

Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Southeast Region
Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex
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Information Bulletin



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Contact: Nathan Hawkaluk
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Public Scoping Comments Requested by September 17, 2026:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Major Boundary Expansions for

National Wildlife Refuges in Coastal Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry at the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex and South Carolina Lowcountry Refuges Complex

Responding to changes in the coastal Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry landscape, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS, Service) proposes to expand 10 national wildlife refuges (NWRs) to balance ongoing and increasing pressures by conserving a diverse suite of lands, waters, and habitats with a goal to establish or enhance the network of Federal, state, local, and private connected or complimentary conservation lands in this important coastal area.

The Service proposes to expand 6 NWRs in the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex:

- Blackbeard Island NWR,
- Harris Neck NWR,
- Pinckney Island NWR,
- Savannah NWR,
- Wassaw NWR, and
- Wolf Island NWR.

The Service also proposes to expand 4 NWRs in the South Carolina Lowcountry Refuges Complex:

- Cape Romain NWR,
- Ernest F. Hollings ACE Basin NWR,
- Santee NWR, and
- Waccamaw NWR.

The natural and wild qualities of the South Atlantic region of the United States have been altered, fragmented, and significantly impacted for over 300 years. These impacts have entered a period of acceleration over the most recent decades, resulting in conservation concerns for imperiled wildlife species; the further fragmentation and reduction in connected habitats; the loss of truly wild, natural, and free functioning earth systems; and further loss or reduction of public access and the ability of people to access wild lands. Working with partners to respond to these impacts, the Service proposes to protect habitats in this important landscape, including barrier islands and beaches, salt marsh, maritime forest, forested wetlands, and pine dominated habitats; all are components of an interconnected and resilient ecosystem. The proposed Service acquisition of interest in lands would complement the expansive conservation effort of numerous conservation partners within the coastal Atlantic ecosystem. The goal of the proposed boundary expansions is to increase the Service's ability to conserve resilient and connected coastal lands that provide necessary habitat protection for migratory birds and resident wildlife, as well as support the conservation of rare, threatened, and endangered species. The proposed boundary expansions would also provide opportunities for additional public access to coastal wildlands for outdoor recreation, consistent with the National Wildlife Refuge System policy that wildlife-dependent recreation activities (i.e., hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and wildlife interpretation) shall be considered priority uses.

To help focus our planning efforts, the Service has outlined 4.5 million acres in two conceptual focus areas based on watershed boundaries, urban areas and features, priority areas identified by the states of Georgia and South Carolina, and the Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS) Southeast Conservation Blueprint priority areas based on natural and cultural resource indicators (see the attached figures). To respond to the challenges and in coordination with the partners across this important coastal landscape, the Service:

- Proposes to expand the nearly 60,000-acre Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex between 150,000 and 200,000 acres and
- Proposes to expand the 120,000-acre South Carolina Lowcountry Refuges Complex between 30,000 and 300,000 acres.

The proposal would, for both refuge complexes, define an area along the coast in both states that would allow for the limited acquisition of additional NWR properties. A limited acquisition boundary (also known as an approved limited acquisition boundary) is a defined area within which we are authorized to acquire a specified, limited amount of acreage within a larger area. If approved, the proposed major boundary expansions would enable the Service to work with willing landowners to explore voluntary conservation actions, including fee title sale, that would further conserve the diverse and rich coastal habitats that provide habitat for wildlife, fish, and plants, as well as public access for wildlife-dependent recreation. An effort of this scale requires a vast network of partners. The Service's collaborative conservation ethos could leverage partnerships from the non-profit sector, academia, Federal and state governments, Native American Tribes, and private sector.

The Service's policy is to work with willing sellers. Being included within the proposed boundary expansion area would not affect how owners use their property or to whom they may choose to sell their property. There is no guarantee or commitment from the Service that properties included within the boundaries of the proposal would be purchased in the future. Future purchases would be dependent on willing sellers, available funding, and/or changes in land use that make a parcel non-compatible with a conservation mission.

The Service highly values public engagement and comments. All interested parties will have opportunities to review the conservation goals of the proposed boundary expansions with opportunities to provide early comments at the scoping phase (now) prior to development of the proposal and subsequently during public review and comment on the proposed land conservation plans (LCPs). During this scoping period, the Service is seeking to collect information from interested organizations and individuals to learn more about the potential issues and opportunities related to the proposed boundary expansions. To ensure consideration of your comments, concerns, and ideas in the development of our proposal, we request the submission of your

comments by September 17, 2026. We request that comments be submitted in writing to either of the addresses listed with the subject line “Proposed NWR Expansions in GA and SC.”

- By Email to:
 - Dorothy_Wells@fws.gov
- By Mail to:
 - Nathan Hawkaluk, Project Leader, Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex, 694 Beech Hill Lane, Hardeeville, SC 29927

For more information on the proposed expansions, please visit any of the websites of any of the NWRs involved, as listed. (Note: The websites link to the same information.)

Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex:

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/blackbeard-island>

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/harris-neck>

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/pinckney-island>

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/savannah>

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/wassaw>

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/wolf-island>

South Carolina Lowcountry Complex:

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/cape-romain>

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/ernest-f-hollings-ace-basin>

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/santee>

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/waccamaw>

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



