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Draft Sport Hunting

Decision Documents

for

Sabine National Wildlife Refuge
Draft 2010

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Contents

1. Draft Hunting Plan

2. Draft Environmental Assessment

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Decision Documents

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Sabine National Wildlife Refuge

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1. Sport Hunting Plan

DRAFT SPORT HUNTING PLAN

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Sabine National Wildlife Refuge

2010

Recommended by _____Date:_____
Refuge Manager

Reviewed by _____Date:_____
Refuge Supervisor

Concurrence by _____Date:_____
Regional Chief, NWRS

Approved:_____Date:_____
Regional Director

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I. INTRODUCTION

During 2007 the U S Fish and Wildlife Service completed the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge (SNWR) Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (SCCP). The SCCP took nearly 5 years to complete and went through an extensive public scoping and public comment process. This major planning initiative lead the way for the development of the Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Complex Visitor Services Plan (VSP) which integrates the goals, objectives and strategies found in the SCCP related to hunting and the updating of the SNWR Hunting Plan. The Hunting Plan addendum was prepared to conform to current U S Fish and Wildlife Service Policy and collectively supersedes the former 1988 SNWR Hunting Plan.

Located in the southwest corner of Cameron Parish Louisiana, SNWR is a vital link in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuge was established in 1937 and is the largest coastal marsh refuge on the Gulf of Mexico and encompasses 125,790 acres of fresh, brackish, and saline coastal marshes which are interspersed with low prairie ridges. The refuge consists of approximately 40,403 acres of open water and 85,387 acres of marsh grassland. Calcasieu Lake transects the refuge on the east, while Sabine Lake adjoins it on the west. The refuge is located in Cameron Parish which is situated in the extreme southwest corner of Louisiana (See Figure 1). Agricultural lands are north of the refuge and the Gulf of Mexico lays 5 miles south of the refuge. State Highway 27, the only road access to the refuge, parallels the west shore of Calcasieu Lake for 11 miles as it crosses the refuge.

The refuge is a primary link in the chain of refuges making up the National Wildlife Refuge System. It is a terminus for migratory waterfowl of both the Mississippi and Central Flyways and is of major importance to wintering lesser snow geese, gadwall, green-winged teal, widgeon, and pintail. Other wildlife of major importance found on the refuge includes the American Alligator, many fur animals, and numerous species of wading, water, and marsh birds.

Three freshwater impoundments contain a total of 33,729 acres. The remaining 92,061 acres of the refuge are of major significance as an estuarine nursery area for many important species of estuarine dependent marine organisms. The refuge has over 100 miles of canals and almost 50 miles of bayous bisecting it. These waterways are used by estuarine dependent species to migrate into and out of the nursery areas on the refuge.

Historically, because of access problems, many areas of southwest Louisiana were never hunted and served as refuges for waterfowl. Over the years, this situation has radically changed. Areas that formerly were impossible to reach for hunting purposes became accessible by either boat or car. Hunting leases that once cost one hundred dollars or less per section in the late 1960's now cost up to $10,000. Many hunters, except the wealthy or those with relatives that own wetlands, were being deprived of the opportunity to hunt waterfowl.

In 1967, the refuge opened 10,000 acres to public waterfowl hunting for the first time. Hunters were required to have refuge hunting permits. Over 4,000 hunters utilized the area and harvested 1.2 birds (ducks and geese) per hunter effort. A method of requesting voluntary hunt

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data was attempted during this first hunting season resulting in a 20% return rate from hunters. Total cost to manage the first hunt was $5,513.00. The refuge dropped the permit requirement after the first year because of the inefficiencies associated with the permitting and data collecting process.

In 1972, the first experimental steel shot, 12 gauge only, waterfowl hunt program was initiated at Sabine. It was on a voluntary participation basis with the government furnishing the free steel shot shells to the hunters and requiring them to fill in a questionnaire regarding their hunt.

In 1973 the second waterfowl hunting steel shot program was undertaken with the best segment of the refuge hunt area being reserved for steel shot hunters only and the shells were again free.

In 1974 the entire refuge waterfowl hunt area was restricted to steel shot only with the government selling shells to the hunters.

In 1975 and through the 1978-79 waterfowl hunting season, the requirement of issuing a hunt permit was re-instituted with all hunters being required to; submit an annual report on their season of hunting the refuge. Only 24 percent of these hunters responded by submitting data. Comparison of their data to the bag checks being taken at the check station revealed that there was an overall 9 percent error in reporting.

In 1979, waterfowl hunting permits were again deleted and the refuge stopped selling steel shot shells. Also during the 1978-79 and the 1979-80 seasons, refuge personnel could not enforce the steel shot requirement and over 80% of the refuge hunters shot lead shells during these two years.

During the 1980-81 waterfowl season, steel shot became available in both 12 and 20 gauge shells and the refuge returned to steel shot only for its hunters. During the 1981-82 season two major changes occurred in the refuge hunt program. A September teal season was initiated on the refuge and the hunt area was expanded from 10,000 acres to 24,000 acres. Also the hunt program was changed from five days hunting to three days hunting per week.

In the 1977-78 waterfowl hunting season, because of the lead-steel shot controversy, the refuge began collecting gizzards from all duck species to check for lead poisoning potential on a non-toxic shot waterfowl hunt area. Also data collected in the 1978-79 season showed a dramatic rise in the presence of lead shot when the refuge was required to permit lead shot to be used again. This situation also occurred during the 1979-80 season. During the 1983-84 season only, the refuge collected soft tissues for analysis of the lead level along with the routine gizzard collection to reconfirm the necessity of using steel shot only to hunt waterfowl. The refuge was again designated a steel shot or non-toxic shot zone after that season.

The present waterfowl hunting program at SNWR probably provides hunters with some of the best quality hunting conditions in Louisiana. Since 1993 to the 2008-09 hunt seasons the refuge average take per hunter effort has been 2.6 birds.Waterfowl populations for the refuge have followed the national trends very closely. Permits are required to waterfowl hunt on

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SNWR. Hunting is permitted during the teal and regular duck seasons on approximately 34,000 acres 4 days per week.

