

Refuge land transfer gets senator's OK

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Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison is writing the Department of Defense to inform Army officials they can now feel free to move forward with the transfer of former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant property to the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge because county residents and officials have made their preferences clear, Hutchison Press Secretary Chris Paulitz said Wednesday.

County commissioners voted Tuesday not to support an industrial site on land that had previously been scheduled to join the refuge, and 80 percent of the people who spoke at a Monday public hearing also opposed the industrial site.

The land transfer was put on hold last summer after Ms. Hutchison wrote Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army Joseph Whitaker and told him the community supported an industrial site on some of the Longhorn land.

Although industrial site proponents seemingly switched the land they want for the industrial site from land that has not been transferred to the Department of the Interior to land that has already been included in the refuge, Paulitz said the Senator doesn't know anything about the change in preference.

No one has asked Ms. Hutchison to take land out of the refuge for industrial development or any other proposal, he said, adding "If the community has a federal issue, the senator's door is always open."

One land industrial site proponent, Sam Moseley, said Monday night he and other supporters have always wanted land that has already been included in the refuge.

Not according to a statement that Moseley himself made in August, 2005 to the Marshall News Messenger and the letter Ms. Hutchison wrote to Whitaker.

Moseley told the News Messenger in August, 2005 that he and local businessman Tommy Whaley were working on acquiring land that had not been conveyed to the refuge. Moseley said he and Whaley wanted the land for industry.

Hutchison's letter to Whitaker asked him to consider transferring the 2,200 acres in question to Harrison County, rather than the refuge, because "the community would like at least 1,000 acres of this land to be preserved for future economic development.

"...Many would like to see the production area (land which has not been transferred) to Harrison County or to a public entity to fully examine the alternatives."

Mark Williams, wildlife refuge manager, said Tuesday he has always understood the proposed industrial site as being located in the land that has not been conveyed to the refuge.

But refuge land can be taken away from the refuge by congressional action which is signed by the president, he said. Williams added, however, that Congress has never subtracted land from a wildlife refuge.

"The army is waiting for direction from public officials and they are ready to start the process back up to transfer the property to the refuge and complete the

permit," he said. "From the vote of the commissioner's court, the people in the county have been heard and the court voted accordingly.

"We're happy that the refuge won't be divided, it won't have a industrial park and the acres will be used for wildlife management and public use," he said, adding "Hopefully the senator will hear the people that fought hard for what they thought was right, which was no industrial park."

But if the land were taken from the refuge to be transformed into an industrial site, it would still be difficult for industry to build on it, according to Dr. Lee Guice, an engineer who owns and operates Guice Engineering Sciences, headquartered in Longview.

Guice said much of the soil on the newly chosen site is "a silting sand. It flows readily and expands," which would make it very expensive site on which to build.

"I can float a bathtub if you want me to. We can float it on the ocean if you want to pay for it," he said.

Although the sandy soil co-exists with better soil, Guice said a large area of good soil on the acreage would be difficult to find.

Guice said an industrial site could also harm three major creeks that run through the area.

All waterways in the refuge and Longhorn property drain into Caddo Lake, Williams said.

The senator's action to move forward with the land transfer was made in concurrence with letters forwarded to her office from local officials.

Two letters were sent to Washington informing her of Harrison County commissioners' Tuesday vote against the industrial park.

One was sent by Precinct 4 Commissioner Jeffrey Thompson, who made the motion, calling for the use of all former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant property as a wildlife refuge.

The other was signed by Robert Speight Jr., president of Greater Caddo Lake Association; Sam Canup, mayor of Uncertain, and Jay Webb, president of Caddo Lake Chamber of Commerce and Tourism.

That letter was also sent to U. S. Congressman Louie Gohmert (R-Tyler).

Thompson's letter, sent to Hutchison and copied to Gohmert, repeats his motion, calling for the immediate transfer of all land to the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Department.

"This will be an enormous opportunity for Harrison County, Northeast Texas and the state," Thompson wrote. The refuge "will generate much-desired economic value to Harrison County and our region, when it becomes operational," he added.

As does Thompson's letter, the other mentions the fact that more than 85 percent of those attending a public hearing on the matter expressed opposition to use of 2,000 acres for industrial development.

The second letter notes: "At this hearing, supporters of the industrial site conceded the property they have been seeking is land that has already been transferred to the wildlife refuge and they have no interest in the Army lands that are the subject of the temporary hold.

"The commissioners court has voted. We urge you to act on this matter at once and encourage the Army to proceed with the transfer ... to the U. S. Department of the Interior as soon as possible."