

**RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN
BIG BRANCH MARSH NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex
St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana**

April 6, 2007

This is a revision of the original Recreational Hunting plan
for Big Branch Marsh dated March 5, 1996
Amended March 26, 1998

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April 6, 2007

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**2007 BIG BRANCH MARSH
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
RECREATIONAL HUNTING PLAN**

The original hunt plan for Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was approved by signature of the Regional Director on March 5, 1996, and a subsequent amendment to the plan was approved by signature of the Regional Director on March 26, 1998. The approved plan and amendment identified and approved recreational hunting of big game (whitetail deer), migratory game birds (waterfowl, coots, woodcock, snipe), and upland game (squirrel, rabbit). This plan is revised and amended to include recreational hunting of rail, gallinule, and quail. All provisions of the Section 7, Environmental Assessment, Compatibility Determination, and other requirements of the original plan remain in affect and shall serve to cover this plan as amended. An additional Environmental Assessment is prepared and attached to this plan. Upon approval and signature, this plan as revised and amended along with the accompanying Environmental Assessment, shall serve as the 10 year review of the station hunt program for compatibility purposes.

I. Introduction

Created in 1994, Big Branch Marsh NWR is the 504th refuge established within the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). Big Branch Marsh NWR is one of eight refuges managed as part of the Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex. Prior to establishing the refuge, area wetlands were threatened by urban expansion from the city of New Orleans. Several local organizations, including Northshore Coastal Watch, St. Tammany Sportsman's League, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation supported and initiated the establishment of the refuge (USFWS 2000). These organizations lobbied local senators and congressmen to save the wetland areas which resulted in the establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR.

Public interest in the project and governmental support lead to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) authorizing the establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR on September 29, 1994 under the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986. The original acquisition boundary of the refuge included 12,000 acres of marshlands and forested wetlands between Cane Bayou on the west, Lake Pontchartrain on the south and the Southern Railroad trestle on the east. The initial acquisition occurred on October 13, 1994 when The Conservation Fund (TCF), with funding from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, donated 3,660 acres of wetlands. Subsequently, the refuge acquisition boundary went through two expansion phases. The first expansion proposal, approved in December 1996, consisted of 10,000 acres which included 3 expansion sites: Oak Harbor, a 2,931-acre tract, Fritchie Marsh covering 6,500 acres, and a 500-acre tract along the east side of Lacombe Bayou. The second expansion proposal was approved in April 1998 and included 1,770 acres of wetlands, hardwood ridges, and pine flatwoods adjacent to existing refuge lands. These small tracts of land also included the current 110-acre site for Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex headquarters. Additional acquisitions were made possible by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Land and Water

Conservation Act funds, and donations from TCF. Currently, Big Branch Marsh NWR is approximately 17,366 acres of fee title lands within the 24,000 acre acquisition boundary of marshlands and forested wetlands

The refuge is a mixture of marshes, pine islands, pine ridges, and hardwood hammocks and drains along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Lake Pontchartrain is a shallow, flat-bottomed, fresh to brackish water lake. The lake's water salinity varies widely dependent on rainfall and wind direction. Heavy rainfall will freshen the lake and its adjacent marshes, while drought and strong easterly winds will cause higher salinity water to move into the area. Salinity in the tidally influenced portions of the refuge has ranged from less than 5 ppt to over 20 ppt.

Its diverse habitats attract a wide variety of species of shorebirds, wading birds, neo-tropical migratory birds, and wintering waterfowl. Mammals common in the area include white-tailed deer, mink, nutria, raccoon, rabbits, squirrel, and river otter. The refuge also contains numerous estuaries, ponds, and bayous that provide critical spawning and nursery habitat for commercially important fish, shrimp, and crabs. It also supports a large and diverse recreational fishery for both saltwater and freshwater species. Species commonly caught include largemouth bass, catfish, bream, redfish, white trout, croaker, and speckled trout. Recreational crabbing is extremely popular and productive.

REFUGE PURPOSES: The purposes of the refuge were defined by the following authorities:

Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986, 16 USC 3901 (b):

- For the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.

