



Action Needed for Catahoula National Wildlife Refuge and the Catahoula Basin

Conserve critical habitat for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds

Protect public lands and public recreation use

Ensure the future of this world-class destination

Delays in setting property boundaries in the aftermath of the *Crooks* decision are stalling critical wildlife habitat management that is impacting the entire system generally known as Catahoula Lake.

Establishing the property boundaries of Catahoula National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) would provide increased public access and allow the US Fish and Wildlife Service to enter agreements to comprehensively manage a large portion of this important habitat sooner rather than later.

While the private landowner plaintiffs are proceeding slowly with their surveying, the Federal Government should complete their survey ASAP and assert their ownership of adjacent land for the public's benefit and use.

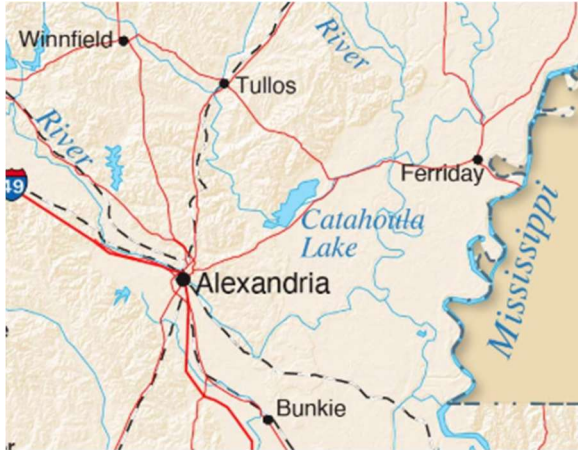
Louisiana Wildlife Federation is calling for action now.



- 1. Support public and private landowners setting their property boundaries.** Surveying of boundaries is proceeding too slowly. Additional resources, particularly for setting the boundaries of the Catahoula NWR, would speed up the process. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should assert ownership of and expand the new boundaries of Catahoula NWR to the maximum extent possible. This would expeditiously facilitate boundary setting with the Dewey Wills Wildlife Management Area (WMA).
- 2. Develop conservation management plans that address the new, fractured ownership of the basin.** While management of the water levels on the area known as Catahoula Lake is expected to continue under the existing tri-party agreement as it did before the *Crooks* decision, the state's longstanding management of vegetation in the basin is in doubt now that much of it is now privately owned. The management of woody growth and invasive species are top priorities that must be addressed to maintain high-value waterfowl habitat.
- 3. Identify and conserve priority acreage.** Initial priorities may include restoring the mid-lake refuge, where hunting and boating are prohibited, and identifying surveyed acreage adjacent to the Dewey Wills WMA and the Catahoula NWR. Resources for voluntary acquisitions (whether fee title or conservation servitudes) must be identified and secured.

4. **Adequately fund wildlife management.** Wildlife management on and around Catahoula Lake requires resources. Once the boundaries between the public and private landowners around Catahoula Lake are determined, resources to implement conservation management plans must be secured. Additionally, the Dewey Wills WMA and the Catahoula NWR are currently under-resourced and will require more resources to maintain and manage waterfowl habitat as their boundaries expand.

Background:



For generations, Catahoula Lake was considered a navigable, state-owned lake up to its ordinary high-water mark of 36 feet Mean Sea Level (MSL). It was considered Louisiana's largest freshwater lake and the state's most important inland wetland for waterbirds and shorebirds, serving as a critical migratory stopover on the Lower Mississippi flyway. Because of its unique ecological significance, Catahoula Lake was designated as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance in 1991. Because Catahoula Lake is

such an excellent habitat for waterfowl, sportsmen have long enjoyed public access to Catahoula Lake as well as the adjacent Catahoula NWR and the Dewey Wills WMA.

Reclassification of Catahoula Lake as a River:

In 2020, the Louisiana Supreme Court upheld a trial court's determination in the case *Crooks v. State Dept. of Nat. Res.*, 2019-0160 (La. 1/29/20), that Catahoula Lake is not a lake but instead a river under Louisiana law. As a river under Louisiana law, the vast majority of the waterbody is now privately owned "riverbank." The riverbank is the area between the ordinary high and ordinary low-water marks. As a result, only the portion of the waterbody below the ordinary low-water mark (i.e. the "riverbed") is considered publicly owned. In this way, a public lake of about 23,000 acres was largely privatized, and many of the elements of public management have been put on hold or lost while the many adjacent landowners, both private and public, assert their new property boundaries.

The reclassification of Catahoula Lake as a river became final and unappealable in 2021. Since then, the litigation has continued in large part to set the boundaries of the ordinary low-water mark, ordinary high-water mark, and the boundaries between the adjacent landowners on waterbody's riverbanks (i.e. the land between the ordinary low-water and ordinary high-water marks). All three of these boundaries must be located and set (either through mutual consent or through litigation) in order to lift the cloud over the area known as Catahoula Lake and its ownership and management.