tactical program to begin addressing the future health of the Pool. The first action needed is to improve water management capabilities in the Pool. This action is needed to determine if more aggressive steps need to be taken in the future to benefit fish and wildlife resources. Several months ago the southwest water control structure (spillway), which was severely leaking, was refurbished. The leaking and broken concrete stop-logs were replaced and set at 4 feet MSL. The two remaining spillways were also set at Full Pool (approximately 4ft MSL). This is the level the pool was designed to be managed at and the level that was maintained from the period the structures were operational during the 1940's until 1992. Keep in mind that an excellent fisheries resource prospered during that time.

Despite the past and recent activities, the fisheries resource is still excellent. The only significant fisheries decline that the refuge staff is aware of occurred during the 2000 drought. But, thanks to restocking and many fish finding ways to survive the drought conditions, the Pool is still producing excellent fisheries.

The current management program that the staff of Lacassine Refuge is implementing has been supported by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (who closely manages the fisheries resource in the pool), and 24 other fish and wildlife management professionals. These professionals met at the Refuge and provided recommendations on how to best manage the Lacassine Pool to both fulfill the purposes for which the refuge was established (migratory birds), and sustain a fisheries resource. The Service also considers fishing to be a priority public use that will continue to be enjoyed by the American public at Lacassine NWR.

On a grander scale, a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) is being developed for the Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge which will propose more aggressive actions that will need to be taken over a 15 year period to save the Pool. One such action that will be proposed is to subdivide the Pool into three 5,000 acre units by modifying an existing dike and adding another dike. The units would be interconnected with water control structures for fish and boat passageways and water pumping facilities appropriately placed to better enhance water management capabilities. The completion of this project would ensure that both the migratory birds and the fisheries resource that the public enjoys will be there for future generations. A similar proposal developed in 1990 called for subdividing the Pool into six compartments. The project never moved forward because it was cost prohibitive.

The public will have an opportunity to comment on the future management direction of the refuge through the CCP process. The public review draft should be available during the fall of 2005 for comment. A focus group meeting for area fisherman to learn more about management of the Lacassine NWR and its Pool will be held during May of 2005.

At the date of this article the Pool was about two inches above the southwest spillway which means we are approaching the full pool level that is needed to take the pressure off the southeast dike to allow the Lacassine staff to make the necessary repairs to the dike. It will also set the stage for prescribed burning later in the year.

Diane Borden-Billiot
Refuge Outreach Coordinator
SW Louisiana Refuge Complex

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Contact: Diane Borden-Billiot
337-762-3816 or 912