

Caddo Lake land, water transfer deal remains clogged

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Caddo Lake residents learned last week a federal logjam blocking transfer of the last piece of land and water rights has not loosened in the four months since they last met.

The future of the former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant, a federal Superfund pollution site, remains secure as a national wildlife refuge despite delays in the final property transfer, the Army officer in charge of the plant told a residents' committee Thursday night.

"We've been trying to go to Albuquerque and meet with (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife over a number of issues including the property transfer," Base Realignment and Closure Deputy Chief Tom Lederle told Restoration Advisory Board members. "We're pretty patient, but I would like to meet. ... It's kind of waiting. Nothing bad is going to happen by waiting."

The Restoration Advisory Board was established by the government to give residents a voice as contaminants are removed from soil and water in the 8,416-acre plant. The property is a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site.

The roughly 30-member committee, however, has been asking about the property transfer from the Army to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2010, Fish and Wildlife asked Army for better assurance the final acreage will be adequately cleaned. Mark Williams, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuge manager said the memorandum of understanding his department now has with the Army does not contain that assurance.

It also allows the Army to turn the property over to a third party if Fish and Wildlife turns it down.

The residents' committee wants a new agreement eliminating the third-party option for Army.

Army wants the land off its roster, and a third party would be its only option if Fish and Wildlife decides the land is too polluted to take for the refuge.

After six years of gradual land and water transfers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is operating all but 1,400 acres of the plant site as the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge. That's exactly where the advisory board wants the land, plus the remaining 3.3 billion gallons of water rights, to go — the refuge.

Pine Island Pond resident and board member Judith Johnson told Lederle that Caddo area residents fear some third party swooping in to take the last acreage and water rights.

"We've had this happen before," Johnson said, referring to an incident several years ago when a developer targeted some of the land. "I've heard you say, there's no bad things going to happen, and I'm assuming you mean somebody like that."

U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, stepped in to halt that transfer to a third party when it was clear the residents couldn't stop it. They hope she and U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert will nudge the two federal departments to meet and iron out differences blocking the final property transfer.

"For the past six years, saving Caddo Lake has been a critical priority," Gohmert said in a prepared statement Friday. "Sen. ... Hutchison and I have been diligently working on this matter, and she has offered to take the lead in trying to resolve the differences between the U.S. Army and U.S. Fish and Wildlife."

Gohmert was optimistic he and Hutchison can break the impasse.

"We believe we can then facilitate the transfer of the land in question," he said. "We will continue to work closely with Sen. Hutchison's office and to pressure both government entities to resolve their differences."