



July 19, 2012

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Dear Mr. Saucier,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the *Draft Atchafalaya Basin System Floodway Project, Louisiana Master Plan (June 2012)*. The Ruffed Grouse Society, an international wildlife conservation organization of over 15,000 members (including 130 Louisiana residents who constitute the Louisiana Woodcock chapter), is dedicated to the principle of ecologically sound forest and habitat management for all wildlife – both hunted and non-hunted – and to sustaining our sport hunting tradition and outdoor heritage. We fulfill that mission, in part, by helping assure that the traditions of hunting that were given to us are passed to those who succeed us; promoting the unwritten "ethical code of behavior" that is characterized by respect for the resource, expectations with regard to the hunting experience, and; an unwavering commitment to informing sportsmen and women of the past, present and future of the sport so as to enable our members to fully appreciate its sense of value, personal satisfaction, and the need to perpetuate it for future generations.

We support a vision for the Atchafalaya Basin that recognizes the interdependence of natural resources, culture, and recreation, and a plan that continues to sustain and enhance that relationship through increased recreation and conservation efforts, and which will strengthen the region culturally, environmentally, and economically. As a wildlife conservation organization we have a great appreciation for the link between our culture – our hunting heritage – and abundant wildlife populations, and the habitats on which wildlife depend.

Of particular interest to us in the Atchafalaya Basin System Floodway Project is the American woodcock, a migratory gamebird which requires forest and shrublands on moist soils. As you are aware, the Atchafalaya Basin is recognized as an Important Bird Area in part because it is "... world-famous for the numbers of American woodcock resident in the Basin, which is central in the range of the bird. There are tens of thousands of American woodcock that winter in the damp, brushy woods of the Basin" (National Audubon Society 2011). The woodcock is one of several bird Species of Conservation Concern in Louisiana that depend on "early successional" forest habitat that is typified by dense stands of small-diameter trees and shrubs (Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries 2005); additional species include swamp rabbit, white-eyed vireo, painted bunting, indigo bunting and many others. Timber harvest is the most effective means of creating or maintaining high quality habitat for woodcock (Dessecker and McAuley 2001, Kremetz and Jackson 1999), and simultaneously can support local economies and provide renewable resources in the form of timber and wood fiber for human use.

*Dedicated To Improving The Environment For
Ruffed Grouse, Woodcock, And Other Forest Wildlife*

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Louisiana has a rich heritage of hunting, fishing, and trapping. Louisiana is particularly well known among woodcock hunters, ranking fourth in number of woodcock hunters of all states (Cooper and Parker 2011). Total numbers of hunters in Louisiana, in contrast to the Nation as a whole, have increased over the last two decades (USDI 2003). In addition to being important culturally, hunting in the State represents a significant economic engine. In 2006, hunting contributed \$975 million (14.4%) of the \$6.75 billion generated by all fish, wildlife, and boating resources to the State's economy, and jobs related to fishing, wildlife, and boating represent 6% of Louisiana's total employment (Southwick et al. 2006).

In light of the importance and inter-dependence of wildlife conservation, wildlife-related recreation, culture, and the local and regional economy in the Atchafalaya Basin System Floodway Project Area, we offer the following comments and suggestions:

- We whole-heartedly support the purpose of this Master Plan update to provide guidance for further improvements needed to *maximize public access and use of public lands, and enhance fish and wildlife resources.*
- We agree that management planning should recognize the importance of hunting as the most important visitor activity in the IBA and BDOA, and that providing resources such as high quality habitat and hunter access should be high priorities. Examples of high quality habitat for American woodcock include actively managed forest in zones III-VI that provides regenerating forest (second growth hardwoods – e.g. clearcuts), shrub/scrub, mature forest with relatively open canopy, and cane breaks for diurnal cover. Nocturnal habitat during winter is provided in the form of open fields. Note that timber harvest and agricultural activity are important in the active management of habitat for American woodcock; also, the proximity of these forested (diurnal) habitats and open field (nocturnal) habitat to one another are important to woodcock.
- Access management actions should include providing parking and hunter walking trails in proximity to high quality woodcock habitat. Special provision should be made for adequate parking and trails for disabled hunters of woodcock near high quality habitat.
- Planners should keep in mind when planning access and habitat management activities that many woodcock hunters hunt extensively over fairly large areas and use bird dogs for hunting, therefore, small (e.g. 5 acre) isolated parcels of habitat near busy roads are less desirable for bird hunters than are larger patches of good habitat in close proximity to one another within a forest matrix farther from busy roads.
- Hunter walking trails can also accommodate bird watching and other nature observation activities, as the woodcock hunter season lasts just 45 days per year.
- Incorporate into educational and outreach efforts information on the natural history and conservation of American woodcock and other Species of Conservation Concern in Louisiana, including the importance of this region to attaining national conservation objectives such as those identified in the American Woodcock Conservation Plan (2008).

- Incorporate into educational and outreach efforts information on the essential role of active forest management in sustaining the Basin's biodiversity, including American woodcock, blue grosbeak, yellow-billed cuckoo, rough green snake, North American racer and others, as well as supporting the local economy. In this message include information that habitat for young forest wildlife is short-lived, lasting just a few years from the time of a clear cut harvest for many species, before the forest stand grows too tall and the canopy closes, shading out herbaceous ground cover plants and eliminating escape cover and food sources needed by these species. Therefore new clear cut harvest patches, and intermediate harvests in older forest, need to be created annually to maintain a sufficient supply of young forest (sapling-shrub) or dense understory habitat across the landscape, as previously harvested stands mature beyond optimal for the sapling-shrub forest wildlife and begin to provide habitat for another suite of wildlife that prefer slightly older, taller, regenerating stands. When properly planned, periodic timber harvests create a mosaic of different age groups of forest stands spread across the landscape, providing habitat needed by the full array of the region's forest wildlife and yielding timber revenues as a by-product of creating the habitats. Note that not only is active management (such as clear cut harvests and intermediate treatments) to provide these early-seral forest habitats critical for shrub and young forest specialists, recent research has demonstrated that species of migratory birds that breed in mature forest, such as wood thrush, preferentially use regenerating clear cuts (i.e. young sapling forest) during migration, juvenile dispersal, and post-nesting, and experience increased fitness (e.g. better health, increased survival) due to the greater abundance of food resources (insects, berries) in these habitats. Note that forestry activities for improving or maintaining high quality habitat for American woodcock and other wildlife within bottomland hardwoods should be guided by "Restoration, Management, and Monitoring of Forest Resources in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley: Recommendations for Enhancing Wildlife Habitat" (LMVJV Forest Resource Conservation Working Group, 2007) and follow "Recommended Forestry Best Management Practices for Louisiana" <http://www.ldaf.state.la.us/portal/Portals/0/FOR/for%20mgmt/BMP.pdf>
- Activities and materials that educate the public regarding contributions to conservation by hunters and anglers could be implemented in conjunction with annual National Hunting and Fishing Day celebrations.
- The Ruffed Grouse Society would welcome the opportunity to provide consultation to USACE on habitat management planning for American woodcock and other young forest species, access planning for woodcock hunters, and development of interpretive materials regarding habitat ecology and habitat management for early successional habitat wildlife in the Atchafalaya Basin.

The Ruffed Grouse Society appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the *Draft Atchafalaya Basin System Floodway Project, Louisiana Master Plan (June 2012)*.

Sincerely,

Andrew Weik

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