

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION MEMORANDUM

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and have determined that the action of:

BIG BRANCH MARSH NWR 2007 RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN

- is a categorical exclusion as provided by 516 DM 6 Appendix 1. No further documentation will be made.
- is found not to have significant environmental effects as determined by the attached Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact.
- is found to have special environmental conditions as described in the attached Environmental Assessment. The attached Finding of No Significant Impact will not be final nor any actions taken pending a 30\_day period for public review [40 CFR 1501.4(e) (2)].
- is found to have significant effects, and therefore a "Notice of Intent" will be published in the Federal Register to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement before the project is considered further.
- is denied because of environmental damage, Service policy, or mandate.
- is an emergency situation. Only those actions necessary to control the immediate impacts of the emergency will be taken. Other related actions remain subject to NEPA review.

Other supporting documents:

Environmental Assessment  
Finding of No Significant Impact

Ken Litzemberger  
Ken Litzemberger, Project Leader

4/4/07  
Date

Kelly Purkey  
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4/11/07  
Date

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Regional Environmental Coordinator

4/19/07  
Date

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4/20/07  
Date

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Regional Director, Southeast Region

4/23/07  
Date



**Final Environmental Assessment for recreational sport hunting and the  
2007 Recreational Hunt Plan**

**On**

**BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE  
St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana**

**For Further Information, Contact:  
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**Prepared by:  
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April 2007**

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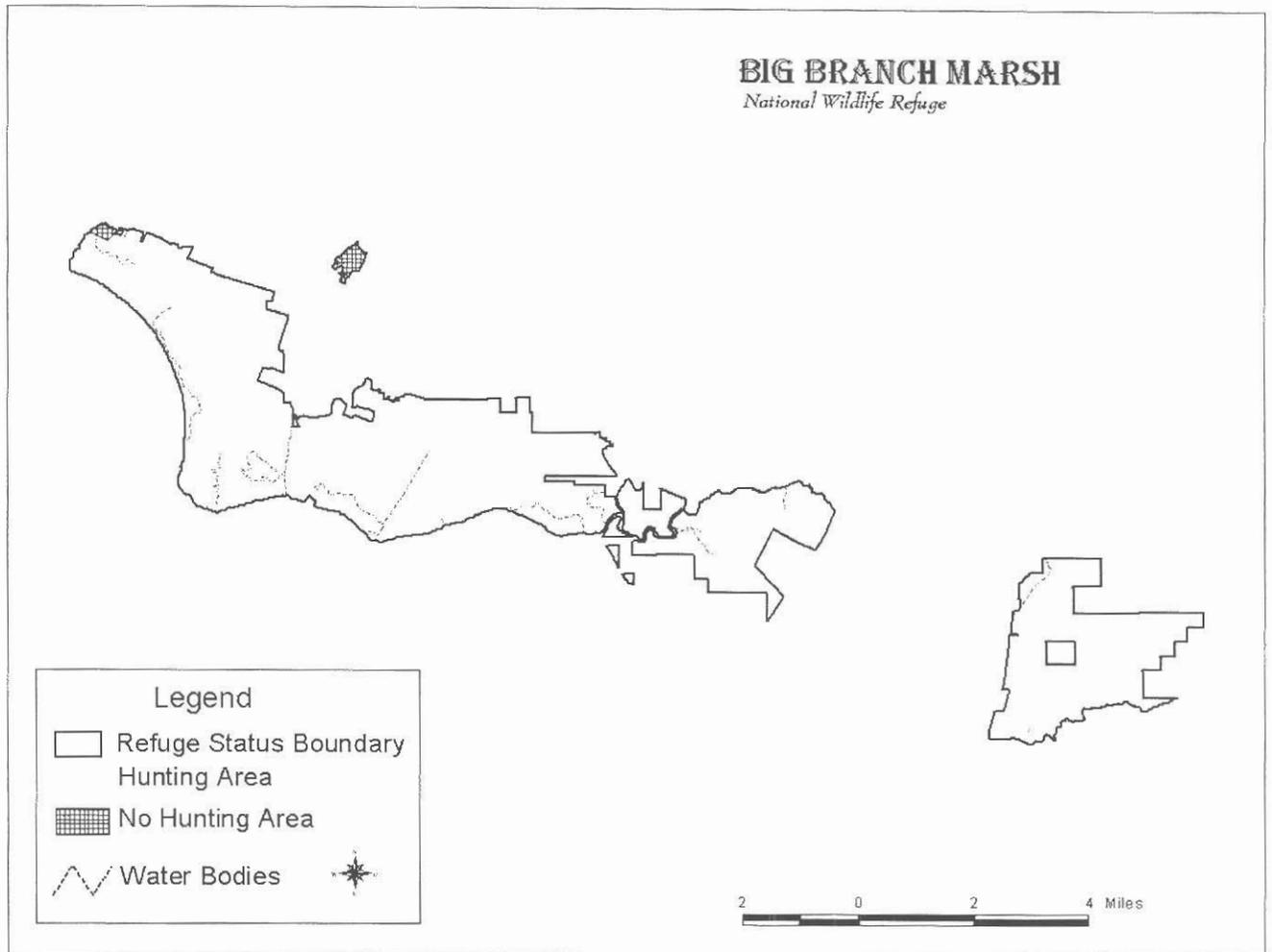


Figure 1. Areas open and closed to hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR

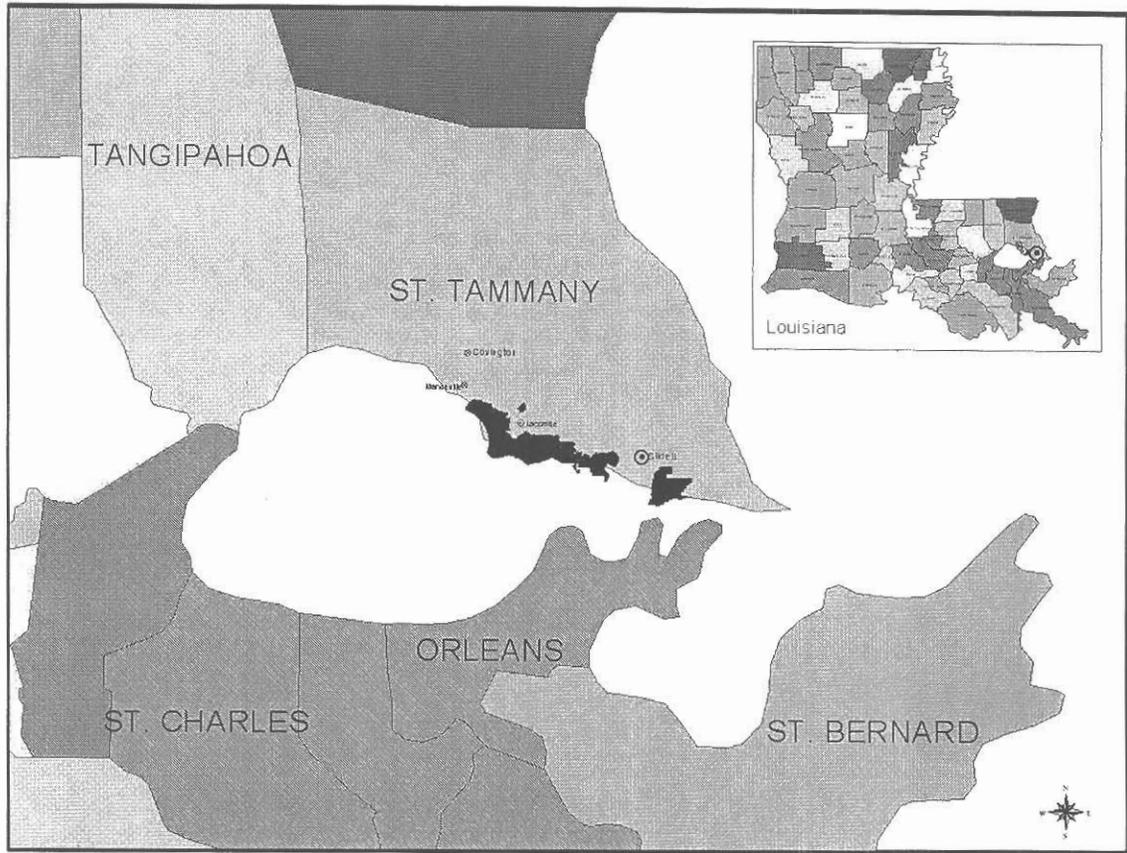


Figure 2. Location of Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

## Chapter 1 Purpose and Need for Action

Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) developed environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at twenty-three national wildlife refuges located in the Southeast Region. The new environmental assessments, including this one, will address the cumulative impacts of hunting at all refuges which were named in or otherwise affected by the lawsuit. This document addresses the hunting programs at Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) concurs and fully supports the regulated consumptive public use of the natural resources associated with the Big Branch Marsh NWR. Refuge hunting is coordinated annually with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries through pre hunt planning meetings where hunt seasons and regulations are proposed to the state. Hunting opportunities provided on the refuge are a component of the state's wildlife management plans. Typically, the state annually asks the refuge to increase the huntable opportunities on the refuge.

Created in 1994, Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge is the 504<sup>th</sup> refuge established within the NWRs. Big Branch Marsh NWR is one of eight refuges managed as part of the Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex. Prior to establishing the refuge, area wetlands were threatened by urban expansion from the city of New Orleans. Several local organizations, including Northshore Coastal Watch, St. Tammany Sportsman's League, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation supported and initiated the establishment of the refuge (USFWS 2000). These organizations lobbied local senators and congressmen to save the wetland areas which resulted in the establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR.

Public interest in the project and governmental support lead to the Service authorizing the establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR on September 29, 1994 under the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986. The original acquisition boundary of the refuge included 12,000 acres of marshlands and forested wetlands between Cane Bayou on the west, Lake Pontchartrain on the south and the Southern Railroad trestle on the east. The initial acquisition occurred on October 13, 1994 when The Conservation Fund (TCF), with funding from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, donated 3,660 acres of wetlands. Subsequently, the refuge acquisition boundary went through two expansion phases. The first expansion proposal, approved in December 1996, consisted of 10,000 acres which included 3 expansion sites: Oak Harbor, a 2,931-acre tract, Fritchie Marsh covering 6,500 acres, and a 500-acre tract along the east side of Lacombe Bayou. The second expansion proposal was approved in April 1998 and included 1,770 acres of wetlands, hardwood ridges, and pine flatwoods adjacent to existing refuge lands. These small tracts of land also included the current 110-acre site for Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex headquarters. Additional acquisitions were made possible by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Land and Water Conservation Act funds, and donations from TCF. Currently, Big Branch Marsh NWR is approximately 17,366 acres of fee title lands within the 24,000 acre acquisition boundary of marshlands and forested

wetlands. Boundaries of the approved acquisition are Cane Bayou on the west, Lake Pontchartrain to the south, LA Highway 90 on the east, and an irregular boundary south of and generally paralleling LA Highway 190.

The federally legislated purposes for which Big Branch Marsh Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established are:

**Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986, 16 USC 3901 (b):**

- For the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.

**North American Wetlands Conservation Act, 16 USC 4401 2(b):**

- To protect, enhance, restore, and manage an appropriate distribution and diversity of wetland ecosystems and other habitats for migratory birds and other fish and wildlife in North America;
- To maintain current or improved distributions of migratory bird populations; and
- To sustain an abundance of waterfowl and other migratory birds consistent with the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the international obligations contained in the migratory bird treaties and conventions and other agreements with Canada, Mexico, and other countries.

The refuge purposes were further defined in the 1994 Final Land Protection Plan and two subsequent Supplemental Environmental Assessments (1996, 1998) for expansion of Big Branch Marsh NWR as the following management objectives:

- To provide habitat for a natural diversity of wildlife associated with Big Branch Marsh;
- To provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl;
- To provide nesting habitat for wood ducks;
- To provide habitat for non-game migratory birds; and
- To provide opportunities for public outdoor recreation, such as hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and environmental education and interpretation, whenever they are compatible with the purposes of the Refuge.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd et seq.) provides authority for the Service to manage the Refuge and its wildlife populations. In addition it declares that compatible wildlife-dependent public uses are legitimate and appropriate uses of the Refuge System that are to receive priority consideration in planning and management. There are six wildlife-dependent public uses: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation. It directs managers to increase recreational opportunities including hunting on National Wildlife Refuges when compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The purpose of this Environmental Assessment is to evaluate the feasibility of opening all lands on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge to hunting under conditions set forth in the refuges attached 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan and in accordance with state regulations and refuge specific regulations and to open hunts of species listed in the 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan.

The proposed action of allowing hunting on the refuge through the 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge which would provide the public with a high quality recreational experience and provide the refuge with a wildlife management tool to promote the biological integrity of the refuge.

