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Information Bulletin



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PLANNING UPDATE

for Proposed Boundary Expansions at National Wildlife Refuges in Coastal Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry at the

Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex and South Carolina Lowcountry Refuges Complex

In response to questions received to date during public scoping, the Service developed this Planning Update.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is working with the partners to address the future of the coastal Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry landscape. The proposal supports numerous conservation partners' goals in this important landscape, supporting:

a more **functional, connected landscape with public access and enjoyment** of wild lands.

Public scoping occurs **early in the planning process** to gather public input on the proposed concept to aid the Service in the design of the proposal and the development of draft documents. Based on public scoping comments and later this year, the Service anticipates requesting **public review and comment** on the draft documents that will provide more details about the proposal.

Highlights of the Proposal

- **Hunting and other permitted recreational uses would continue** on existing public recreational areas, including state Wildlife Management Areas under jurisdictions of the states. The Service is not seeking to manage those existing public conservation areas; the Service is seeking to add lands to the existing conservation network in this important landscape.
- The proposal would **not affect state navigable waters**; fishing and boating would continue on those waters under state regulations.
- 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. The boundary expansion simply allows the Service to acquire lands that meet our conservation priorities through purchase from willing sellers or donations.
- If finalized, the proposal would **conserve about 10%** of the outlined Conceptual Focus Areas, aligning with Georgia and South Carolina goals, both State Wildlife Action Plans, and the Southeast Conservation Blueprint. Implementation of the **proposed expansions could take many decades**.
- The Service's policy is to work with **willing sellers**.

For More Information

Clink each question below for more information.

Why is the Service proposing these boundary expansions?

What are the states saying?

What are the Conceptual Focus Areas and what do these boundaries mean?

Would the Service be seeking to acquire existing conservation lands?

How would private landowners' rights be affected? How would this proposal enable the Service to work with willing landowners?

What is the land ownership pattern in this landscape?

What about public access? Would the proposal close areas currently open to public access, including hunting and fishing? Conversely, would the proposal open new areas to public access, including hunting and fishing?

How would the proposal improve the quality of waterfowl hunting (e.g., how would it address crowded waterfowl hunting conditions)?

Would newly acquired properties be managed (e.g., timber harvesting and prescribed burning)?

What is the planning process?

How do I submit comments?

Why is the Service proposing these boundary expansions?

We have all seen changes to the landscape.

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.

Recently

- In the 2025 State of the State address, South Carolina Governor McMaster outlined **South Carolina's land conservation goal**: "South Carolina's future prosperity requires us to enhance our efforts to respect and protect our land, our history and our culture and our environment."
- Also in 2025, the **Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies** requested that the US Fish and Wildlife Service "...continue to pursue opportunities to expand refuge boundaries, where appropriate, through fee simple acquisition or easement."
- Engaging over 2,600 people across over 680 organizations, the Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy and **2025 Conservation Blueprint** articulated a multi-agency and multi-entity shared goal of **≥10% improvement** in the health, function, and connectivity of Southeastern ecosystems by 2026.
- In 2026, **South Carolina enacted Act 190**, recognizing the conservation of natural resources as an important state interest and establishing a statewide protected land benchmark to **protect an additional 3.6 million acres by 2050** for a total of 7 million acres of protected land in South Carolina.
- Secretarial Order 3447 and Director's Order 233 direct agencies and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to **improve public access** and expand recreational opportunities, prioritizing hunting and fishing.

What is the USFWS proposing?

- **Building on this momentum** as one of the many conservation partners in this important landscape, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing **boundary expansions for 10 national wildlife refuges** (NWRs) in coastal Georgia and the South Carolina Lowcountry on ~10% of the Conceptual Focus Areas (~6% of the 12 counties).
- The proposed NWR expansions aim to balance ongoing and increasing anthropogenic pressures by conserving a diverse suite of lands, waters, and habitats
 - to **enhance the existing network** of Federal, state, local, and private connected or complimentary conservation lands in coastal Georgia and the South Carolina Lowcountry and
 - to provide additional opportunities for **public access and enjoyment** of wild lands.
- The proposal is being designed to serve **shared conservation goals and objectives** outlined in various planning efforts, including the Georgia and South Carolina State Wildlife Action Plans (<https://georgiawildlife.com/WildGeorgiaSWAP> and <https://www.dnr.sc.gov/swap/index.html>) and the Southeast Conservation Blueprint (<https://secassoutheast.org/blueprint/>).
- The changes to this landscape did not occur overnight.
 - Implementation of the **proposed expansions could take many decades**.
 - This planning process **simply sets the stage** for the Service to work with the **partners and willing sellers** to enhance the conservation network in this important landscape.

