

I. BACKGROUND

Introduction

This Environmental Assessment for Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge has been prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act. It discusses the purpose and need for the comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge, and provides an analysis of the impacts that could be expected from each of the management proposals outlined in the plan. This analysis assists the Fish and Wildlife Service in determining if it will need to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement or a Finding of No Significant Impact for the refuge.



*Fishing in flooded
bottomland forest
USFWS Photo*

The Fish and Wildlife Service is the nation's primary conservation agency concerned with the protection and long-term management of wildlife resources. The Service administers the National Wildlife Refuge System, a system of more than 540 national wildlife refuges covering over 93 million acres, much of which is primarily managed for the enhancement of migratory bird populations and federally listed threatened/endangered fish, wildlife, and plants. Of particular interest in the Central Gulf Ecosystem is the plight of resi-

dent and migratory bird resources, including the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Significant loss of old growth and mature pine forests is the cause. As a result, the Service is directing management emphasis on the recovery of these species at Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge.

Purpose and Need for the Plan

The purpose of the plan is to specify a management direction for Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge and to provide long-term guidance in relation to management decisions. Both direction and guidance are described in detail through a set of goals, objectives, and strategies in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. Also, the plan is needed to address current management issues and to satisfy the legislative mandates of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, which requires preparation of a comprehensive conservation plan for all national wildlife refuges.

The environmental assessment is needed to determine and evaluate a range of management alternatives. Each alternative has the potential to be fully developed into a comprehensive conservation

plan and describes the predicted biological, physical, social, and economic impacts of managing the refuge.

The Service identified issues, concerns, and needs through discussions with the public, agency managers, conservation partners, and others. In particular, the Service's planning team identified a range of alternatives, evaluated the possible consequences of implementing each alternative, and recommended Alternative 2 as the action that would provide the best approach to managing the refuge.

The former comprehensive plan that identified priorities and ensured consistent and integrated management was the master plan, written in 1961, and revised as needed. Over time, the master plan has become increasingly outdated, thus necessitating the need for the comprehensive conservation plan.

Decisions to be Made

Based on the assessment described in this document, the Fish and Wildlife Service will select an alternative to implement the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge. A Finding of No Significant Impact will be prepared to determine if the selected alternative is a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, thus requiring the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement. Assuming no significant impacts are found, implementation of the plan will begin and will be monitored annually and revised when necessary.

Planning Study Area

The Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge planning study area is located in east-central Mississippi, 13 miles south of Starkville, Mississippi (Fig. 12). The planning study area for this environmental assessment includes lands outside the existing refuge acquisition boundary that are being studied for inclusion in the refuge system and/or partnership planning efforts. It also includes portions of the Central Gulf Watershed. The Fish and Wildlife Service presently owns and manages 47,049 acres within the 56,451-acre refuge acquisition boundary. Approximately 8,000 acres of in-holdings are also within the refuge's proposed acquisition boundary; however, only 4,263 acres are privately owned. The remaining 3,737 acres are either state-owned Section 16 properties or owned by the John Starr State Forest, and these lands will never be acquired by the Service. The Service will continue seeking to acquire, from willing sellers, the acres in private ownership. This environmental assessment will identify management on refuge lands, as well as on those lands proposed to be acquired.

Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process

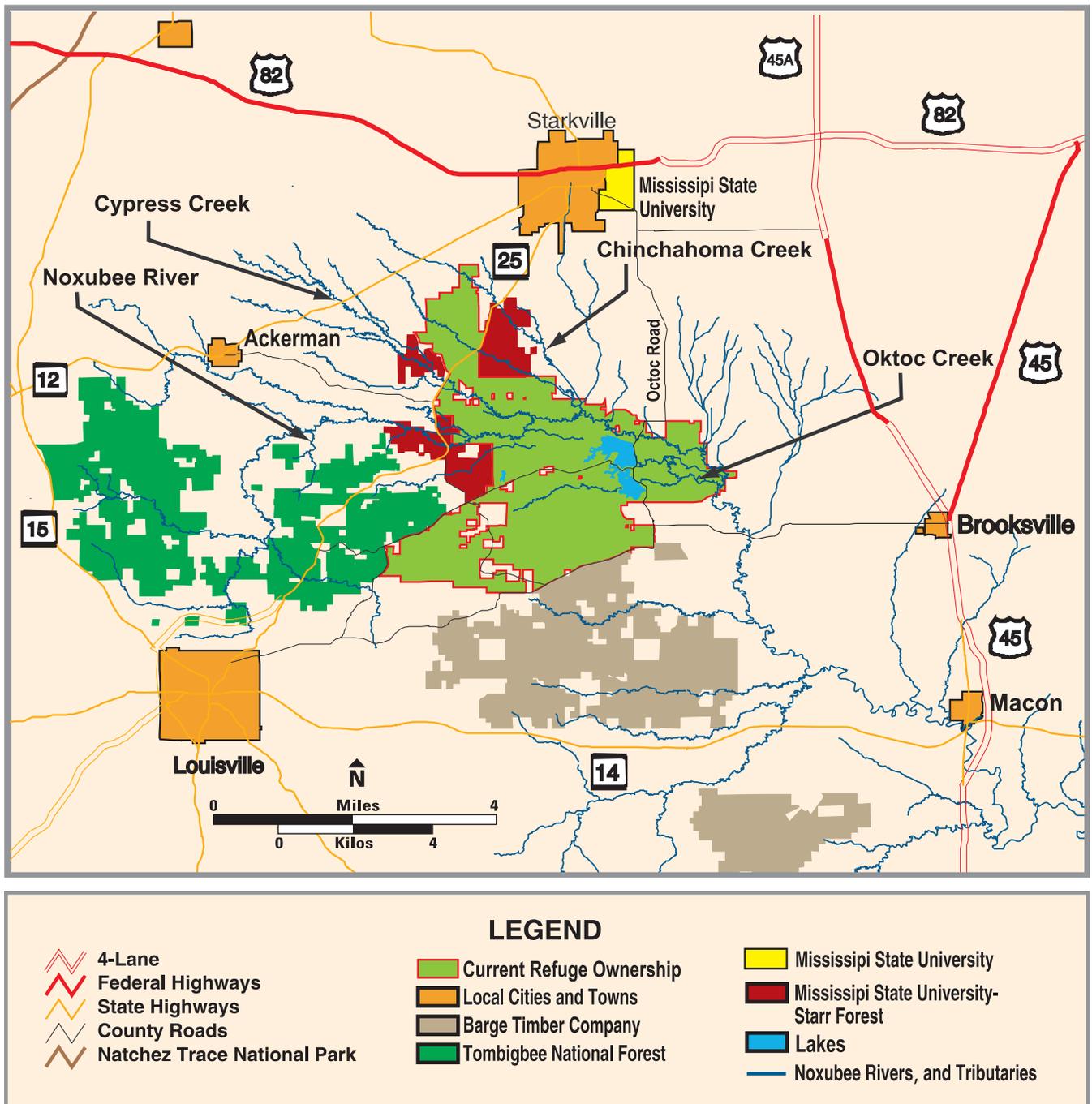
The Service developed this plan using a systematic decision-making approach and ensured public involvement in management decisions throughout the planning process. After the planning team was assembled, the Service contacted a wide array of people including federal agencies, state conservation agencies, tribal and local governments, conservation organizations, landowners, and other members of the public. Announcements stating the location, date, and

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time for the first scoping meeting were furnished to local residents. At the scoping meeting the staff explained the refuge's purpose, history, and laws and regulations governing management, as well as purpose and need for the plan, and management activities and issues.

Input obtained from attendees at the the scoping meeting and discussions held with state and local officials, civic groups, and conservation organizations were used to develop the plan. Issues and concerns were developed by the planning team and expanded to include comments generated by local citizens and others from the scoping meeting. The refuge received 85 responses regarding a variety of activities and issues.

Figure 12. Planning Study Area



The planning team developed and analyzed three management alternatives, including the current management plan. Management alternatives describe resource conditions and visitor experiences as integrated sets of goals, objectives, and strategies for specific geographic areas or specific resource types wherever they occur refuge wide. Alternative 2 has been tentatively selected as the proposed action and is described in Section B, Chapter II. Each alternative addresses significant resource problems and is crafted to achieve the mission and purpose(s) for which the refuge was established. The comments received from the internal agency review, as well as anticipated responses from the public following review of this plan, will assist the Service in refining each alternative. Several key issues or problems formed the basis for the development of the different alternatives as described in Chapter II.