The primary management objective of SNWR is to maintain and perpetuate Gulf Coast wetlands for wintering waterfowl from the Mississippi and Central Flyways. The refuge is one of the largest estuarine dependent marine species nurseries in southwest Louisiana. Wetlands are maintained using prescribed burning and water level manipulation. There are more than 115 miles of canals, 61 miles of levees, and 8 water control structures that are part of the complex water management operation. Major issues involve restoration of approximately 42,000 acres of marsh habitat for migrating birds, maintaining aquatic conditions for saltwater and freshwater fisheries, and regulation of gas and oil exploration and production activities. The refuge habitat is for the use of all wildlife, with special emphasis on waterfowl. SNWR is an integral part of a national scenic byway which is the Creole Nature Trail All-American Road and is visited by more than 280,000 people annually. The refuge fishing/crabbing and, waterfowl hunting opportunities and the walking trails at SNWR are considered one of the principal visitor attractions in southwest Louisiana.

SNWR boasts more than 250 bird species, 132 fish species, 36 reptile and amphibian species, and 28 mammal species. This diversity exists in spite of ongoing habitat changes on the refuge. Plant species composition has changed from an expansive area of emergent marsh dominated by sawgrass (*Cladium jamacense*) to an area largely composed of shallow open water ponds and slowly eroding land dominated by saltmeadow cordgrass (*Spartina patens*); seashore paspalum (*Paspalum vaginatum*); Olney's three-square (*Scirpus olneyi*); and common reed (*Phragmites australis*) present today (Valentine 1979; Chabreck et al. 2001). This has been caused by changes in the salinity regime and water retention time on the refuge. Records indicate that the sawgrass die-off at Sabine occurred after the large tidal surge of Hurricane Audrey in 1957, which was followed by two years of drought. Dumping of oil field production waters (salinities of 200 parts per thousand) into the marsh has also been blamed for the die-off. Habitat shift analysis has shown that while the species composition may have changed, there has not been a basin-wide shift to a more saline environment since 1949 (Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force 2002). What has not changed is that waterfowl still flock to the refuge, but they are concentrated in the freshwater impoundments.

Areas in coastal southwest Louisiana outside of freshwater impoundment have experienced changes in vegetation (see Figure 2) due to increased salinity and freshwater retention time, according to surveys dating back to 1949 (O'Neil 1949). The increased salinity can be attributed to navigation channels and their maintenance, primarily the Calcasieu Ship Channel into nearby Calcasieu Lake. These channels allow salt water from the Gulf of Mexico into the marsh faster than fresh water can flow into it. Between 1875 and 1910, Calcasieu Lake salinities were low enough for the water to be used to irrigate rice, which cannot tolerate salinities over 0.6 parts per thousand (Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force 2002). Today, the average water salinity of Calcasieu Lake is between 8 and 12 ppt.

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The other major factor contributing to shifting vegetation is canals and their associated spoil banks impeding the north-south flow of fresher water over the marsh. Combined with drought conditions, this can cause areas with salinities to more than double in some instances. Three areas of the refuge were impounded to prevent saltwater intrusion and lessen drought-induced salinity shifts in those areas.

The three impounded freshwater marsh management units are dominated by bulltongue (*Sagittaria spp.*), water shield (*Brasenia schreberi*), white water-lily (*Nymphaea odorata*), spikerush (*Eleocharis spp.*), cattails (*Typha spp*.) and bulrushes (*Scirpus spp.*). Open water areas throughout the refuge host a variety of submerged aquatics that assist with marsh stabilization, add to detritus build-up, and provide food for waterfowl. Widgeon grass (*Ruppia maritime*), coontail *(Ceratophyllum demersum*), southern naiad (*Najas quadalupensis*), common bladderwort (*Utricularia vulgaris*), fanwort (*Cabomba caroliniana*), Eurasian milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*) and Ottelia (*Ottelia alismoides*) line the shallow areas along canals and bayous, in addition to occupying large expanses of open water. Over 25 acres in Management Unit 3 are inhabited by wild celery (*Vallisneria americana*), an important food of wintering canvasbacks. Vegetative species that occur on drier upland sites such as ridges and levees include Chinese tallow (*Sapium sebiferum*), groundsel-tree (*Baccharis halimifolia*), live oak (*Quercus virginiana*), rattlebox (*Sesbania drummondii*), black willow (*Salix nigra*), waxmyrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), common elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), blackberry (*Rubus spp*.), trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*), blue vervain (*Verbena hastate*), and goldenrod (*Solidago spp*.) (USFWS 1996).

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Figure 1.

