

III. Plan Development

OVERVIEW

Early in the process of developing this draft plan, the planning team identified a list of issues and concerns that were likely to be associated with the conservation and management of Lake Ophelia National Wildlife Refuge.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND PLANNING PROCESS

The identification of issues is a major factor in determining management goals and objectives. To ensure that the future management of the Refuge reflects the public's issues and concerns, the planning team conducted a series of public meetings and interviews. A stakeholders' workshop, held on September 18, 1997, provided representatives of Federal, State, local agencies and congressional representatives an opportunity to learn about the planning process and identify issues and concerns. A public scoping meeting was held on October 28, 1997 to provide an opportunity for the public to identify additional issues and concerns. These meetings were coordinated with a variety of Federal, State, and local agencies; conservation organizations and other citizen groups; and the local citizens of the surrounding communities. This coordination was essential from the perspective of the Service, and helped to ensure the completion of the plan and the projects identified for the Refuge.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

A number of issues and concerns were generated from the input of local citizens and public agencies, the team members' knowledge of the area, and the resource needs identified by the Refuge staff. A Fish and Wildlife Service planning team (see Section B, Chapter V) was assembled to evaluate the resource needs. The team then developed a list of goals, objectives and strategies to shape the management of the Refuge for the next 15 years.

The identification of these issues provided the basis for developing the Refuge's management objectives and strategies. These issues will play a role in determining the desired future conditions for the Refuge and were considered in the preparation of the long-term Comprehensive Conservation Plan. The issues and concerns are described below. They are of local, regional, and national significance and they reflect the public's concerns as expressed at the planning meetings.

FISH AND WILDLIFE POPULATIONS

Threatened and Endangered Species

Recovery and protection of threatened and endangered plants and animals is an important responsibility delegated to the Service and its national wildlife refuges. Three threatened or endangered animals are thought to use (or could use) Lake Ophelia NWR: the bald eagle, Louisiana black bear, and pallid sturgeon.

Bald eagles have historically nested on Lake Ophelia NWR. In the past, the Refuge has attempted to restore nesting bald eagles by hacking eaglets collected from coastal Louisiana. This project was carried out for three years and terminated, after 32 eaglets were successfully fledged. While no known active nests have resulted from these efforts to date (a partial nest was observed one year after hacking ended), the Refuge's habitat restoration and protection activities do provide suitable habitat for nesting eagles.

Louisiana black bears have been relocated to Lake Ophelia NWR as part of the recovery plan to establish a population within suitable habitat. The Refuge can continue to support the recovery of this species by providing suitable habitats (including the interior forest and forest corridor) and by providing personnel to monitor the bears, conduct education programs, and handle nuisance complaints. In order to ensure the success of local recovery efforts, an effective public outreach program aimed at educating the local community about the black bears needs to be conducted.

The Refuge can support pallid sturgeon recovery efforts by restoring riverine habitat and providing technical assistance to other Service divisions or resource management agencies.

Waterfowl

The Refuge's waterfowl purpose guides the primary operation and management actions on the Refuge. A portion of the Refuge is dedicated to providing seasonally flooded cropland, moist soil, and forested wetlands to meet the feeding, resting, and breeding needs of migratory and resident waterfowl. The Louisiana Waterfowl Step-Down Plan identified the following minimum habitat objectives needed to provide sufficient winter water, food, sanctuary, and resting/loafing areas to meet the needs of waterfowl in the core waterfowl sanctuary area: 500 acres of bottomland hardwood forest providing 56,000 duck-use days; 500 acres of harvested crop providing 336,500 duck-use days; 200 acres of unharvested crop providing 4,258,000 duck-use days; and 350 acres of moist soil providing 485,100 duck-use days. Additional waterfowl habitat would be preserved and managed in nonsanctuary areas of the Refuge to support wintering waterfowl and provide public waterfowl hunting opportunities.

Reforestation of all Refuge cropland and expanding waterfowl hunting opportunities are wishes identified during the scoping process. But in order to meet its waterfowl purpose, the Refuge must maintain enough cropland/moist soil areas to meet multi-species waterfowl habitat needs and must provide sufficient sanctuary areas to provide undisturbed resting and feeding areas for waterfowl. Some additional reforestation can be accomplished, but the Refuge must maintain enough cropland/moist soil habitat to meet the needs of waterfowl. Additional waterfowl hunting opportunities can be provided as the Refuge acquires additional land, but the core waterfowl sanctuary needs to remain intact to meet the undisturbed resting and feeding needs of waterfowl.

Neotropical Migratory Birds

Neotropical migratory birds are a species group of special management concern. Providing interior forest habitat (i.e., core forest area at least 1 kilometer [0.62 mile] from forest edge) for forest-dwelling Neotropical migratory birds is one of the Refuge's major objectives. Strategic reforestation of cropland surplus to the Refuge's waterfowl habitat objectives would contribute to the interior forest needs of Neotropical migratory birds. Management of existing bottomland hardwood forests will also create structural elements required by forest-dwelling Neotropical migratory birds.

