

DRAFT
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Moorman Mountain Boardwalk Trail



Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge
Fort McClellan, Calhoun County, Alabama
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Purpose and Need for Action -----	4
II. Alternatives Including The Proposed Action-----	8
III. Affected Environment-----	11
IV. Environmental Consequences-----	12
V. Information on Preparers-----	12
VI. Summary of Proposed Action-----	13

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Mountain Longleaf NWR Location-----	5
Figure 2 – Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge-----	6
Figure 3 – Moorman Mountain Topography-----	7
Figure 4 – Moorman Mountain Vista View-----	9
Figure 5 – Proposed Boardwalk and Viewing Platform-----	10

I. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

A. Introduction

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 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, 7,759 acres in order to establish Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). On October 23, 2003, the Calhoun County Joint Powers Authority (JPA) transferred an additional 1,257 acres to the Department of the Interior to increase refuge acreage to 9,016 acres. The location of the refuge in Calhoun County is provided in Figure 1. A more detailed public access map can be found in Figure 2.

B. Background

Choccolocco Mountain forms a 2000 foot high mountain barrier stretching over 30 miles north-south across Calhoun County. The two highest peaks along the 30-mile mountain ridge are Morton Mountain (2063 ft asl) and Moorman Mountain (2030 ft asl). Both peaks are located within the refuge. Morton Mountain is about two miles south of Bain’s Gap Road, while Moorman Mountain is one mile north of the road (Figure 3). Ridge Road North extends north from Bain’s Gap Road along the mountain ridge and passes through higher sections of Moorman Mountain.

The vista is located along a small rock outcrop just east of Ridge Road North (Figure 3). During army ownership, the vista point served as a rendezvous for graduating training classes to celebrate and paint their unit’s insignia on the rock outcroppings. Since closure of the fort in 1998, the rocks have weathered and most paint has disappeared into history.

Since public opening of the refuge in 2004, the vista has become a popular destination for refuge visitors. A small roadway leads off the main road behind the rock outcrop. Visitors park their vehicles along this side road and walk a short distance onto the rock ledge. Panoramic views