What are the states saying?

The Service has worked closely with the states of Georgia and South Carolina in the development of this proposal, including the State Wildlife Action Plans (<https://georgiawildlife.com/WildGeorgiaSWAP> and <https://www.dnr.sc.gov/swap/index.html>).

Georgia

“The Georgia Department of Natural Resources’ Wildlife Resources Division and Coastal Resources Division support the USFWS effort to expand the National Wildlife Refuge System in coastal Georgia. Expanding protected lands will enhance quality of life for coastal residents while improving the long-term conservation and resilience of priority habitats and Species of Greatest Conservation Need. ... Expanding public access to these resources aligns with DNR’s mission and will ensure future generations continue to enjoy these opportunities.”

South Carolina

“The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources supports the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) proposal to expand the acquisition boundary for several National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) in South Carolina. The expansion of the NWR acquisition boundaries will provide the ability for the USFWS to respond to willing landowners and acquire properties that will increase habitat connectivity and public access for hunting and fishing. Consideration of additional lands for conservation by the USFWS in the NWR system is imperative during a time when South Carolina fish and wildlife are facing numerous pressures from habitat loss and degradation to changing weather patterns causing drought, flash floods and rising tides.”

What are the Conceptual Focus Areas and what do these boundaries mean?

The Conceptual Focus Areas (see figures at the bottom) are simply a concept. They are general areas on the map to help the Service understand where to start looking for suitable lands to enhance the existing conservation network in this important landscape. They do not create authority under this proposal for the Service to restrict private property use or access, including hunting, fishing, and boating. Within these areas, if the proposal were to be finalized, and based on willing sellers and available funding, the Service would evaluate properties based on the land acquisition priority criteria to be outlined in the draft documents. The Service would be seeking properties with willing sellers and with conservation values to add to the existing network of conservation lands.

Would the Service be seeking to acquire existing conservation lands?

In general, no. While the Service would not be seeking to acquire existing conservation lands protected in perpetuity (e.g., state or local government owned properties such as wildlife management areas), there could be specific circumstances where the Service might purchase existing publicly-owned conservation properties (e.g., we might purchase or accept a donation for a city or county-owned property where we could improve management capacity for the city or county, or we might purchase a property that has an existing conservation easement on it to enhance future management options, including the opportunity to provide public access). The Service would be seeking properties with key conservation values to add to the existing network of conservation areas in this important landscape. The Service would not be seeking to acquire developed areas (e.g., cities and towns).

How would private landowners' rights be affected? How would this proposal enable the Service to work with willing landowners?

The **rights of a private landowner would not be affected** by the approval of the proposed expansions.

The Service's policy is to **work with willing sellers**.

If you don't want to sell

- 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.
- If the proposal were to be approved, landowners within any approved boundary would be under **no obligation to sell** or otherwise participate in it.
- Approval of the proposed expansions would not impose any new regulations on property within its boundary unless the Service acquired a particular property.

If you might want to sell

- 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. From a landowner's perspective, the only difference would be that the Service would have the option to acquire land if it has important conservation value and **if the landowner is willing** to sell or donate its interests. It would provide landowners within any final expansion boundary another potential buyer if they chose to sell their property.
- Implementation of the **proposed expansions could take many decades**.
- If a property were to be included in any final approved boundary, that landowner could, at their complete discretion, approach the Service about potential Service acquisition of the property. The Service could also approach landowners within any final approved boundary. Any Service acquisition would be dependent upon available funding, land acquisition priorities, and the seller's final acceptance of our fair market offer. As with any purchase of property, the landowner and the Service would negotiate; either party could withdraw from the process at any time during the negotiation.
- Again, the **Service's policy is to work with willing sellers**.

What is the land ownership pattern in this landscape?

Based on land ownership data compiled by the U.S. Geological Survey, in 2024, within the 12 counties:

- **87.2% private property** ownership and
- 1.4% Service ownership (U.S. Geological Survey 2024).

If the proposal were to be finalized and if 500,000 acres were to be acquired in the future, within the 12 counties:

- **81.3% private property** ownership and
- 7.3% Service ownership/management.

What about public access? Would the proposal close areas currently open to public access, including hunting and fishing? Conversely, would the proposal open new areas to public access, including hunting and fishing?

