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Some parts of refuge to still require cleaning up

By GAIL K BEIL
News Messenger

Because cleaning up the Superfund sites on the old Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant in Karnack is still the responsibility of the U.S. Army, those areas will not be a part of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge until they pass inspection by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

And that could take anywhere from 20 to 50 years, according to U.S. Representative Max Sandlin.

"U.S. Fish and Wildlife and the Army are negotiating a long-term plan for the cleanup," Sandlin said.

Fifty years of manufacturing, much of it done before anyone realized how much of a pollutant some of the by-products of rocket fuel production were, has led to a number of areas being deemed too toxic to permit public access. Clean up of the area began before the plant was closed in 1993, and Sandlin said no matter which federal agency manages the land, the U.S. Army will pay to make it pristine again.

"There will have to be money. It will either come of the Army's budget or it will be appropriated," said Sandlin. "But I think the great proportion of the property is clean."

What was and what wasn't was the biggest stumbling block to the transfer of responsibility for nearly 7,200 acres of the 8,500 total into the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife's hands, said Dwight Shellman. He is the president of the privately-funded Caddo Lake Institute, and he spent years negotiating transfer of the into Department of the Interior hands.

"It's an overlay refuge," Shellman explained. "There is no transfer of title

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Part of refuge still has to be cleaned

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because the government already owns the land."

Shellman and Jim Neal of U.S. Fish and Wildlife department arranged to map all the land, determining what was environmentally clean and what wasn't. When the mapping was finished, Shellman said, most of the buildings, including some with historic significance, were in contaminated areas.

"We're all aware of their importance, and preservation of them will be part of the long-range plan."

Those detailed maps were the key to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife overlay refuge, said Shellman.

Exactly when the public will have access to the land whether and when they will be able to hunt or fish there is

still to be negotiated.

"That element will be an open planning process with a lot of community input," said Shellman.

Tom Cloud, field supervisor for U.S. Fish and Wildlife, said public access to the plant's land have to be done carefully.

"The problem with this site at the moment is that it is so fragmented," he said. "We've been very cautious about U.S. Fish and Wildlife taking over areas that might still be polluted."

Cloud has long been involved with Caddo Lake. He wrote the original application adding the lake itself to the 13 ecologically important areas in the United States to be part of the Ramsar Treaty. Cloud called the Longhorn preserve, particularly the area around

Haggarty Creek and Goose Prairie "certainly worth protection."

"It's high quality bottom-land hardwood and wetland," he said.

Many people believe the Haggarty Creek land is just as it was when the area was settled in the 1830s. Cloud is not sure. "It may not be virgin forest, but it certainly hasn't been logged in a long time, so it's often referred to as virgin."

Cloud will be among the dignitaries present when the first step in the transfer comes at 3 p.m., Saturday, at the T.J. Taylor Community Center.