

MOUNTAIN LONGLEAF NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

HUNTING 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.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	HP-3
Background	HP-3
Contaminants	HP-3
CONFORMANCE WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITY	HP-5
Scope and Rationale.....	HP-5
Legal Mandates.....	HP-5
Relationship to Other Plans and Documents	HP-6
STATEMENT OF REFUGE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES.....	HP-7
ASSESSMENT	HP-7
DESCRIPTION OF HUNTING PROGRAM	HP-8
Hunting as a Compatible Public Use	HP-9
Hunting as a Priority Public Use.....	HP-9
Hunting Regulations	HP-9
Regulations Pertaining to all National Wildlife Refuge System Lands.....	HP-9
Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge Specific Regulations.....	HP-10
MEASURES TAKEN TO AVOID CONFLICTS WITH OTHER MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES.....	HP-11
CONDUCT OF THE HUNT	HP-13
Hunting Orientation and Safety	HP-13
Entry Access/Procedures	HP-13
Law Enforcement.....	HP-14
Community Support.....	HP-14

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1 Location of Refuge	HP-4
Fig. 2 Closed Area Signs	HP-5
Fig. 3 Refuge Signs.....	HP-11
Fig. 4 Hunting Areas.....	HP-12

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 (Fig. 1). P.L. No. 107-314 established that the primary purpose of Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) was to “enhance, manage, and protect the unique mountain longleaf pine ecosystem on the property.” The majority of the lands at Ft. McClellan were hunted prior to the establishment of the Refuge. 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.