HABITATS

Bottomland Hardwood Restoration

Lake Ophelia NWR is situated near several large forested tracts in the Three Rivers Source Population Objective Area. A cooperative private-State-Federal partnership under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Partners in Flight, and the LMVJV calls for public lands in this zone to be managed to provide 84,000 acres of interior forest habitat (forest more than one kilometer [0.62 mile] from edge). The largest amount of unforested public land in the Three Rivers SPOA is located on the Refuge. With

strategic reforestation, significant amounts of interior forest can be created by reforesting certain agricultural areas on the Refuge that are not needed to meet waterfowl and shorebird objectives.

Approximately 12,000 acres of the Refuge are forested. Of this, 4,588 acres have been reforested since Refuge establishment. Sites were restored by planting both seeds and seedlings (by hand and machine). Restoration on some sites is incomplete, and further planting efforts are required. Currently, no active forest management, other than reforestation, inventory, and survivability checks, occurs. Also, there is a need to manage existing forests to simulate old-age type conditions within several of the current mid-aged stands. In these stands, management actions should be directed toward providing a more complex forest stand structure with large tree crowns interspersed with openings to promote vertical structure in the mid-story and understory.

The local community was an integral part of the court decision that stopped land-clearing operations (specifically, those that occurred on the property that would become Lake Ophelia NWR) under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. As a result of this involvement, the community is very concerned about bottomland hardwood restoration. Some in the community believe that the Refuge was established to restore the forest that had been removed. More than 10 years after Refuge establishment, there is still significant local interest in reforesting the entire Refuge. The area's cultural tradition has a strong history of fishing and hunting, and forest restoration is seen as a first step toward increasing the opportunities for hunting (primarily for white-tailed deer). Because providing multi-species waterfowl habitat, including sanctuary areas, is a primary Refuge purpose, total reforestation is not suitable. However, approximately 1,178 acres, or 32 percent, of the existing Refuge cropland is being recommended for future reforestation in this plan.

Agriculture

Reforesting the majority of the current Refuge cropland acreage would not result in a corresponding increase in huntable acres because land is needed to provide a core waterfowl sanctuary area, protected from disturbance, for migratory waterfowl. Most of the current Refuge cropland lies within the core waterfowl sanctuary. During the November-to-February time period, the sanctuary area is closed to most public entry in order to minimize disturbance to migratory birds. However, 13,325 acres, or 76 percent of the existing Refuge acreage, is open to various forms of hunting, including waterfowl hunting.

The Refuge farms approximately 3,700 acres on Lake Ophelia NWR. Cooperative farming is used to fulfill the Refuge's waterfowl, resident wildlife, and threatened and endangered species trust responsibilities. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement where the farmer is allowed to farm Refuge land (with restrictions on crop type, pesticide use, techniques, etc.), while the Refuge receives 20 percent of the crop or an equivalent value in services (e.g., mowing or disking moist-soil areas, maintenance of water control facilities). Cooperative farming also infuses money into the local economy by providing jobs and supporting local businesses.

Typically the Refuge grows a combination of corn, soybeans, wheat, milo, and millet. In combination, each provides significant benefits to the species (waterfowl, Louisiana black bears) we are entrusted to protect. However, ancillary benefits also include improved habitat conditions for the American woodcock, white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and numerous other resident wildlife species.

Most of the current cropland lies within the core waterfowl sanctuary. During the November-to-February time period, the sanctuary area is closed to public entry in order to minimize disturbance to migratory birds. However, 13,325 acres, or 76 percent of the existing Refuge acreage, is open to various forms of hunting, including waterfowl hunting.

VISITOR SERVICES

Visitor Services and Education

Currently, little public use occurs besides hunting and fishing. The complex does not have the staff or facilities to provide on- or off-Refuge environmental education or interpretive or other wildlife-dependent recreational programs. The lack of exposure and awareness resulting from the absence of non-consumptive public use negatively affects all Refuge programs.

The Refuge is located in Avoyelles Parish (population 41,860), within 15 miles of Marksville, Louisiana (population 6,087). The Tunica-Biloxi Paragon Casino is a major tourist attraction in the parish, attracting over 200,000 overnight visitors annually. Many of the casino's overnight hotel and recreational vehicle (RV) resort guests are interested in half-day tourist destinations. Visitor facilities in association with Grand Cote NWR visitor center annex would provide wildlife-dependent environmental education, interpretation, and recreation opportunities currently not available in Avoyelles Parish.

