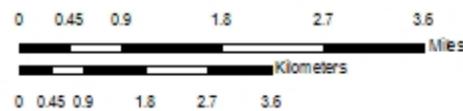
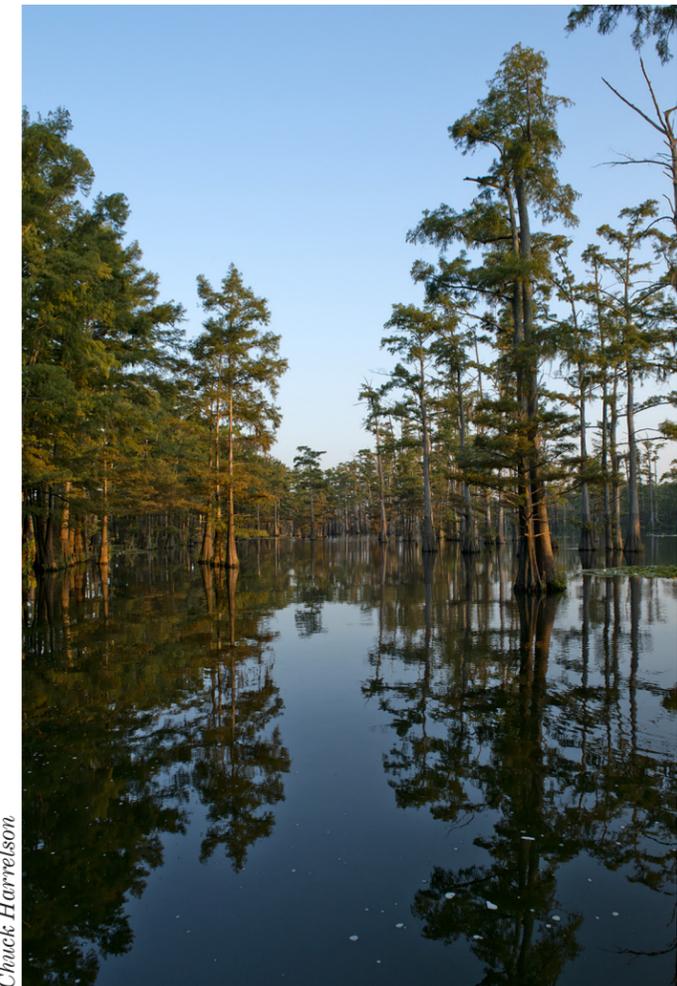


Produced by South Arkansas Refuge Complex
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Felsenthal National Wildlife Refuge (NWR or refuge) is located in Ashley, Bradley, and Union Counties, Arkansas, about eight miles west of Crossett, Arkansas on U.S. Highway 82. Established in 1975 as mitigation for the creation of the U.S. Corps of Engineers' (USACE) Ouachita and Black Rivers Navigation Project and Felsenthal Lock and Dam, this 65,000 acre refuge is named for the small Felsenthal community located at its southwest corner, and contains an abundance of water resources dominated by the Ouachita and Saline rivers and the Felsenthal Pool.

Felsenthal National Wildlife Refuge Habitat Management Plan



Chuck Harrison

winter and spring provided excellent wintering waterfowl habitat. These wetlands, in combination with the pine and upland hardwood forest on the higher ridges, support a wide diversity of native plants and animals.

Purpose of the Habitat Management Plan

The Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) developed in 2010 and this Habitat Management Plan (HMP) are the primary tools used to guide refuge staff in achieving refuge objectives and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). Although much of the information in the CCP is still relevant, the HMP modifies the Refuge's objectives and strategies based on current information.

Geographically, the refuge is located in what is known as the Felsenthal Basin, an extensive natural depression that is laced with a vast complex of sloughs, bayous and lakes. The region's two major rivers, the Saline and Ouachita, flow through the refuge. These wetland areas in combination with the refuge's diverse forest ecosystem of bottomland hardwoods, pine forests and uplands support a wide variety of wildlife and provide excellent fishing, hunting, boating, wildlife observation and environmental education opportunities.