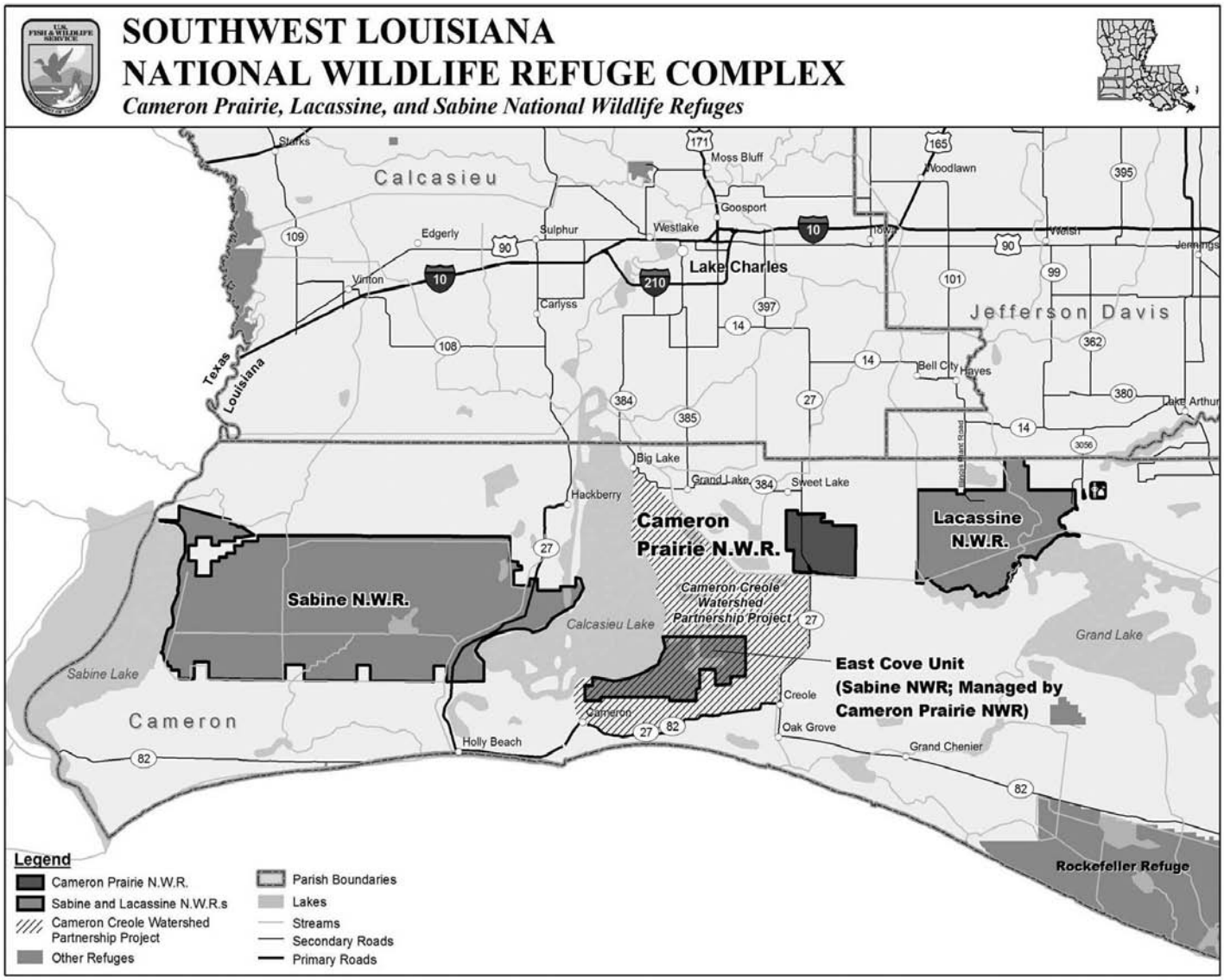
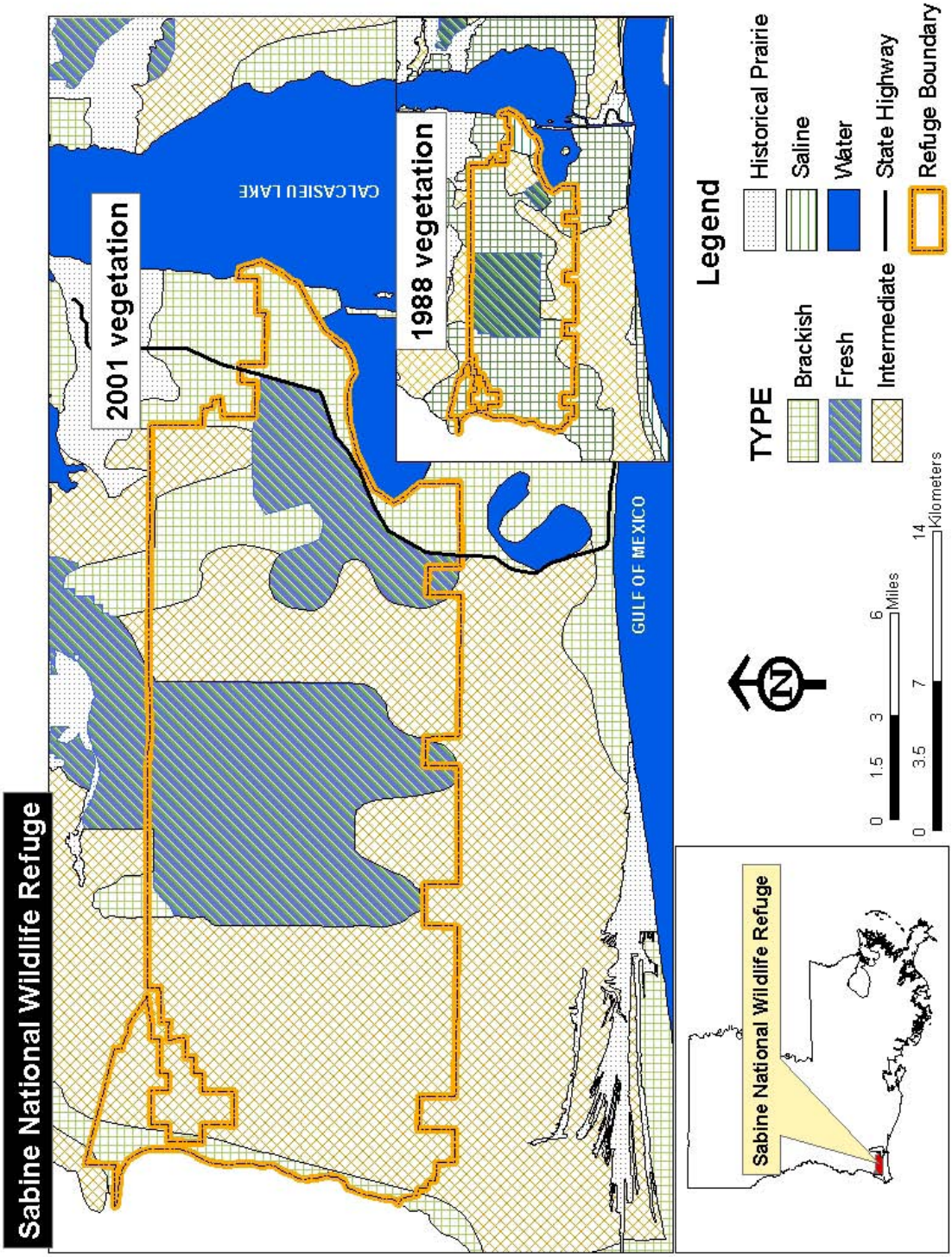