## **Chapter 2 Alternatives Including the Proposed Action**

This chapter discusses the alternatives considered for hunting on big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. These alternatives are the 1) no action which continues with current management of the hunt program and 2) proposed action which implements the Refuge's attached 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan

### **2.1 No Action Alternative:**

No Action: This alternative would result in setting aside Big Branch Marsh NWR essentially as a "wildlife sanctuary" with no provisions for the harvest of its wildlife. The FWS would prohibit the sport taking of all game species on all lands acquired in fee title or otherwise managed as a part of the refuge.

### **2.2 Proposed Action: 2007 Hunting Plan for Big Branch Marsh NWR**

Proposed Action: Establishment of a recreational hunting program on refuge lands. Recreational hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR would be carried out in compliance with the refuge recreational hunt plan and in accordance with State, Federal, and special refuge regulations, and FWS policy and directives. All or parts of the refuge may be closed to hunting at any time if necessary for public safety, to provide wildlife sanctuary, or for administrative reasons.

Refer to 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan for Big Branch Marsh NWR for specific regulations.

## **Chapter 3 Affected Environments**

### **GENERAL**

Big Branch Marsh is the last undeveloped large natural area on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. It is unique because it is the only area in coastal Louisiana with an interface of sandy beaches, nearshore grass beds, marshes, hardwood hummocks, and pine ridges. Its overall fish and wildlife resources are substantial. The area's habitat for

wading birds, neo-tropical migratory birds, and shorebirds is outstanding. The area provides good waterfowl habitat and is located within the Lower Mississippi River Watershed, a traditional waterfowl migration corridor.

### **3.1 Physical Environment**

The climate in the area is humid and subtropical. The weather is dominated by the area's proximity to the Gulf of Mexico and daily weather patterns are influenced by Lake Pontchartrain. Average rainfall is approximately 63 inches. Summer months are characterized by afternoon thunderstorms, tropical storms, and the potential for hurricanes. Winters are mild with occasional nights in which the temperature drops below freezing.

Big Branch Marsh NWR is located within the Pontchartrain Basin in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. Sediments forming the Basin were deposited during the Pleistocene geologic epoch, approximately 1.5 million to 25 thousand years ago. At the end of the glacial period, a depositional land form, known as the Pleistocene prairie terrace was formed. The sediments found in the prairie terrace are more consolidated and formed the forested longleaf, loblolly, and slash pine and mixed pine-hardwood areas. Sediments forming the Basin consist of fine sands, silts, and silty clays in landforms, and largely sand in marine environments. One common component is that all sediments have high organic and water components.

About 18,000 years ago, the sea level rose and flooded the area. Approximately 6,000 years ago sea level rise slowed and a barrier beach system was created on the south shore forming the Pontchartrain embayment. Sediments deposited by the Mississippi River enclosed the embayment. Natural processes associated with deltaic development and abandonment eventually led to the development of Lakes Maurepas, Borgne, and Pontchartrain. Land subsidence, faulting, storm events, salt water intrusions, erosion, and sea level rise have been natural occurrences throughout the history of the Pontchartrain Basin. Beginning about 300 years ago, European settlers began to exert an ever increasing influence on the area. Development, river stabilization, levees, canals, roads, etc. have had an impact on the habitats and resources found in and around the refuge. These changes have been especially rapid within the last 100 years.

Urban development significantly changes hydrology. Natural landscapes allow water to slowly and gradually filter into the ground. However, surfaces associated with urban development are nonporous, causing water to accumulate above the surface and run off in large volumes. Areas that have not been susceptible to flooding are now experiencing increased volumes of faster moving water which causes erosion.

Water quality is reduced as a result of urban development. A variety of pollutants is contained in urban runoff. Pollutants include toxic chemicals from automobiles, sediments from new construction, oil, grease, nutrients and pesticides from garden, lawn, and road maintenance, bacteria from improperly managed sewage, and household debris.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina directly hit the area with the eye passing over the eastern sections of the refuge. The environment was drastically changed and will take years to recover; some areas were changed permanently. All forested areas were heavily damaged. Many trees were uprooted or broken. In some areas, tornadoes spawned by the hurricane left few trees standing where dense woods had existed. The storm surge and winds introduced salt water that was detrimental to freshwater vegetation. All refuge marshlands experienced some sediment and vegetation movement, resulting in increased shallow ponding.

### 3.2 Vegetation

The refuge is comprised of approximately 18,600 acres of coastal marsh and pine forested wetlands. The coastal marsh consists of approximately 7,000 acres of vegetated marsh and 6,000 acres of open water. Marsh types vary from brackish to fresh depending on proximity to Lake Pontchartrain and are tidally influenced through numerous natural bayous and drainages and man-made canals. Dominant marsh vegetation includes wiregrass (*Spartina patens*), smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*), and various rushes (*Juncaceae* sp.). Interior marsh ponds and bayous compose open water habitat within the marsh system.

The transition from marsh to forested wetlands is distinct within the refuge. Pinelands along much of the marsh edge are prone to shallow flooding and support an understory of wiregrass.

Typically, vegetation above the five foot contour line is characteristic of pine flatwoods and savannahs found in the northern portions of the refuge. The predominate pine species are slash (*Pinus elliottii*) and loblolly (*Pinus taeda*), with few pockets of longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*). Within the approximately 5,000 acres of forested lands, habitats are predominately pine forest with hardwood hummocks and sumps scattered throughout. Hardwood forests and swamps are present along the major and minor drainages which bisect the refuge. Hardwoods areas are dominated by oaks (*Quercus* sp.), sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), and green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*).

#### Vegetation and Land Use

This particular area of Louisiana is a unique botanical zone that contains a diverse combination of plant communities found in very few places. Grass beds along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain are the healthiest in the lake and consist of eelgrass, wigeon grass, and spike rush. Inland from the lake in the marsh there are three major plant zones. The first zone consists of wiregrass, *Paspalum* sp., rattlebox, Roseau, freshwater threesquare, and marsh elder which occur on a sandy beach fringing the lake.

The next inland plant zone is the brackish marsh zone. Here the water level is slightly above the marsh floor. Plants in this zone include wiregrass, brackish three-cornered

grass, saltmarsh pluchea, saltmarsh aster, deerpea, and loosestrife. Hogcane dominates on the natural levees of the bayous and inlets.

The third zone is the intermediate marsh zone. The water level here is slightly below the marsh floor. The predominate plants are wiregrass, *Bacopa* sp., sedge, bulltongue, alligatorweed, black rush, sugarcane, plumegrass, smartweed, fanwort, coontail, white waterlily, and spike rush.

Another plant zone outside the marsh areas is the upland zone and it consists of pine ridges and bottomland hardwood hummocks. The pine ridges are dominated by slash pine, live oak, wax myrtle, and sweetgum. The bottomland hardwood areas are dominated by bald cypress, black willow, red maple palmetto, green ash, and hackberry.

The upland areas have high pine site indexes and produce excellent stands of slash pine. Much of the original cypress was logged in the past.

### **3.3 Wildlife Resources**

The refuge is a mixture of marshes, pine islands, pine ridges, and hardwood hammocks and drains along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Lake Pontchartrain is a shallow, flat-bottomed, fresh to brackish water lake. The lake's water salinity varies widely dependent on rainfall and wind direction. Heavy rainfall will freshen the lake and its adjacent marshes, while drought and strong easterly winds will cause higher salinity water to move into the area. Salinity in the tidally influenced portions of the refuge has ranged from less than 5 ppt to over 20 ppt.

Diverse habitat types within Big Branch Marsh NWR provide valuable habitat for numerous wildlife species. Refuge habitats attract 15 species of migratory waterfowl, 2 species of resident waterfowl, geese, shorebirds, wading birds, neotropical migratory birds, alligators, federally-listed RCW and bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), mammals, and other wildlife. Mammals common in the area include white-tailed deer, mink, nutria, raccoon, rabbits, squirrel, and river otter. The refuge ponds, bayous, estuaries, and the vegetated shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain provide spawning and nursery habitat for commercially important species of fish, crabs, and shrimp. Recreationally important fishes such as largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*), catfish (*Ictaluridae*), and sunfish (*Centrarchidae*) are also abundant within the waters of the refuge. Recreational crabbing is extremely popular and productive.

Numerous species of birds utilize Big Branch Marsh for nesting roosting, and feeding. Clapper rails can be found year-round, while Virginia rails and Sora rails are usual winter visitors. King rails and gallinules are found year-round in limited numbers. Seabird and wading birds include the black-crowned night heron; snowy and great egrets; great blue, green-backed and tri-colored herons; white ibis, American and least bitterns; royal, Caspian and least terns; herring and laughing gulls. Raptors include osprey and northern harriers. There is an active osprey nest within the proposed refuge. Shorebirds include

various plovers, sandpipers, willet, black-necked stilt, American oystercatcher, and killdeer. The most common waterfowl species which winter in the area are gadwall, American wigeon, blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, mallard, northern pintail, American coot, northern shoveler, mottled duck, wood duck, ring-necked duck and lesser scaup. Mottled ducks and wood ducks are the only ducks which nest in the vicinity. Numbers of wintering waterfowl are substantial at times and are expected to benefit from the added protection from disturbance provided by the refuge. Historically, geese used the North shore, thus the name Goose Point, just to the west of the mouth of Bayou LaCombe.

The many ponds, lagoons, and nearshore grass beds provide good waterfowl habitat. The sandy beaches, marsh, and lagoons provide excellent habitat for shorebirds and wading birds. The pine ridges, hardwood hummocks, and bottomland hardwood swamps offer prime migration and breeding habitat for neotropical migratory birds. These ridges and swamps on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain offer the first significant landfall habitats for neotropical migratory birds after their trans-Gulf of Mexico migrations.

Game animals include white-tailed deer and swamp rabbit. Nutria, common muskrat, North American mink, northern raccoon, Virginia opossum, and river otter are the primary furbearers.

Historically, this area was known for its high quality fur, although the collapse of the fur market has substantially reduced this traditional activity. Alligators are still in demand and the refuge lands were leased for alligator hunting on an annual basis prior to acquisition. Non-game mammals include nine-banded armadillos, marsh rice rats and other small mammal species.

Species of concern and/or significance for management purposes occurring on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge are listed below. For a complete list of birds found on the refuge, contact refuge headquarters for a bird list.

**Common Name**

**Scientific Name**

**Birds**

Red-cockaded Woodpecker  
 Bald Eagle  
 Brown Pelican  
 Wood Duck  
 Gadwall  
 American Widgeon  
 Mallard  
 Mottled Duck  
 Blue-winged Teal  
 Northern Shoveler  
 Northern Pintail  
 Green-winged Teal

*Picoides borealis*  
*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*  
*Pelecanus occidentalis*  
*Aix sponsa*  
*Anas strepera*  
*Anas americana*  
*Anas platyrhynchos*  
*Anas fulvigula*  
*Anas discors*  
*Anas clypeata*  
*Anas acuta*  
*Anas crecca*

Canvasback  
Redhead  
Ring-necked Duck  
Greater Scaup  
Lesser Scaup  
Common Goldeneye  
Bufflehead  
Hooded Merganser  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Ruddy Duck  
American Swallow-tailed Kite

*Aythya valisineria*  
*Aythya americana*  
*Aythya collaris*  
*Aythya marila*  
*Aythya affinis*  
*Bucephala clangula*  
*Bucephala albeola*  
*Lophodytes cucullatus*  
*Mergus serrator*  
*Oxyura jamaicensis*  
*Elanoides forficatus*

### **Mammals**

White-tailed Deer  
Nutria  
Feral Hogs

*Odocoileus virginianus*  
*Myocastor coypus*  
*Sus scrofa*

### **Reptiles and Amphibians**

American Alligator

*Alligator mississippiensis*

### **Fish**

Gulf Sturgeon

*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*

### **Plant Communities**

Pine Flatwoods  
Pine Savannah  
Fresh Marsh  
Brackish Marsh  
Intermediate Marsh  
Submergent Vascular Vegetation  
Bayhead Swamp (hardwood dominated drainage)

## **3.4 Threatened and Endangered Species**

Endangered or threatened species that may use this area include the bald eagle, gulf sturgeon, brown pelican, West Indian Manatee, and red-cockaded woodpecker. Fountainbleu State Park, which lies adjacent to the western boundary of the refuge, has a long history of red-cockaded woodpecker use. Bald eagles are common winter residents and utilize the basin for foraging. Piping plovers migrate through this area in the spring and fall. Brown pelicans are found throughout the Lake Pontchartrain Basin and are increasing in numbers. Occasional manatees are spotted in the Lake Pontchartrain waters during warm months.

### **3.4.1 Red-cockaded Woodpecker**

The red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) is confined to old pine stands in the southeastern United States. Because this species evolved in a fire-maintained ecosystem, these woodpeckers prefer open, park-like pine stands with no midstory and herbaceous groundcover. Red-cockaded woodpeckers (RCW) excavate only live pine trees that are usually 75 years old or greater. Habitat loss and then demographic isolation are the primary cause of their endangerment. Pine stands are on shorter rotations and fire has been excluded from most of the landscape causing RCW habitat to be scarce. The RCW Recovery Plan calls for growing season burns, pine basal areas of 40-70 sq. ft, the installation of artificial cavities, population monitoring, and the translocation of individuals to help increase genetic diversity and overcome demographic isolation (USFWS 2003).