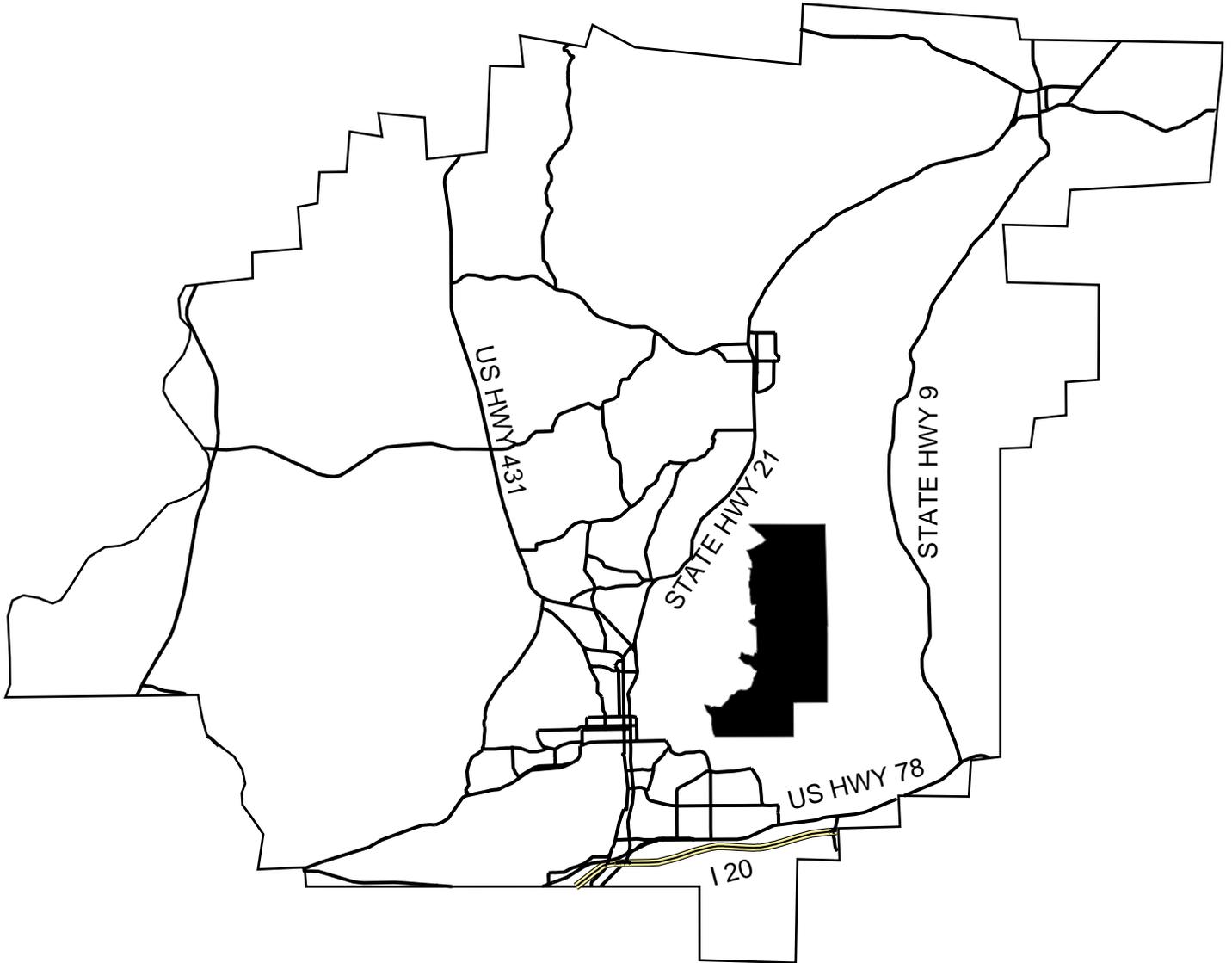
Contaminants

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 these previously contaminated areas.

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 (Fig. 2). 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.

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. The remaining 6,000 acres that contain UXO and other contaminants will be opened under the uses described in this Hunting Plan once a reasonable assurance of public safety can be made.

Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge



Legend

 Roads

 I 20

 Refuge

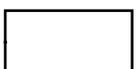
 Calhoun County



FIG. 1 LOCATION OF THE REFUGE



Fig. 2 Closed Area Signs

CONFORMANCE WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITY

Scope and Rationale

The Refuge and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have developed this Hunting Plan (Plan) to guide hunting 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 an instrument that guides future decisions on hunting at the Refuge. A cooperative agreement will be pursued with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to implement this Plan.

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 the Refuge. P.L. No. 107-314 established that the primary purpose of the 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 1,257 acres to the Department of the Interior. This transfer increased the size of the Refuge to 9,016 acres and provided additional acreage for habitat restoration, wildlife management activities and public use.

Relationship to Other Plans and Documents

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

The Refuge completed compatibility determinations on uses proposed within this document. All uses proposed are deemed to be compatible with the mission of Mountain Longleaf NWR. These uses, which include big game, upland game, and migratory bird hunting will be presented in this Draft Hunting Plan to solicit public comments. A list and detailed description of the hunting opportunities proposed for the Refuge is provided in this document.

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 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. These plans will be incorporated and amended as necessary when the Refuge develops its Comprehensive Conservation Plan as required within 15 years of establishment.

The Refuge developed this plan in coordination with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Their ideas and suggestions were incorporated into this document prior to this public review. A cooperative agreement will be pursued with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to implement this Plan. Any proposed changes to the document that result from the public review will also be coordinated with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources prior to finalizing the Plan.

Upon completion and adoption of the Final Hunting Plan, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will publish in the Federal Register a Proposed Rule to allow hunting on the Refuge. Following the comment period on the Proposed Rule, a determination will be made whether to go forward with opening the Refuge to hunting as outlined in the proposed hunting plan and a subsequent Final Rule will be published outlining the final decision on hunting at Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge.

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

Populations of game animals are not currently monitored within the refuge so population estimates are not known. Species proposed to be hunted within this plan were previously hunted during Army management. Suitable habitat exists on the Refuge to support populations of all species proposed to be hunted. Population of these species should not be negatively affected by hunting. As habitat conditions improve and/or additional areas are remediated of contaminants on the refuge, hunting of additional species may be allowed following public comment and review of the proposed expansion in the Federal Register. A portion of species harvested may be examined and data recorded by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources at check-in stations to

monitor trends in health and as a population index. In addition to providing recreational opportunities, hunting will provide useful population data from retrieved harvest information.

DESCRIPTION OF HUNTING PROGRAM

Most Refuge management activities (restoration, public use, hunting, 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.

Hunting on the Refuge will occur through a cooperative partnership with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The hunting program will mirror to the greatest degree possible the season dates and weapons type used currently on Alabama Wildlife Management Areas. The permit required to hunt on the refuge will be the permit issued annually by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Hunters should refer to the permit for specific regulations regarding hunting on the Refuge.

Hunting on Refuge lands will be allowed for big game, upland game and migratory game bird species. Hunting dates will be set annually through meetings with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Hunters will be required to follow all State and Federal laws and regulations and all Refuge specific regulations.

Hunting on the refuge is currently limited by Army Land Use Controls agreed to by the Service when the Refuge was established. Once clean-up of contaminants and unexploded ordnance by the US Army is complete, these land use controls may be modified.

