

Refuge support group seeks answers on land transfers

Marshall News Messenger

Robin Y. Richardson ryrichardson@marshallnewsmessenger.com

Posted: Thursday, September 29, 2011 8:02 am

Since 2007, there has not been a transfer of property to the Caddo Lake National Refuge, and Friends of the Caddo Lake Refuge wants to know why.

“The transfer between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Army was going very smoothly through the course of the last couple of years until last year, we started questioning the Army about why weren’t they working with the Fish and Wildlife Service to go ahead and transfer the remaining land, approximately 1,400 acres of water pipes, which was approximately 10,000 feet of water, to the Fish and Wildlife Service,” said Paul Fortune, a member of the Friends group.

“We haven’t been able to get any answers from the Army through the course of this last year,” he continued. “This discussion has been placed on hold for the last year.”

Because of what the group considers a “prolonged impasse,” members are now seeking the help of the Texas Congressional Delegation of U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, U.S. Senator John Cornyn and U.S. Representative Louie Gohmert to help with appropriate legislation “to force the Army’s hand” to transfer all the remaining land at the former Longhorn Ammunition Plant from the U.S. Army to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department.

The U.S. Army transferred administrative control of more than 5,000 acres of the former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in April 2004.

These transferred properties are included in the Caddo Lake National Refuge. From 2004 to 2006, more than 2,000 additional acres were added to the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge through property transfers from the U.S. Army to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

The transfers have since ceased. “The future of Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge is currently imperiled by the U.S. Army’s lack of response to the public’s concerns regarding contaminant mitigation and the subsequent transfer of its remaining properties from Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant,” the Friends group explained on its Web site, www.caddofriends.org. “For over a year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service attempted to reach a new agreement for transfer of all former ammunition plant property. Instead of negotiating in good faith, the Army has refused to answer a growing number of questions from the Service and public, and is using the property’s remaining water rights as leverage against further questions and complaints.”

Fortune told the Harrison County Commissioners' Court that the feedback the group did receive at a meeting last year raised a "red flag."

"At that meeting we had representatives from the Army who told us, when asked why they wouldn't go ahead and transfer the water rights to Fish and Wildlife Service, he plainly told us they were holding on to that water right should they choose to give it to a third party. So, that sent up a red flag," he said. This is why the group is reaching out to the congressional delegation for help, and asked the commissioners' court to sign a resolution in support of its efforts.

"Trying to get answers...we've not been able to, so therefore, we're seeking your support in assisting us...in this matter...to get it resolved," Fortune told the court.

In the resolution of support, which was recently signed, the court states that it supports the following initiative:

All the former Longhorn Ammunition Plant property, administered by the U.S. Army, shall be transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service upon completion of clean-up of the property as outlined in the terms of the 2004 Transfer of Lands Memorandum of Agreement between the U.S. Army and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service;

That the U.S. Army shall not transfer or assign any former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant property to any entity other than the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service;

And the land surface of all former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant property, administered by the U.S. Army, shall be administered as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System;

And all U.S. government water rights and mineral rights assigned to the former Longhorn Army Ammunition plant shall be administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service;

And the U.S. Army shall provide annual funding to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide a refuge employee, equipment and materials to complete work relative to maintenance, monitoring and protection of all former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant properties that will be transferred to the Refuge in the future. The U.S. Army shall provide the annual funding until all property at the former plant is clean and deed restrictions pertaining to contaminants are removed from the title of U.S. property at the former plant.

The resolution further states that the commissioners' court "recognizes the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge's value as a venue for outdoor public use activities, environmental education and eco-tourism opportunities and desires the transfer process to move forward and provide additional recreation and economic opportunities to the residents of Harrison County."