Figure 2. **Vegetation of SNWR**


Sabine National Wildlife Refuge
2001 vegetation
1988 vegetation
CALCASIEU LAKE
GULF OF MEXICO
Legend
Historical Prairie
Saline
Water
State Highway
Refuge Boundary
TYPE
Brackish
Fresh
Intermediate
N
0 1.5 3 6 Miles
0 3.5 7 14 Kilometers
Sabine National Wildlife Refuge

II. CONFORMANCE WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITY

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service maintain the policy of permitting hunting on refuges where it is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established. The following laws, regulations, and Executive Orders relate to hunting on Federal lands:

1. The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, permits the uses of refuges provided that the proposed use is compatible with the primary purpose for which a refuge was established.

2. The Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, as amended, authorizes public hunting on refuges where the hunting program is compatible with the other major purposes for which the area was established.

3. The Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, as amended, authorizes development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources.

4. Executive Order 12996, "Management and General Public Use of the National Wildlife Refuge System" recognizes compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, among others, as priority general public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

5. Title 50 CFR, Section 31.2 lists hunting as a method of surplus wildlife population control.

6. Title 50 CFR 32.1 states that the opening of a wildlife refuge area to hunting will be dependent upon the provisions of law applicable to the area and upon a determination by the Secretary of the Interior that the opening of the area to hunting of migratory game birds, upland game, or big game will be compatible with the principles of sound wildlife management and will otherwise be in the public interest.

7. Title 50 CFR 32.2 provides provisions which apply to each person while engaged in public hunting on a wildlife refuge.

The purposes of SNWR are:

Executive Order 7764 , dated December 6, 1937 stated the official purpose of the refuge, "….as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife." A secondary purpose of the refuge is *"... for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds*" (16 U.S.C. 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)).

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The mission of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is:

> "...working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people."

In addition to the overall mission of the Service, the National Wildlife Refuge System also has its own mission as set forth by congress in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. It is as follows:

> "...to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."

III. STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

The management goals for SNWR are to (USFWS 2007)

- maintain and perpetuate refuge wetlands for wintering waterfowl
- provide for the needs of endangered plants and animals;
- allow compatible public uses, such as hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife observation, and photography; and
- promote research on marsh and aquatic wildlife

Hunting Program Objective and Strategies

The hunt program, along with all other management programs, relates directly to the overall mission of the Service. Additionally, the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 identifies six priority public uses that are appropriate on National Wildlife Refuges, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental interpretation and education.

Continuing to conduct a well-managed hunt on the SNWR would assist the refuge in meeting one of its primary objectives, which is to provide the general public with quality wildlife-oriented recreational programs that are compatible with the purposes for which it was established. It will also aid in fulfilling the U S Fish and Wildlife Services Strategic Plan, Goal 3 relating to public use.

Objective: Improve hunting opportunities that are compatible with the purpose of the refuge.

Strategies:

(a) Provide up to 50,000 acres or 40% of the refuge for waterfowl hunting.

(b) Continue to provide waterfowl hunting opportunities four days per week.

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(c) Continue providing sanctuary with minimal human disturbance three days per week.

(d) Continue restrictions on boat motors and sizes, utilizing only trolling motors and push poles in marsh, and prohibiting the use of permanent blinds.

(e) Initiate permit drawings if conditions require them.

(f) Continue youth waterfowl hunting days as set by Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

(g) Continue to monitor potential for hunting of deer and feral hogs.

(h) Allow the taking of gallinules during the waterfowl hunt.

Refer to Decision Document Package, Environmental Assessment for additional information.

IV. ASSESSMENT

Hunting for:

1. Migratory Game Birds (ducks, geese, coots, and gallinules)

Migratory waterfowl use the refuge and are economically important in the area. Mottled ducks, wood ducks, and fulvous whistling-ducks are known to nest and raise broods on the refuge. The refuge provides excellent wintering habitat for many other waterfowl species including white-fronted geese, lesser snow geese, and Canada geese. At least 20 duck species, including gadwall, green-winged teal, blue-winged teal, American widgeon, mallards, and ring-necked ducks winter on Sabine (USFWS 1996).

Aerial waterfowl surveys have recorded over 100,000 ducks on the refuge three out of five winters between the winter of 1994–95 and the winter of 1998–99, and one of those years over 200,000 ducks were counted. Gadwall, green-winged teal, and lesser snow geese frequent the refuge in higher numbers than other waterfowl species.

Sabine NWR provided approximately 1.2 million duck use days for wintering waterfowl during 1994-95. During the waterfowl harvest season of the same year 2,283 people harvested 4,978 waterfowl in Management Units 2 and 4, in 17 days. Winter population surveys over the last ten years averaged almost 25,000 gadwall and 10,000 green-winged teal and snow geese, respectively (USFWS 2002c). Table 1 shows the approximate peak wintering waterfowl numbers for SNWR for the years 1990 to 1998.

Since 1993 to the 2009 hunt season, the refuge has averaged over 3,000 hunters each waterfowl hunt season. The harvest rate during this same time span averages 2.6 ducks taken per hunter (see Figure 3). There are very few geese harvested on the public hunting area. The refuge did not have waterfowl hunts during the 2005-06 and 2006-07 hunt seasons due to

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Hurricane Rita. The refuge September teal hunt was an abbreviated hunt in 2005 due to Hurricane Rita and completely cancelled in 2006 due to the clean-up efforts following the storm. The teal hunter success in 2007 was the best it has been since 1999 (see Figure 4). Hurricane Ike led to a cancelled September teal hunt in 2008.