Hunting is further limited due to a portion of the Refuge being within the limits of the City of Anniston. We will work with the City of Anniston to alleviate concerns regarding hunting with firearms within the city limits and hopefully change the zoning of that portion of the refuge to allow hunting with firearms. The Refuge is proposing safety measures that provide for public safety while allowing hunting to occur within areas near development. These safety measures are discussed within this document and within the Compatibility Determination for Hunting in Appendix A.

Hunting as a 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 hunting opportunities 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 all forms of public use including hunting.

Hunting as a Priority Public Use

The National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 (PL 105-57) (NWRIA) states that hunting is one of 6 wildlife-dependent public uses that, when determined to be compatible, is to be a priority public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Hunting provides the public with wildlife-oriented recreation opportunities and has been determined to be compatible with the purposes for which this Refuge was established.

Hunting Regulations

Regulations Pertaining to all National Wildlife Refuge System Lands

There are regulations regarding hunting on all National Wildlife Refuges which can be found in 50 CFR 32.2. The following list contains an overview of these regulations but is not a complete list or exact text of each regulation. Each hunter should familiarize themselves with the regulations as they are published in the Code of Federal Regulations.

1. Each person will secure and possess the required State licenses.
2. Each person will comply with the applicable provisions of the laws and regulations of the State where they are hunting.
3. Each person will comply with the terms and conditions of access on a refuge.
4. Each person must comply with any refuge specific regulations.
5. It is prohibited to use any drug on any arrow.
6. Baiting or hunting over a baited site is prohibited.
7. The use of nails, wire, screws or bolts to attach a stand to a tree or hunting from a tree in which a metal object has been driven to support a hunter is prohibited.
8. It is unlawful to use or possess alcoholic beverages while hunting.

Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge Specific Regulations

Refuge specific regulations have been proposed to further ensure the safety of visitors and habitats of the Refuge. These refuge specific regulations once published may be found in 50 CFR 32.20 and will include:

Migratory Game Birds

A. Hunting of Migratory Game Birds. We allow hunting of woodcock on designated areas of the refuge in accordance with State regulations subject to the following conditions:

1. You must possess and carry a signed hunt permit when hunting.

Upland Game Hunting

B. Upland Game Hunting. We allow hunting of quail, squirrel, rabbit, groundhog, raccoon, opossum, beaver and fox on designated areas of the refuge in accordance with State regulations subject to the following conditions:

1. You must possess and carry a signed hunt permit when hunting.
2. We allow hunting during daylight hours only.
3. We prohibit the use of dogs to hunt or pursue raccoon, opossum or fox.

Big Game Hunting

C. Big Game Hunting. We allow the hunting of white-tailed deer, bobcat, coyote, feral hog and turkey on designated areas of the refuge in accordance with State regulations and subject to the following conditions:

1. You must possess and carry a signed hunt permit when hunting.
2. We prohibit damaging trees or hunting from a tree that contains and inserted metal object. Hunters must removed stands from trees after each day's hunt.
3. You may not use dogs to hunt or pursue big game.

MEASURES TAKEN TO AVOID CONFLICTS WITH OTHER MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

In order to avoid conflicts with other management and public use activities, the Refuge has proposed a series of Refuge-specific regulations. Initially, hunting will be limited to the area east and south of Ridge Road (Fig. 4) on the eastern and southern slopes of Choccolocco Mountain. Approximately 6,000 acres of the Refuge are 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 these previously contaminated areas.

Access to public use areas will be from Ridge Road which is accessible by two-wheel drive vehicle during most of the year but four-wheel drive vehicles are recommended due to the steep terrain.

Hunting permits and related information will be issued by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources each fall for the current hunting season. This information will be available at the Refuge Office, District II Wildlife Section Office and various licensing agents throughout the Calhoun County area. Hunting permits will contain maps of hunting area locations and rules and regulations. Each hunter must sign the hunting permit prior to hunting to show that they have read and understand the rules and regulations.

The boundary of all lands owned by the Service will be marked with Refuge boundary signs (Fig. 3). All areas permanently off-limits to hunting will be clearly marked with No Hunting or Closed Area Signs. A safety buffer of 150 yards will be established on lands the Service owns adjacent to other developed areas for visitor and neighborhood safety.



