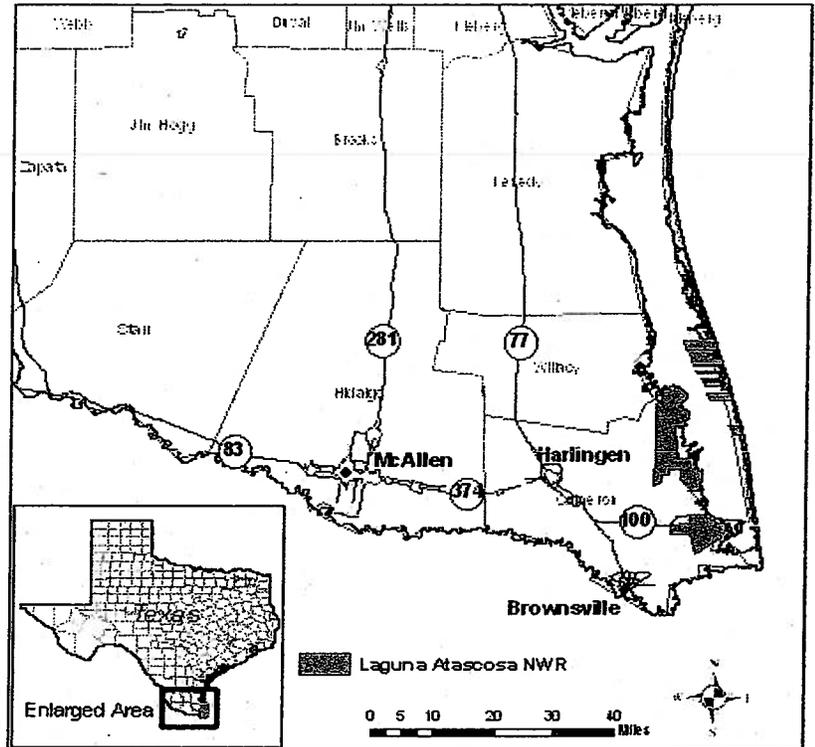


LAGUNA ATASCOSA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE TO FORMULATE A COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION PLAN

Overview:

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is formulating a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) that will serve as a management tool to be used by the Refuge staff and its partners in the overall conservation, development, and restoration of the ecosystem's natural resources.

The 86,904-acre Laguna Atascosa NWR is located in Cameron and Willacy counties and consists of three main units: (1) Laguna Atascosa Unit, 45,617 acres; (2) Bahia Grande Unit, 19,909 acres; and (3) South Padre Island Unit, 21,378 acres. The Laguna Atascosa Unit is located approximately 16 miles east of Rio Hondo, Texas on Farm-to-Market Road 106. The Bahia Grande Unit is sandwiched between State Highway 100 and State Highway 48 about one mile west of Port Isabel, Texas. The South Padre Island Unit, which consists of 18 separate tracts, is located on the north end of South Padre Island with the first refuge tract location about 9.5 miles north of South Padre Island, Texas.



The first refuge tract was acquired on March 29, 1946. This and subsequent refuge tracts were established and acquired under the authorities of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, as amended, "...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds," and/or the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, as amended, "...for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources..." and "... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or conditions of servitude...". On January 12, 1949, 8,486 acres of the Refuge were acquired by transfer from the War Assets Administration to the Secretary of Interior under Public Law 537.

General refuge purposes for the Laguna Atascosa Unit are to: (1) provide feeding and resting habitat for migrating and wintering waterfowl; (2) to protect, restore and enhance habitat for migratory waterfowl and endangered species occurring on the refuge; (3) preserve natural diversity and abundance of resident wildlife; and (4) provide the visiting public with a safe and enjoyable recreational opportunity directed toward an appreciation of wildlife and people's role in the environment.

The general purpose for the Bahia Grande and South Padre Island Units is to protect existing natural habitats and reestablish, as much as possible, the natural character and functions of the ecological communities that once occurred in the area, with the following interim goals: (1) to preserve, restore, and enhance in their natural ecosystems (when practicable) all species of animals

and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered; (2) to perpetuate the migratory bird resource; (3) to preserve a natural diversity and abundance of animals and plants on refuge lands; (4) to provide an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology and man's role in his environment; and (5) to provide refuge visitors with high quality, safe, wholesome, and enjoyable recreational experiences oriented toward wildlife to the extent these activities are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

Typical of Texas Coastal Plain physiography, the refuge is virtually flat with most elevations below 5 feet above sea level. The highest elevations on the refuge occur on natural lomas, reaching heights up to 35 feet above sea level. Precipitation averages 26 inches per year and occurs all year with the greatest amounts in September and October. The refuge encompasses 86,904 acres of coastal prairie, lomas (clay ridges), resacas (oxbow lakes), native thornbrush, tidal saltflat, barrier island habitats, and salt and freshwater marshes.

The refuge landscape is a unique blending of temperate, subtropical, coastal, and desert habitats. Mexican plants and wildlife reach their northernmost limits here, while migrating waterfowl fly down for the mild winters. This combination makes Laguna Atascosa NWR world famous for its mix of birds and other wildlife, found nowhere else. Ten federally listed endangered or threatened species (i.e., ocelot, jaguarundi, northern aplomado falcon, brown pelican, piping plover, American alligator, green sea turtle, loggerhead sea turtle, Kemp's ridley sea turtle, and hawksbill sea turtle) occur on the refuge. Approximately 450 plant, 413 bird, 42 mammal, and 44 reptile and amphibian species have been recorded on the refuge.

