



- Provide greater opportunities for public wildlife-dependent recreation in western Tennessee;
- Provide an economic boost to local businesses which cater to refuge visitors;
- Protect cultural and historical resources.

Why is the Service having another round of public meetings for the draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment?

During the first comment period in 2013, the Service heard concerns about the potential economic impact of refuge expansions and questions about fee title purchases versus conservation easements.

We also heard from supporters of the proposal and a number of individuals who were interested in selling their property. Although the first public meeting was very well attended, and we received follow-up letters and written comments from more than a dozen individuals and organizations, the Service felt that extending the opportunity to comment on the draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment would increase public participation and further our goal of transparency. Ultimately, we hope that your participation will help us make it a better proposal.

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Proposed Expansion for Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region, has been working with partners for nearly 50 years to save and restore wildlife habitat on bottomlands along the Mississippi and Hatchie Rivers in western Tennessee. These lands, which make up the Chickasaw, Hatchie, and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges, provide high quality habitat for waterfowl, deer, turkey, and many nongame species, as well as places where the public can go to hunt, fish, and observe wildlife.



Introduction

Now, as part of our continuing effort to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people, the Service is proposing to expand the acquisition boundaries of Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges. This would:

- Enhance our ability to provide habitat for migratory birds, fisheries, resident game and nongame animals, and rare, threatened, and endangered species
- Protect habitat corridors along major wildlife travel routes,
- Improve natural patterns of wildlife movement,
- Increase the size and health of wildlife populations, and
- Increase opportunities for public, wildlife-dependent recreation.

The Service is working with partners, including the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, Tennessee Department of Agriculture, numerous non-governmental conservation organizations (NGOs), and private landowners to protect and enhance fish and wildlife habitats to ultimately connect Hatchie, Lower Hatchie, and Chickasaw NWRs with John Tully Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Cold Creek WMA, Fort Pillow State Park, and John Tully State Forest.

This expansion, if approved, would allow the Service to negotiate conservation easements with willing landowners or buy lands, only from willing sellers, within an expanded area totalling 120,078 acres and stretching from Hatchie NWR on the east to Lower Hatchie NWR on the southwest, and north to Chickasaw NWR.

Goals

The goals of this proposal are:

- Protect and enhance the natural function of the un-leveed bottomlands along the Hatchie and Mississippi Rivers in western Tennessee to provide high quality wildlife habitat, clean water, and public wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities;
- Improve aquatic habitats important for game fish as well as aquatic species of conservation concern;
- Protect and restore unfragmented bottomland hardwood forest as part of a region-wide effort to rebuild the bottomlands of the Lower Mississippi Valley;
- Enhance and restore biological diversity, watershed health, and ecosystem function at landscape scale;
- Assist in meeting the goals set forth in approved national, regional, and refuge conservation plans.



conserve and manage migratory bird populations, fisheries and aquatic resources, endangered and threatened species, and other inter-jurisdictional trust resources and species.

■ Management and protection of these areas would create landscape level connectivity and an essential wildlife corridor reaching into the habitats of John Tully Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Cold Creek WMA, and Fort Pillow State Park. The contiguous wildlife habitat corridor would continue along the Hatchie River floodplain to connect Lower Hatchie NWR to Hatchie NWR while protecting an additional 71.3 river miles of the Hatchie River. This landscape connectivity will improve natural patterns of wildlife movement and help restore the hydrological functions of these watersheds.

■ The Service's Lower Mississippi River Ecosystem Team supports the creation of this contiguous wildlife corridor, and several partnership opportunities exist with state agencies and conservation organizations. The project is consistent with the goals and objectives of several significant regional, national, and international resource management partnerships and plans, including:

- North American Waterfowl Management Plan
- Lower Mississippi River Joint Venture Project
- Lower Mississippi Valley Migratory Bird Wetlands Conservation Initiative
- National Wetlands Priority Conservation Plan
- Partners-in-Flight Initiative
- Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network
- Lower Mississippi River Ecosystem Plan
- Hatchie River Plan
- Hatchie River Alliance
- Hatchie River Conservancy
- West Tennessee Wildlife Resources Conservation Plan
- Tennessee State Wildlife Action Plan

Basic Facts about the Proposal

■ The proposed expansion of the acquisition boundaries for Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges encompasses 120,078 acres in Lauderdale, Tipton, Haywood, and Dyer Counties, Tennessee. Most of the land within the proposed expansion is un-leveed bottomland of the Mississippi and Hatchie Rivers.