- If the proposal were to be finalized, it would convey **no authority to the Service** to impose restrictions on or closures to hunting, fishing, and boating on private properties, state wildlife management areas, or state navigable waters (e.g., Lake Marion).
- If the proposal were to be finalized, it would allow the Service to acquire property with conservation values from willing sellers. It would allow the Service to evaluate any newly acquired properties for **opportunities for public access and enjoyment** of wildlife-dependent recreation, likely resulting in the opening of newly acquired properties, including to hunting and fishing. The 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act articulated the priority public uses for national wildlife refuges: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.
- The Service has a **longstanding tradition of providing public access** to and enjoyment of wild lands, including the listed priority public uses of refuges.
 - **Hunting**
 - **Fishing**
 - **Wildlife Observation and Photography**
 - **Environmental Education and Interpretation**

How would the proposal improve the quality of waterfowl hunting (e.g., how would it address crowded waterfowl hunting conditions)?

If the proposal were to be finalized, the Service would work with the public to understand and address waterfowl hunting concerns for any newly acquired properties. For current concerns with crowded hunting conditions on state or private properties, please consult with the Georgia and South Carolina Departments of Natural Resources since those areas are under their authorities.

Would newly acquired properties be managed (e.g., timber harvesting and prescribed burning)?

Yes. If the proposal were to be finalized, depending on the resources and conservation values of any newly acquired properties, the Service would work under the existing refuge management plans, including Comprehensive Conservation Plans, Habitat Management Plans, Fire Management Plans, and Inventory and Monitoring Plans, as well as the Conceptual Management Plans (to be outlined in the draft documents for this proposal to be available later this year for public review and comment).

What is the planning process?

Public Scoping on the Concept - Now

- Public scoping occurs **early in the planning process** to gather public input on the concept of expanding the 10 NWRs in coastal Georgia and the South Carolina Lowcountry.
- The Service is committed to working with the public. While we are required to engage the public under various laws and policies, including the National Environmental Policy Act, we want to work with the public, which is why we have engaged the public early in this planning process. The **public has intimate knowledge** of this important coastal Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry landscape and has experienced and witnessed the changes in this landscape over time. The public can provide specific information to aid our understanding and analysis, including specific areas, habitats, species, and public access and recreation opportunities. Public scoping input gained at this early stage of the planning process can help us **design a better proposal** that addresses a wide variety of concerns to complement other conservation goals and objectives.
- The Service will **review all comments received** during public scoping to aid in the development of the draft documents.

Public Review and Comment on Draft Documents – Later this Year

- Once we have gathered public scoping input, we will develop draft documents that provide details about the proposed action. We will then request public review and comment on those draft documents.
- Those draft documents will provide detailed information about the why, where, and how of the proposal. Those draft documents will also clearly show the Service's **commitment to public access and enjoyment** of wild lands for any proposed future acquisitions.
- The Service will **review all comments received** during public review and comment in the development of any final documents and decision.

Development of Final Documents and Decision – Early 2027

- Following review of the comments received during public review and comment, the Service will decide whether or not to move forward to final documents. If the Service does move forward with final documents, comments received during public review and comment may result in changes to the proposed action. If the Service does not move forward with final documents, we would notify the public at that time.
- If the Service does move forward with final documents and a decision, we would notify the public of the availability of final documents and the Service's decision at that time.

Implementation - Future

- While it may take many decades and based on available funding, conservation values, and land acquisition priorities, the Service would work with willing sellers and conservation partners to connect conservation lands in this important landscape and provide additional opportunities for public access and enjoyment of wild lands.

How do I submit comments?

The Service is committed to working with the public. While we are required to engage the public under various laws and policies, including the National Environmental Policy Act, we want to work with the public, which is why we have engaged the public early in this planning process. The public has intimate knowledge of this important coastal Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry landscape and has experienced and witnessed the changes in this landscape over time. The public can provide specific information to aid our understanding and analysis, including specific areas, habitats, species, and public access and recreation opportunities. Public scoping input gained at this early stage of the planning process can help us design a better proposal that addresses a wide variety of concerns to compliment other conservation goals and objectives. We need your input.

To ensure consideration of your comments in the development of the draft proposal, we need your comments by 9.17.2026. 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

Reference:

U.S. Geological Survey. 2024. Gap Analysis Project. Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 4.1: U.S. Geological Survey data release, <https://doi.org/10.5066/P96WBCHS>.
<https://www.usgs.gov/programs/gap-analysis-project/science/pad-us-data-download>.

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.



