

# **Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge**

**2003**

## **Refuge Narrative**

### **Introduction**

The Bob Stump National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003, P.L. No. 107-314, authorized the transfer, to the administrative jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Interior, 7,759 acres in order to establish Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge. P.L. No. 107-314 established that the primary purpose of Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge was to “enhance, manage, and protect the unique mountain longleaf pine ecosystem on the property.” Additional management objectives given in P.L. No. 107-314 are to: 1) conserve and enhance populations of fish, wildlife, and plants in the refuge, including migratory birds and species that are threatened or endangered, with particular emphasis on the protection of the mountain longleaf pine plant ecosystem, 2) protect and enhance the quality of aquatic habitat in the refuge, 3) provide, in coordination with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the public with recreational opportunities, including hunting, fishing<sup>1</sup>, wildlife observation and photography, 4) provide opportunities for scientific research and education on land use and environmental law.

On October 23, 2003 the Calhoun County Joint Powers Authority (JPA) transferred an additional 1,257 acres to the Department of the Interior. This transfer increased the size of the Refuge to 9,016 acres (Fig. 1) and provided additional acreage for habitat restoration, wildlife management activities and public use.

Refuge establishment objectives, as described in the Preliminary Project Proposal (USFWS 1998) and the Refuge Establishment Environmental Assessment (USFWS 2003a), were (1) to preserve and enhance the natural mountain longleaf pine ecosystem; (2) to help perpetuate the neotropical migratory bird resource; (3) to preserve a natural diversity and abundance of native fauna and flora, with special emphasis on the red-cockaded woodpecker and other endangered and threatened species; and (4) to provide compatible, wildlife dependant recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.

The Refuge Vision broadly reflects the reason for establishing the refuge, based on both legislated and planning purposes and objectives. The vision statement is as follows: Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge will be managed to maintain and restore a naturally regenerating mountain longleaf pine ecosystem, along with providing educators, research scientists, and the public with a broad range of opportunities to appreciate and enjoy a rare and disappearing southern forest type.

The presence of the best remaining example of a fire maintained mountain longleaf pine ecosystem is recognized as the primary factor for selecting the area as a National Wildlife Refuge. With closure of the base in 1998, military related wildfires disappeared and longleaf pine forests no longer experienced recurring wildfires. Without implementation of an active

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management program, these forests and associated fire dependant ecosystems will slowly evolve into a more hardwood dominated forest community. To meet the primary purpose of refuge establishment, priority was given to preserving and enhancing the longleaf pine ecosystem through an active management program.



**Caffey Mountain Old Growth Stand**



**Second Growth Longleaf Pine Stand**

Refuge staff consists of a Refuge Manager (Steve Miller) and biologist (Bill Garland). Offices are provided by the U.S. Army within the Army Transition Force compound on Fort McClellan. A crawler tractor, three farm tractors, transport trucks, three pickup trucks and a small fire suppression engine unit were transferred from the Army to the Service for use in management programs. The Refuge is currently under management supervision of Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge.

### **Proposed Establishment EA**

The draft EA for establishing the refuge was completed in July 2000 with the final EA released in March 2003. The final EA included the Conceptual Management Plan, Interim Compatibility Determination, and Interim Recreational Act Funding Analysis.

### **Environmental Condition of Property (ECOP) Report**

The final ECOP was released in April 2003 by the Army for the 7759 acres that were legislatively transferred to the Service. This report is required for the transfer of army lands to private or non-army government ownership. Lands are characterized according to environmental contamination, unexploded ordnance, biological significance, endangered species, wetlands and cultural resources. The Land Use Control Assurance Plan (LUCAP) and Land Use Control Implementation Plan (LUCIP) were included as attachments to the report. These two plans address environmental and safety restrictions that are imposed on transferred lands that have not been remediated. After remediation by the Army is completed, these restrictions will be lifted or converted to final land use restrictions that will exist in perpetuity. The LUCAP established a process for maintaining, inspecting and enforcing land use restrictions. The LUCIP is the actual refuge land use control plan and provides specific restrictions for individual areas within the refuge.