North American Wetlands Conservation Act, 16 USC 4401 2(b):

- To protect, enhance, restore, and manage an appropriate distribution and diversity of wetland ecosystems and other habitats for migratory birds and other fish and wildlife in North America;
- To maintain current or improved distributions of migratory bird populations; and
- To sustain an abundance of waterfowl and other migratory birds consistent with the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the international obligations contained in the migratory bird treaties and conventions and other agreements with Canada, Mexico, and other countries.

The refuge purposes were further defined in the 1994 Final Land Protection Plan and two subsequent Supplemental Environmental Assessments (1996, 1998) for expansion of Big Branch Marsh NWR as the following management objectives:

- To provide habitat for a natural diversity of wildlife associated with Big Branch Marsh;
- To provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl;
- To provide nesting habitat for wood ducks;

- To provide habitat for non-game migratory birds; and
- To provide opportunities for public outdoor recreation, such as hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and environmental education and interpretation, whenever they are compatible with the purposes of the Refuge.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, H.R. 1420, signed into law on October 9, 1997 establishes hunting as one of the six primary public uses of national wildlife refuges. The Act states that these uses should be facilitated when ever they can so as long as they are compatible with the purpose of the refuge.

II. Conformance with Statutory Authorities

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended, and the Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, authorize public hunting on refuges where the hunting program is compatible with the major purposes for which the area was established. The establishment of Big Branch Marsh NWR was authorized in 1994 by signature of the Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 4, by memorandum requesting the establishment of the refuge in order to preserve the habitats and associated wildlife in perpetuity for the benefit and use of the general public. The area has recreational value for both consumptive and nonconsumptive users. One of the stated objectives of the refuge is to provide ‘... opportunities for public outdoor recreation, such as hunting ...’ Hunting, as proposed, is compatible with the protection of refuge habitats and associated wildlife and will provide recreational opportunities for the public.

The Refuge Recreation Act requires that funds be available for the development, operation, and maintenance of hunting programs. Presently the refuge is funded and staffed at a sufficient level to administer the hunt program as proposed.

III. Statement of Objectives

The following have been established as the primary management objectives of Big Branch Marsh NWR:

- To provide habitat for a natural diversity of wildlife associated with Big Branch Marsh;
- To provide wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl;
- To provide nesting habitat for wood ducks;
- To provide habitat for non-game migratory birds; and
- To provide opportunities for public outdoor recreation, such as hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and environmental education and interpretation, whenever they are compatible with the purposes of the Refuge.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recognizes hunting as an acceptable, traditional, and legitimate form of wildlife oriented recreation. Within the context of the above stated objectives, the management objectives of the hunting program on the refuge will be to:

- Provide the public with a quality, wildlife oriented recreational opportunity;
- Provide for the utilization of a renewable resource by the public; and
- Maintain wildlife populations at sustainable levels and at levels compatible with the maintenance and protection of refuge habitats.

As proposed, the hunt program including cumulative effects of neighboring hunts on surrounding public lands should in no way conflict with the stated objectives of the refuge. Continuation of the hunt program will contribute to meeting the objective for public use. Restrictions on equipment, time, and place considerations should aid in preventing conflicts with nonconsumptive users and with refuge education and interpretation programs.

IV. Assessment

Hunting is proposed for:

1. Big Game
2. Migratory Game Birds
3. Upland Game

The following is an assessment of the hunting resource on the refuge

Big Game:

Big game, primarily consisting of white-tailed deer, is present refuge wide, primarily on the higher, forested areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents and hunting club members prior to the establishment of the refuge and have been sufficient to sustain a hunting program while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Competition between white-tailed deer and other species could potentially occur if population levels are allowed to expand beyond the carrying capacity of the available habitat. The hunt program should keep deer populations within acceptable levels. If deer numbers increase beyond acceptable levels, other harvest methods may be considered.

Competition exists between deer and feral hogs on the refuge. Feral hogs compete with deer and other wildlife species for available food resources. The taking of feral hogs may be permitted during the proposed deer hunt season in an effort to reduce and limit numbers of hogs present on the refuge. If feral hog numbers increase beyond acceptable levels, other control methods may be considered.

Migratory Game Birds:

Hunting is proposed for all migratory game birds, including waterfowl, within established Federal and State approved regulations.