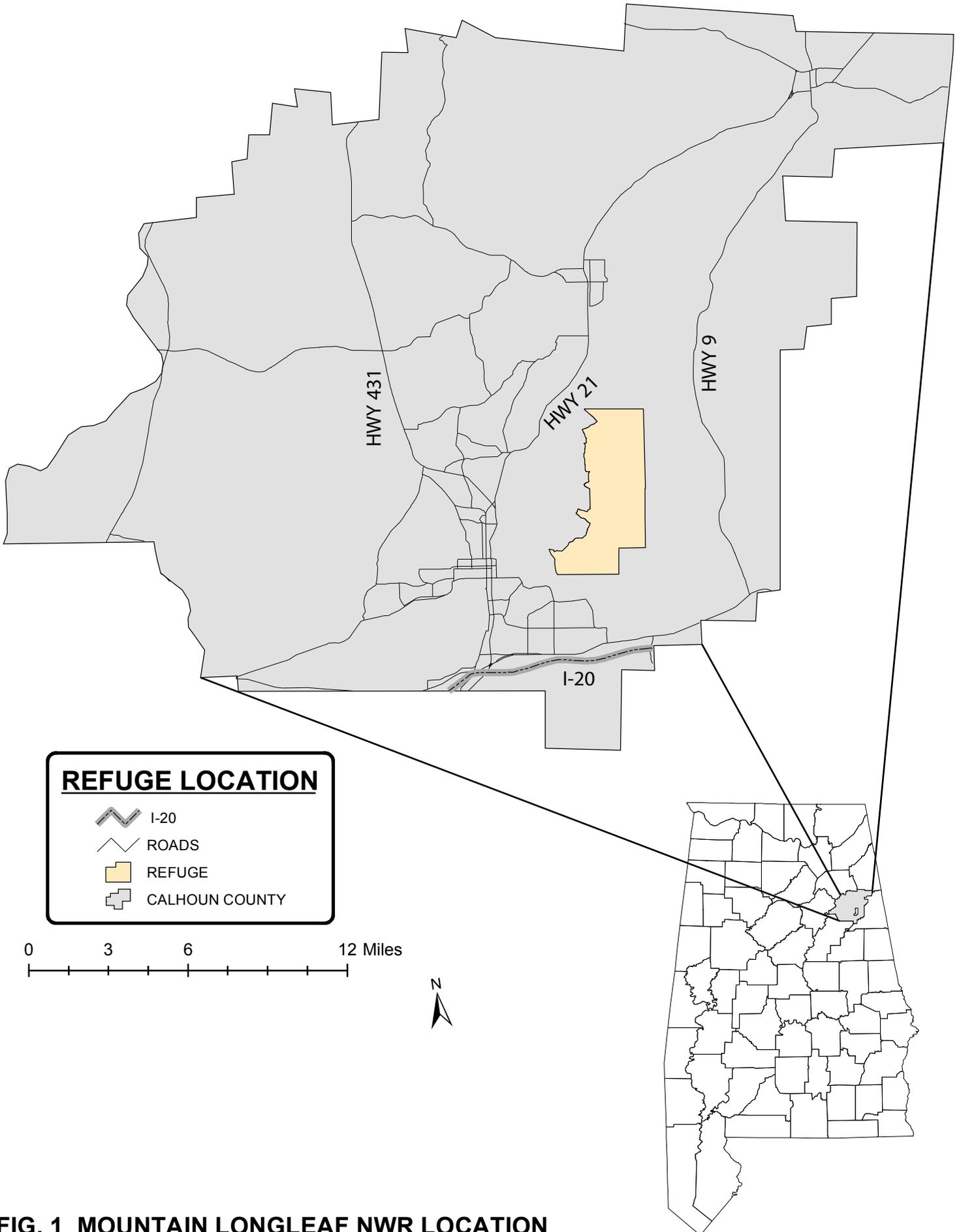


FIG. 1 MOUNTAIN LONGLEAF NWR LOCATION

