

III. PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Overview

Early in the process of developing this draft and after public scoping meetings conducted in 1998, the planning team identified a list of issues and concerns that were likely to be associated with the conservation management of the refuge.

Scoping Issues and Concerns

Issue identification is a major factor in determining management goals and objectives and the management direction for the refuge.

To ensure that management of the refuge is reflective of the issues and concerns, a series of meetings were conducted to guide the planning effort. The planning process was coordinated with government agencies, various organizations, and surrounding communities. This coordination is essential to ensure support for the plan and projects identified for the refuge.



*Dozing Fire Breaks
USFWS Photo*

Community participation is an integral component of the planning process. Initial planning efforts for the comprehensive conservation plan began in January 1998. On March 11, 1998, the refuge staff, regional

planning staff, and a group of local citizens met to identify refuge issues, concerns, and opportunities; to develop a mailing list of concerned and interested publics; and to develop planning and public involvement strategies. Local citizens participated in open discussions. Those citizens included environmentalist and refuge volunteer, Margaret Copeland, Co-President of the Oktibbeha County Audubon Society; refuge user, commercial logger, hunter, fisherman, and land in-holder, Travis Prisock; and academic, Dr. Randy Robinette, Head, Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Mississippi State University. The pre-planning meeting was professionally facilitated by contractors from Patrick C. Moore, ASLA, Alexandria, Louisiana.

On May 12, 1998, a scoping meeting was held on the Mississippi State University campus to garner public opinion on management of the refuge. The meeting was advertised through local newspapers and open to the public. Mr. Tony Thompson of the Natural Resources Conservation Service facilitated the meeting of 24 members of the local community. To further ensure public involvement

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Section A.
Draft Comprehensive
Conservation Plan

CHAPTER III -
Plan Development

in the planning process, the refuge manager developed a questionnaire to solicit public opinion of the refuge and suggestions for its management. A summary of the public scoping meeting and the 85 responses received from the questionnaire is reflected below.

Habitats

--There is concern expressed by turkey hunters about the timing of prescribed fires and smoke coinciding with turkey hunting season. Other citizens are concerned about the effects of prescribed burning on various other species and the impacts to air quality.

--Local loggers would like for the level of timber harvesting to increase on the refuge, while others would like to see the level of timber harvesting decreased.

--The effects on game fish populations from manipulating water levels in Bluff and Loakfoma lakes to provide for waterfowl are a concern expressed by some citizens.

Fish and Wildlife Populations

--A few citizens are concerned about the need to control beaver population levels on the refuge.

--Visitors and staff are concerned that some alligators are becoming overly accustomed to people, and where this is occurring, the welfare and safety of the public and staff may be at risk.

--Commercial catfish operators near the refuge are concerned about the increase in cormorants roosting on the refuge and feeding on catfish in their rearing ponds.

Land Protection and Conservation

--Some citizens are concerned that too much staff/funds may be directed towards management of the proposed wilderness and research natural areas.

--Some citizens are concerned that management of private inholdings on lands inside the refuge acquisition boundary limit the ability of managers to achieve and contribute to overall habitat configuration and wildlife population goals. It is recognized that these in-holdings, particularly on non-forested lands, increase edge effects which are ongoing problems.

Education and Visitor Services

--Waterfowl hunters would like for the refuge to bring back and manage an annual waterfowl hunt.

--Fishermen would like to see an increase in sport fishing access and opportunities on refuge-managed waters.

--Citizens want to improve entrance roads and directional and informational signs on the refuge.

--Some citizens would like for birdwatching and hiking to be

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Draft Comprehensive
Conservation Plan

CHAPTER III -
Plan Development

separated—away from areas open to hunting. They would like a reduction in the interaction between hunters and other recreational users of the refuge during hunting season.
--Several citizens would like the refuge to improve and increase wildlife viewing facilities.

Refuge Administration

--Several citizens expressed a desire for the Fish and Wildlife Service to locate, investigate, and protect cultural resources that may be on refuge lands. Once this is accomplished, citizens would like for the refuge to provide interpretation programs concerning these resources.

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Draft Comprehensive
Conservation Plan

CHAPTER III -
Plan Development