Currently, there are 14 active groups of RCWs on big Branch Marsh NWR. When populations are this small and this isolated, any mortality of adults affects the population greatly. Any population under 30 groups is not considered viable, or to be relatively safe from extirpation (USFWS 2003).

The refuge plans to increase the RCW population on pine lands that can be managed to improve RCW habitat. These lands comprise 4,709 acres of upland pine or pine/hardwood. Preliminary efforts aimed at increasing the woodpecker population have been slow. Burn units have been established and prescribed burning is accomplished when possible. Mechanical work has been conducted to remove dense understory vegetation in some areas. Recruitment clusters have been established by installing artificial cavities.

### **3.4.2 Bald Eagle**

Many bald eagles are seen during the year, most of them during winter along the pine tree and marsh line. One nest on refuge and two nests off refuge were successful until Hurricane Katrina. Since then, the nest trees have died, but eagles have been found in the area and may re-nest.

### **3.5 Fishery Resources**

The refuge ponds, bayous, estuaries, and the vegetated shoreline of Lake Pontchartrain provide spawning and nursery habitat for commercially important species of fish, crabs, and shrimp. Recreationally important fishes such as largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*), catfish (*Ictaluridae*), and sunfish (*Centrarchidae*) are also abundant within the waters of the refuge. Recreational crabbing is extremely popular and productive.

This entire area serves as an important nursery for fish, shrimp, and crabs and represents one of the better fish production areas on Lake Pontchartrain. The mix of brackish and fresh water provides habitat for many fresh and salt water fish. The fishery varies with the season and the accompanying salinity.

Anglers regularly catch largemouth bass, redfish, speckled trout, drum, catfish, and bream in the area's bayous and ponds. Recreational crabbing is very popular along State Highway 434 which parallels Bayou Lacombe through the marsh.

The threatened Gulf of Mexico sturgeon is anadromous, spending a portion of its life cycle in rivers and bays, and migrating between those areas and the Gulf of Mexico when mature. It is found in Lake Pontchartrain and could also use tributaries such as Bayou Lacombe, Bayou Liberty, Salt Bayou, or Bayou Bonfouca.

### **3.6 Cultural Resources**

The body of federal historic preservation laws has grown dramatically since the enactment of the Antiquities Act of 1906. Several themes recur in these laws, their promulgating regulations, and more recent Executive Orders. They include: 1) each agency is to systematically inventory the "historic properties" on their holdings and to scientifically assess each property's eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places; 2) federal agencies are to consider the impacts to cultural resources during the agencies' management activities and seek to avoid or mitigate adverse impacts; 3) the protection of cultural resources from looting and vandalism are to be accomplished through a mix of informed management, law enforcement efforts, and public education; and 4) the increasing role of consultation with groups, such as Native American tribes, in addressing how a project or management activity may impact specific archaeological sites and landscapes deemed important to those groups. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, like other federal agencies, are legally mandated to inventory, assess, and protect cultural resources located on those lands that the agency owns, manages, or controls. The Service's cultural resource policy is delineated in 614 FW 1-5 and 126 FW 1-3. In the FWS's Southeast Region, the cultural resource review and compliance process is initiated by contacting the Regional Historic Preservation Officer/Regional Archaeologist (RHPO/RA). The RHPO/RA will determine whether the proposed undertaking has the potential to impact cultural resources, identify the "area of potential effect," determine the appropriate level of scientific investigation necessary to ensure legal compliance, and initiates consultation with the pertinent State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and federally recognized Tribes.

None of the refuge sites covered by this assessment are known to be eligible for inclusion on the *National Register of Historic Places* at this time and they will not be designated as scientific sites. The Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 specifically prohibits making available to the general public the location of any archaeological site, if such notification may create a risk of harm to the site.

### **3.7 Socio Economic**

In St. Tammany Parish, wetlands and forested lands are being converted to subdivisions, shopping centers, and business complexes at a rapid rate. St. Tammany is the fifth largest parish in Louisiana in population, with the 2005 population estimated at 220,295 and has been the fastest growing parish since the 1970s. The influx of people looking for higher

ground after Hurricane Katrina increased this fast-paced trend. The economy is primarily retail trade, health care, and professional, scientific, and technical services. Residents of the parish are employed in jobs ranging from agriculture to space technology. The median household income in 1999 was \$55,346. The population growth can be attributed to the parish's proximity to New Orleans, low business costs, good school system, labor availability, and a strong medical community.

The refuge, with an estimated 49,300 visitors in 2005, provides an important source of recreation in the parish. Most visitors are interested in wildlife observation, fishing, and hunting. Many people are also interested in environmental education and interpretive programs, and wildlife photography.

**Table 1. Demographics of St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, based on U.S. Census 2000 data and the Louisiana Recovery Authority.**

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Households</i>	<i>Families</i>	<i>Housing Units</i>	<i>Median Annual Household Income (\$)</i>
St. Tammany	191,268 Post Katrina 220,600	69,253	52,701	75,398	\$47,883

St. Tammany Parish has experienced tremendous population growth in recent years. There has been a 50 percent increase in rural growth during the last decade alone. This continuing growth results in a high demand for outdoor recreational opportunities on public lands, including Big Branch Marsh NWR.

Businesses along US Highway 190 between Mandeville and Slidell consist primarily of small family owned stores, restaurants, and small commercial enterprises. In addition, there are several commercial and recreational fishing camps and marinas along Bayou Bonfouca and Bayou Liberty.

Many area residents enjoy a suburban lifestyle that includes frequent recreational use of the abundant natural resources of the area. A high percentage of the households enjoy hunting, fishing and boating for both sport and subsistence. The bayous and lakes are available to the public and fishing, shrimping, and water sports are popular uses of these waterways. Refuge lands have not been available for public use. Prior to acquisition, most of the marsh land was leased for duck hunting and the pine ridges and hardwood hummocks were leased for deer hunting.

North Shore residents also participate in many forms of non-consumptive outdoor recreation. Biking, hiking, camping, bird watching, canoeing, and other outdoor sports are popular. Recently, the old Gulf Mobile and Ohio railroad right-of-way north of the refuge boundary was converted into a bike path.

## **Chapter 4 Environmental Consequences**

This chapter describes the foreseeable environmental consequences of implementing the two management alternatives in Chapter 2. When detailed information is available, a scientific and analytic comparison between alternatives and their anticipated consequences is presented, which is described as “impacts” or “effects.” When detailed information is not available, those comparisons are based on the professional judgment and experience of refuge staff and Service and State biologists.

### **4.1 Effects Common to all Alternatives**

“Cumulative Impacts” refers to effects on the environment resulting from incremental consequences of the proposed action when added to other past, present, and reasonable foreseeable future actions, regardless of who takes these actions whether on same lands or nearby lands. Cumulative impacts can result from minor actions collectively becoming numerous and significant over a period of time. The cumulative actions of both alternatives are discussed in terms of human health of low-income populations, public health and safety, refuge physical environment, cultural resources, refuge facilities, habitat, hunted wildlife, non-hunted wildlife, wildlife dependant recreation, and endangered and threatened species.

#### **4.1.1 Environmental Justice (Human health – low income)**

Executive Order 12898 “Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations” was signed by President Bill Clinton on February 11, 1994, to focus federal attention on the environmental and human health conditions of minority and low-income populations with the goal of achieving environmental protection for all communities. The Order directed federal agencies to develop environmental justice strategies to aid in identifying and addressing disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income populations. The Order is also intended to promote nondiscrimination in federal programs substantially affecting human health and the environment, and to provide minority and low-income communities access to public information and participation in matters relating to human health or the environment. The mission of the Fish and Wildlife Service is to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife resources and their habitats for the continuing benefits of the American people. The environmental justice strategy of the Fish and Wildlife Service fulfills this mission by ensuring all segments of the human population have equal access to the refuges wildlife resources.

This assessment has not identified any adverse or beneficial effects for either alternative unique to minority or low-income populations in the affected area. Neither alternative will disproportionately place any adverse environmental, economic, social, nor health impacts on minority or low-income populations.

#### **4.1.2 Public Health and Safety**

Each alternative would have similar effects or minimal to negligible effects on human health and safety. No rifle hunting will be allowed on the refuge because of the urban interface of the refuge with neighbors. Special regulations will be implemented as described in the hunt plan to provide safety to people; For example, no hunt zones in high public use areas and no hunting within a public parking area or pipeline. The public already hunts more liberally through surrounding areas on private lands and on the Adjacent Pearl River Wildlife Management Area. However, Fountainbleu State Park, a neighbor on the western border of the refuge does not allow hunting. Total hunting pressure should change little in the area whether the refuge is closed to hunting or open entirely as described in the 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan.

#### **4.1.3 Refuge Physical Environment**

Impacts of each alternative on the refuge physical environment would have similar minimal to negligible effects. Some disturbance to surface soils, topography, and vegetation would occur in areas selected for hunting; however effects would be minimal. Hunting would benefit vegetation as it is used to keep many resident wildlife populations in balance with the habitat's carrying capacity. The refuge would also control access to minimize habitat degradation.

Impacts to the natural hydrology would have negligible effects. The refuge expects impacts to air and water quality to be minimal and only due to refuge visitors' automobile and off-road vehicle emissions and run-off from road and trail sides. The effect of these refuge-related activities on overall air and water quality in the region are anticipated to be relatively negligible. Existing State water quality criteria and use classifications are adequate to achieve desired on-refuge conditions; thus, implementation of the proposed action would not impact adjacent landowners or users beyond the constraints already implemented under existing State standards and laws.

Impacts associated with solitude are expected to be minimal given time and space zone management techniques, such as seasonal access and area closures, used to avoid conflicts among user groups.

#### **4.1.4. Cultural Resources**

Indigenous Native Americans were present in the area dating back to 1800 B.C. The original inhabitants were nomadic hunters, which later gave way to more sedentary mound building cultures. Muskegon peoples were firmly established in the area, including the Bayougoula tribe which resided along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain and survived on seafood harvested from the lakes, the Acolapissa which lived along the Pearl River, the Houma which was the most dominant tribe, and the Chitimacha. Tribes who migrated to or through St. Tammany were the Biloxi, Kiasata, and Choctaw. No organized cultural resource surveys have taken place on the refuge. There are no known mounds, but several middens are located along waterways.

As European exploration occurred, the French were the first to claim the area, and the native tribes began to migrate west away from the intrusion. The French concluded that the land of St. Tammany Parish was too low, the water too brackish to drink, and mosquitoes were too bad to accommodate further settlement. By the 1700s, the forested north shore of Lake Pontchartrain was used to supply the emerging city of New Orleans with meat and naval stores of tar, pitch, turpentine and resin. The first significant European settlement on the north shore occurred during the British occupation through land grants. Britain's claim to the area was transferred to Spain after their loss in the American Revolution, and Spain continued to offer land grants. American control was exerted in the early 1800s. St. Tammany Parish's history was greatly influenced by the abundant sources of water and the navigable waterways. After the Civil War, the economy flourished as New Orleanians traveled to the north shore for fresh air. A resort community built up as people flocked across Lake Pontchartrain to escape epidemics such as yellow fever and to sample the artesian water with legendary healing powers. Natural resources of the area, timber and bricks, porcelain and glass made from the clay and sandy soils, became important trade items with the advent of the rail system. The north and south shores of Lake Pontchartrain were linked by bridges causing thousands of New Orleanians to relocate to St. Tammany Parish and commute into the city.

A former Catholic seminary and high school in Lacombe now serves as the administrative headquarters of the Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex. The Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex headquarters site, referred to as Bayou Lacombe Centre, includes historic buildings and gardens and poses a unique opportunity for restoration. Under each alternative, hunting, regardless of method or species targeted, is a consumptive activity that does not pose any threat to historic properties on and/or near the Refuge.

#### **4.1.5 Impacts to Refuge Facilities (roads, trails, parking lots)**

##### *No Action Alternative*

Additional damage to roads and trails due to hunter use during wet weather periods would not occur; however, other users would still be using roads, thereby necessitating periodic maintenance. Additionally, costs associated with an expanded hunting program in the form of road maintenance, instructional sign needs, and law enforcement would not be applicable.

##### *Proposed Action Alternative*

The Service defines facilities as: "Real property that serves a particular function(s) such as buildings, roads, utilities, water control structures, raceways, etc." Under the proposed action those facilities most utilized by hunters are: roads, parking lots, trails and boat launching ramps with minor utilization of a few buildings such as rest-rooms and designated check stations. Maintenance or improvement of existing facilities (i.e. parking areas, roads, trails, boat ramps and buildings) will cause minimal short term impacts to localized soils and waters, and, may cause some wildlife disturbances and damage to vegetation. The facility maintenance and improvement activities described are

periodically conducted to accommodate daily refuge management operations and general public uses such as wildlife observation and photography. These activities will be conducted at times (seasonal and/or daily) to cause the least amount of disturbance to wildlife. During times when roads are impassible due to flood events or other natural causes those roads, parking lots, trails and boat ramps impacted by the event will be closed to vehicular use.