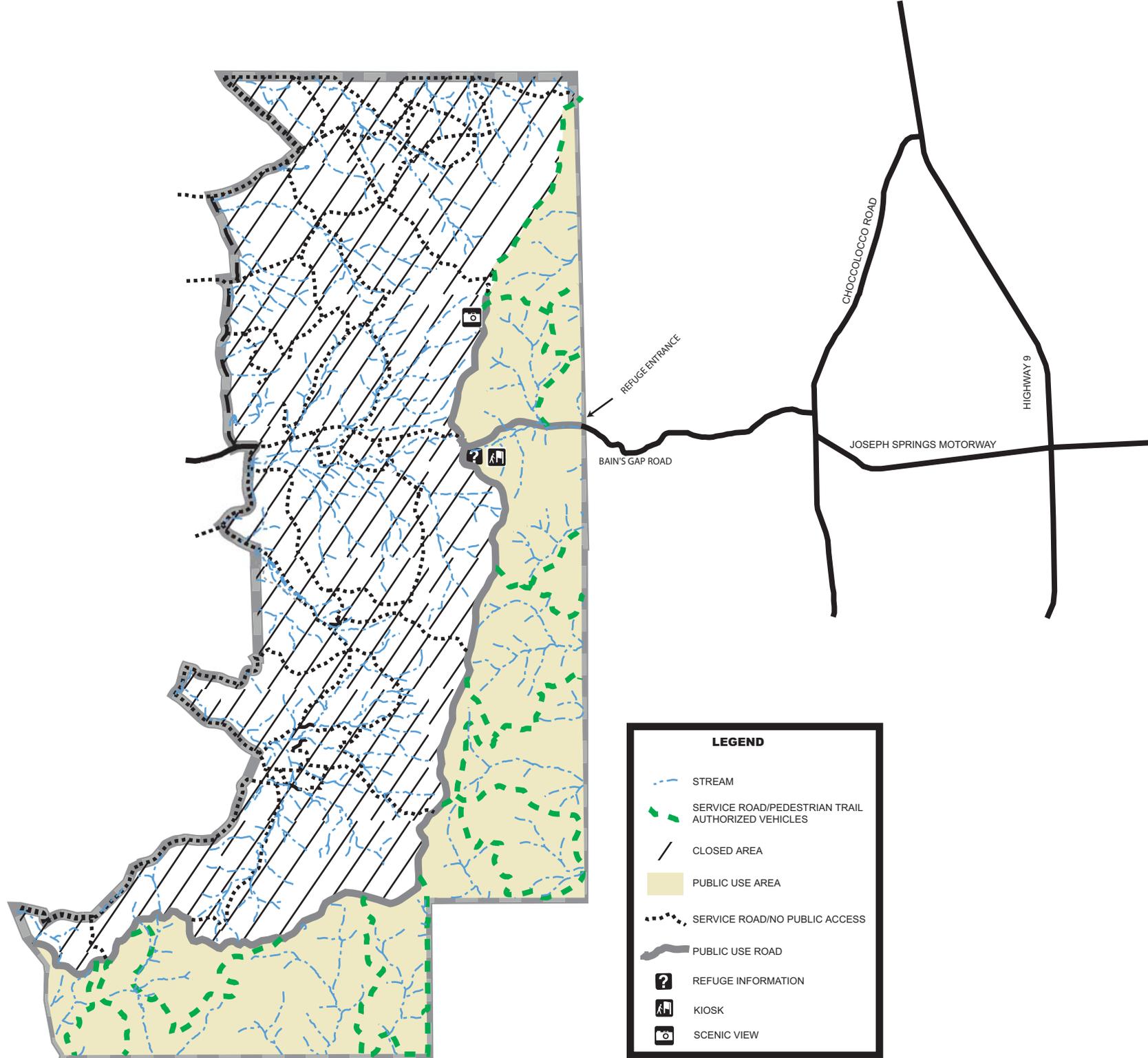
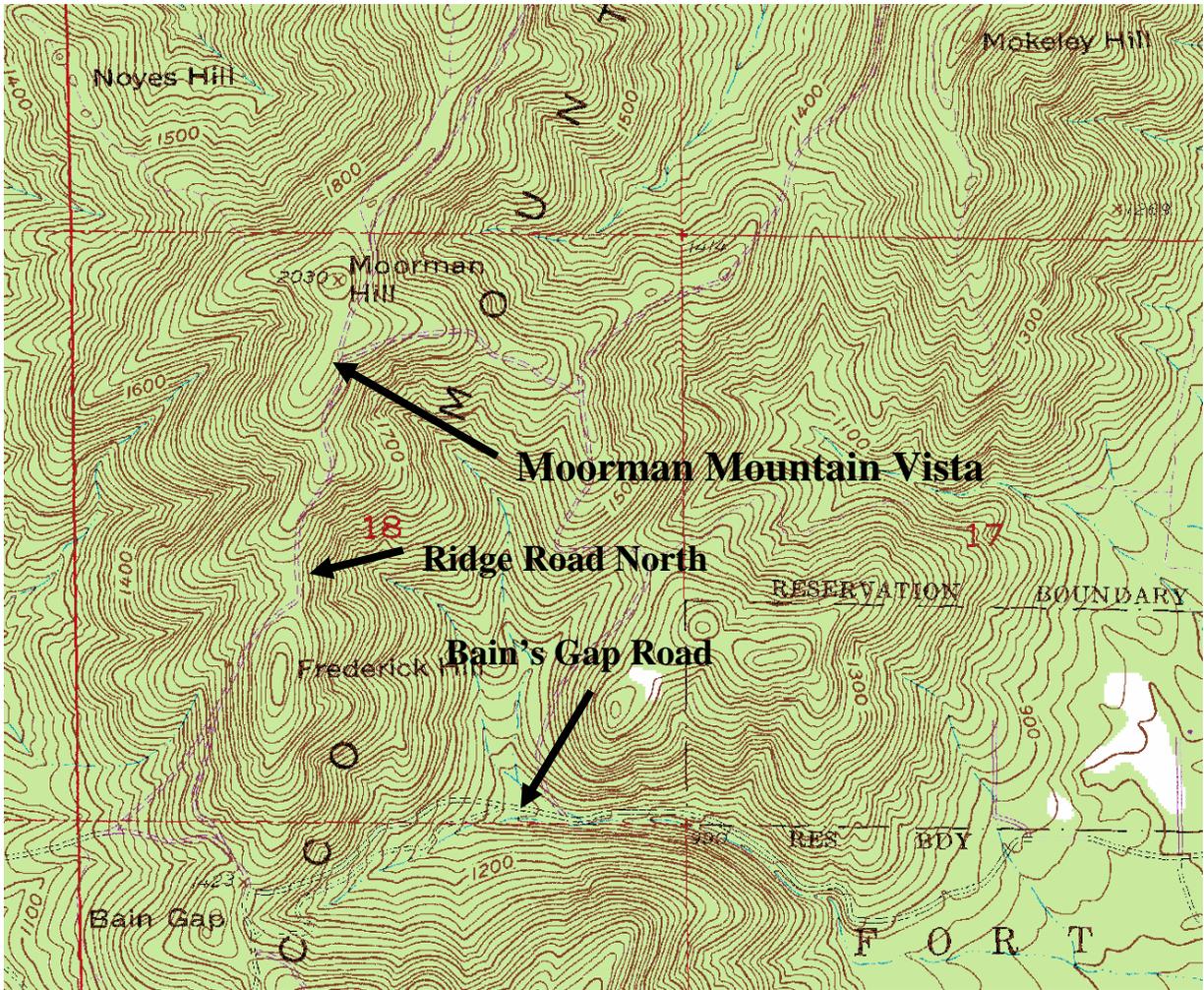


