

Questions You May Have

What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposing?

The Service has proposed the expansion of the Clarks River NWR by 34,269 acres. The refuge currently has fee title ownership of about 8,634 acres with an approved acquisition boundary of approximately 19,605 acres. Fee title lands are distributed as follows; Graves County (56 acres), Marshall County (5,970 acres) and McCracken County (2,608 acres). Lands are purchased on a willing-seller basis only. The proposed expansion of 34,269 acres would bring the total refuge acquisition boundary to approximately 53,874 acres and would protect lands along the east and west fork of the Clarks River. If the expansion is approved, the Service would be able to work with partners to connect the existing protected lands for the benefit of people and wildlife.

What is a national wildlife refuge?

A national wildlife refuge is part of a network of habitats that is set aside to benefit wildlife, provide unparalleled wildlife related experiences for all Americans, and protect a healthy environment. Wildlife refuges give wildlife top priority, but public access is a legally mandated priority for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and environmental education.

Today, there are more than 556 national wildlife refuges and other units of the Refuge System, plus 38 wetland management districts.

Why is the Service proposing to expand Clarks River NWR in Kentucky?

Although the floodplain of the Clarks River has been altered by land use changes over time, the East and West Forks of the Clarks River contain some of the last remaining intact bottomland hardwood wetlands within the Clarks River watershed. This habitat type is very important for many wildlife species, especially migratory birds, maintaining water quality in the watershed and for many species of wildlife recognized by Kentucky of being species of special concern. After more than a decade of Service presence in the area, more information has been gathered and limitations to achieving the original intent of the Clarks River NWR have been experienced. The

limitations include access, a much needed upland component, protection of larger core habitats still intact and a more opportunity for restoration actions to achieve long-term structure and functions of the lower Clarks River watershed.

What is a refuge acquisition boundary?

It's a line on a map within which the Service would be authorized to negotiate with willing sellers. The boundary itself does not give the Service any special jurisdiction or control over these lands. Lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System only when they are purchased from willing sellers or placed under agreements with willing participants. Some landowners may choose not to sell, and those landowners would continue to manage their lands as before. Others may choose to sell, donate, or enter into special agreements, and their lands are added to the refuge. These lands can then be managed for the protection of wildlife and habitat.

What happens if my property is included in a refuge acquisition boundary and I don't want to sell?

Nothing. The Service will only purchase lands and conservation easements from **willing sellers**. You would be largely unaffected by the establishment of the new boundary, except for the fact that you would have a new neighbor. Even if refuge lands surround private property, legal access to the property would be maintained.

How would the Service prioritize land acquisition, both in fee title and conservation easements?

The Service would consider four criteria in determining which lands to protect first.

- Would buying the land -- or a conservation easement on the land-- connect existing conservation lands and create a wildlife corridor for plants and animals?
- Does the land consist of high quality habitats for threatened and endangered species?
- Does the land contain wetlands that could be restored to improve water quality in the Clarks River watershed?

- Would purchasing the land enable the Service to provide wildlife-dependent outdoor recreation and education?

If I were to sell a conservation easement to the Service, what would I NOT be able to do on my land?

On the portion of land that contains an easement, you and any subsequent owner would not be able to develop it or sell it for the purpose of developing it. You also would not be able to: alter the natural topography nor the natural water regime; use your land in a way that damages the flora and fauna communities; or convert native habitats to another use.

If the refuge is expanded, would I be able to use it for activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, or bird watching?

As soon as practically possible, the Service plans to open newly acquired lands to public access. As outlined in the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, the Service gives priority consideration to six wildlife-dependent public uses on national wildlife refuges: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

Would land use and zoning change within the refuge boundary?

Zoning and land use regulations would continue under the jurisdiction of the appropriate local government. The Fish and Wildlife Service would act as a landowner and manage only its own property, or property in which it acquires an interest.

How would tax revenues be affected if lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System?

The federal government does not pay property tax on land it owns, but two factors help offset this potential hardship to communities. First, refuge lands demand very little in the way of expensive services or infrastructure from local government and they generate tourism dollars. Second, under the provisions of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (Public Law 95-469), the Service annually reimburses counties to compensate for revenue lost as a result of acquisition of private property. The Refuge Revenue Sharing Act also requires that Service lands be reappraised every five years to ensure that payments to local governments remain equitable. Payments under this Act

would be made only on lands which the Service acquires in fee title. On lands where the Service acquires only partial interest through easement, all taxes would remain the responsibility of the individual landowner.

An example of how this has worked is at the current Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge. In 2010, the Refuge Revenue Sharing payments were \$89.00 for 56 acres in Graves County, \$6,345 for 2,848 acres in McCracken County and \$12,886 for 5,835 acres in Marshall County.

How would the acquisition of new lands be funded, and how long would it take to establish?

The Service draws funding for land acquisition from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The expansion of Clarks River NWR proposal would most likely be funded through the LWCF, which is mainly derived from the sale of offshore oil leases and is intended for land conservation. However, because this is a voluntary program, it could take many years of working with willing landowners for the Service to acquire the majority of the land as envisioned in the proposal. It's possible that the Service would be unable to acquire 100 percent of the land and conservation easements.