Additional damage to roads and trails due to hunter use during wet weather periods might occur. The current refuge hunt program on 14,000 acres for the past nine years has shown these impacts to be minimal. There would be some costs associated with a hunting program in the form of road and trail maintenance, instructional sign needs, and law enforcement. These costs should be minimal relative to total refuge operations and maintenance costs and would not diminish resources dedicated to other refuge management programs.

Maintenance or improvement of existing facilities (i.e. parking areas, roads, trails, and boat ramps) will cause minimal short term impacts to localized soils and waters and may cause some wildlife disturbances and damage to vegetation.

#### **4.1.6 Impacts to Habitat**

##### *No Action Alternative*

Under this alternative, the refuge would not be opened to any hunting. When deer are overpopulated, they over browse their habitat, which can change the structure and plant composition of a forest. Young tree seedlings (1-9 years old) can be killed by over browsing. Damage includes erosion along waterways and wetlands and the loss of native plants.

Although hunters would not be traversing across the refuge, which could cause damage to individual plants by trampling vegetation, non-consumptive users would still be able to walk throughout the area.

##### *Proposed Action Alternative*

The biological integrity of the refuge would be protected under this alternative, and the refuge purpose of conserving wetlands for wildlife would be achieved. The hunting of whitetail deer, migratory game birds (waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe), and upland game (squirrel, rabbit, rail, gallinule, quail, and raccoon) would positively impact wildlife habitat by promoting plant health and diversity, reducing overpopulation which destroys vegetation and compacts soils, and increasing tree seedling survival.

The additional acreage would be utilized more by the public (hunters) than previously which might cause increased trampling of vegetation. Impacts to vegetation should be minor. Hunter density is estimated to be an average of 1 hunter/1,000 acres throughout the hunting season. Refuge-regulations would not permit the use of ATVs off of designated trails. Vehicles would be confined to existing roads and parking lots.

#### 4.1.7 Impacts to Hunted Wildlife

##### *No Action Alternative*

Additional mortality of individual hunted animals would not occur under this alternative. Disturbance by hunters to hunted wildlife would not occur; however, other public uses that cause disturbance, such as wildlife observation and photography, would still be permitted and would likely increase to levels of hunters if no hunting is allowed.

Whitetail deer, migratory game birds (waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, rail, gallinule) and upland game (squirrel, rabbit, quail, and raccoon) populations could exceed the habitat's carrying capacity in the area not opened to hunting. The likelihood of starvation and diseases, such as bluetongue and EHD in deer and distemper and rabies in raccoon, would increase as would vehicle-deer collisions. There would be no positive or negative impact on waterfowl populations. Compared to the preferred alternative, the area would be a waterfowl sanctuary.

##### *Proposed Action Alternative*

Additional mortality of individual hunted animals would occur under this alternative, estimated by the refuge to be a maximum of 50 deer, 1,000 ducks and coots, 200 squirrel, and 5 white-fronted geese annually. Estimates for other hunted species (woodcock, snipe, rabbit, rail, gallinule, quail, and raccoon) would be less than 20 individuals per species based on observations from law enforcement compliance checks. Most waterfowl in the area migrate to the neighboring Pearl River Management Area or the sanctuary refuge of Bayou Sauvage NWR. Hunting causes some disturbance to not only the species being hunted but other game species as well. However, refuge regulations would minimize incidental disturbance.

Hunting of deer and raccoon would help maintain their populations at or below carrying-capacity. The likelihood of starvation and diseases, such as bluetongue and EHD in deer and distemper and rabies in raccoon, would be decreased as would deer-vehicle collisions. Hunting of squirrel, woodcock, rabbit and quail would have limited adverse impact on these species.

While managed hunting opportunities result in both short and long term impacts to individual animals, effects at the population level are usually negligible. Small game animal populations are capable of sustaining harvest because of their short reproduction cycles. Hunting regulations for both endemic and migratory game species are based on specific state-wide and nation-wide harvest objectives. Migratory bird regulations are established at the federal level each year following a series of meetings involving both state and federal biologists. Harvest guidelines are based on population survey and habitat condition data. Refuge hunting programs are always within these regulations. As currently proposed, the known and anticipated levels of disturbance of allowing hunting are considered minimal and well within the tolerance level of known wildlife species and populations present on the refuge. All hunting activities would be conducted with the

constraints of sound biological principles and refuge-specific regulations established to restrict illegal or questionable activities. Monitoring activities through wildlife inventories and assessments of public use levels and activities would be utilized, and public use programs would be adjusted as needed to limit disturbance.

Implementation of an effective law enforcement program and development of site specific refuge regulations that are reviewed annually should minimize most incidental take problems.

#### **4.1.8 Impacts to Non-hunted Wildlife**

##### *No Action Alternative*

Predator species may become overpopulated, depredating turtle, and songbird nests at high rates. For example, In North Louisiana, research conducted on one population of alligator snapping turtles has shown that raccoons are responsible for depredating 93% of turtle nests (USFWS 2002). Under this alternative, feral hog populations would increase dramatically. Non-native hogs are predators of small mammals and deer fawns as well as ground-nesting birds.

Increased disturbance to non-hunted wildlife would not occur in the refuge; however, non-consumptive users would still be permitted to access this land, which might cause disturbance to wildlife.

##### *Proposed Action Alternative*

Populations of wildlife predators would be decreased through hunting under this alternative. Depredation rates of songbirds, turkeys, turtles and their nests would decrease. Feral hog populations would be reduced thereby decreasing predation of deer fawns, turkeys and small mammals.

Disturbance to non-hunted wildlife would increase slightly. However, significant disturbance would be unlikely for the following reasons. Small mammals, including bats, are inactive during winter when hunting season occurs and are nocturnal. Both of these qualities make hunter interactions with small mammals very rare. Hibernation or torpor by cold-blood reptiles and amphibians also limits their activity during the hunting season when temperatures are low. Hunters would rarely encounter reptiles and amphibians during most of the hunting season. Invertebrates are also not active during cold weather and would have few interactions with hunters during the hunting season. The refuge has estimated current hunter density on peak days to be no more than 1 hunter per 100 acres. During the vast majority of the hunting season, hunter density is much lower (1 hunter/1,000 acres). Refuge regulations further mitigate possible disturbance by hunters to non-hunted wildlife. Vehicles are restricted to roads and the harassment or taking of any wildlife other than the game species legal for the season is not permitted. Disturbance to the daily wintering activities, such as feeding and resting, of birds might occur, but would be transitory as hunters traverse habitat. Disturbance to birds by hunters would probably be commensurate with that caused by non-consumptive users.

#### **4.1.9 Impacts to Endangered and Threatened Species**

##### *No Action Alternative*

If hunting is not allowed, non-consumptive users are expected to increase. Because current public use levels on the refuge would remain the same, there would be no increased chance of cumulatively affecting threatened and endangered species.

##### *Proposed Action Alternative*

A potential disadvantage of this alternative is its effect on threatened and endangered species on the refuge such as the bald eagle and red-cockaded woodpecker. However, a Section 7 Evaluation associated with this assessment was conducted, and it was determined that the proposed action is not likely to cumulatively affect these species (Refer to 2007 Section 7 Evaluation for Recreational Hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR). Direct effects to endangered species would be through human/wildlife contact. Public contact and interest in endangered species on the refuge are mainly through non consumptive uses and would remain the same in either alternative.

#### **4.1.10 Impacts to Wildlife Dependant Recreation**

##### *No Action Alternative*

The public would not have the opportunity to harvest a renewable resource, participate in wildlife-oriented recreation that is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established, have an increased awareness of Big Branch Marsh NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System; nor would the Service be meeting public use demand. Public relations would not be enhanced with the local community. Under this alternative, youth would be unable to experience hunting.

##### *Proposed Action Alternative*

As public use levels expand across time, unanticipated conflicts between user groups may occur. Experience has proven that time and space zoning (e.g., establishment of separate use areas, use periods, and restrictions on the number of users) is an effective tool in eliminating conflicts between user groups. Squirrel and rabbit hunters would not be able to use dogs until after the last deer gun hunt to ensure conflicts do not arise. Conflicts between hunters and non-consumptive users might occur but would be mitigated by time (non-hunting season) and space zoning. The refuge would focus non-consumptive use (mainly bird watching and other wildlife viewing) in the small but high public use areas that are closed to hunting.



The public would be allowed to harvest a renewable resource, and the refuge would be promoting a wildlife-oriented recreational opportunity that is compatible with the purpose for which the refuge was established. The public would have an increased awareness of Big Branch Marsh NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System and public demand for more hunting would be met. The public would also have the opportunity to harvest a renewable resource in a traditional manner, which is culturally important to the local community. This alternative would also allow the public to enjoy hunting at no or little cost in a region where private land is leased for hunting, often costing a person \$300-\$2000/year for membership. This alternative would allow youth the opportunity to experience a wildlife-dependant recreation, instill an appreciation for and understanding of wildlife, the natural world and the environment and promote a land ethic and environmental awareness.

## **4.2 Cumulative Impacts Analysis**

### **4.2.1 Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of Proposed Action on Wildlife Species.**

#### **4.2.1.1 Migratory Birds**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working with partners, annually prescribe frameworks, or outer limits, for dates and times when hunting may occur and the number of birds that may be taken and possessed. These frameworks are necessary to allow State selections of season and limits for recreation and sustenance; aid Federal, State, and tribal governments in the management of migratory game birds; and permit harvests at levels compatible with population status and habitat conditions. Because the Migratory Bird Treaty Act stipulates that all hunting seasons for migratory game birds are closed unless specifically opened by the Secretary of the Interior, the Service annually promulgates regulations (50 CFR Part 20) establishing the frameworks from which States may select season dates, bag limits, shooting hours, and other options for the each migratory bird hunting season. The frameworks are essentially permissive in that hunting of migratory birds would not be permitted without them. Thus, in effect, Federal annual regulations both allow and limit the hunting of migratory birds.

Migratory game birds are those bird species so designated in conventions between the United States and several foreign nations for the protection and management of these birds. Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 703-712), the Secretary of the Interior is authorized to determine when "hunting, taking, capture, killing, possession, sale, purchase, shipment, transportation, carriage, or export of any ... bird, or any part, nest, or egg" of migratory game birds can take place, and to adopt regulations for this purpose. These regulations are written after giving due regard to "the zones of temperature and to the distribution, abundance, economic value, breeding habits, and times and lines of migratory flight of such birds, and are updated annually (16 U.S.C. 704(a)). This responsibility has been delegated to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the lead federal agency for managing and conserving migratory birds in the United States. Acknowledging regional differences in hunting conditions, the Service has administratively divided the nation into four Flyways for the primary purpose of

managing migratory game birds. Each Flyway (Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, and Pacific) has a Flyway Council, a formal organization generally composed of one member from each State and Province in that Flyway. Big Branch Marsh NWR is within the Mississippi Flyway. The control/reduction of hunted populations on the refuge, concomitant with similar wildlife management efforts on refuges throughout the National Wildlife Refuge System, conserves the cumulative health of the habitat of the flyway in which the refuge is located and the migratory birds that utilize that flyway.

The process for adopting migratory game bird hunting regulations, located in 50 CFR part 20, is constrained by three primary factors. Legal and administrative considerations dictate how long the rule making process will last. Most importantly, however, the biological cycle of migratory game birds controls the timing of data-gathering activities and thus the dates on which these results are available for consideration and deliberation. The process of adopting migratory game bird hunting regulations includes two separate regulations-development schedules, based on "early" and "late" hunting season regulations. Early hunting seasons pertain to all migratory game bird species in Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands; migratory game birds other than waterfowl (e.g., coots, woodcock, snipe, rail, and gallinule, etc.); and special early waterfowl seasons, such as teal or resident Canada geese. Early hunting seasons generally begin prior to October 1. Late hunting seasons generally start on or after October 1 and include most waterfowl seasons not already established. There are basically no differences in the processes for establishing either early or late hunting seasons. For each cycle, Service biologists and others gather, analyze, and interpret biological survey data and provide this information to all those involved in the process through a series of published status reports and presentations to Flyway Councils and other interested parties (USFWS 2006).