Resident species which may be legally hunted in areas surrounding the refuge are: white-tailed deer, raccoon, opossum, rabbit, squirrel and quail. Migratory game birds for which state hunting is permitted include mourning dove, common snipe, woodcock, king rail, sora rail, Virginia rail, American coot, common moorhen, purple gallinule, white-fronted goose, snow goose, mallard, pintail, green-winged teal, blue-winged teal, gadwall, widgeon, shoveler, mottled duck, wood duck, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup, redhead, canvasback, fulvous whistling duck, and miscellaneous other waterfowl species.

1. Compatibility with Refuge Objectives

Hunting is one of the six wildlife-oriented recreational uses prioritized by the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. The Secretary of Interior may permit hunting on a refuge if he/she determines that such use is compatible with the refuge purpose for which it was established. As published in the final SNWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan, (USFWS CCP 2007) the hunting program would not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the purposes of the Refuge or mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (603 FW).

2. Biological Soundness

Migratory Birds

Waterfowl hunting currently occurs on 34,000 acres of the 125,790 acre refuge. Hunting on the refuge has become a customary and traditional use of the area by hundreds of hunters each year. While mottled ducks breed on the refuge and are present year round, the bulk of the harvest waterfowl are represented by winter migrants and managed through the North America Waterfowl Management Plan. Waterfowl populations on refuge lands fluctuate with habitat conditions in the marsh including changes in vegetation, water levels and weather. Populations may also respond to hunting pressure and move to areas of lower disturbance/hunting pressure. The harvest of waterfowl on the refuge is not expected to reduce population levels below acceptable levels see Section 3.3 and 4.2.1.1 of the SNWR Sport Hunting Environmental Assessment attached.

Gallinules are common and widespread throughout the marsh habitat at Sabine NWR. Statewide, populations of these species are considered adequate to support a recreational hunt program. Gallinules breed on the refuge and are present year round. Harvest of these species on the refuge is largely incidental to the harvest of other species, primarily waterfowl. Hunting of gallinules in the wiregrass marshes of the refuge is extremely difficult and they are not generally pursued by hunters. Populations of these species fluctuate with habitat conditions more so than hunting pressure. The harvest of these species is not expected to reduce population levels below acceptable levels.

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Big Game

Big game on Sabine NWR primarily consists of white-tailed deer. Currently there is no big game hunting occurring on Sabine NWR. However, a limited duration feral hog management hunting program may be initiated in concert with other management tools identified in the Sabine NWR Feral Hog Management Plan and Environmental Assessment which is currently being drafted. When completed and if approved, hunting is one of several tools that could be used to control feral hogs. The hunt would be managed and regulated through a special use permit. Currently the state of Louisiana lists feral hogs as an outlaw quadruped that may be taken year-round. This action would be consistent with the SNWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

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Figure 3.

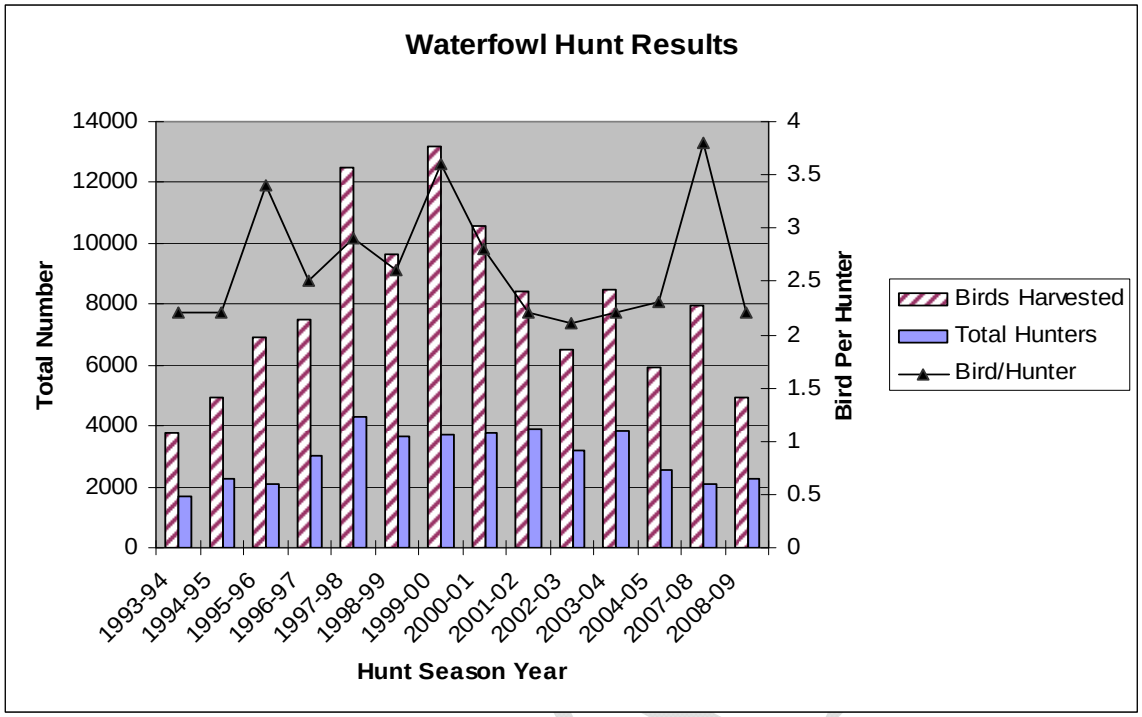


Figure 4.