Management of the refuge includes habitat management, water management, biological inventory, facility and equipment maintenance, staffing, law enforcement, public uses (e.g., hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, hiking, etc.), research, and environmental educational outreach. Habitat management includes re-establishment of native brushland in appropriate areas. This is helping to provide more habitat for species such as the ocelot and other brushland wildlife. The refuge also maintains grasslands for those species that depend on them. Occasional prescribed burns help maintain healthy grassland habitats. The water levels on the refuge's main wetland features, such as Laguna Atascosa and Cayo Atascosa, are controlled seasonally to optimize habitat for a variety of wildlife needs, but primarily for wintering waterfowl and migrating shorebirds. Since so little native habitat remains in South Texas, the refuge is a center for ecological and conservation research and investigation. The largest U.S. population of ocelots are located on the refuge making it the center for ocelot conservation and recovery. Other research, conservation, and management activities involve sea turtles, reddish egrets, shorebirds and other migratory birds, and aplomado falcons.

Popular public uses on the refuge include wildlife observation (such as the Visitor Center's butterfly garden and the refuge is one of the 10 best birding areas in the nation), photography, walking trails (self-guided interpretive and other trails), scheduled guided tours, school group tours, camping (limited to Adolph Thomae, Jr. County Park, which is located on the Laguna Atascosa Unit), boating and fishing (limited to Adolph Thomae, Jr. County Park, South Padre Island Unit, and San Martin Lake on the Bahia Grande Unit), hunting, picnicking, bicycling, and the auto tour routes. There are two auto tour routes and six walking trails varying in length from the 1/8-mile Kiskadee Trail to the 15-mile Bayside Wildlife Drive Loop. The annual white-tailed deer hunt is the largest public hunt in South Texas and continues to be very popular. Each year, 800 archery permits are issued and a drawing is held to select 235 firearm permits. The refuge's visitor services staff and volunteers also provide on-site educational outreach as well as participate in several off-site science, nature, outdoor, career, and birding festivals and shows within the community each year. Between 80,000 and 100,000 people visit the Laguna Atascosa NWR each year.

What is a CCP?

A CCP is a document that describes the desired future conditions of the Refuge, and specifies management actions to achieve Refuge goals and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

When Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, it required that all refuges have a CCP completed by 2012 and it provided the following legislative mandates to guide refuge management and planning:

- Wildlife has first priority in the management of refuges.
- Wildlife-dependent recreation involving compatible hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation are the priority public uses of the Refuge System.
- Other uses have lower priority in the Refuge System and are only allowed if they are compatible with the mission of the Refuge System and the purpose of the individual refuge.

The CCP will provide management direction to present and future Refuge Managers for the next 15 years. It will describe all management activities that occur on the Refuge and provide management goals, measurable objectives, and management actions or strategies designed to enhance, protect, and restore habitats for the benefit of wildlife. The most important principles of the act are to maintain biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the refuge and facilitate compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

The CCP:

- Ensures that management of the refuge reflects the purposes of the refuge and the mission, policies, and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System;
- Provides the public with an understanding of the reasons for management actions on the refuge;
- Provides a vision statement for the refuge;
- Ensures the compatibility of current and future uses of the refuge with its purposes;
- Provides long-term continuity in refuge management; and
- Provides budget justification for operation and maintenance and facility development requests.

The CCP will outline refuge goals, objectives, and management strategies. It is a flexible, dynamic document that will be updated every 15 years. The CCP will provide broad management direction and guidance for the refuge, contingent upon future funding and resources. The accompanying environmental document, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, will describe the alternatives considered and their environmental effects. You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the draft CCP and environmental document when they are completed.

How is a CCP prepared?

In order to identify issues concerning Laguna Atascosa NWR, input is solicited from many sources including interested parties and the general public. Information is also continually compiled by Laguna Atascosa NWR to better understand plant and animal communities at the refuge and adapt management strategies accordingly. Current refuge management activities that will be reviewed during this planning process include, but are not limited to:

- Threatened and Endangered Species Management
- Land Protection and Acquisition
- Habitat Management and Restoration
- Water Management
- Wildlife Inventories, Management, and Research
- Cultural Resources Management
- Interagency Coordination and Relationships
- Public Uses: Fishing, Hunting, Wildlife Observation, etc.
- Visitor Services and Facilities

What has been done to date?

To begin the CCP process, a comment period notification was published in the Federal Register in July 19, 2004 (69 FR 43010-43011). This notice can be obtained by key word searching at the Federal Register site at: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html> . Draft documents and other relevant information for public review will be available at the refuge headquarters. Internal (Fish and Wildlife Service) pre-planning meetings were held at the refuge in February and June, 2004 to discuss concerns, issues, and opportunities for the future of the refuge. During the process of preparing the CCP, goals, objectives, and strategies will be developed using the best available information. They will be based on the refuge purpose, management opportunities, and issues, concerns, and opportunities identified during the scoping process.

Help us plan the future

Through this announcement, we are inviting interested individuals, agencies, organizations, and other stakeholders to express their concerns and share their visions for the refuge. Your comments and/or participation will be critical to the success of this planning effort. The Service needs your help to identify issues. Your input will be used to create a meaningful and effective CCP for Laguna Atascosa NWR. Special mailings, newspaper articles, and announcements will inform interested parties and people in the general area of the current status of the project as well as the time and place of any meetings considered throughout the planning process. Over the next year, planning updates will provide such information for those who chose to participate. **The first step is for you to complete the enclosed mail-in response form.**

Do you want to remain on the mailing list to receive subsequent planning updates for this project?

Yes

No

Is there anyone else you know who would like to be on the mailing list?

Name: _____

Address: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Do you have any additional comments at this time?

That's it! Thank you for your time.



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