Figure 3
Moorman Mountain Topography



across the Choccolocco Valley into the nearby Talladega Mountains attract increasing numbers of visitors (Figure 4). The side road behind the vista was graveled in 2004 to provide better parking for visitors. Signage has also been erected along refuge roads directing visitors to the vista point. Additionally, the refuge web site and brochures provide map directions to the vista and photographs of the view.

While the parking lot has been graveled to improve vehicle parking, there have been no facility improvements to the trail and the rock overlook. Increased visitation is progressively degrading soils along the trail. Improvements were considered necessary to prevent further impacts to the local environment, and provide a better quality experience for refuge visitors.

II. ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

An assessment for improving and opening Bain's Gap Road to vehicle through traffic was evaluated through three design alternatives:

Alternative 1 (No Action – No Improvement)

Alternative 2 (Preferred Alternative-Boardwalk, Viewing Platform and Gravel Trail)

Alternative 3 (Viewing Platform and Gravel Trail)

A. Alternative 1: No Action – No Improvement

Moorman Vista would continue to be used without any facility improvements. Visitors would walk up a steep four foot slope adjacent to the parking lot, and then meander through and around a number of rocks to reach the exposed rock ledge. Total distance from the parking lot to the rock outcropping is 120 feet. Soils along the trail and on the slopes would continue to be degraded through increasing visitation. Steep drop-offs on the rock ledge constitute a safety hazard. The trail would not be accessible to the disabled.

B. Alternative 2: Preferred Alternative – Boardwalk, Viewing Platform and Gravel Trail

The Preferred Alternative involves constructing both a boardwalk (200 feet) and viewing platform with access for the disabled, along with a gravel trail (120 feet) for those interested in a shorter and more direct walking route (Figure 5). The boardwalk would meet the intent and goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The railing along the boardwalk would extend out onto the viewing platform and provide a safety barrier along the step rock drop-off. The local environment would be stabilized and protected from further degradation due to increased visitation.

C. Alternative 3: Viewing Platform and Gravel Trail

The third alternative involves constructing the more direct gravel trail (120 feet) and the elevated viewing platform with safety guardrails (Figure 5). The boardwalk providing access to the viewing platform for the disabled would not be constructed, and the visitor facility would not

Figure 4

Moorman Mountain Vista View



meet the intent of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The local environment, however, would be protected from further degradation from increased visitation.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. General.

The Refuge is located north of the City of Anniston in Calhoun County, Alabama (Figure 1). 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. Bain's Gap Road bisects the refuge west-east with 2.4 miles of paved road surface within refuge boundaries (Figure 2).