■ Public lands near the proposed acquisition boundary include state and federal lands:

- John Tully WMA
- Cold Creek WMA
- John Tully State Forest
- Sunk Lake Public Use Natural Area
- Fort Pillow State Park
- Fort Pillow State Prison
- Chickasaw National Wildlife Refuge
- Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge
- Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge

■ The purpose of the proposed boundary expansion is to meet the goals of the Lower Mississippi River Ecosystem by preserving valuable riverine and wetland habitat. In meeting these goals this project will restore and protect key habitats as well as

Partners

- Area landowners
- The public
- Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
- Mississippi River Corridor-TN
- The Trust for Public Land
- The Nature Conservancy
- Ducks Unlimited
- The Conservation Fund
- Tennessee Wildlife Federation
- Sierra Club, Tennessee Chapter
- Friends of West Tennessee Refuges

Timeline

December, 2012: Public Scoping period, with two public meetings

December, 2012 - January, 2013: Develop draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment

February, 2013 - May, 2014: Provided Public review, held comment period, conducted three public meetings

June, 2014: Prepare final Land Protection Plan and associated documents required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

Summer/Fall, 2014: Decision by the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Benefits of this Proposal to the Public

Increased opportunities for:

- Hunting
- Fishing
- Wildlife observation
- Wildlife photography
- Environmental education
- Environmental interpretation

Ecosystem services including:

- clean water
- sediment trapping
- carbon sequestration

Wildlife Potential

The bottomland hardwood forests of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley serve as important habitat for breeding landbirds and migratory birds in the spring and fall, and the Lower Mississippi Valley serves as the primary wintering ground for mid-continental waterfowl populations. Together, Chickasaw, Lower Hatchie, and Hatchie NWRs support wintering waterfowl population numbers exceeding 300,000 dabbling ducks each year. Acquisition of these areas could provide up to 56,000 acres of re-established bottomland and upland forest, protect an additional 27,000 acres of existing forest within the proposed expansion boundary, and, when combined with existing Federal and State lands, provide about 190,000 acres of contiguous forest habitat to support objectives outlined in other



national and state plans for waterfowl, priority landbirds, waterbirds, upland wildlife, reptiles, amphibians, and fish.

Three federally listed wildlife species which occur in the region would also benefit: the interior least tern, pallid sturgeon, and the Indiana Bat. In addition, other rare or imperiled species present or potentially present in the proposed acquisition boundary include Mississippi kite, wood stork, yellow billed cuckoo, cerulean Warbler, Swainson's warbler, Rafinesque's big-eared bat, northern long-eared bat, fish including the blue sucker, firebelly darter, sturgeon chub, sicklefin chub, alligator gar, American eel, and paddlefish, as well as southern hickorynut mussel, Hatchie burrowing crayfish, and several plants of conservation concern.

Frequently Asked Questions

How can taxpayers afford to purchase public lands in these times of tight budgets?

If this proposed expansion is approved, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will use funding from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which are funded by user fees, federal duck stamps, revenue from leasing offshore oil drilling rights, and other, non-tax sources. Congress has designated these revenues for conservation use, including the acquisition of wildlife habitat.

How long will it take to acquire the lands within the proposed acquisition boundary?



This is a long-term project; it will likely take many decades, given the realities of funding, and would also depend on the willingness of landowners to sell their land or convey conservation easements. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service only acquires land from willing sellers, so there will be lands within the acquisition boundary which never become part of the refuge.

Would the Service consider other options besides purchasing lands (fee title)?

Yes; the Service is authorized to negotiate and purchase conservation easements, and can enter into other types of agreements with private landowners which protect wildlife while keeping the land in private hands. Conservation easements, because they are less costly and because they allow landowners to retain their fee interest in the property, are a preferred method of protecting wildlife habitat. As with fee title purchases, these types of arrangements are only made with willing landowners.

How will the proposed acquisition boundary expansion benefit the public?

If approved, this expansion would:

- Allow willing sellers to protect the wildlife values of their land by selling it to the Service or by entering into various types of agreements with the Service, including conservation easements;
- Conserve up to 120,078 acres of important habitat for waterfowl, resident game, and rare species;
- Protect and enhance a natural landscape which will support high quality, connected hardwood forest and aquatic habitats;