Under the proposed action, Big Branch Marsh NWR estimates a maximum additional 1,000 ducks, and 5 white-fronted geese would be harvested each year. This harvest impact represents 0.1%, and <0.03%, respectively of Louisiana's four-year average harvest of 921,990 ducks, and 72,611 white-fronted geese (USFWS 2005). Because the Service is required to take abundance of migratory birds and other factors in to consideration, the Service undertakes a number of surveys throughout the year in conjunction with the Canadian Wildlife Service, State and Provincial wildlife-management agencies, and others. To determine the appropriate frameworks for each species, the Service considers factors such as population size and trend, geographical distribution, annual breeding effort, the condition of breeding and wintering habitat, the number of hunters, and the anticipated harvest. After frameworks are established for season lengths, bag limits, and areas for migratory game bird hunting, migratory game bird management becomes a cooperative effort of State and Federal Governments. After Service establishment of final frameworks for hunting seasons, the States may select season dates, bag limits, and other regulatory options for the hunting seasons. States may always be more conservative in their selections than the Federal frameworks but never more liberal. Season dates and bag limits for National Wildlife Refuges open to hunting are never longer or larger than the State regulations. In fact, based upon the findings of an environmental assessment developed when a National Wildlife Refuge opens a new

hunting activity, season dates and bag limits may be more restrictive than the State allows. At Big Branch Marsh NWR, season length is more restrictive for waterfowl than the State allows and hunting of doves is not allowed. Waterfowl hunting is only allowed until noon and only for four days each week during the season, which is more restrictive than regulations set forth by Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF). Waterfowl hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR should not have cumulative impacts on migratory bird populations.

NEPA considerations by the Service for hunted migratory game bird species are addressed by the programmatic document, “Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement: Issuance of Annual Regulations Permitting the Sport Hunting of Migratory Birds (FSES 88– 14),” filed with the Environmental Protection Agency on June 9, 1988. We published Notice of Availability in the Federal Register on June 16, 1988 (53 FR 22582), and our Record of Decision on August 18, 1988 (53 FR 31341). Annual NEPA considerations for waterfowl hunting frameworks are covered under a separate Environmental Assessment, “Duck Hunting Regulations for 2006-07,” and an August 24, 2006, Finding of No Significant Impact. Further, in a notice published in the September 8, 2005, Federal Register (70 FR 53376), the Service announced its intent to develop a new Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the migratory bird hunting program. Public scoping meetings were held in the spring of 2006, as announced in a March 9, 2006, Federal Register notice (71 FR 12216). More information may be obtained from: Chief, Division of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, MS MBSP-4107-ARLSQ, 1849 C Street, NWR, Washington, DC 20240.

Although woodcock are showing declines in numbers on their breeding grounds, habitat loss is considered to be the culprit, not hunting. This assertion was tested in a study conducted by the U.S. Geological Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in 2005 (McAuley *et al.* 2005). Results showed no significant differences in woodcock survival between hunted and non-hunted areas. Furthermore, the authors concluded that hunting was not having a considerable impact on woodcock numbers in the Northeast (McAuley *et al.* 2005).

An estimated 24,000 woodcock were harvested in the 2005/06 season in the state of Louisiana. Louisiana’s harvest of 24,000 woodcock represented 0.5% of the estimated 4.6 million North American woodcock population. Limited woodcock habitat exists during most of the hunting season because tidal flooding inundates the refuge. During extremely dry years, when more woodcock habitat becomes available, they may experience higher harvest rates. With such relatively few woodcock being currently harvested on the refuge, the opening to hunting as stated in the proposed action should have no cumulative effects on their local, regional or flyway populations.

#### 4.2.1.2 Resident Big Game

##### 4.2.1.2.1 Deer

Deer hunting does not have regional population impacts due to restricted home ranges. The average home range of a male deer in Mississippi is  $1,511 \pm 571$  S.D hectares. (Mott *et al.* 1985). Therefore, only local impacts occur. The Louisiana Dept of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) recorded deer harvest rates on lands on a 25,000-acre management area from 1993-2003. An average of 213 deer per year was harvested during the 10-year period. Average weights of deer and lactation rates of females remained stable throughout (LDWF 2003).

Harvest and survey data confirm that decades of deer hunting on surrounding private lands (using bait and a longer season) have not had a local cumulative effect on the deer population. LDWF estimate 209,200 deer were harvested throughout the state in 2005/06. The average annual statewide harvest since 1995 is 234,000 deer. The refuge estimates an additional maximum 25 deer would be harvested under the proposed action, representing only 0.01% of the long-term average state harvest. Archery hunting deer on 18,000 acres of refuge lands should not have cumulative impacts on the deer herd.

White-tailed deer is present refuge wide, primarily on the higher, forested areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents and hunting club members prior to the establishment of the refuge and have been sufficient to sustain a hunting program while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations. Since refuge hunting of deer under the hunting plan will be less than hunting allowed as private lands prior to refuge establishment, the cumulative impacts will be lessened.

Competition between white-tailed deer and other species could potentially occur if population levels are allowed to expand beyond the carrying capacity of the available habitat. The hunt program should keep deer populations within acceptable levels. If deer numbers increase beyond acceptable levels, other harvest methods may be considered.

#### 4.2.1.2.2 Feral Hogs and Nutria

Feral hogs are an extremely invasive, introduced, non-native species and are not considered a game species by the State of Louisiana. Hunting of feral hogs provides the refuge with another management tool in reducing this detrimental species, and at the same time, is widely enjoyed by local hunters. No bag limits are established for feral hogs.

Cumulative effects to an exotic, invasive species should not be of concern because the refuge would like to extirpate this species on refuge lands. Hunting of hogs is not considered detrimental to the biological integrity of the refuge, is not likely to create conflict with other public uses and is within the wildlife dependant public uses to be given priority consideration. Since hogs are exotic, they are a priority species for refuge management only in terms of their cumulative impacts on refuge biota and need for eradication. They are a popular game species though, and the public interest would best be served by allowing this activity on the refuge. However, even with hunting, feral hogs are likely to always be present because they are prolific breeders.

Since competition exists between deer and feral hogs on the refuge for available food resources, the taking of feral hogs may be permitted during the proposed deer hunt season in an effort to reduce and limit numbers of hogs present on the refuge. If feral hog numbers increase beyond acceptable levels, other control methods may be considered.

Trapping is employed to prevent or reduce refuge habitat damage and targets nutria, an exotic species. Nutria, native to South America, were imported for fur farms in the early 1900's. When the fur farming industry collapsed after World War II, many were released or weren't recaptured after escaping. The descendents established themselves in the marshes and have adapted well to the semi-aquatic environment. Since nutria are almost exclusively vegetarians and can eat 2.5 to 3.5 pounds of food daily, they can be very detrimental to marsh vegetation where large populations exist. Their burrows can also damage levees and banks. They are in direct competition with the native muskrat for habitat and resources. Trapping nutria will be allowed under Special Use Permits that designate locations and methods for removing nutria. Trappers are encouraged to participate in the Coastwide Nutria Control Program administered by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

The Special Use Permit system allows the refuge manager to specifically regulate locations and methods for nutria removal. Areas will be well marked and traps will not be set in areas with high use by other visitors. Disturbance to non-target wildlife will be occasional, temporary and isolated to small geographic areas. Positive impacts will be the control of an exotic species and reducing damage to refuge resources.

#### **4.2.1.3 Upland/Small Game: (squirrel, rabbit, quail, and raccoon)**

Squirrels, rabbit, quail, and raccoon cannot be affected regionally by refuge hunting because of their limited home ranges. Only local effects will be discussed. Raccoon are hunted primarily at night. Hunting helps regulate raccoon populations; however, unless the popularity of this type of hunting increases, raccoon numbers will always be higher than desired. When these species become extremely overabundant, diseases such as distemper and rabies reduce the populations. However, waiting for disease outbreak to regulate their numbers can be a human health hazard. Cumulative impacts to raccoon are unlikely considering they reproduce quickly, are difficult to hunt due to their nocturnal habits, and are not as popular for hunting as other game species.

Studies have been conducted within and outside of Louisiana to determine the effects of hunting on the population dynamics of small game. Results from studies have consistently shown that small game, such as rabbits and squirrels, are not affected by hunting, but rather are limited by food resources. The refuge consulted with biologists at the Louisiana Dept of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) in association with this assessment on the cumulative impacts of hunting on rabbits and squirrel. The statewide Louisiana harvest for 2005/06 was estimated at 1,253,900. On Big Branch Marsh NWR, from 2001-2004, hunter harvest data reports indicated a peak of 73 squirrels/season, representing 0.006% of the state's harvest. LDWF estimated 255,200 rabbits killed by

hunters in the 2005/06 season. Under the proposed action, the refuge estimates a maximum additional 20 rabbits would be harvested, representing only 0.008% of the statewide harvest. Gray squirrels, fox squirrels, eastern cottontails, and swamp rabbits are prolific breeders and their populations have never been threatened by hunting in Louisiana even prior to the passing of hunting regulations as we know them today. Numbers of squirrels and rabbits have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Quail are non-migratory and therefore are not regionally affected by hunting. Only local effects will be discussed. The early successional grassy habitat that quail favor is not abundant on the refuge; therefore, quail hunting is limited. Studies by the LDWF indicate that a harvest of <30% in the southeast should be sustainable. Quail are present in small numbers on the forested and grassy upland areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a small harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations and having no cumulative effects.

Raccoons are present refuge wide. Raccoons are known predators of nesting birds, including wood ducks and mottled ducks, small mammals, and reptiles and amphibians. In large numbers they may have a significant impact on populations of other wildlife species. Numbers are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus. Populations of raccoons can be reduced and still maintain sustainable populations while also meeting refuge objectives for other wildlife species and refuge programs other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

#### 4.2.1.4 Non-hunted Wildlife

Non-hunted wildlife would include non-hunted migratory birds such as songbirds, wading birds, raptors, and woodpeckers; small mammals such as voles, moles, mice, shrews, and bats; reptiles and amphibians such as snakes, skinks, turtles, lizards, salamanders, frogs and toads; and invertebrates such as butterflies, moths, other insects and spiders. Except for migratory birds and some species of migratory bats, butterflies and moths, these species have very limited home ranges and hunting could not affect their populations regionally; thus, only local effects will be discussed.

Disturbance to non-hunted migratory birds could have regional, local, and flyway effects. Regional and flyway effects would not be applicable to species that do not migrate such as most woodpeckers, and some songbirds including cardinals, titmice, wrens, chickadees, etc. The cumulative effects of disturbance to non-hunted migratory birds under the proposed action are expected to be negligible for the following reasons. Hunting season would not coincide with the nesting season. Long-term future impacts that could occur if reproduction was reduced by hunting are not relevant for this reason.

Disturbance to the daily wintering activities, such as feeding and resting, of birds might occur. Disturbance to birds by hunters would probably be commensurate with that caused by non-consumptive users.

The cumulative effects of disturbance to non-hunted migratory birds under the proposed action are expected to be negligible for the following reasons; Small mammals, including bats, are inactive during winter when hunting season occurs and are nocturnal. Both of these qualities make hunter interactions with small mammals very rare. Hibernation or torpor by cold-blood reptiles and amphibians also limits their activity during the hunting season when temperatures are low. Hunters would rarely encounter reptiles and amphibians during most of the hunting season. Encounters with reptiles and amphibians in the early fall are few and should not have cumulative effects on reptile and amphibian populations. Invertebrates are also not active during cold weather and would have few interactions with hunters during the hunting season. The refuge has estimated current hunter density on peak days to be no more than 1 hunter per 100 acres. During the vast majority of the hunting season, hunter density is much lower (1 hunter/1,000 acres). Refuge regulations further mitigate possible disturbance by hunters to non-hunted wildlife. Vehicles are restricted to roads and the harassment or taking of any wildlife other than the game species legal for the season is not permitted.

Although ingestion of lead-shot by non-hunted wildlife could be a cumulative impact, it is not relevant to National Wildlife Refuges because the use of lead shot would not be permitted on any refuge for any type of hunting.

Some species of bats, butterflies and moths are migratory. Cumulative effects to these species at the "flyway" level should be negligible. These species are in torpor or have completely passed through Louisiana by peak hunting season in Nov-Jan. Some hunting occurs during September and October when these species are migrating; however, hunter interaction would be commensurate with that of non-consumptive users.

#### 4.2.1.5 Endangered Species

Endangered and threatened species that utilize the refuge are red-cockaded woodpecker, bald eagle, Manatee, Gulf sturgeon, and the brown pelican. A Section 7 Evaluation was conducted in association with this assessment for opening hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR. It was determined that the proposed alternative would not likely cumulatively affect these endangered species. Hunting will not occur in March is during the RCW nesting season.

Bald eagles currently winter in areas that are open to waterfowl, deer, and small/upland game hunting without noticeable adverse effects. Actually, in the past few years, the number of bald eagles wintering on the refuge has increased. The nest on the refuge has been successful most years and eagles have returned after Hurricane Katrina destroyed it in 2005.

Manatees, Gulf sturgeon and brown pelicans habitats exist outside of the areas hunted for huntable populations and are not expected to be affected by hunting on Big branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

Refer to the Section 7 Evaluation for the 2007 Recreational Hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR for more information.

#### 4.2.2 Anticipated Direct and Indirect Impacts of Proposed Action on Refuge Programs, Facilities, and Cultural Resources.

##### 4.2.2.1 Wildlife-Dependant Recreation

As public use levels expand across time, unanticipated conflicts between user groups may occur. The Refuge's visitor use programs would be adjusted as needed to eliminate or minimize each problem and provide quality wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities. Experience has proven that time and space zoning (e.g., establishment of separate use areas, use periods, and restrictions on the number of users) is an effective tool in eliminating conflicts between user groups.

