

Impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Its Trust Resources



Hurricanes Katrina and Rita impacted not only U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands and facilities in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas, but also left a wide path of destruction that is affecting resources such as migratory birds, interjurisdictional fisheries, and imperiled species and their habitats.

The Service is partnering with many relevant Federal and State agencies, including the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), to address hurricane related needs and resource issues in a cooperative and collaborative manner and to eliminate any duplication.



photo: USFWS/Tom MacKenzie

Damaged oil facility near Sabine NWR

We continue to gather information from other agencies about impacts to natural resources and we are compiling this information to address the needs of this effort and future storm-related events. We are addressing our assessment, restoration, and response needs in the broad categories including aquatic and upland ecosystem impacts, invasive species, imperiled species, and customer service to the public and other agencies.

Hurricane Natural Resources Impacts:

- Immense areas of coastal wetlands have been degraded to open water areas.

- A preliminary assessment of satellite imagery covering Southeast Louisiana suggests that more than 100 square miles of coastal wetlands have been transformed from marsh to open water as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

- The U.S.G.S. suggested through satellite imagery of the Breton sub-basin that Katrina and to a lesser degree, Rita accelerated erosion to levels not expected before 2050.

- Exotic animals and plants from zoos, aquariums, nurseries, and pet collections have been released into the environment.

- Saltwater intrusion and degraded habitat quality may pave the way for a damaging influx of both aquatic and terrestrial exotic species.

- Southeastern Louisiana, and especially Breton National Wildlife Refuge and the Galveston Bay area of Texas are globally important for colonial nesting birds. Up to 15% of the world's Brown Pelicans and up to 30% of the world's Sandwich Terns nest there, and these habitats have been significantly impacted.

- The heavily damaged upper Texas coast hosts one of the greatest spectacles of bird diversity and abundance found anywhere in North America.

- Debris and silt are clogging aquatic habitats, and oil, chemical, or other hazardous waste releases are impacting entire aquatic ecosystems both through the water column and in storm-deposited sediments. These releases may have short-term, immediate impacts as well as long-term, chronic ecosystem-wide effects to aquatic communities and migratory birds.



photo: USFWS

Service biologist James Harris points out snapped red-cockaded woodpecker tree.

- An estimated 150,000 acres of coastal wetlands and bottomland forests have been damaged on national wildlife refuges. This represents expanses of coastal marshlands along the Louisiana/Mississippi coast and important inland systems like the Atchafalaya basin.
- Fifty sea turtle nests on the Alabama coast were lost.
- Primary dunes and most secondary dunes that provide habitat for the endangered Alabama beach mouse were destroyed.
- More than 70% of cavity trees used by endangered Red-cockaded woodpeckers were destroyed at Big Branch Marsh NWR. Forty-one artificial cavity inserts were installed in standing trees to provide shelter for the birds.

The Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.