

Pre

Returning to Nature  
Army to transfer more land to Caddo wildlife refuge

By Steve Bandy, News Messenger

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Ownership of about 7,500 of the approximately 8,400 acres that was once the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant has already been transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Transfer of about half of the remaining acreage of what is now the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge should be completed by the end of the year.

"The Army is working hard on it," said Mark Williams, FWS project leader, from his office in Karnack.

Williams said the Army has a contract with Shaw Environmental to complete clean-up of the entire site by the end of 2010.

"The Army has things that have the potential to be human health hazards, including unexploded ordnance," Williams said.

The U.S. Army acquired the land from a number of private landowners and established the LHAAP in October 1942 to produce TNT. Munitions for World War II and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam eventually were produced and stored — and tested — at the site.

Williams noted that two of the sites slated to be transferred to Service ownership in the near future were once used for ordinance testing and that live mortar shells had been found at one site in the past.

"Extensive searches are being conducted at these sites — walk-over searches and with heavy machinery and metal detectors," Williams said. "Even after the refuge is open to the public, there probably still will be restricted areas."

The plant became excess to the Army's needs in July 1997 and on April 17, 1998, the Fish and Wildlife Service first expressed an interest in a no-cost transfer of the lands.

The director of the FWS approved the establishment of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge effective Oct. 13, 2000, "for the purpose of migratory bird and other fish and wildlife management, conservation and protection." Under the arrangement, the Army retained primary jurisdiction, custody and control of the LHAAP and the Service created "an overlay" refuge on

a portion of the property.

The Army has been, and continues to be, in the process of cleaning up those areas within the LHAAP that have environmental contaminants. When the Army, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Service agree that the lands within the overlay refuge are suitable for transfer, the Service will accept primary jurisdiction, custody and control over the lands.

"The main problems we have are with groundwater," Williams said, referring to man-made holding ponds constructed by the Army.

The munitions plant was established and in use long before the stringent EPA regulations for waste disposal were implemented and some dump sites on the refuge grounds are contaminated.

Outside of the few contaminated spots, "It's not a dirty site," said Jay Webb, president and volunteer coordinator of the Friends of the Caddo Lake NWR, a volunteer group chartered with the state.

"I don't know what I'd do without the Friends group," Williams said. "The Fish and Wildlife Service is the smallest service in the smallest department (Department of the Interior) in the federal government. We have no staff out here except for me and Paul (Bruckwicki, biologist). These guys help me a whole lot."

Currently the refuges is closed to public access.

"We'll do (pre-arranged) tours — Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, church groups and such — all day, but the refuge is closed in the sense that you can't just come and go as you please," Williams said.

The FWS agent said he has been working closely with the Friends group in planning driving tours, limited hunting access, horseback riding trails, birding trails and more for when the refuge is opened to the public.

"There will be no camping allowed," he said. "We're so close to the state park that we don't want to compete with them, or with the facilities already available in Karnack, Uncertain, Marshall and Jefferson."

When it passed the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, Congress established hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation as "priority public uses" where compatible with the mission and purpose of an individual refuge. These wildlife-dependent public uses are sometimes referred to as the "Big 6." "We hit all six out here," Webb said. "Some of the other refuges in the state can hit on three or four, but we hit all six."

"The establishment of this refuge will ensure the conservation and protection of the migratory and resident waterfowl and neotropical migratory birds associated with these wetlands," Williams added.

Studies have listed up to 224 species of birds, 22 species of amphibians, 46 species of reptiles, and 93 species of fish in this area. A total of 20 animal "species of concern" are located or potentially located on the LHAAP and adjacent Caddo Lake. They include seven species of fish, six species of reptiles, six species of birds and four species of mammals. Two species — the Louisiana black bear and the American bald eagle — are federally listed under the Endangered Species Act.

"The refuge also is designed to protect one of the highest quality old-growth bottomland hardwood forests in the southeastern United States, the hardwood forest along Harrison Bayou, and the associated wetlands located along the shore of Caddo Lake," Williams said.

That wetlands area is listed as a "Wetland of International Significance" under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and is one of only 22 such designated areas in the United States.

"The Army left us a really great forest to work with," Williams said, "and, thus far, this whole exercise has been a shining example of how to transfer property. I can't make any promises, but I feel pretty confident that they (Army) will hit the 2010 deadline for clean-up. Whether the transfer of all the property is complete by that time or not, I don't know."

Williams added that he hopes to see the refuge open to limited public access by the end of this year.

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