The level of recreation use and ground-based disturbance from visitors would be largely concentrated at trails and the Refuge's office and maintenance areas. This, combined with the addition of increased hunting opportunity, could have a cumulative effect on nesting bird populations. However, the hunting season is during the winter and not during most birds' nesting period. It is unlikely that bald eagles would establish nests near developed facilities or during the hunting season.

The opportunities for hunting would be created under the proposed action. Hunting would be used to keep the deer herd and other resident wildlife in balance with the habitat's carrying capacity, resulting in long-term positive impacts on wildlife habitat.

The refuge would control access under this alternative to minimize wildlife disturbance and habitat degradation, while allowing current and proposed compatible wildlife-dependent recreation. Bayou Sauvage NWR, A nearby refuge is a waterfowl sanctuary and is closed to all hunting to minimize disturbance to wintering waterfowl.

##### 4.2.2.2 Refuge Facilities

The Service defines facilities as: "Real property that serves a particular function(s) such as buildings, roads, utilities, water control structures, raceways, etc." Under the proposed action those facilities most utilized by hunters are: roads, parking lots, trails and boat launching ramps. Maintenance or improvement of existing facilities (i.e. parking areas, roads, trails, and boat ramps) will cause minimal short term impacts to localized soils and waters and may cause some wildlife disturbances and damage to vegetation. The facility maintenance and improvement activities described are periodically conducted to accommodate daily refuge management operations and general public uses such as wildlife observation and photography. These activities will be conducted at times

(seasonal and/or daily) to cause the least amount of disturbance to wildlife. All disturbed sites will be restored to as natural a condition as possible. During times when roads are impassible due to flood events or other natural causes those roads, parking lots, trails and boat ramps impacted by the event will be closed to vehicular use.

#### 4.2.2.3 Cultural Resources

Hunting, regardless of method or species targeted, is a consumptive activity that does not pose any threat to historic properties on and/or near the Refuge. In fact, hunting meets only one of the two criteria used to identify an “undertaking” that triggers a federal agency’s need to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. These criteria, which are delineated in 36 CFR Part 800, state:

- 1- An undertaking is any project, activity, or program that can alter the character or use of an archaeological or historic site located within the “area of potential effect;” and
- 2- The project, activity, or program must also be either funded, sponsored, performed, licenses, or have received assistance from the agency.

Consultation with the pertinent State Historic Preservation Office and federally recognized Tribes are, therefore, not required.

#### 4.2.2.4 Anticipated Impacts of Proposed Hunt on Refuge Environment and Community.

The refuge expects no sizeable impacts of the proposed action on the refuge environment which consists of soils, vegetation, air quality, water quality and solitude. Some disturbance to surface soils and vegetation would occur in areas selected for hunting; however impacts would be minimal. Hunting would benefit vegetation as it is used to keep many resident wildlife populations in balance with the habitat’s carrying capacity. The refuge would also control access to minimize habitat degradation.

The refuge expects impacts to air and water quality to be minimal and only due to refuge visitors’ automobile and off-road vehicle emissions and run-off on road and trail sides. The effect of these refuge-related activities, as well as other management activities, on overall air and water quality in the region are anticipated to be relatively negligible, compared to the contributions of industrial centers, power plants, and non-refuge vehicle traffic. Existing State water quality criteria and use classifications are adequate to achieve desired on-refuge conditions; thus, implementation of the proposed action would not impact adjacent landowners or users beyond the constraints already implemented under existing State standards and laws.

Impacts associated with solitude are expected to be minimal given time and space zone

management techniques, such as seasonal access and area closures, used to avoid conflicts among user groups.

The refuge would work closely with State, Federal, and private partners to minimize impacts to adjacent lands and its associated natural resources; however, no indirect or direct impacts are anticipated. The newly opened hunts would result in a net gain of public hunting opportunities positively impacting the general public, nearby residents, and refuge visitors. The refuge expects increased visitation and tourism to bring additional revenues to local communities but not a significant increase in overall revenue in any area.

#### 4.2.2.5 Other Past, Present, Proposed, and Reasonably Foreseeable Hunts and Anticipated Impacts

Cumulative effects on the environment result from incremental effects of a proposed action when these are added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. While cumulative effects may result from individually minor actions, they may, viewed as a whole, become substantial over time. The proposed hunt plan has been designed so as to be sustainable through time given relatively stable conditions. Changes in refuge conditions, such as sizeable increases in refuge acreage beyond the current approved refuge acquisition boundary or public use, are likely to change the anticipated impacts of the current plan and would trigger a new hunt planning environmental assessment process.

The implementation of any of the proposed actions described in this assessment includes actions relating to the refuge hunt program (see 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan for Big Branch Marsh NWR). These actions would have both direct and indirect effects (e.g., new site inclusion would result in increased public use, thus increasing vehicular traffic, disturbance, etc); however, the cumulative effects of these actions are not expected to be substantial.

The past refuge hunting program has been very similar to the proposed action in season lengths, species hunted, and bag limits. Changes to the hunt program in the past decade have been made to open hunting on more land within the refuge. These lands were usually those that had been recently acquired. The refuge does not foresee any changes to the proposed action in the way of increasing the intensity of hunting in the future.

#### 4.2.2.6 Anticipated Impacts if Individual Hunts are Allowed to Accumulate

National Wildlife Refuges, including Big Branch Marsh NWR, conduct hunting programs within the framework of State and Federal regulations. Big Branch Marsh NWR is at least as restrictive as the State of Louisiana for deer, squirrel, rabbit, quail, woodcock, gallinule, rail, and snipe and in many cases more restrictive for waterfowl, raccoon, and coots. By maintaining hunting regulations that are as, or more, restrictive than the State, individual refuges ensure that they are maintaining seasons which are supportive of management on a more regional basis. The proposed hunt plan has been

reviewed and is supported by the Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries. Additionally, refuges coordinate with LDWF annually to maintain regulations and programs that are consistent with the State management program.

## Chapter 5 Consultation and Coordination with Others

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) concurs and fully supports the regulated consumptive public use of the natural resources associated with the Big Branch Marsh NWR. Refuge hunting is coordinated annually with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries through pre hunt planning meetings where hunt seasons and regulations are proposed to the state. Hunting opportunities provided on the refuge are a component of the state's wildlife management plans. The Fish and Wildlife Service also provided an in depth review by the Regional Office personnel and staff biologists.

On August 16, 1995 a public hearing was held at the Bayou LaCombe Junior High School, LaCombe, Louisiana. The purpose of this hearing was to obtain public input into the feasibility and/or need for various public use programs on Big Branch Marsh NWR. The comments received at the hearing were overwhelmingly in favor of allowing some form of recreational hunting and fishing on refuge lands. Additional comments have been received from the League of Women Voters of St. Tammany, the Big Branch Civic Association, The Louisiana Bowhunters Association, St. Tammany Sportsman's League, and various individuals in support of some type of recreational hunting program.

This environmental assessment has received input from refuge personnel, the general public, and other agencies.

A draft of this document is made available for public review. Availability of the document was advertised in local newspapers and copies were placed in local public libraries (See Appendix B). Comments were made a part of this document after a one month comment period.

## Appendix A: Literature References

- Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries. 2003. Deer harvest summary 1994-2003: Georgia Pacific Wildlife Management Area. Technical Report, District II, Monroe, Louisiana.
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- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2005, Waterfowl harvest and population survey data: Estimates of U.S. harvest, hunting activity, and success derived from the state-federal cooperative harvest information program. Division of Migratory Bird Management, Columbia, Missouri, 92 pp.
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## Appendix B: Public Distribution and Comment

News Releases:

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

A draft recreational hunting plan, environmental assessment and compatability determination for hunting on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in St. Tammany Parish are available for public review at the Slidell, Lacombe and Mandeville branches of the St. Tammany Parish Library. The comment period will extend until April 5.

Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at 23 national wildlife refuges in the Southeast Region to address cumulative impacts of hunting. Under the proposed action, hunting of deer, rabbits, squirrel, quail, and migratory birds such as waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, gallinule and rails would occur. Hunting would be carried out in accordance with Federal and State of Louisiana regulations, and refuge-specific regulations.

The Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge currently contains more than 17,000 acres. The refuge lies along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain between Cane Bayou west of Lacombe to U.S. 90 east of the Fritchie Marsh. Visitors can currently enjoy fishing, wildlife observation, photography and environmental education.

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# U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Seeks Comments on Draft Recreational Hunting Plan, Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
March 2, 2007

**Contacts:**

Daniel Breaux, Refuge Manager, 985-882-2030  
Tom MacKenzie, 404/679-7291

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Seeks Comments on Draft Recreational Hunting Plan, Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge

A draft Recreational Hunting Plan and Environmental Assessment for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in St. Tammany Parish is available for public review on March 5, 2007. The comment period will extend until April 5, 2007.

The plan describes two alternatives for hunting on the refuge: (1) the no action alternative would not allow hunting and (2) the proposed action would open the refuge to hunting of up to all species listed and regulations described in the 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan. Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) developed environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at twenty-three national wildlife refuges located in the Southeast Region to address cumulative impacts of hunting. Under the proposed action, hunting of deer, rabbits, squirrel, quail, and migratory birds such as waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, gallinule, and rails would occur. Hunting would be carried out in accordance with Federal and State of Louisiana regulations, and refuge-specific regulations.

Copies of the plan can be reviewed on the refuge web site at: <http://www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/> and at the following libraries:

St. Tammany Parish:  
Slidell Branch: 555 Robert Blvd.  
Lacombe Branch: 28027 Hwy 190  
Mandeville Branch: 845 Gerard St.

Written comments or questions can be directed to Daniel Breaux, Refuge Manager, at 61389 Hwy 434, Lacombe, LA 70445; (985) 882-2030. Email comments can be provided to the following address: [Daniel\\_Breaux@fws.gov](mailto:Daniel_Breaux@fws.gov).

The Big branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge is currently over 17,000 acres and is located in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. The refuge lies along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain between Cane Bayou west of Lacombe to Hwy 90 east of the Fritchie marsh. Hunting is proposed for the refuge but visitors can currently enjoy fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94 million acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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For more information about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, visit our home page at <http://www.fws.gov/southeast> or <http://www.fws.gov/>.

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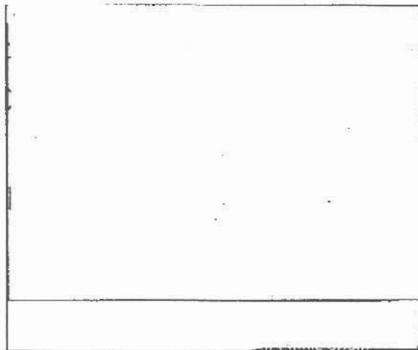
### WEIGH IN ON HUNTING

A draft recreational hunting plan, environmental assessment and compatibility determination for hunting on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in St. Tammany Parish are available for public review at the Slidell, Lacombe and Mandeville branches of the St. Tammany Parish Library. The comment period will extend until April 5.

The environmental assessment describes two alternatives for hunting on the refuge: the no action alternative would not allow hunting, and the proposed action would open the refuge to hunting of up to all species listed and regulations described in the 2007 recreational hunting plan.

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Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife

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Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed environmental assessments that describe hunting programs at 23 national wildlife refuges in the Southeast Region to address cumulative impacts of hunting. Under the proposed action, hunting of deer, rabbits, squirrel, quail, and migratory birds such as waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, gallinule and rails would occur. Hunting would be carried out in accordance with Federal and State of Louisiana regulations, and refuge-specific regulations.

Copies of the plans also can be reviewed on the refuge Web site at [www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/](http://www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/).

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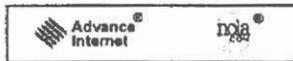
The Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge currently contains more than 17,000 acres. The refuge lies along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain between Cane Bayou west of Lacombe to U.S. 90 east of the Fritchie Marsh. Visitors can currently enjoy fishing, wildlife observation, photography and environmental education.

CHAMPIONSHIP BOWLING

The Northshore USBC Bowling Association will hold its annual championship tournament today, Friday and Saturday at Tiffany Sports Center in Metairie.

Fee is \$23 per event per bowler for team, doubles or singles events.

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# Beware of mistruths

"The Fund for Animals is unalterably opposed to the recreational killing of wildlife. Besides being a piteously, unfair and cruel slaughter of innocent animals, sport hunting is also ecologically destructive. Despite claims to the contrary, hunters take a heavy toll on endangered and threatened animals." - *Fund for Animals Position Statement.*

Sound like any of your hunting buddies? Didn't think so. But spreading mistruths to potential donors has always been modus operandi for the animal rights crowd. They are also real big on using their donors' cash to file frivolous lawsuits that suck up money. If it had not been needed to finance court battles, it certainly could have been better spent on sound, scientific-based programs to benefit wildlife. Their latest project to protect the rights of animals is to ban hunting on National Wildlife Refuges, including one right



**DON DUBUC**  
*Louisiana Outdoors*

here in our back yard. That's right. Hunting on the popular Big Branch National Wildlife Refuge is under attack. Their lawsuit filed in 2003 contends the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did not conduct environmental assessments to determine if the "cumulative impact of hunting" on NWRs might be negative. But Big Branch and most refuges have more-limited seasons than surrounding private lands. Most refuges limit weapons use and won't allow hunters to employ

practices hunters use on adjacent private lands.