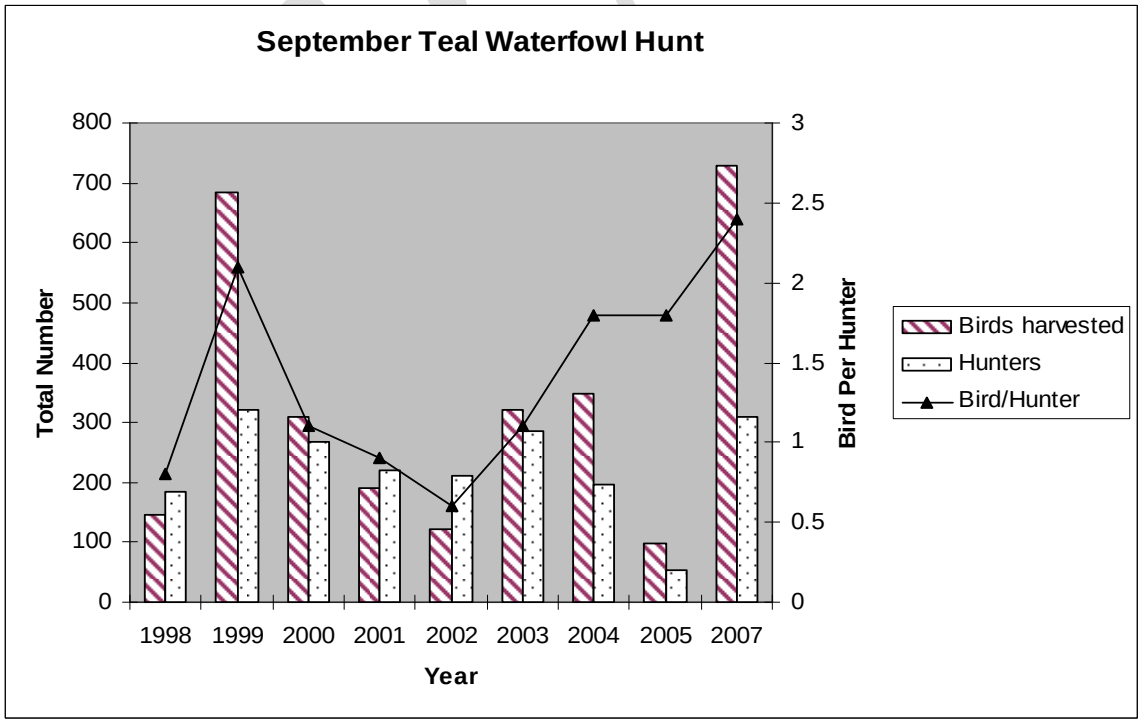
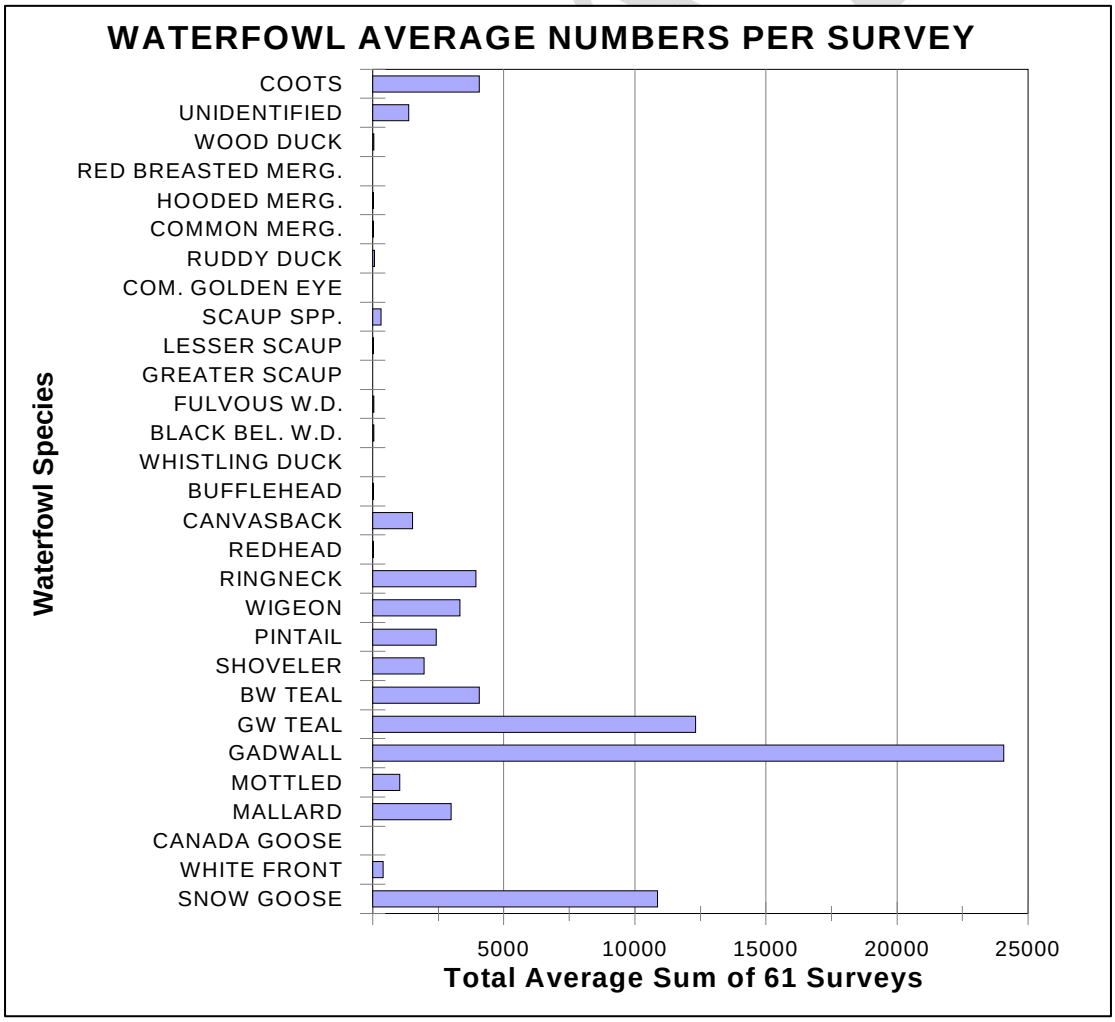


Table 1.