This low lying refuge area is dissected by an intricate system of rivers, creeks, sloughs, buttonbush swamps and lakes spread throughout a vast bottomland hardwood forest that gradually rises to an upland forest community. Historically, periodic flooding of the "bottoms" during

The purpose of Felsenthal NWR HMP is to ensure that refuge management will strategically address four key areas of concern. Strategic here means approaches that are ecologically sound and sustainable in light of physical and biological change, practical, viable, or economically realistic, and responsive to the following four key areas of concern:

- 1) abide by and contribute to the mission, mandates and policies of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Refuge System;
- 2) meets the refuge's establishing purposes;
- 3) addresses key issues; and
- 4) responds to public concerns.

Objectives	Alternative A (Current Management– No Action Alternative)	Alternative B (Proposed Alternative)	Alternative C	Selected Alternative
Objective 2.1 Upland Pine (Open Pine) (Replaces CCP Objectives 1.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.8, 2.9, and 2.10 and Modifies CCP Objective 2.11)				
Acres	9,000	6,200	8,159	6,339
Fire Managed Acres	9,490	6,200	8,159	6,339
Uneven-aged Managed	None	None	500 acres	None
RCW Cluster (population objective)	22	13-14	18	13-14
Consider Neighboring Population of RCWs	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Open Fields	Not mentioned in the CCP	132 acres	132 acres	132 acres
Objective 2.2 Upland Hardwood/Pine (New Objective)				
Acres	188 acres (no objective in CCP is mentioned)	3,388 acres	1,219 acres	2,959 acres
Objective 2.3 Bottomland Hardwoods (Modifies CCP Objectives 2.1, 2.5, and 2.11, and Replaces Objectives 2.8, 2.9, and 2.10)				
Acres	40,000 acres	40,000 acres	40,000 acres	40,000 acres
Passively Managed Acres (an effort will continue to control invasive species)	None	5,551 acres (GP's Sustainable Forestry and Certification Program)	5,551 acres (GP's Sustainable Forestry and Certification Program) plus all lands between 65' and 67' msl	5,551 acres (GP's Sustainable Forestry and Certification Program)
Objective 2.4 Water Management/ Sanctuaries (Replaces CCP Objective 2.3 and modifies CCP Objective 2.5)				
GTR Management	No flooding for two-three years. Mimic historic winter flooding. Various scenarios can be utilized but fluctuate.	None – Allow natural winter flood events	Starting December 15 raise the pool one tenth/day until the 68' msl level is reached. Start the drawdown on January 16 to 65' msl.	Every other year starting December 15 raise the pool one tenth/day until the 68' MSL level is reached. Start the two tenths/day drawdown on January 16 to 65'MSL. Allow natural winter flood events on opposite years
Sanctuary	9,050 acres	6,910 acres (old area removed would be opened to small game, big game hunting and fishing)	9,050 acres	6,910 acres (old area removed would be opened to fishing, small game, big game hunting, and waterfowl hunting)
Objective 2.5 Drawdown of the Felsenthal Pool/Moist Soil (Modifies CCP Objective 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, and 2.12)				
Drawdown	None	One foot drawdown every three years	One foot drawdown every year	One foot drawdown every three years
Objective 2.6 Aquatic Resources (Modifies CCP Objective 2.12)				
Water Quality Monitoring and Mussel Bed Survey	None	Yes	Yes	Yes
ATV Trails	Maintain existing	Eliminate 18.3 miles of ATV trails	Eliminate 5.8 miles	Eliminate 5.8 miles of ATV trails

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

While explained in more depth in the draft plan, briefly, this HMP addresses

- 1) flooding of the green-tree reservoir in winter and forest health concerns,
- 2) relocation of the waterfowl sanctuary,
- 3) the production of moist-soil vegetation in the Felsenthal Pool, and
- 4) a reduction of ATV trails from 59.25 to 53.45 miles.

Coordination

We released the Draft Habitat Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (Draft HMP/EA) for 67 days of public review from October 26-December 31, 2015. A news release announcing the Felsenthal NWR Draft HMP/EA public comment period was sent out to all media outlets within Ashley, Bradley, and Union Counties, Arkansas. Documents/notices were also posted on the refuge's website and Facebook page. A factsheet was also developed and distributed to interested parties.