Waterfowl: Waterfowl are present in the marshes and flooded woodlands of the refuge. The refuge currently supports a huntable population of waterfowl. While wood ducks and mottled ducks breed on the refuge and are present year round, the bulk of the waterfowl are represented by winter migrants. Waterfowl populations on refuge lands fluctuate with habitat conditions in the marsh including changes in vegetation and water levels. Populations may also respond to hunting pressure and move to areas of lower disturbance/hunting pressure. The harvest of waterfowl on the refuge is not expected to reduce population levels below acceptable levels.

Coots, rails, gallinules: Coots, rails, and gallinules are present primarily in the marshes of the refuge. Statewide, populations of these species are considered adequate to support a recreational hunt program. Coots are winter migrants to the refuge while rails and gallinules breed on the refuge and are present year round. Harvest of these species on the refuge is largely incidental to the harvest of other species, primarily waterfowl. Hunting of rails and gallinules in the wiregrass marshes of the refuge is extremely difficult and they are not generally pursued by hunters. Populations of these species fluctuate with habitat conditions more so than hunting pressure. The harvest of these species is not expected to reduce population levels below acceptable levels.

Woodcock, Snipe: Migratory woodcock and snipe are present in the marshes and wet woodlands of the refuge during the fall and winter months. The refuge supports huntable populations of these species. Habitat management practices on the refuge including timber harvest and prescribed fire will benefit these species and it is expected that this management and the added protection afforded birds on the refuge will lead to increased populations on refuge lands. Hunting of woodcock and snipe in the thick wet cover they prefer is extremely difficult and they are not generally pursued by hunters. Populations of these species fluctuate with habitat conditions and weather more so than hunting pressure. The harvest of these species is not expected to reduce population levels below acceptable levels.

Upland Game:

Hunting is proposed for squirrel, rabbit, quail, and raccoon on refuge lands.

Squirrel: Squirrels are present on the forested areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Rabbit: Rabbits are present refuge wide. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Quail: Quail are present in small numbers on the forested and grassy upland areas of the refuge. Numbers have been sufficient in this area to support hunting by local residents prior to the establishment of the refuge. Populations are sufficient to sustain a small harvestable surplus while meeting refuge objectives other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

Raccoon: Raccoons are present refuge wide. Raccoons are known predators of nesting birds, including wood ducks and mottled ducks, small mammals, and reptiles and amphibians. In large numbers they may have a significant impact on populations of other wildlife species. Numbers are sufficient to sustain a harvestable surplus. Populations of raccoons can be reduced and still maintain sustainable populations while also meeting refuge objectives for other wildlife species and refuge programs other than hunting. Restrictions on methods of harvest and seasons will aid in maintaining sustainable populations.

V. Description of Hunting Program

- A. There are currently considered to be harvestable populations of all target species throughout the refuge.
- B. Hunting will be permitted in accordance with Federal regulations governing public use on National Wildlife Refuges as set forth in Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations. Hunting will be in accordance with applicable State of Louisiana regulations and other Federal laws regulating the take of wildlife, subject to the special conditions as published annually in the Code of Federal Regulations and outlined in annual Refuge Specific Hunting brochures which are available to the general public. Refuge specific hunting regulations allow for proper management of public lands and their resources. They also provide increased safety to refuge visitors.
- C. All lands currently owned and/or managed as a part of Big Branch Marsh NWR may be opened to the taking of all hunted species by the public with the following exceptions: 1) hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities; 2) hunting is prohibited on the grounds of the main administrative facility for the Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex, such grounds being separate from the main portion of the refuge and located at 61389 Hwy. 434, Lacombe, LA 70445, encompassing approximately 110 acres +/-.
- D. All future lands acquired and/or managed as part of Big Branch Marsh NWR through fee title purchase, donation, lease, management agreement, memorandum of understanding, or any other means may be opened at the time such document becomes effective to the taking of all hunted species by the public under the conditions of this hunt plan with the exception of any conditions, exclusions, or reservations contained in such document which may expressly prohibit such action.