While it should be obvious that since hunting on Big Branch NWR is at least, if not more restrictive, than on adjacent private or state lands it can't possibly be detrimental to wildlife. An expensive and exhaustive process has to be conducted to provide data for the court to make a ruling. Based on the evidence presented the fate of public hunting on millions of acres of federally-owned lands hangs in the balance.

Hunting on federal refuges only requires a free refuge permit and a hunting license, but it does come at a price, a price hunters have been more than willing to pay for decades through special taxes on hunting equipment and licenses. Hunting federal refuges also calls for paying close attention to special regulations not required of private or state lands. Areas like Big Branch NWR are treasures. They represent some of the last remaining wild areas in the country and provide hunters a place to be active participants. For those who can't afford to hunt in private clubs, it provides the last remaining opportunity to continue a freedom and a tradition as old as this nation.

Because licenses are required for NWRs, hunters and fishermen are the only users who are charged a fee. Not hikers, photographers, birdwatchers, canoeists or anyone else who enjoys the tranquility of these wild places. Even though a huge portion of Big Branch and other NWRs were paid for by the sales of duck stamps (which are mandatory for anyone who hunts waterfowl) the animal rights crowd wants to take hunting rights away. I'd call that stealing.

I'm optimistic the USFWS assessments will demonstrate a good case for hunting to continue. But it will take more and it has to come from hunters. The public is being asked to comment on this issue and if the only comments are from the anti-hunting side, why

# organizations offer



**Sportsmen's Paradise lost?** In response to a lawsuit filed by the Fund For Animals, public comment is sought by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on the issue of hunting on Big Branch and many other National Wildlife Refuges. (Photo by Don Dubuc)

should hunting be allowed if the perception is that no one cares? That's why hunters need to be heard loud and clear and make our comments count. The decision will not be made on numbers alone as in an election. Hunters and those who may not hunt themselves, but support hunting, need to tell the Fish and Wildlife Service why hunting should be continued. As a hunter, you need to explain how hunting affects you, the community and how it will affect the local economy. Tell them hunting is a tool for managing healthy game populations and that it provides the funds for programs that benefit wild game and by preserving their habitat

too, non-game birds and animals. Other user groups enjoy refuges paid in large part by sportsmen. Tell them you will have nowhere else to hunt in an area where trees are being cut and blacktop roads and buildings replace forests at one of the fastest rates in the country. Tell them Big Branch NWR, as a unique slice of rare habitat consisting of piney woods, mixed hardwoods, cypress swamp and brackish marshes, offers hunting opportunities found in very few places. Tell them it's a good place to introduce children to hunting as opposed to their hanging out on the street. Be sure to tell them what a wonderful place Big Branch NWR

is to hunt even if you kill nothing but time. If you don't, you may never get another chance. The artis have spoken, now it's our turn. Direct your comments to Daniel Breaux, Refuge Manager, 61389 Louisiana Highway 434, Lacombe, LA 70445 or email them to: [Daniel.Breaux@fws.gov](mailto:Daniel.Breaux@fws.gov).

*Don Dubuc, a regular contributor to St. Tammany News, is host of "Outdoors with Don Dubuc Radio" heard Saturdays from 5-7 a.m. on WWL 870.AM and the Louisiana Network stations and "Outdoors with Don Dubuc" television, which airs on Tuesdays at 10 p.m. and Wednesday at 6 p.m. on WGNO ABC 26.*

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## NOTES

Sunday, March 25, 2007

By **Bob Marshall**

Hunting suit at Big Branch

In response to a lawsuit by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been required to complete a draft Recreational Hunting Plan, draft Environmental Assessment, and Computability Determination for hunting on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in St. Tammany Parish. The Environmental Assessment describes two alternatives for hunting on the refuge: the "no action alternative" which would ban hunting, and the "proposed action" which would keep the refuge open to hunting. Public comment is open until April 7. Copies of the plans can be reviewed on the refuge Web site at:

[www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/](http://www.fws.gov/bigbranchmarsh/) and at the following St. Tammany Parish libraries, 555 Robert Boulevard, Slidell; 28027 U.S. 190, Lacombe, and 845 Gerard Street, Mandeville. Written comments or questions can be directed to Daniel Breaux, Refuge Manager, 61389 Louisiana 434, Lacombe, 70445; (985) 882-2030. E-mail [Daniel\\_Breaux@fws.gov](mailto:Daniel_Breaux@fws.gov).

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## **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Seeks Comments on Draft Recreational Hunting Plan, Draft Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge**

A draft Recreational Hunting Plan, draft Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination for hunting on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge is available for public review. The comment period will end on April 5, 2007.

The Environmental Assessment describes two alternatives for hunting on the refuge: (1) the **no action** alternative would not allow hunting and (2) the **proposed action** would open the refuge to hunting of up to all species listed and regulations described in the 2007 Recreational Hunting Plan. Although hunting has been ongoing on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, in response to a 2003 lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed an environmental assessment to address cumulative impacts of hunting. Under the proposed action, hunting of deer, rabbits, squirrel, quail, and migratory birds such as waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe, gallinule, and rails would occur. Hunting would be carried out in accordance with Federal and State of Louisiana regulations, and refuge-specific regulations.

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# # # # #

The above public notice was posted at the following locations in Lacombe, Louisiana on 3/8/2007:

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Lacombe branch of St. Tammany parish Library  
Minnie's Discount Station  
Lloyd's Bayou Bargains  
Alice's Restaurant  
Bayou Lacombe Stop

## Public Comments Received:

We received Twenty nine comments on our draft EA titled Draft Environmental Assessment for recreational sport hunting and the 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, that was available for public comment from march 5<sup>th</sup> to April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Twenty seven of these comments were in support of the Service's preferred Alternative in the draft EA. Two comments were in opposition to the preferred Alternative.

Comments were incorporated into the EA where appropriate. The Fish and Wildlife Service's reply to the opposition to the preferred alternative are listed below:

We are proud of the more than 300 world-class hunting programs on national wildlife refuges that fulfill the Refuge Improvement Act's mandate to provide opportunities for compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation to Americans. The decades-old hunting program is also a fulfillment of America's deeply rooted outdoor heritage that has, at its very core, the conservation mission that is the foundation of the Refuge System and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Big Branch March Refuge has been open to hunting since it's establishment. The refuge's purposes for which it was established was to include opening the refuge to consumptive and non consumptive use of the refuge. The lands were purchased from willing sellers who impressed on the Service to continue allowing some form of hunting on the lands.

In addition to its recreational value, hunting gives resource managers an important tool in controlling populations of some species that might otherwise exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat.

In 1966 and again in 1997, Congress expressly recognized the legitimacy of hunting on units of the refuge system and directed the Service to facilitate these opportunities whenever they are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

The Service currently considers hunting impacts through required refuge plans and environmental assessments, as well as annual national migratory bird population and harvest studies. In response to an opposition to hunting, the refuge is considering closing to hunting parts of the highly used boardwalk and trail along the Boy Scout Road area for non consumptive wildlife use, just as it already has areas along Lemieux Road and at the headquarters site.

List of comments received:

Comment

We received a letter from the Humane Society of the United States that contained general comments of disagreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service related to hunting on the National Wildlife Refuge System as a whole and containing elements related to litigation filed in 2003 by the Fund for Animals against the Service. These generalized comments were not specific to this draft EA and are noted but not responded to here.

Comment

It is my understanding that an "animal rights" group has sued to end public hunting on the Big Branch NWR. Although I no longer hunt, I understand that the funds to maintain Big Branch as well as other game management areas comes mostly from hunter-paid license fees and taxes on ammunition.

Hunters provide a way to control animal populations for more effective management, rather than allowing over population to spread disease and starvation. Many youngsters are introduced to the joys of the great outdoors by being taking on hunting trips. And, although not every hunting trip results in the taking of game, they learn to use and enjoy the outdoors responsibly and can increase their use to other forms of outdoor recreation in the off season, such as camping, hiking, fishing, bird watching and the like.

Please add my name to the list of those who OPPOSE ending hunting in Big Branch NWR.

Comment

We saw the article about Big Branch in the St. Tammany News and wanted to give our input. The outdoors has always been a big part of our family. Our 2 sons grew up in this area and have a great appreciation and love for hunting and fishing. Even though they live in other areas part of the year, when they do come home they can't wait to go fishing and hunting. If these areas are taken away, they won't have such a nice place to go that is close to home and inexpensive. We believe that these type of places encourage good healthy outdoor activities for all ages. Kids especially need to be exposed to the "basics" of life. I have heard our sons commenting that when they have kids they will do the same outdoor kinda stuff. They feel they grew up in a great area and it would be a shame if others miss out on the same kind of opportunity.

Comment

My husband and I are retired and living in Slidell. Many times we have gone on walks along Boy Scout road, taking in the serene scenery and indulging in one of our favorite pastimes, bird watching. When I read that opening up Big Branch to hunters is now being considered, I was appalled! It seems that the whole purpose of a refuge is to provide a haven for animals, not to kill them! Nature lovers like ourselves will be subjected to the sound of gunfire and I fear that what is now a peaceful sanctuary will be gone forever. Please don't let this happen.

Comment

I wanted to voice my strong opposition to closing hunting in the Big Branch Refuge. I just saw where there is a proposal to close hunting in this beautiful National Wildlife Refuge and there are numerous dedicated outdoorsmen and women that routinely pursue waterfowl, deer, and hogs and squirrels in Big Branch. If there is any way to prevent such closure, please advise at your earliest convenience. I will be more than glad to forward similar sentiments from the numerous duck hunters that are hunting partners of mine. I hope we can preserve our hunting privileges in this wonderful National Wildlife Refuge. You may contact me via e-mail, voice mail. Thanks in advance.

Comment

I want to thank you for everything that you and your staff have done to try and retain the hunting privileges that we have on Big Branch. If there is anything I can do to help, just ask.

Comment

Please add my name to the list that supports keeping hunting as a much needed activity on NWRs. I support the proposed action option.

Comment

I have read the Environmental Assessment and fully support your "proposed action" that would continue recreational hunting.

I strongly disagree with the "no action alternative" that would eliminate hunting, and actually damage the wildlife and land of the Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

Please let me know if I can voice my opinion in any other arena.

Comment

I have been hunting ducks at Big Branch March (Goose Point) for 55 years. My dad first took me hunting there when I was 10 years old and I have been hunting there ever since.

He is now deceased and I still use his Browning 16 gauge shotgun. I have never heard of the Fund for Animals. It would be a shame to cancel such a long-standing tradition of hunting at Big Branch because of a lawsuit by some unknown organization.

Big Branch Marsh is not the greatest place in the world to hunt ducks. In fact the last five years have been pretty poor. But I love paddling a pirogue in the dark before sunrise, watching the shooting stars, listening to the sounds of the marsh awakening. I love sitting in a duck blind, drinking coffee, watching the sunrise, blowing a duck call, hopefully enticing a duck or two to come in over the decoys.

Please allow this tradition to continue at Big Branch, for us and our kids and grand kids.

Comment

I live in Metairie, La and Big Branch NWR is one of my favorite places to duck hunt.

Comment

Please consider my comments for the public record and include them in any FWS deliberations.

I am opposed to closing the NWR to hunting as the Fund for Animals lawsuit is attempting to do.

Use of the area for hunting recreation is a state tradition and a valuable use of renewable wildlife resources. Hunting is a key scientific management tool used to assure the health of the entire resource.

Comment

I've hunted the area of Goose point for years since I was 8 years old. The area is well respected. I was upset that someone wants to take it (hunting) away from us. If I can help to keep hunting, let me know. I duck hunt. I've contacted Bobby Jindal to give him my opinion.

Comment

I have read the Environmental Assessment and fully support your "proposed action" that would continue recreational hunting.

I strongly disagree with the "no action alternative" that would eliminate hunting, and actually damage the wildlife and land of the Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

Please let me know if I can voice my opinion in any other arena.

Comment

Please oppose Senate Bill 34 and keep the "Big Branch" NWR open to hunting..... Thanks

Comment

Please consider my comments to be for public record. Hunting is a tradition and valuable management tool at "Big Branch" NWR. It must be continued as it has in the past. Please stop any and all hunting bans at "Big Branch" MWR.

Comment

Please consider my comments to be for the public record.

Hunting is a tradition and a valuable scientific resource management tool at Big Branch NWR.

It must be continued as it has in the past.

Comment

Thank you for your efforts on Big Branch NWR.

