

Lack of Caddo Refuge Answers Frustrate Citizens

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KARNACK — Two federal departments point the finger at each other over what's holding up transfer of the remaining resources at the old Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant to a national wildlife refuge here.

“This answered none of my questions — why has the Army not responded to any of my questions?” asked Paul Fortune, chairman of a community-based committee advising cleanup efforts as the U.S. Army clears polluted sites at the former explosives manufacturing plant outside Karnack. Fortune, and many of the 30 other members of the Restoration Advisory Board, weren't asking a cleanup question of Army liaison Rose Zeiler. Their complaint came after the meeting as Zeiler allowed discussion to venture beyond the board's designated sphere into issues related to the property transfer itself.

All but 1,400 acres of the 8,416-acre plant on Caddo Lake, and about 3.2 billion gallons of water rights, have been transferred from the Army to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The latter department is managing the land as the two-year-old Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is a separate entity from the Caddo Lake Institute, a nonprofit group dedicated to researching and preserving the unique Caddo environment.

The community advisory board Fortune leads wants assurances the transfer will be completed to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

“This community — our objective is for all of this property to go to the Fish and Wildlife Service,” Fortune told Zeiler at the end of Thursday night's meeting. “We've got this same scenario we had six years ago when the Army wouldn't tell us anything. And, all of a sudden, ‘Oh. We've got this third party.’ ”

In the case Fortune cited, the third party was an industrial group that planned to develop land at the refuge. The Caddo area residents thwarted that by enlisting U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, who called for public hearings. Fortune says the third party backed off only after that public exposure by the senator.

The issue of a third party might be the rub that offends Caddo residents who support the refuge. But, it's the unexplained stand-off between the Army and Fish and Wildlife that's doing the rubbing — and it's the wrong way.

Mark Williams, the Fish and Wildlife manager for the refuge, on Friday described a two-stage scenario being dammed up by bureaucracy.

A new memorandum of understanding that Fish and Wildlife wants, to replace the one that allowed the third-party threat, must be preceded by a permit that enables the federal government to relinquish control of its land to one of its agencies.

Williams said the Army sent Fish and Wildlife “a boilerplate permit” in May. The permit outlines

pollution remedies the Army plans for the remaining 1,400 acres.

Williams said his department is not satisfied that those remedies will work. If his agency doesn't see assurance in the permit that the remedies will work, Fish and Wildlife to turn down transfer of those final 1,400 acres, he said.

And under the original memorandum of understanding, which remains in effect now, the Army would have no choice but to open the final 1,400 acres to third parties.

Fish and Wildlife also needs clear language in the permit that all water will remain at Caddo where the in-stream flow is critical to aquatic habitat, Williams said.

The Army's Zeiler did not return phone or email messages Friday asking her to comment for this story or provide contact information for an Army communications officer authorized to comment. Thursday night, she told Fortune and the advisory board the next move belongs to Fish and Wildlife. "Why has Fish and Wildlife not responded to my questions?" she repeated Fortune's earlier question but switched agencies. "We don't control this scenario. If Fish and Wildlife refuses to take the land, we have no option (but a third party)."

Fortune finally proposed that he secure a Fish and Wildlife leader to meet with the Army if Zeiler would corral an Army official who can act on the blocked issue.

"I'll send it up the chain of command," she replied.