The refuge held three public Draft HMP/EA meetings to solicit input and to identify concerns or issues on the Draft HMP/EA. The first public meeting was held on Thursday, November 5, 2015, at the El Dorado Conference Center – Murphy Hall I, 311 South West Avenue, El Dorado, AR.

The second meeting was held on Tuesday, November 10, 2015, at the Warren Court House – Old Courtroom, 101 East Cedar, Warren, AR. The third meeting was held on Thursday, November 12, 2015, at the First Baptist Church Multi-Ministry Center, 703 Pine Street, Crossett, AR. These meetings were held from 6-8 pm, with a presentation starting at 6:15 pm.

Approximately 65, 41, and 51 members of the public attended each meeting, respectively, and public comments were transcribed by a court reporter. The Service also held two informal open houses held on November 7 and 14, 2015 at the Felsenthal Visitor Center, 5531 Highway 82 West, Crossett, AR from 10 am-2 pm.

Comments on the Draft HMP/EA were submitted in a variety of ways (e.g., at the public meetings and by mail, fax, and e-mail). The deadline for submitting comments was originally November 27, 2015 but upon request for an extension, ended on December 31, 2015. Approximately 60 sets of comments were received and many more

comments were recorded at the public meetings. In addition, a petition with 644 signatures was received. The refuge received comments regarding its forest management activities; however, none were specifically targeted at commercial forest management operations. A copy of the comments can be found at the refuge's website: <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/felsenthal/>

Selection Rationale

In October 2015, we completed the Draft HMP/EA for the Felsenthal NWR. That Draft HMP/EA outlined three alternatives for habitat management on Felsenthal NWR and identified Alternative B as our preferred alternative. We released the Draft HMP/EA for 67 days of public review from February 22 to March 22, 2013. In response to public requests, we extended that period another 30 days, to April 22, 2013.

Comments on the Draft HMP/EA were submitted in a variety of ways (e.g., at the public meetings and by mail, fax, and e-mail) starting on October 26, 2015. Over 155 people attended three public meetings. The deadline for submitting comments was originally November 27, 2015, but upon request for an extension, ended on December 31, 2015. Approximately 60 sets of comments were received and many more comments were recorded at the public meetings. In addition, a petition with 644 signatures was received. We evaluated all the letters or e-mails we received and the oral testimony we recorded in our public hearings during that period.

This Final HMP summarizes the public comments that raised issues and concerns and summarizes our responses to them. Based on our analysis in the Draft HMP/EA and our evaluation of those comments, we have selected a combination of Alternative B and C, which is our preferred alternative in the Final HMP (See Table 13). Our modifications include additions, corrections, or clarifications of our preferred management actions. We have also determined that none of those modifications warrant our publishing a revised or amended Draft HMP/EA before publishing the Final HMP.

Below are important changes in the Final HMP:

- In response to the majority of comments artificial GTR flooding will occur every other year. In years with artificial flooding of the GTR, the Service will begin flooding on Dec 15, raising water levels one tenth a day until 68' MSL is reached. A drawdown of two tenths a day will begin around the January 14 bringing the pool back to 65 MSL by the month's end;
- The Service added Figure 12 to show the Ouachita River stages for the past eight years;
- The refuge will close 5.8 miles of ATV trails. This is a reduction of 12.5 miles from the proposed 18.3 miles;
- The Service added a prairie/grassland area to Figure 14;
- The Service made minor editorial and formatting changes;
- Open pine and upland hardwood/pine acreages were revisited and updated;
- Figure 16, the updated sanctuary map, was added;
- Due to a flaw that was discovered in open pine model, Figure 21 (Draft HMP/EA) and references to the model have been removed from the plan;
- The ATV CD was updated with the proposed change and new Figure; and
- The literature cited section was updated with new information.

For More Information

To download a copy of the HMP, Draft HMP/EA, and comments submitted on the draft plan, please visit our web page at <http://www.fws.gov/felsenthal>

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