

SYNOPSIS OF LAGUNA ATASCOSA WILDERNESS RECORD

Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Texas

A. BACKGROUND

The Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge is located on the southern Texas coast in the counties of Cameron and Willacy. Nearest towns adjacent to the area are San Benito, Abney, and La Leona. The largest nearby city is Brownsville, located about 25 miles south.

Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1946, under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. The refuge consists of 45,147 acres, of this total 36,547 acres were acquired by purchase. The remaining acreage was acquired through transfer of military holdings. Purchase and transfer agreements recognize previous existing rights and easements. Existing rights and easements include the Harlingen Ship Channel easement; Inter-coastal Waterway; and previous owner rights for prospecting or development of oil, gas, and other minerals for a period of 30 years from date of acquisition. If discovery and production of oil, gas, or other minerals occur prior to the expiration dates, mineral reservations remain in effect indefinitely.

This southernmost coastal refuge is a terminal wintering area for large concentrations of waterfowl and other birds. This refuge is the major winter home of redhead ducks. Approximately 75

percent of the nation's population of this species is found on the refuge and the adjacent Laguna Madre. In total, 300 species of birds frequent the refuge along with a variety of other wildlife. Deer, javelina, bobcat, coyote, and armadillo are among those seen.

The refuge serves as an outdoor environmental classroom for both individuals and organized groups. Travel routes within the refuge provide visitors the opportunity for nature study, photography and the inspiration of the sights and sounds of wildlife in their natural habitat. Public fishing and hunting are also important refuge programs. Future needs for ecological education and wildlife oriented recreation will be great.

Initial field studies revealed that only those lands of the refuge north of the Harlingen Ship Channel qualified for detailed wilderness study. Studies have shown that this area has significant potential for habitat development. Wilderness classification of these refuge lands would conflict with future plans for enhancement and the achievement of local and National Wildlife Refuge System objectives.

B. DESCRIPTION

The wilderness study area comprising 9,440 acres of refuge lands north of the Harlingen Ship Channel is composed chiefly of tidal flats interspersed by low ridges and old stream channels. The

elevations vary from sea level to 34 feet above. Ridges contain thorny trees and some grasses. Lower sites have alkali salt soils supporting cordgrass, salt grasses, and alkali weeds.

Because of limited entrance into the ocean gulf, the adjacent Laguna Madre has no periodic ocean tide. Wind conditions play an important role in existing water levels upon the study area.

Scenic physical features are limited due to the low terrain and exposed mud flats. Over half of the area is covered by coastal mud flats.

C. MANAGEMENT

Current and future management will require an optimum mixture of programs which will meet the station and national goals. Wintering habitat for waterfowl, preserving native populations of all native animals, and providing human enjoyment of these natural resources are some of the primary objectives.

The land area north of the Harlingen Ship Channel can aid in meeting the pressing coastal demands in Texas. Low level diking in conjunction with road development upon the dikes will provide desired freshwater habitat for waterfowl. Such action will enhance the values of the entire refuge by supplying this need in a critical wintering location and are considered essential to meet anticipated needs for waterfowl and other wildlife.

D. WILDERNESS PUBLIC HEARING RECORD

In accordance with Section 3(d)(1)(B) of the Wilderness Act, a public hearing was held at Harlingen, Texas, on October 15, 1970. The Public Hearing Notice was published in the Federal Register on August 12, 1970, announcing the public hearing for the Laguna Atascosa wilderness study area. A form letter, a copy of the Regional Director's public hearing announcement, and a brochure describing the wilderness study area were mailed from Albuquerque, New Mexico, on September 14, 1970. This package was sent to individuals, organizations, and State and local officials. The Governor of the State of Texas, Federal Department heads, and the congressional delegation were sent letters explaining the proposal and the Regional Director's public hearing notice and copies of the wilderness brochure. Local newspapers, radio, and television stations were also provided with the announcement package. A total of 1,283 mailings of the announcement package were made.

1. The Public Hearing

At 9 a.m. on October 15, 1970, the public hearing was held in the Harlingen National Bank, Harlingen, Texas. The hearing officer was Mr. Lotario Ortega, Field Solicitor, Office of the Solicitor, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Bureau representative was Acting Regional Director, W. O. Nelson, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Southwest Region, Albuquerque, New Mexico. A total of 24 persons attended this meeting along with eight government employees or

private individuals who assisted in the presentation.

General opinion expressed at this hearing supported the Bureau's recommendation to forego wilderness establishment. The concept and value of wilderness was appreciated, but wildlife needs particularly for coastal wintering waterfowl habitat development were considered most important.

Persons desiring wilderness establishment stated that because of limited undisturbed coastal habitat available now and in the future, that wilderness was more important for wildlife than man made developments.

2. Communications from Elected Public Officials:

No communications were received from elected officials contrary to Bureau recommendations. Response was limited to acknowledgments of the Public Hearing Brochure Packet.

3. Communications from State and Local Officials:

No official statements were made.

4. Communications from Organizations:

A total of eight organizations responded to the notices. They were split in opinion as to wilderness designation.

5. Communications from Citizens:

A total of twenty letters were received. Ten letters supported the Bureau recommendation, one of which contained 107 signatures. The remaining ten letters supported wilderness designation.