The policies of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, and the National Environmental Policy Act require the Service to actively seek public involvement in the preparation of environmental documents. The National Environmental Policy Act also requires the Service to give serious consideration to all reasonable alternatives for managing refuges, including a "no action" alternative, which represents continuation of current conditions and management practices. Alternative management scenarios were developed as part of the planning process described in this environmental assessment.

Key steps in the Fish and Wildlife Service's comprehensive conservation planning process include:

- Forming the planning team and conducting preplanning;
- Initiating public involvement and scoping;
- Identifying issues and formulating or revising vision, goals, and objectives;
- Developing alternatives and assessing their environmental effects;
- Identifying the proposed action;
- Publishing the draft plan and environmental documents;
- Revising the draft plan and publishing a final plan; and
- Implementing the plan.

Public Involvement in Planning

Public involvement is an essential component of the comprehensive conservation planning process. The Service announced the initiation of the planning effort for Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge on June 3, 1998, through a newspaper article published in the "Starkville Daily News," along with press releases to several other newspapers. A public workshop was held on May 12, 1998, in Starkville, Mississippi, to inform the public of the planning process and to solicit, for a 30-day period, public comments.

Initially, the staff identified issues, concerns, and opportunities followed by issue identification with the public during scoping meetings in 1998. Addressing significant issues plays a role in determining future conditions of the refuge and will be considered in the

long-term management plan. The following descriptions present issues, concerns, and opportunities summarized from all public input received during the scoping process. The public workshop and written comment period are collectively referred to as the scoping process.

Many of the resource problems and management challenges facing the refuge are also reflected on a larger scale within the Central Gulf Ecosystem. These problems, both individually and cumulatively, play a significant role in determining future conditions on this refuge. For the sake of clarity, these resource problems and management challenges, detailed in the following sections, are briefly summarized in the following paragraphs:

Wildlife and Habitat Management

Many people were concerned about the loss of wildlife habitat and felt that protecting, restoring, and enhancing wildlife populations and habitats should be a refuge priority. Managing and restoring older-aged forests to support red-cockaded woodpeckers were discussed as significant issues. Development of a database containing pertinent information on specific types of research was suggested. Some people recommended a rigorous biological assessment and inventory of all plant, fish, and wildlife species present on the refuge, including birds and invertebrates. One person felt that the refuge should limit prescribed burning because it interferes with the managed turkey hunt. One commenter wanted to see a decrease in timber cutting to improve habitats, while another wanted an increase to support the local timber industry. Control of invasive species and continual management of the grassland/prairie restoration project were expressed as concerns. The effects resulting from the suppression of prescribed fire, as well as the difficulty of the public to accept it as a management tool, were expressed as issues. Managing water levels in the lakes for production of food for waterfowl can have a detrimental effect on fish populations, thus there were opposing views on the necessity of water level draw-downs.

One respondent would like to see two areas nominated as research natural areas. One commenter wanted to see the proposed wilderness area officially designated by Congress as Wilderness. There is an overall concern to proceed with the designations of two research natural areas, and to develop inventories and long-term protection for cultural resources.

Recreation and Public Use

Public comments included concerns over recreation use, including both access issues and issues related to impacts. Some respondents felt that hunting and fishing were over-emphasized while wildlife viewing and environmental education and interpretation should be emphasized more, and that facilities should be improved as well as built to support these activities. Some recommended the expansion of hunting and fishing opportunities and facilities. An investigation to determine impacts on non-target species resulting from recreational use was requested.

The need for additional funding to support hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and environmental education is a concern which was expressed by several people. Some comments suggested paving entrance roads and improving buildings, roads, trails, and signs to enhance visitor experiences. The number of staff would have to be increased to support additional visitors and activities. This is a concern since operational funding at its present level cannot support increases. One person felt that providing funds and staff to support recreation activities could deter funds and staff from fish and wildlife management programs and activities.

Land Protection and Conservation

One respondent wanted the refuge to purchase all the remaining private lands identified within the approved refuge acquisition boundary, and to consider expanding the acquisition boundary to protect more wildlife habitats, especially pine and grassland, for species with declining populations.

Refuge Administration and Management

Increasing and balancing staff numbers and obtaining the expertise and funding to support a backlog of maintenance activities are major concerns. The need for more scientific research and monitoring was a continuing issue expressed by several respondents. Some people felt that the public's understanding of the Service was poor and they would like to see increased communication and outreach, thereby enlarging support and appreciation of refuge resources and management issues.