- E. Waterfowl (ducks, geese) and coot hunting will be permitted until noon no more than four (4) days per week during the state waterfowl seasons, including early teal season, youth waterfowl hunt season, or other such special seasons which may be promulgated by law or statute. Specific days will be determined by refuge management and published in the refuge permit. The refuge shall be closed to waterfowl and coot hunting during that segment of the goose season that extends beyond the regular duck season.
- F. Other migratory game bird hunting will be permitted in accordance with State seasons, and bag limits. Use of firearms shall be restricted to shotguns only.
- G. Deer archery hunting will be permitted – state season. Firearms are prohibited. Use of dogs and/or driving of deer are prohibited.
- H. Upland game hunting will be permitted in accordance with state seasons. Use of firearms shall be restricted to shotguns only.
- I. All persons participating in refuge hunts shall be required to possess a refuge permit. Permits are primarily for the purpose of providing information on hunt specific regulations and other refuge specific regulations. Permits shall be available to all persons desiring to participate in refuge hunt programs. Should public demand become great enough that numbers must be restricted; a lottery permit system may be instituted in an effort to control numbers of hunters. In addition, consideration may be given to time and space scheduling and/or zoning.
- J. Annual meetings will be held with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to coordinate annual hunt proposals for refuge lands.
- K. Enforcement of refuge regulations is an essential element in protecting trust resources and in providing for a quality recreational opportunity. Periodic, random patrols of refuge lands will be conducted by refuge law enforcement personnel. In addition, harvest and public use data may be collected at various times within the refuge. Law enforcement personnel may also be available to respond to specific reports of suspected violations.
- L. Self clearing check stations may be established at key entrance points to refuge lands. The purpose of such check stations shall be for the collection of harvest and public use data. Hunters are encouraged to report harvest at these check stations. If deemed necessary by refuge management for the collection of such data, harvest reporting by hunters may be required.

VI. Measures Taken to Avoid Conflicts with Other Management Objectives

Biological Conflicts:

None of the lands open to hunting have been designated as critical habitat for any species listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. The red-cockaded woodpecker, southern bald eagle and American alligator are known to occur on the refuge. The potential does exist for conflicts between hunting programs and non-target wildlife. However, the expected level of disturbance is expected to be minimal and below that of similar non-refuge lands. Refuge officers will make every effort to maximize protection of endangered species and other non-target wildlife. Restrictions on methods of hunting should aid in reducing incidental take of non-target species.

Refer to the Decision Document Package, Section 7 Evaluation.

Public Use Conflicts:

Sport fishing and hunting activities will overlap to some degree. No conflicts of consequence are expected between sport fishermen and deer and upland game hunters. Conflicts between sport fishermen and migratory bird hunters may arise but are expected to be minimal due to the dissimilar nature of these activities and the areas of the refuge where these activities may be expected to occur. It is expected that the majority of waterfowl hunting will occur in shallow marsh ponds not conducive to sport fishing due to their location (difficult to access by outboard powered boat) and water depth.

The demand for nonconsumptive wildlife oriented use on Big Branch Marsh NWR is expected to be high. Conflicts between hunters and nonconsumptive users may occur. Restrictions on hunting methods and restrictions on hunting near designated public use facilities and trails should aid in reducing potential conflicts. Should serious conflicts arise, considerations will be given to time and space scheduling and/or zoning.

The demand for consumptive uses is also expected to be high. While conflicts within user groups are expected to be minimal it may occur. Should serious conflicts arise within or between user groups, consideration will be given to limiting the number of users through a lottery permit system and through time and space scheduling and/or zoning.

Administrative Conflicts:

Administrative conflicts may arise from the need to conduct hunt programs simultaneously on several refuges within the Southeast Louisiana Refuges complex. Manpower and budgetary restrictions may lead to conflicts. Big Branch Marsh NWR is minimally funded and staffed and hunts must be

administered utilizing current personnel and funds allocated to Southeast Louisiana Refuges. Refuge specific regulations will be made as simple as possible in order to minimize the personnel and funding needed to administer the hunt program. Assistance may be sought from other refuges and from state personnel if serious conflicts arise.

