

# **Caddo Lake Weeks after meeting, no progress on wildlife refuge**

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More than five weeks after a community panel asked the Army to break its impasse with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over transfer of land and water rights at the former ammunition plant at Karnack, little has changed.

“The Army is just not doing due diligence on what its supposed to be doing out there on the transfer,” said Paul Fortune, co-chairman of a 30-member residents committee overseeing cleanup work at the former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant.

The Restoration Advisory Board that Fortune co-chairs was established to provide residents’ input and oversight as the Army remedies pollution problems at the World War II plant. The 8,416-acre facility is a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site.

The Army has transferred all but 1,400 acres, and 3.2 billion gallons of water rights, as each section has been declared pollution-free.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has taken ownership of the cleaned areas and two years ago opened them to the public as the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Transfer of the final land and water, however, has been stuck at high center since the summer of 2010 when Fish and Wildlife sent the Army its conditions for accepting the final parcels. During a Sept. 15 meeting of the advisory board, Fortune and other members urged co-chairwoman Rose Zeiler, a liaison with the Army, to set up a meeting between her superiors and Fish and Wildlife.

In mid-2010, the wildlife department asked for better assurance the final acreage will be adequately cleaned. Fish and Wildlife’s refuge manager, Mark Williams, said the memorandum of understanding his department now has with the Army does not contain that assurance. It also allows the Army to turn the property over to a third party if Fish and Wildlife turns it down.

“The dirtiest spot on the whole reserve has not been cleaned up, and it’s in that 1,400 acres,” Fortune said. “And if it takes 20 years to clean it up (to Fish and Wildlife’s satisfaction), that’s not the big issue.”

That third-party option is what the community panel finds threatening, after fighting off a third-party that wanted to build an industrial park in the refuge several years ago. That fight was won for the residents by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, whose call for public hearings preceded a withdrawal by the industrial group.

Since the meeting five weeks ago, supporters in a group called Friends of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge have recruited the Harrison County Commissioners Court and others to endorse a letter asking Hutchison to push the two federal departments to an agreement. Contacted repeatedly during recent weeks, Hutchison's office replied with a one-sentence statement that her office continues to work with both departments.

Fortune said Thursday that no meetings have been scheduled among the parties. A spokesman in the Army's Public Affairs Office said Thursday he would forward a request for comment on the impasse to the Pentagon. The Army had issued no comment on the matter by Friday afternoon. Meanwhile, under the Freedom of Information Act, both the Friends group and the Longview News-Journal have asked for documents indicating progress of cleanup.

The newspaper made its request after a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers official announced at the Sept. 15 meeting that a new firm will be brought in to complete the cleanup. The newspaper and Friends also have asked for a copy of the aborted contract, said to be worth \$17 million to \$22 million, with former cleanup firm, Shaw Environmental.