Hunting

Hunting and fishing are integral parts of Louisiana culture. It is not surprising that there is a considerable State and local interest in expanding hunting opportunities. Any additional hunting opportunities will be dependent on providing safe, quality experiences that are compatible with Refuge purposes. However, hunting opportunities would be made available to a greater number of people over a larger land base through the Refuge's continuation of a land acquisition program, within the current acquisition boundary.

There is some interest in a modern gun hunt for white-tailed deer. However, much of Lake Ophelia NWR's hunting areas are open habitat (early succession and/or recently reforested areas), and a modern gun hunt cannot be conducted there safely. Furthermore, recent surveys indicate that the Refuge's deer herd is in balance with the habitat, indicating that the current hunting strategies (either-sex deer archery, youth gun, and muzzleloader hunts only) are biologically sound. While the deer herd could be controlled with modern firearms, relying on the current program provides more hunting opportunities (primitive weapons are less efficient, requiring more units of effort to harvest a sustainable number of individuals). As forest stands mature, opportunities for a modern gun hunt will be explored.

Fishing

Under current conditions, the area available for fishing opportunities cannot be greatly expanded without compromising the Refuge's waterfowl habitat objectives (i.e., allowing fishing in Lake Ophelia during the current closed season, October 15- February 28). However, fishing could be expanded by developing bank fishing areas, improving or expanding fishing piers, and controlling aquatic weeds. A recent acquisition has provided the potential to allow public access to 300-acre Frazier-Whitehorse Lake. Also, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' preliminary surveys for the Spring Bayou Reconnaissance Study indicate that Lake Long could be reconnected to the Red River, thus possibly restoring a historic fishery.

Roads and Trails, Exterior and Interior

In general, lack of access, both interior and exterior, limits all public use on the Refuge. No all-weather roads or trails exist.

The Refuge's only exterior access route is Louisiana Highway 452. The paved section of this road ends approximately 2 miles from the Refuge. Avoyelles Parish is responsible for maintaining Highway 452, 2

miles after the pavement ends. The Service is responsible for maintaining most of the remaining 38 miles of roads and trails that exist within the Refuge. Seasonal weather limits access (including that by Refuge staff) to four-wheel-drive and high-clearance vehicles. Access will remain limited until all-weather roads are provided and maintained.

Access to many of the interior areas within the Refuge is also limited. Because no all-weather interior roads exist, access to much of the Refuge is by foot or by all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). During wet conditions, visitors must use a four-wheel drive vehicle to access one of several parking areas and proceed on foot or ATV. With heavy use, ATV trails quickly become unsuitable for foot travel, limiting those visitors without ATVs to areas served by designated hiking trails.

FSA Fee Title Tract Access

Three Farm Services Agency fee title tracts large enough to provide public use opportunities are managed by this Refuge complex. Lack of ingress and egress routes and poor quality roads have prevented compatible public use. Future Refuge land acquisition and development of public ingress would allow compatible public use opportunities on these tracts.

GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

Funding and Staffing

Funding has been insufficient to support Refuge programs. Inadequate staff, facilities, and equipment have prevented the Refuge from realizing its purpose and management objectives. Currently, the Refuge is not meeting its waterfowl and shorebird habitat objectives; has few public use facilities; has incomplete habitat/wildlife management plans; provides few wildlife-dependent environmental education, interpretation, or wildlife viewing opportunities; and has degrading facilities (e.g., water control infrastructure, roads, public access).

Cultural Resources

Archaeological investigations within the Refuge have been limited and, with the exception of Gibson (1989), have occurred prior to its establishment. Eight archaeological sites have been documented in previous archaeological investigations. While few known cultural resources exist on Lake Ophelia NWR, management activities must be conducted so as to avoid compromising sensitive sites.

The Tunica-Biloxi Native American tribe is located in the local community (tribal lands and Paragon Casino). The Tunica-Biloxi are strong supporters of natural resource issues and could be a valuable partner.

LAND PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

Land Acquisition and Forest Fragmentation

When the Refuge was established, its role in providing bottomland hardwood forest and a mix of other habitat types was seen mostly as an opportunity to provide an additional habitat type for wintering waterfowl (i.e., flooded woodlands in addition to agricultural and moist soil areas). Reevaluation has determined that supplying interior forest (in cooperation with Partners in Flight) and forested corridors between forested blocks (in support of Louisiana black bear recovery) is as important as simply providing forest. The Refuge's current acquisition boundary does not reflect the importance of restoring and protecting interior or corridor forest. Several properties lie between the publicly owned forests in the

Three Rivers SPOA, but they are outside the Refuge acquisition boundary. To help maintain the potential to protect these lands, the Service would need the authority to restore and protect (through land acquisition or conservation easements) the habitat between the Refuge's current acquisition boundary and other public natural resource areas. Also, new land acquisitions would provide expanded public hunting opportunities; conservation easements would not.