Year	No. of Waterfowl Observed
1990	138,107
1991	134,909
1992	279,427
1993	204,804
1994	204,881
1995	153,912
1996	72,057
1997	136,977
1998	38,538
Source: USFWS, unpublished data	

Figure 5. Waterfowl survey results for SNWR.



3. Economic Feasibility

Annual hunt administration costs including salary, equipment, hunt area boundary and sign maintenance, fuel, etc. total $26,000. The proposed hunts will be administered by refuge personnel and partners such as the LDWF. Law Enforcement assistance will be requested from the LDWF if needed.

Past experience has shown that properly managed hunts can be demanding of both staff and funding. Funds are needed for administration (planning, brochures, maps, etc.), law enforcement, and biological data collection. Harvest data collected during the hunts is essential as a barometer relative to quality of hunt areas. It is anticipated that current funding would continue to be sufficient to continue the hunting program in the future.

4. Relationship with other Refuge Programs

The proposed hunts will not cause any major conflicts with non-consumptive users. Non-consumptive users on the refuge during the migratory bird hunting season are generally relegated to public areas in the vicinity of the boat launches along the state highway that passes through the refuge. The exception to this is during the September teal hunt season that overlaps a period when boats are still allowed on the interior canals and marshes in the refuge. Public use recreation areas immediately adjacent to Louisiana State Highway 27 are available to wildlife observation and photography year-round.

5. Recreational Opportunity

The nature and vast size of Sabine NWR dictates that much of the area will be under-utilized as compared to other areas its size. Several factors contribute to this situation. Foremost, the refuge and its hunt areas are primarily tidal marsh with varying water levels. Tidal marsh conditions make access very challenging and sometimes difficult. The organic layers associated with the marsh makes accessing the hunt areas on foot very difficult. Hurricanes Rita and Ike left their impacts (2005 and 2008 respectively) that also negatively affected routes of travel with storm debris. Although a road (Vastar Road) has been established to help improve public access, most of the refuge is still, at times, difficult to access.

V. DESCRIPTION OF HUNTING PROGRAM

As a basis on which to establish a compatible hunting program, only specific portions of the refuge are open to hunting at any given time. Listed species include migratory birds (ducks, geese, coots and gallinules). There are currently considered to be harvestable populations of all target species throughout the refuge.

Hunting will be permitted in accordance with Federal regulations governing public use on National Wildlife Refuges as set forth in Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations. Hunting will be in accordance with applicable State of Louisiana regulations and other Federal laws regulating the take of wildlife, subject to the special conditions as published annually in the

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Code of Federal Regulations and outlined in annual Refuge Specific Hunting brochures which are available to the general public. Refuge specific hunting regulations allow for proper management of public lands and their resources. They also provide increased safety to refuge visitors.

Public waterfowl hunting is allowed on approximately 34,000 acres. Waterfowl (ducks, geese) coot and gallinule hunting will be permitted until noon no more than four (4) days per week during the Louisiana West Zone waterfowl hunting seasons, including early teal season, youth waterfowl hunt season, or other such special seasons which may be promulgated by law or statute. Specific days will be determined by refuge management and published in the refuge hunting brochure and permit. The refuge shall be closed to waterfowl and coot hunting during that segment of the goose season that extends beyond the regular duck season.

Other migratory game bird hunting will be permitted in accordance with State seasons and bag limits. Gallinule hunting will occur only in the designated areas that are open to waterfowl hunting. The refuge shall be closed to gallinule hunting during that segment of the goose season that extends beyond the regular duck season. Use of firearms shall be restricted to shotguns only.

All persons participating in refuge hunts shall be required to possess a refuge permit/special use permit. Permits are primarily for the purpose of providing information on hunt specific regulations and other refuge specific regulations. Permits shall be available to all persons desiring to participate in refuge hunt programs. If public demand become great enough that numbers must be restricted, a lottery permit system may be instituted in an effort to control the number of hunters. In addition, consideration may be given to time and space scheduling and/or zoning.

Annual meetings will be held with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to coordinate annual hunt proposals for refuge lands.

Enforcement of refuge regulations is an essential element in protecting trust resources and in providing for a quality recreational opportunity. Periodic, random patrols of refuge lands will be conducted by refuge law enforcement personnel. In addition, harvest and public use data may be collected at various times within the refuge. Law enforcement personnel may also be available to respond to specific reports of suspected violations. Cost for salaries, materials and equipment upkeep would be approximately $26,000 annually.

Self clearing check stations may be established at key entrance points to refuge lands. The purpose of such check stations shall be for the collection of harvest and public use data. Hunters are encouraged to report harvest at these check stations. If deemed necessary by refuge management for the collection of such data, harvest reporting by hunters may be required.

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VI. MEASURES TAKEN TO AVOID CONFLICTS WITH OTHER MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

A. Biological Conflicts

Refer to Decision Document Package, Environmental Assessment (attached).

B. Public Use Conflicts

Sport fishing and hunting activities will overlap to some degree during the September teal hunt. No conflicts of consequence are expected between sport fishermen and hunters. Conflicts between sport fishermen and hunters may arise but are expected to be minimal due to the dissimilar nature of these activities and the areas of the refuge where these activities may be expected to occur. It is expected that the majority of hunting will occur in shallow marsh ponds not conducive to sport fishing due to their location (difficult to access and water depth).

The demand for non-consumptive wildlife oriented use on Sabine NWR is expected to be high. Conflicts between hunters and non-consumptive users may occur. Restrictions on hunting methods and restrictions on hunting near designated public use facilities, canals and trails should aid in reducing potential conflicts. Should serious conflicts arise, considerations will be given to time and space scheduling and/or zoning.

The demand for consumptive uses is also expected to be high from March 15 through October 15. While conflicts within user groups are expected to be minimal, it may occur. Should serious conflicts arise within or between user groups, consideration will be given to limiting the number of users through a lottery permit system and through time and space scheduling and/or zoning.