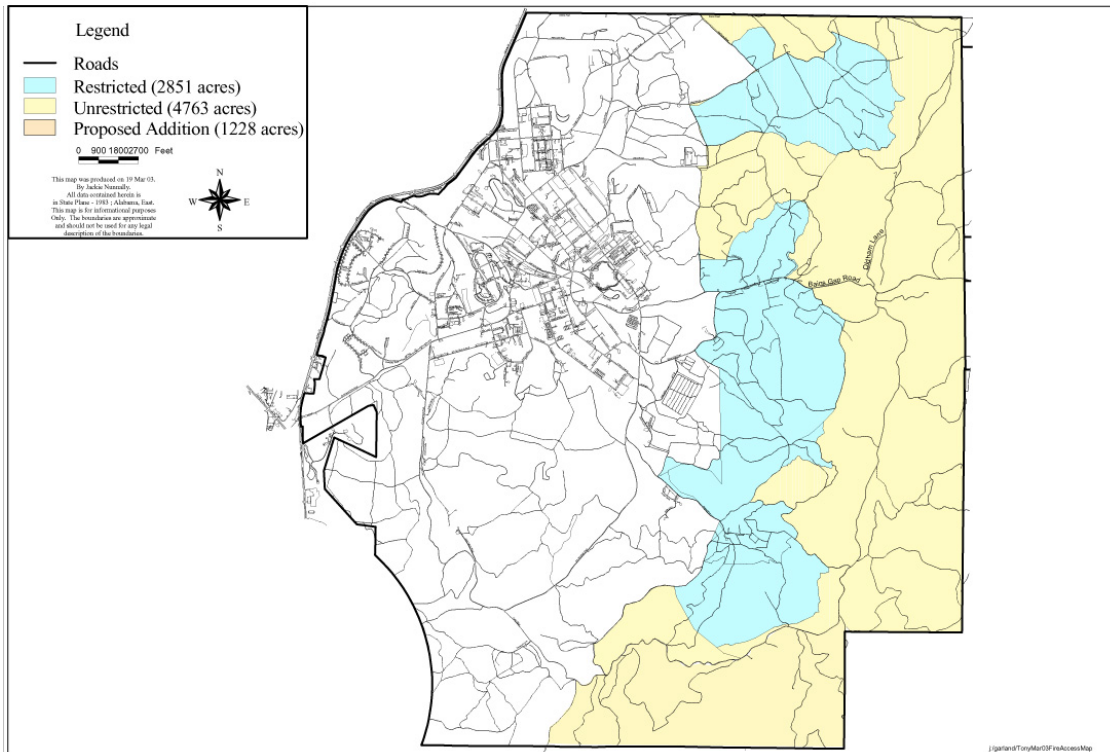
### **Chemical Warfare Contamination**

The Army completed studies in 2002 and determined that chemical agents used in training exercises do not exist on refuge areas or, for that manner, anywhere on the former army base. The only site on the refuge suspected of potentially containing chemical warfare agents was located behind former Range 24A. While this fenced area is now considered free of chemical agents, it remains fenced and must still be assessed for environmental contamination and UXO.

### **Unexploded Ordnance - Engineering Evaluation/Cost analysis (EE/CA)**

Fort McClellan existed as a military training facility for over 100 years. During this time, a wide variety and number of firing ranges existed on the former base. Some of these ranges were used for training with explosive rounds, and currently represent a danger from remaining unexploded ordnance (UXO). Some ranges were only used for a few years, particularly during World Wars I and II, and have since disappeared and grown back in a forest cover. Other ranges were actively used up to base closure in 1998, and are evident to the present observer. As part of the base closure process, the Army surveyed and characterized all training lands for the potential presence of UXO. Within the legislative transfer of land to the Service, stipulations were made that the Army remains responsible for the remediation of all UXO within the Refuge. Army investigations are entitled, Engineering Evaluations/Cost Analysis (EE/CA), and involve random sampling of lands to determine contamination, design of appropriate remediation techniques, and cost scenarios for cleanup. While a number of EE/CA investigations are in process on Fort McClellan, the Refuge is located on lands evaluated within the Charlie Area EE/CA.

Preliminary investigations characterized about one-third of the refuge as free of potential UXO contamination, another third possibly contaminated and the remaining third free of UXO, but so intertwined with contaminated areas that public access would be difficult and confusing. The Army allows unrestricted use by the Service on all lands considered free of UXO contamination.



**Preliminary Map of UXO Provided to Service for Operational Activities**

The boundaries of areas suspected of containing UXO were marked with signs indicating potential danger. These lands were identified as posing safety hazards for any activity that penetrated the soil surface or caused an action that resulted in a disturbance of the ground layer. Service personnel were permitted to surface access to these areas as long as they attended a safety briefing and followed land-use controls. The Army constructed a system of gates and barricades to ensure restricted access to these lands.



**Army UXO Warning Signs**



**Army Constructed Gates**

## **Environmental Contamination**



Environmental contamination from past military training remains the responsibility of the Army and is being evaluated within a process similar to CERCLA. Potential contamination is generally related to small arms ranges or training sites. Investigations were ongoing through 2003 with evaluation methods involving both the EE/CA process and site remediation reports.



**Ranges 21 and 22**



**Range 24A**

### **Refuge Dedication**

While legislatively the refuge came into existence on May 29, 2003, the actual dedication was held on June 30. Senator Jeff Sessions along with local political leaders, conservation organizations, army representatives and local citizens attended a formal dedication on JPA lands overlooking the refuge. Attendance was around 200. The dedication formalized the transfer of 7759 acres from the Army to the Service. As part of the agreement, \$500,000 was provided by the Army to the Service for transitional operational costs. A barred owl from the Alabama Rehabilitation Center was released by the Senator as part of the opening ceremonies.



**Dedication Site on Range 29**



**Senator Session's Release of Barred Owl**

### **Mountain Longleaf Conference**

Creation of the refuge and continual regional interest in longleaf pine was the catalyst for organizing a regional conference on the mountain longleaf pine ecosystem. Sponsors of the conference included the Longleaf alliance, Auburn University, Jacksonville State University (JSU), Alabama Forestry Commission, Georgia Forestry Commission, US Forest Service, and the US Fish and wildlife Service. The conference was held at JSU on October 15-17. The second conference day, October 16, was a cooperative field visit and educational program between the refuge and Talladega National Forest. Buses toured over 100 conference attendees through the refuge and national forest with periodic stops and educational presentations.