



LOUISIANA WILDLIFE FEDERATION

The voice of Louisiana's wildlife and natural resources since 1940.

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Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries
and Louisiana Wildlife & Fisheries Commission
PO Box 98000
Baton Rouge, LA 70898
via: Rshadoin@wlf.la.gov and andrew@pearlbrandseafood.com

RE: Catahoula Lake

Dear Secretary Shadoin and Commissioner Blanchard,

Louisiana is at a major decision point for many aspects of the Catahoula Lake situation as it continues to evolve since the court decisions declaring the lakebed to be private property. We at LWF are very concerned about the possible loss or degradation of this important wetland as well as the huge loss of public hunting opportunities.

As background, you should know that in 2019 we filed an amicus brief with the Supreme Court asking that body to consider the impact of the Crooks case on future habitat management at the lake. Catahoula lake/basin is one of the largest moist soil habitats in North America. Due to the large annual range of water levels that promote excellent feeding and resting areas for a variety of avian species—waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds—it was designated as a wetland of international significance in the 1990s. Although we regretted the potential loss of a huge public hunting resource, our focus in the brief was to urge the Court to consider the impact of their decision on the more important question of whether the habitat would be damaged or destroyed by a conversion from public to private ownership of the lake bottom. Now that unfortunate result has actually happened, and we are seeing the early stages of a potentially long-term fight over property boundaries. What will happen to the resource in the ensuing chaos?

In this context, we applaud the decision of the Army Corps of Engineers to continue managing the water levels per the terms of the Catahoula Lake Water Level Management Agreement (often referred to the Tri-Party Agreement) of 1969 as amended in 1977 and 1980. The water level management program was implemented to counter the flooding out of the lake that would have occurred as a result of the Ouachita-Black navigation project of the late 60s. Its purpose was to maintain the waterfowl habitat by engineering the fluctuations (for example via the diversion canal) that had historically resulted from natural processes (backwater flooding) that created the habitat with its excellent waterfowl hunting.

We also applaud the decision of LWFC to assert expansion of its Dewey Wills WMA into the lakebed and we urge the USFWS to act promptly to assert its right to similarly expand Catahoula NWR into the lakebed.

There are several actions/policies that we strongly urge regarding maintenance of the habitat and management of what's left of the public hunting area.

1. Recreate the 1000+ acre conservation pool refuge in close proximity to the location that was negated by the change of land ownership. Manage this as a no-hunting/no-access area to retain the rafts of canvasbacks and other species that remain on the lake throughout the fall and winter.
2. To implement the above recommendation, purchase--from willing sellers among the new owners--fee simple interest (omitting mineral rights) or conservation easements giving LDWF control of the boundary and access. This should be a priority.
3. As a secondary but related priority, purchase land that borders the expanded boundaries of Dewey Wills WMA for public hunting. We urge that hunters in the WMA land be required to end hunting and pick up decoys in order to vacate the lake by 2 pm. We also urge the USFWS to consider additions to the NWR once their refuge's boundaries are established.
4. Resume elimination/control of woody vegetation on all lakebed lands that are owned by LDWF or USFWS.
5. To monitor impact of all the changes on waterfowl populations and hunter success, we recommend aerial surveys of waterfowl several times during the season. Regarding hunter success (or lack thereof), we recommend in-person surveys including bag checks for verification of hunters departing the WMA on random occasions. (We have little confidence in the accuracy of results as reported on hunter self-checkout cards.) We are concerned that some owners of privatized lake bottom may flood the lake with hunters in order to maximize income from blinds and leases, and we therefore suggest deployment of significant enforcement personnel (federal and state) to assure that bag limits are being observed. If LDWF's observations of hunter activity in the upcoming season suggest that overcrowding is occurring, consider use of lotteries to regulate the number of hunters in the lake bottom sections of the WMA.
6. Finally, we recommend that the Catahoula Lake resource be viewed as part of a network of habitats that collectively hold ducks in the northeast Louisiana region, historically a major duck hunting region that has declined in recent years due to fewer and later-arriving ducks and heavy hunting pressure. We recommend that LWFC consider reestablishment of "rest areas" (mini-refuges) in WMAs of northeast Louisiana in an attempt to retain more ducks in this heavily hunted region of the state.

We appreciate your consideration of our views as many of LWF's members are veteran Louisiana duck hunters distressed by the trends in our sport and believe that our state's habitat management and hunting management policies must start with the reality that Louisiana is in a

downtrend characterized by fewer ducks coming here, those that do come arriving later, and heavy hunting pressure that needs to be better managed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Zac Burson" with "III" written above the name.

Zac Burson
LWF Board President

CC: Brandon Decuir, Vice-Chair, LWFC
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