C. Administrative Conflicts

Staffing and funding is available to administer this hunting program. Hunts will not be encumbered with unnecessary procedures requiring funds and manpower to enforce. The only considerations to be observed will be procedures to ensure that the resources are not damaged, that participants are assured of safety and experience a quality hunt. Presently, little labor intensive data is collected during the hunts. SNWR hunts are administered utilizing current personnel and funds allocated to the Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Refuge specific regulations will be made as simple as possible in order to minimize the personnel and funding needed to administer the hunt program. Staggered tours of duty by law enforcement personnel minimize staffing shortages. Assistance may be sought from other refuges and from state personnel if serious conflicts arise.

VII. CONDUCT OF THE HUNT

Federal Register Publication

The Secretary of the Interior has previously determined that the opening of SNWR to the hunting of migratory game birds was compatible with the principles of sound wildlife management and will otherwise be in the public interest (50 CFR 32). The Secretary opened the refuge to waterfowl hunting in 1967.

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A. Refuge-specific hunting regulations

Hunting regulations are designed to protect the sportsman and wildlife populations. The regulations below supplement the general regulations which govern hunting on national wildlife refuges as set forth in Title 50, Code of Federal Regulations. Hunting will be in accordance with applicable State licensing and regulations, unless otherwise stated in refuge specific regulations.

Hunting of ducks, geese, coots and gallinules is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.

2. Hunters can enter the refuge and launch boats no earlier than 4 a.m.

3. Public hunting of ducks, geese, coots and gallinules on Sabine NWR is only permitted in hunt units designated by signs stating Waterfowl Hunting Only and delineated on permit map.

4. Youth hunters (ages 17 years and younger or as amended by state and federal law) must be supervised by an adult 21 years old or older. Adults may supervise no more than two youths on waterfowl hunts. Youths must be under direct supervision, within sight and normal voice contact of adult. For all hunts, hunters born after September 1, 1969 must possess proof of completion of a hunter education course.

5. Hunters may scout refuge hunt areas during the refuge open fishing season, March 15 - October 15 and Monday through Friday during the one week prior to the opening of the Louisiana west zone's duck and coot season. All firearms and blind material are prohibited while scouting.

6. Waterfowl (ducks, geese), coot and gallinule hunting is permitted until noon on designated days of the week during the state waterfowl seasons and including September teal season or other such special seasons (such as a weekend youth waterfowl hunt) which may be promulgated by state law or statute. The refuge shall be closed to duck, coot and gallinule hunting during that segment of the goose season that extends beyond the regular duck season.

7. Waterfowl hunting must cease at 12 noon and all decoys and blinds must be removed from the hunting area by 1 p.m.

8. Boats may not be dragged across levees. No air-thrust boats or all terrain vehicles allowed; motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water may only be operated in designated canals, bayous and boat trails. Their operation in refuge marshes is prohibited. Electric trolling motors can be operated in marsh areas.

9. No trailers are allowed on Vastar Road.

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10. Federally permitted non-toxic shot only.

Refuge-specific hunting days for this program:

Youth Waterfowl Hunt --- During the open waterfowl season on designated days. Open days will be published in the Annual Hunt Brochure which also serves as a permit.

September Teal Hunt ----- During the open teal season on designated days. Open days will be published in the Annual Hunt Brochure which also serves as a permit.

Waterfowl Public Hunt ---Open 4 days per week during the state season on designated days. Open days will be published in the Annual Hunt Brochure which also serves as a permit.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunt

Public reaction from surrounding communities to the refuge waterfowl hunts has been very favorable. The opportunity to harvest gallinules during their waterfowl hunt should continue to attract favorable responses. Nationally, there are some anti-hunting sentiments, and many organizations are opposed to hunting on national wildlife refuges. It is possible that some objections may be voiced to the hunt within this plan.

During 2007 the U S Fish and Wildlife Service completed the SNWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (CCP). The Sabine CCP took nearly 5 years to complete and went through an extensive public scoping and public comment process. Hunting never surfaced as a major negative issue in the CCP.

C. Hunter Application and Registration Procedures

(Not applicable)

D. Media Selection for Announcing and Publicizing the Hunt

A list of media contacts is maintained at the Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Complex office. This list includes newspaper, radio, and television stations located in southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas. The media may be contacted when hunt dates and regulations are announced. Refuge permits and brochures will be printed and disseminated throughout the communities surrounding the refuge. Permits and brochures shall also be made available electronically via the refuge web page.

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E. Hunter Orientation

Hunters may scout refuge hunt areas during the refuge open fishing season, March 15 - October 15 and Monday through Friday during the one week prior to the opening of the Louisiana west zone's duck and coot season. All firearms and blind material are prohibited while scouting.

F. Hunter Requirements

All hunts will be carried out in accordance with federa1 and state laws and regulations. Additional special refuge regulations are published in the refuge hunt brochure.

Permits are required for all hunters. When signed and in the hunters possession, the permit provided in the Southwest Louisiana National Wildlife Refuge Complex hunting brochure serves as a permit for all refuge hunts except those requiring limited lottery drawn permits. The signed permit acknowledges the hunters understanding of the regulations contained within the brochure.

Individuals using SNWR are subject to inspections of permits, licenses, hunting, equipment, bag limits, boats, vehicles, and their contents by refuge or state officers.

Youth hunters (age 17 years old or younger or as amended by state and federal law) must be supervised by an adult 21 years old or older, and the youth must possess proof of completion of a hunter education course prior to applying. Youths must be under direct supervision, within sight and normal voice contact of adult. For waterfowl hunts, adults may supervise no more than two youths. .

Allowable equipment – **Waterfowl, gallinules and coots:** may be taken with shotguns and ammunition which comply with all state and federal regulations. Portable blinds and decoys allowed. Use of retrievers is allowed.

License and permits – all hunters will be required to possess and carry on their persons while hunting all appropriate state and federal licenses, stamps, and refuge permits.

Reporting harvest – all hunters are required to report their harvest at such self clearing check stations as may be established or to the refuge office.

See Environmental Assessment for Literature cited.

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