B. Endangered Species.

With the decision to close Fort McClellan in 1993, the U.S. Army prepared and submitted a Biological Assessment (BA) to the USFWS 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 (*Myotis grisecens*) and the historical presence of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) in pine forests within the mountains. Streams within the refuge portion of Fort McClellan however were classified as low quality foraging habitat and provide little or no value to foraging gray bats. The red-cockaded woodpecker historically was found within refuge forests, but has not been recorded on refuge lands since 1968. With restoration efforts and improving habitat, woodpeckers could be reintroduced or pioneer to the refuge from existing clusters in the adjacent Talladega National Forest at some future time.

A single candidate species, white-fringeless orchid (*Platanthera integrilabia*), has been recorded on the refuge. This orchid is found in spring seepages within the Marcheta Mountain Seepage and along the upper reaches Cave Creek. The Marcheta Mountain Seepage contains one of the largest remaining populations of white-fringeless orchid in the Southeast.

C. Cultural Resources.

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, and Section 14 of the Archeological Resources Protection Act require the USFWS to evaluate the effects of any of its actions on cultural resources (historic, architectural and archeological) that are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The U.S. Army contracted to have the entire military installation, to include refuge lands, surveyed for cultural resources. The results of these surveys were submitted to the State of Alabama's Historic Preservation Office and are available through that agency.

Seventeen cultural resource sites were identified on the refuge as possessing the necessary attributes to make them eligible for inclusion on the NRHP (U.S. Army 2003). There are no sites on or in the immediate vicinity of Moorman Mountain Vista.

D. Wetlands.

Steep mountain ridges and slopes limit the types and extent of wetlands on the refuge. Springs and associated seepages comprise most wetlands. No wetlands are located on or in the immediate vicinity of Moorman Mountain Vista.

E. Significant Biological Areas.

The refuge Habitat Management Plan (HMP) maps and identifies outstanding biological features on the refuge. Five ecologically significant communities on the refuge were termed “Significant Biological Areas (SBA)”. Only Moorman Mountain Rock Ledges SBA is located in the vicinity of Moorman Mountain Vista. These rock ledges are located 500 feet northeast of the project area along the north side of Moorman Mountain. The undisturbed high elevation rock faces shelter populations of ground juniper at scattered sites along the linear ridge. This population represents the only documented record from Alabama, and the southern range extension for this more northern plant. Careful inspection of rock faces within and adjacent the proposed boardwalk failed to identify the presence of this plant.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 firmly established that wildlife conservation takes priority on national wildlife refuges. It established a framework for ensuring refuge uses are compatible with the mission of “conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats”. The Ecological Integrity Provision of the Act further requires refuges to “ensure that the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of the System are maintained”.

The three design alternatives for providing public access to Moorman Mountain Vista (Section II) were evaluated according to the biological and cultural environment at the project area (Section III). Only Alternative 1 (No Action) is expected to result in adverse effects to the local environment. The No Action Alternative fails to remedy or mitigate ongoing impacts to site soils and vegetation from increased visitation. This condition is expected to worsen as visitation increases and the local environment continues to degrade. Both Alternative 2 (Preferred) and Alternative 3 will result in no adverse effects to the local environment, and will mitigate and remedy ongoing effects from increased visitation. Alternative 3, however, does not provide access for the disabled, and fails to meet the intent and goals of the American with Disabilities Act.

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 USFWS proposes to improve public access to Moorman Mountain Vista. The preferred alternative (Alternative 2) provides maximum benefits for improving accessibility and safety, while the mitigating environmental effects of increased visitation. The preferred alternative also provides access for the disabled, and meets the intent of the Americans with Disabilities Act. An analysis of three alternatives included:

Alternative 1: No Action – No Improvement

Alternative 2: Preferred Alternative-Boardwalk, Viewing Platform and Gravel Trail

Alternative 3: Viewing Platform and Gravel Trail

An analysis of potential environmental and cultural resource impacts concludes that with the described mitigative measures significant adverse impacts are not anticipated through implementation of the Preferred Alternative- Alternative 2. The following mitigative measures are included as part of the preferred alternative:

- a. Boardwalk design will minimize the number of trees that must be removed for construction;
- b. Signage will direct visitors to remain on trails and boardwalk to reduce impacts on adjacent soils and vegetation;
- c. Construction of the boardwalk will minimize disturbances to the shallow mountain soils;
- g. Construction activity will avoid periods of heavy precipitation or heavy surface water runoff.