



Proposed Urban National Wildlife Refuge in Jackson, Mississippi, Metropolitan Area: Questions and Answers

What is the Proposed National Wildlife Refuge in Central Mississippi?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to establish an urban national wildlife refuge on up to 5,000 acres along the Pearl River in the Jackson, Mississippi, metropolitan area. The proposed refuge would include the forested floodplain along the river between the Ross Barnett Reservoir and Highway 25 (Lakeland Drive).

What are national wildlife refuges?

National wildlife refuges are areas of land and water set aside for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation, and managed by, or in partnership with, the Service. Collectively, refuges across the nation comprise the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's premier system of public lands and waters set aside to conserve fish, wildlife and plants.

What is an urban national wildlife refuge?

Since 80 percent of the U.S. population now lives in urban or suburban areas, Americans will have much of their direct contact with nature while in an urban setting, thereby shaping the nation's conservation values, ethics and priorities. To reach this audience, the Service established an urban wildlife refuge initiative to help connect urban America with our wild places. The goals of an urban refuge are to create unique outreach initiatives that don't exist at other refuges such as urban school partnerships, reaching diverse populations, youth employment opportunities, as well as to create local recreational opportunities such as hiking, biking, and canoeing that help connect people with nature.

How is a national wildlife refuge created?

The Service works with communities and willing landowners to acquire an interest in land through several methods, including donations, fee simple purchases, conservation easements, leases, lands set aside through habitat conservation plans, and/or cooperative agreements. All lands and waters acquired would be managed by the Service as a national wildlife refuge.

How would the Proposed National Wildlife Refuge in Central Mississippi be established?

The largest parcel, (2,712 acres), within the proposed acquisition boundary is being donated to the Service by the Mississippi Department of Transportation. The Service would then work with partners and willing landowners to protect the remaining acreage within the proposed refuge acquisition boundary.

How does the refuge planning process work?

The area is initially assessed biologically and then recommended as a project proposal site based on ecosystem values. A preliminary project proposal is then completed which provides a conceptual overview of the project. Once this initial proposal has been approved by the Service Director, detailed planning and the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) process begins. This portion of the process includes detailed project

development based on extensive public review and comment. Then the completed plan is submitted to the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for consideration for final approval. If approval is granted, funding can be sought through the Congressional budget process. Once funding is secured and willing landowners are identified, additional refuge lands can be acquired or easements can be put in place.

Will land-use and zoning change within the refuge acquisition boundary?

Zoning and land-use regulations continue under the jurisdiction of local government. The Fish and Wildlife Service acts as a landowner and manages only its own property, or property in which it has acquired a legal interest.

How would the Service acquire funds to purchase or lease refuge land?

Funding for this project could be provided through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) or the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (MBCF). The LWCF includes monies collected from the sale of offshore oil leases. It is the principal source of land acquisition funding for the purpose of outdoor recreation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Forest Service. Funding for this project could also be sought through the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, which is funded by revenues from the sales of Duck Stamps and import duties on arms and ammunition.

What is an acquisition boundary?

An acquisition boundary is the area within which the Service is authorized to negotiate with landowners willing to sell an interest in their properties. Acquisition boundaries for refuges are typically approved by the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The U.S. Congress also may approve them if specific legislation is involved. The boundary itself does not give the Service any special jurisdiction or control over these lands.

What if my land is within the refuge acquisition boundary and I do not want to sell?

You maintain every right to your land, including the right to sell your land to whomever you choose. It is the policy of the Service to purchase lands only from willing sellers. Having land within the refuge acquisition boundary does not require you to sell your property to the Service. Please see our Landowner Options fact sheet for more information.

Will private landowners adjacent to the refuge have restrictions placed on the use of their land?

Private landowners both within and adjacent to the refuge acquisition boundary would not be subject to any of the rules or regulations pertaining to refuge management. Therefore, they would not be impacted by it. Additionally, the Service does not have direct permitting or licensing authority; and thus, no direct control over private land use activities, such as silviculture, agriculture, outdoor recreation, etc.

