
Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 and Secretarial Orders 3347 and 3356.

The Refuge Manager may establish specific regulations if conflicts with other wildlife dependent recreation priorities occurs. Permanent or periodic hunting closures of the Refuge may be necessary if the Refuge Manager determines that there is specific habitat, wildlife protection and/or public safety requirements. The need to implement mitigation measures will be evaluated annually. All hunting will be conducted in accordance with all applicable State regulations. Coordination with the public and Refuge stakeholders will promote continuity and understanding of Refuge and Service resource goals and objectives, and will help assure that the decision-making process takes into account all interests.

The Refuge minimizes conflict related to biological resources by adopting a “wildlife first” principle explicitly stated in the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. The Georgia DNR monitors species population trends to ensure that target species can be hunted on the Refuge.

The Refuge could limit or exclude hunting activities on portions of the Refuge to avoid conflicts related to biological resources, such as eagles and threatened or endangered species. Most hunting on the Refuge occurs outside the period when eagle populations are high and nests are active. A Section 7 Biological Evaluation associated with this assessment was conducted, and it was determined that the preferred action is not likely to adversely affect these species (Appendix G).

The refuge will be closed during the hunts to avoid conflict with non-hunting Refuge visitors. This alternative offers increased opportunities for public hunting/fishing and fulfills the Service’s mandate under the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. The Service has determined that the hunt plan is compatible with the purposes of the Refuge and the mission of the NWRS.

Affected Environment

Banks Lake NWR is part of the Peninsular Florida ecosystem, one of the Service’s 52 designated ecosystems and watersheds (USFWS 2009). The refuge lies in the northern portion of this ecosystem and in an area of Georgia that has dramatically changed through historical land use practices, and more recently, development. The refuge is important in a regional ecosystem context because it protects important aquatic and wetland habitats that are declining regionally (Dahl 2006). Furthermore, it is located adjacent to Moody Air Force Base and The Nature Conservancy property, effectively producing a large, relatively unfragmented area of land that will be managed to maintain biological integrity and ecosystem function. Together with other federal and state lands, such a network of conservation lands can help mitigate the effects of habitat loss, provide protection, and serve as wildlife corridors. In addition, vegetated areas of the refuge reduce sedimentation and improve water quality downstream. Another benefit of forested wetlands is that they can function as water retention areas and minimize flood damage during times of excessive rainfall. Furthermore, wetlands provide a valuable habitat for birds and other wildlife

County Demographics and Economic Indicators

In 2018, there were 10,340 people in Lanier County. The median income for a household in the