VII. Conduct of the Hunt

A. Refuge specific hunting regulations.

Hunting of white tail deer is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.
2. Deer may be taken with archery equipment only.
3. Portable stands only.
4. Stands may not be placed on refuge lands prior to 14 days before the start of the refuge deer season and must be removed within 14 days following the end of the refuge deer season.
5. The use of dogs and/or driving deer is prohibited.
6. No air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
7. Hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities.
8. Feral hogs may be taken during the refuge archery hunt.

Hunting of waterfowl and coots is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.
2. Waterfowl (ducks, geese) and coot hunting is permitted until noon no more than four (4) days per week during the state waterfowl seasons, including early teal season, youth waterfowl hunt season, or other such special seasons which may be promulgated by law or statute. Specific days to be determined by refuge management and published in the refuge permit. The refuge shall be closed to waterfowl and coot hunting during that segment of the goose season that extends beyond the regular duck season.

3. Federally permitted non-toxic shot only.
4. No air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
5. Temporary blinds only; blinds and decoys must be removed daily.
6. Retrievers are allowed.
7. Hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities.

Hunting of woodcock, snipe, rail, and gallinule is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.
2. Firearms restricted to the use of shotguns only.
3. Federally permitted non-toxic shot only.
4. Shot size #4 or smaller* (* smaller in this instance shall refer to physical size of the shot, not shot size designation).
5. No air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
6. Setters/retrievers are allowed.
7. Hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities.

Hunting of squirrel, rabbit, quail and raccoon is permitted on designated areas of the refuge subject to the following conditions:

1. Refuge permit is required.
2. Firearms restricted to the use of shotguns only.
3. Federally permitted non-toxic shot only.
4. Shot size #4 or smaller* (* smaller in this instance shall refer to physical size of the shot, not shot size designation).

5. No air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
6. The use of dogs shall be restricted to such time periods as may be designated by refuge management to minimize conflicts with other refuge programs. Such time periods to be printed in the refuge permit.
7. Hunting is prohibited within 200 feet of any road, designated public use trail, designated parking area, and other designated public use facilities.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunt.

The areas now included in Big Branch Marsh NWR have been popular hunting areas for many years. The refuge hunting program is designed to provide for the continued use of refuge lands within a framework designed to protect wildlife populations and provide for public safety. The continuance of these traditional uses has been widely supported by the public both before and since the establishment of the refuge. It is expected that this support will continue.

C. Hunter application and registration procedures.

(Not applicable)

D. Description of hunter selection process.

(Not applicable)

E. Media selection for announcing and publicizing the hunt.

A list of media contacts is maintained in the refuge office. This list includes newspaper, radio, and television stations located in St. Tammany Parish, and the New Orleans metropolitan area. The media may be contacted when hunt dates and regulations are announced. Refuge permits and brochures will be printed and disseminated throughout the communities surrounding the refuge. Permits and brochures shall also be made available electronically via the refuge web page.

F. Description of hunter orientation, including pre-hunt scouting.

(Not applicable)

G. Hunter requirements.

- 1) Age – any hunter under 16 years of age must be accompanied by an adult 21 years of age or older.

- 2) Allowable equipment – **Deer:** may be taken only with the use of archery equipment complying with state regulations. Portable stands only. **Waterfowl and coots:** may be taken with shotguns and ammunition which comply with all state and federal regulations. Portable blinds and decoys allowed. Use of retrievers is allowed. **Other migratory birds and upland game:** may be taken only with the use of shotguns and ammunitions which comply with all state, federal, and refuge specific regulations. Use of dogs may be allowed.
- 3) Use of watercraft is allowed with the following exceptions: no air-thrust boats, motorized pirogues, go-devil type engines, mudboats, or other specialized motors designed to travel in very shallow water. Standard outboard engines and electric trolling motors are allowed on the refuge.
- 4) Use of open fires – the use of open fires is prohibited.
- 5) License and permits – all hunters will be required to possess and carry on their persons while hunting all appropriate state and federal licenses, stamps, and refuge permits.
- 6) Reporting harvest – all hunters are encouraged to report their harvest at such self clearing check stations as may be established or to the refuge office.
- 7) Hunter training and safety – all hunters are required to comply with state regulations dealing with the completion of a Hunter Safety Course. Archery hunters are encouraged to complete a certified bow hunter education course.