If I want to sell my land, or otherwise make it part of the proposed national wildlife refuge, what options do I have?

The Service acquires interest in lands in a variety of ways, including fee title purchase, donation, and less-than-fee agreements, such as leases or conservation easements. Please see our Landowner Options fact sheet for more information.

I'm interested in selling my property, what happens now?

The Service is currently gauging landowner interest in the proposed project and soliciting input from a range of stakeholders. This begins a period of planning and study, concluding in spring 2014, at which time the project will be submitted for final approval consideration. Should the project be approved, someone from the Service's Division of Realty will contact you to gauge your interest in selling and pursue negotiations if appropriate. Please see our Landowner Options fact sheet for more information.

If the refuge is created, will I be able to hunt, fish, hike, and bird watch on lands acquired?

Most likely. The Service gives priority consideration to six wildlife-dependent public uses on national wildlife refuges including: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation. If these uses are determined to be compatible with refuge purposes, and funds are available to manage them, they would be allowed within the proposed refuge. During the planning process, lands proposed for acquisition would be evaluated for potential recreational uses. Since this refuge is being proposed as an urban refuge, emphasis is being placed on public uses.

Why can't you guarantee how the refuge will be managed, and what uses will be allowed, before you establish a new refuge acquisition boundary?

To put it simply, we can't guarantee the specifics of refuge management because we haven't yet asked you (the public) how you think it should be managed. However, before the Service begins acquiring land, we can tell you which wildlife-dependent recreational uses currently occurring will be allowed to continue on that land. Six wildlife-dependent public uses have been given priority consideration over other public uses. Priority public uses include hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. If these uses are determined to be compatible with refuge purposes, and funds are available to manage them, they will be allowed.

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

It's true that the federal government does not pay property tax on its own lands. Two factors help offset this potential hardship to communities. First, refuge lands demand very little in the way of expensive services or infrastructure from county government. 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. This law states that the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) shall pay to each county in which any area acquired in fee title is situated, the greater of the following amounts:

- An amount equal to the product of 75 cents multiplied by the total acreage of that portion of the fee area which is located within such county.
- An amount equal to three-fourths of 1 percent of the fair market value, as determined by the Secretary, for that portion of the fee area which is located within such county.
- An amount equal to 25 percent of the net receipts collected by the Secretary in connection with the operation and management of such fee area during such fiscal year. However, if a fee area is located in two or more counties, the amount for each county shall be apportioned in relationship to the acreage in that county.

Funding for the payments comes from income generated on national wildlife refuges. If there is not enough revenue, Congress is authorized to appropriate money to make up the difference. Service lands are reappraised every five years to ensure that payments to local governments remain equitable. On lands where the Service acquires only partial interest through easement, all taxes remain the responsibility of the individual owner.

How will the proposed refuge affect flood control proposals in the Jackson metro area?

The land under consideration for the new refuge currently serves an important role of storing floodwater during Pearl River flooding events. Establishment of a new refuge will permanently protect this important function; however, the new refuge will not increase or decrease flood storage capabilities over what currently exists. Based on information provided by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Rankin-Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District, the proposed refuge could coexist with a flood control project.

Why does the proposed refuge acquisition boundary not include the west side of the Pearl River, into Hinds County?

The Service has tentatively identified an acquisition boundary that incorporates the 2,712-acre tract that will be donated by the Mississippi Department of Transportation, as well as most all adjoining forested tracts of land, which happen to all be east of the Pearl River. The final acquisition boundary will be determined during the public scoping and environmental assessment phase and will be based on input from the public.

Why has the proposed refuge not received a name yet?

Several candidate names have been suggested for the proposed refuge. Initial recommendations have included: Canebrake Bluff National Wildlife Refuge, Big Woods National Wildlife Refuge, and Crooked Creek National Wildlife Refuge; however, the Service looks forward to working with the local community to help us determine possible names that may best fit this proposed urban refuge.