Fig. 3 Refuge Signs

MOUNTAIN LONGLEAF NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

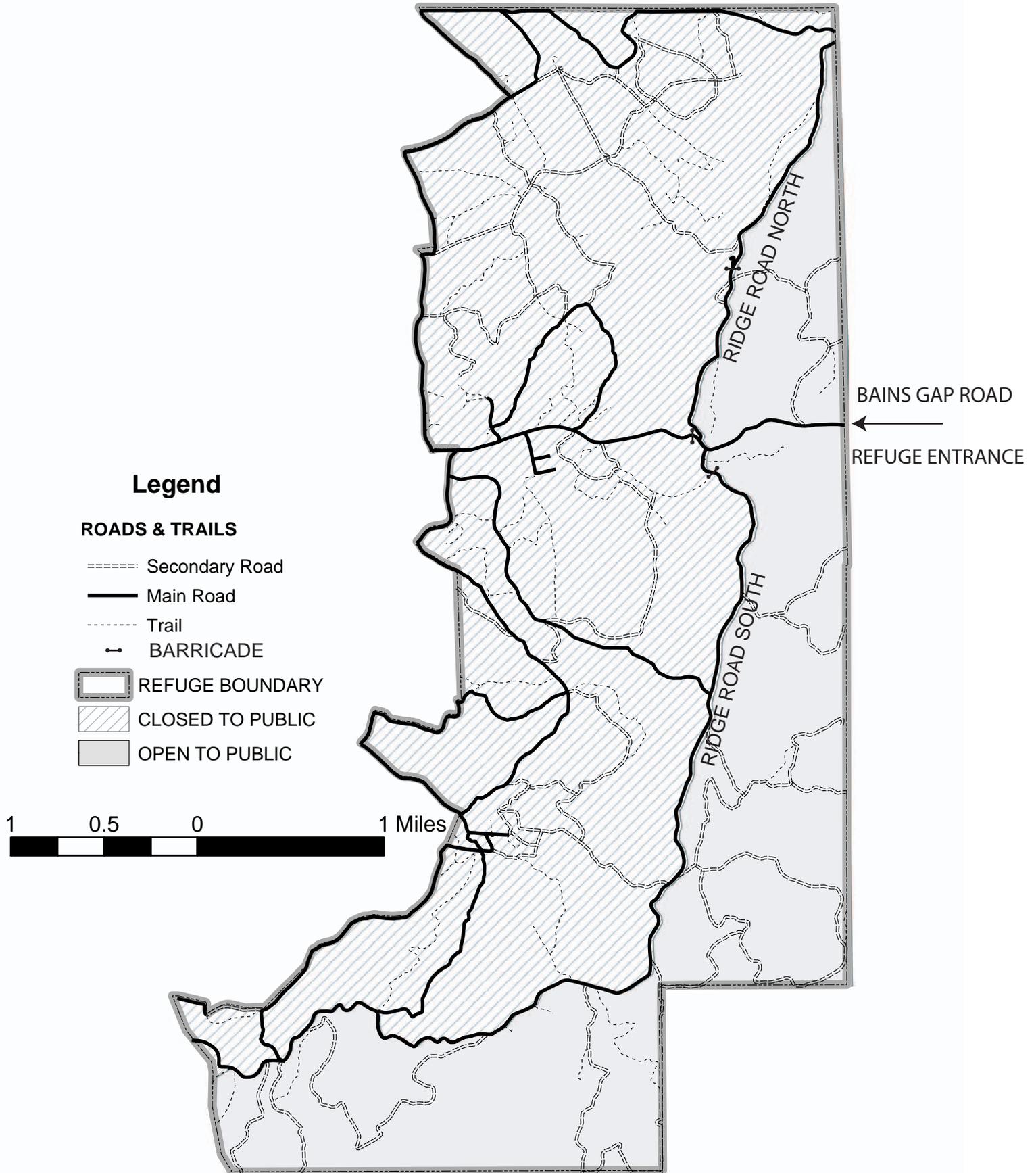


FIG. 4 PUBLIC ACCESS AREAS

CONDUCT OF THE HUNT

Hunting Orientation and Safety

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.

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

To ensure visitor safety, 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. 4) on Bains Gap Road. 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/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 all Army signage, fencing, gates and barricades necessary to ensure public safety within lands that have the potential or are known to contain UXO/environmental contamination. Hunters should report any damaged or missing gates, barricades and/or signs to Refuge personnel. Refuge personnel 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. For assistance on the Refuge within the City of Anniston, the Anniston Police Department will be contacted as needed, while the Calhoun County Sheriff would be contacted 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 Support

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 and public use on the Refuge. The local community must view the Refuge as a positive economic benefit to the community and as a good neighbor.

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.