Our extended family in excess of 25 people are **in favor of continued hunting** on Big Branch NWR.

The hunting community provides financial and overall support to the maintenance of established NWR's and purchase of new ones. It is important to have this type of family recreation near the Mandeville, Slidell and Covington area.

Comment

Please do not take away my ability to hunt on Big Branch NWR!!!!!!!!!!!!

Comment

My name is (blank) and a long time resident of St. Tammany Parish. I would like to go on record that I would like to be able to continue hunting the Big Branch Marsh, there are very few places that a Northshore resident can continue to hunt.

Comment

After reading Bob Marshall's article about the above mentioned lawsuit, I have spent the last two weeks looking over the online copy of the "Revised Hunting Plan & Environmental Assessment". Although a bit dry, I have to admit that I learned a few things about Big Branch NWR that I did not know.

I have hunted waterfowl at Big Branch since you sponsored the first lottery weekend and have enjoyed many hours on the marsh. As with any waterfowl venture during the past few years, some hunts have been good and some very lean but at least the opportunity to enjoy a hunt was there. As I am retired, my fixed income does not afford me the luxury of expensive leases and clubs. Public hunting opportunities like Big Branch are my lifeline to a sport that I have enjoyed my entire life.

All this having been said, I would whole heartedly support the "proposed action" which would keep the refuge open to hunting. If I can be of any help in this matter, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Comment

Please do not let this lawsuit happen. Keep the Preserve open to hunters. People need to stop humanizing animals.

Comment

I write to you today hoping you will make a decision that is in our children's future. I am **for** hunting on the Big Branch Wildlife preserve. I am pleased to have the opportunity to go hunting in Louisiana rather than leaving this beautiful State to hunt elsewhere. Archery hunting is a beautiful and mystical experience. If we loose this land to hunt, we are only contributing to the loss of our heritage in Louisiana. Please do not be scared by these lawsuits. I hope you give me the opportunity to bring my children in the great outdoors like my father did for me. Thank you for your time.

Comment

I have been a resident of Slidell, LA since 2001 and have enjoyed hunting on Big Branch since that time. I have even paid and participated in the lottery hunts that were going on at that time. If there is anything I can do to show my support for the "proposed action" please let me know. I have been priced out of duck leases and enjoy spending my time at Big Branch.

Comment

Safari Club International and Safari Club International Foundation ("SCI and SCIF") appreciate the opportunity to provide our comments on the draft Sport Hunting Plan and Environmental Assessment ("Hunt Plan and EA") for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. We applaud the Service's recognition of hunting as a priority use of the unit and an essential wildlife management tool, both for the refuge and for the areas surrounding the refuge.

Safari Club International, a nonprofit IRC § 501(c)(4) corporation, has approximately 53,000 members worldwide, many of whom hunt on refuges throughout the National

Wildlife Refuge system. SCI's missions include the conservation of wildlife, protection of the hunter, and education of the public concerning hunting and its use as a conservation tool. Safari Club International Foundation is a nonprofit IRC § 501(c)(3) corporation. Its missions include the conservation of wildlife, education of the public concerning hunting and its use as a conservation tool, and humanitarian services. More specifically, the conservation mission of SCIF is: (a) to support the conservation of the various species and populations of game animals and other wildlife and the habitats on which they depend; and (b) to demonstrate the importance of hunting as a conservation and management tool in the development, funding and operation of wildlife conservation programs. SCI and SCIF participated as Defendant-Intervenors in the ongoing litigation in support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act in refuge planning.

At the outset, SCI and SCIF wish to commend the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ("FWS") and the refuge personnel specifically for the efficient and comprehensive manner with which they have examined and reported the effects of hunting on the refuge and on the areas beyond the refuge boundaries that are affected or potentially affected by hunting or the absence of hunting on the refuge.

The draft Hunt Plan and EA make clear that hunting big game, migratory game birds and upland game on the refuge is not only compatible with the purpose for which Big Branch Marsh NWR was established, but actually assists the FWS in carrying out the refuge's purpose to "preserve the habitats and associated wildlife in perpetuity for the benefit and use of the general public." As the draft Hunt Plan and EA note, "hunting would benefit vegetation as it is used to keep many resident wildlife populations in balance with the habitat's carrying capacity." The draft Hunt Plan and EA recognize that sport hunting the populations of white-tailed deer, feral hogs, nutria, migratory game birds, squirrel, rabbit, rail, gallinule, quail, and raccoon promotes plant health and diversity, by reducing overpopulations of species that destroy vegetation and compact soils and increase seedling survival. The planning documents also correctly note that the population management and reduction tools offered by hunting can prevent starvation and diseases that spread not only through the hunted species populations but to other refuge wildlife as well. The draft EA also remarks on the fact that hunting controls predator populations that are likely to prey on songbirds, turkeys, turtles, fawns and small mammals

The draft Hunt Plan and EA do an excellent job of assessing the cumulative impact that hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR will have on the surrounding and/or interrelated areas that include the refuge lands. SCI and SCIF are pleased that the refuge has clearly documented the extensive cumulative research and analysis that the FWS conducts on migratory bird hunting and its flyway-wide and national environmental effects both on species and habitat. SCI and SCIF have a few additional recommendations on how the FWS can enhance its cumulative analysis of the impact of hunting opportunities. We suggest that the draft Hunt Plan and EA feature more prominently the refuge's consultation with the state fish and game agency. We recommend that, in addition to noting the state's concurrence with the draft Hunt Plan, that the draft Hunt Plan and EA include the state agency's input about how hunting on the refuge assists with and/or is an

element of the state's efforts to manage state wildlife populations. The fact that the hunting opportunities provided on the refuge are a component of the state's wildlife management is an essential part of the cumulative impact of the refuge hunting program.

Big Branch Marsh NWR's draft EA also provides some important evidence about woodcock numbers and the potential impact of hunting on population numbers. More specifically, the authors of the draft planning documents indicate that habitat loss, not hunting, has had the most profound impact on woodcock numbers. Further, the authors note no differences in woodcock survival rates between hunted and non-hunted areas. Consequently, it would seem that hunting on refuges where woodcocks are found, because of the benefits that hunting brings to the plant health and diversity of the area, could prove to be essential, rather than detrimental, to woodcock survival.

SCI and SCIF also note that the draft Hunt Plan and EA's cumulative analysis appears to focus on the detrimental cumulative effects of hunting, as opposed to the beneficial ones. We recommend that the FWS add to its cumulative analysis an explanation of how the control and/or reduction of hunted populations, considered collectively with similar wildlife management efforts on numerous refuges throughout the National Wildlife Refuge system, conserves the cumulative health of the habitat of the flyway in which the refuge is located and the migratory birds that utilize that flyway. In addition, the benefits that hunting brings to each refuge improves the entire refuge system's available habitat and native wildlife populations and thus provides the public generally with more valuable and diverse refuge recreational opportunities of all kinds.

FWS reply:

The Service agrees with these recommendations from the Safari Club International and has made modifications to the EA accordingly. Refuge hunting is coordinated annually with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries through pre hunt planning meetings where hunt seasons and regulations are proposed to the state. Hunting opportunities provided on the refuge are a component of the state's wildlife management plans. Typically, the state annually asks the refuge to increase the huntable opportunities on the refuge.

#### Comment

These are my thoughts and opinions on Big Branch Marsh Refuge. I have been hunting the Goose Point and surrounding area since 1981, well before it was a federal refuge. I was a school boy duck and deer hunting. The area has always had a good number of game. Since it has become a federal refuge, I think the game population has increased. Our refuge systems have a tighter limit and regulations problem than the state regulated areas around it. I think it has worked out better than pre refuge days especially on duck hunting with the rest days during each week. Our refuge lands are funded by a lot of dollars generated by us hunters. In a way we kind of own these federal lands. Animal population control is a growing issue in St. Tammany Parish with all the development forcing animals into smaller areas. Hunting is the best tool for controlling animals that could become overpopulated and starve or die from disease. If hunting was stopped we would lose the funding needed to maintain and expand the federal refuge system. The

animal rights groups talk the talk but they don't walk the walk, the hunters put out the money to better wildlife habitat and restore troubled animal populations and protect wetlands. Our state agencies set season and bag limits based on what will benefit the wildlife to keep them healthy and under control: and our federal refuges take it even further, with tighter regulations and some areas like Big Branch certain closed days for rest periods. Keep Big Branch opened for hunting and keep up the good work managing our game and patrolling the area.

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#### Comment

I have a MS Degree in Zoology from LSU and have 26 years of experience in environmental assessment, planning and compliance in the Federal Government. Upon review of the Draft Environmental Assessment for recreational sport hunting on Big Branch National Refuge, I find that the adverse impacts to native wildlife and other recreational uses in the refuge to be negligible. In addition, the reduction of feral hog populations have and would continue to be a significant beneficial impact. It is my hope that sport hunting will continue.

#### Comment

I am writing to you voicing my opposition to the law suit filed by "Fund for Animals". This frivolous law suit is aimed at undermining the management criteria set in place by professionals like you, years ago, to regulate the wildlife and fisheries in the Big Branch Wildlife Management Area. I am also sure these activists are trying this slight of hand in all other federal and state WMA where hunters are involved.

I am grateful to the State of Louisiana and to the Federal Wildlife and Fisheries for providing the Big Branch Wildlife Management Area for our enjoyment year round. It is through your efforts that my father and I and numerous friends have enjoyed the BBWMA for well over 15 years. It is our choice to go out in sunny, rainy or freezing weather to hunt and fish. We enjoy hunting and fishing, and preparing what we are allowed to take by law. We take our responsibility for the fish and game we are allowed to harvest very seriously and respect all life. I resent activist organizations like "Fund for Animals" for trying to take away a freedom that is already regulated, by a technicality.

Also, I would like to ask if anyone of the "Fund for Animals" activist organization has even seen the BBWMA? My guess is that they haven't.

Please feel free to call me if you have any questions or need any additional information. Hunter and Fisher for life!

#### Comment

I am in support of your preferred alternative.

End of public comments:

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

for

### **BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service propose to protect and manage certain fish and wildlife resources in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, through the implementation of the 2007 hunt plan on Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. The Service has analyzed the following alternatives to the proposal in an Environmental Assessment (copy attached):

Alternative 1: No Action:

This alternative would result in setting aside Big Branch Marsh NWR essentially as a "wildlife sanctuary" with no provisions for the harvest of its wildlife. The FWS would prohibit the sport taking of all game species on all lands acquired in fee title or otherwise managed as a part of the refuge.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action:

Establishment of a recreational hunting program on refuge lands. Recreational hunting on Big Branch Marsh NWR would be carried out in compliance with the refuge recreational hunt plan and in accordance with State, Federal, and special refuge regulations, and FWS policy and directives. All or parts of the refuge may be closed to hunting at any time if necessary for public safety, to provide wildlife sanctuary, or for administrative reasons. (Preferred Alternative)

The preferred alternative was selected over the other alternative because world-class hunting programs on national wildlife refuges fulfill the Refuge Improvement Act's mandate to provide opportunities for compatible, wildlife-dependent recreation to Americans. The decades-old hunting program is also a fulfillment of America's deeply rooted outdoor heritage that has, at its very core, the conservation mission that is the foundation of the Refuge System and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Big Branch March Refuge has been open to hunting since it's establishment and the refuge's purposes for which it was established was to include opening the refuge to consumptive and non consumptive use of the refuge.

In addition to its recreational value, hunting gives resource managers an important tool in controlling populations of some species that might otherwise exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat.

In 1966 and again in 1997, Congress expressly recognized the legitimacy of hunting on units of the refuge system and directed the Service to facilitate these opportunities which is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social and economic effects:

See Environmental Assessment, page 19.

Because the project does not have any adverse effects, measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have not been incorporated into the proposal.

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted include:

All affected landowners  
Congressional representatives  
Interested citizens and organizations  
Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Copies of the Environmental Assessment are available by contacting:

Daniel Breaux  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
61389 Hwy 434  
Lacombe, LA 70445  
985-882-2000

Therefore, it is my determination that the proposal does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. This determination is based on the following factors (40 CFR 1508.27):

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered and this action will not have a significant effect on the socio economic human environment (EA, page 27).
2. The action will not have a significant effect on human health and safety (EA, page 28).
3. The project will not significantly affect any unique characteristics of the Refuge Physical Environment (EA, page 29).
4. The action will not significantly affect any site listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources (EA, page 29).

5. The action does not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks to Refuge Habitat (EA, page 31).
6. The action will not lead to a violation of federal, state, or local laws imposed for the protection of Non-hunted Wildlife (EA, page 33).
7. The action will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration of Wildlife Dependant Recreation (EA, page 34).
8. The action is not likely to adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or their habitats (Section 7 Consultation, and EA 34).
9. There will be no cumulatively significant impacts on the environment (EA, page 35).

References:

*Final Environmental Assessment and 2007 Recreational Hunt Plan of Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region, Atlanta, Georgia.*

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Sam D. Hamilton  
Regional Director

4/23/07  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date