

Friends of Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge
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Testifying on HR 3009
THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE REVIEW ACT
House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs

My name is Ann Bloxom Smith, vice president and past president of Friends of Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge. I appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony to the House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs for its hearing on Tuesday, October 25, 2011, on H.R. 3009, the “National Wildlife Refuge Review Act.”

I speak on behalf of Friends of Black Bayou and also have the support of the National Wildlife Refuge Association and the Louisiana Wildlife Federation executive committee.

I grew up in Caddo Parish in Louisiana, just south of Shreveport, on several hundred acres of woods and farmland. I was greatly influenced by my parents and grandparents, especially my grandfather, who took me tramping, hunting, and fishing, always teaching me about the animals and plants along the way. My parents were staunch Methodists; I think my father’s favorite word was “stewardship.” He firmly believed that we had a duty to be good stewards of God’s creation as well as our money and talents. Taking care of the earth was an integral part of my family’s daily discussions and actions. I’m telling you this to let you know how I came by my opinions and habits of life regarding the natural environment.

In 1978, after earning two degrees in English literature at LSU, I moved to Monroe, Louisiana, where I taught at the university there until this past June. For the last 14 ½ years I’ve also been involved with the Friends of Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge—ever since the Refuge’s inception. I’m now the vice president of the group and spent the previous five years as president. I’m proud to have been president when our Friends group was named the National Refuge Friends Group of the Year in 2005.

The Friends of Black Bayou is an amazingly diverse group of dedicated citizens of all political persuasions, and the Refuge we are pledged to protect and enhance is a beautiful and valued place. Except for my two absolutely wonderful sons, my work for this Refuge is my best and proudest accomplishment—and I’m just one among a group of people in the Monroe area who feel the same way about “our” Refuge. FoBB, as the group is affectionately known, has over 200 dues-paying members (individuals, families, businesses and groups) during any single year and boasts over 1,100 donors and contacts on its mailing list. The Monroe MSA is a community of about 100,000 people in the midst of one of the most economically disadvantaged areas of the entire country, but the people value this Refuge and willingly donate both time and money to it.

Today I’m speaking on behalf of those citizen supporters, Friends of Black Bayou, because we believe that our Refuge is a great example of one that was established administratively and is incredibly successful within our community. FoBB is also an affiliate member of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation, and that group supports our position opposing this change in the regulations for establishment of Refuges, as does the National Wildlife Refuge Association (of which we’re also an affiliate member), which supports the approximately 230 Friends groups nationwide.

To help you understand our position, I intend to tell you about the very complicated and

interesting beginnings of Black Bayou Lake NWR, the benefits that the Refuge brings to our area, and the support that the Refuge enjoys locally.

On May 6, 1993, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director approved the Preliminary Project Proposal to create Black Bayou Lake NWR. The approved acquisition boundary encompassed 6,200 acres of wetlands associated with the lake. Initial acquisition efforts began but soon halted when the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries indicated an interest in acquiring the property. Politics, escalating land values, and other factors intervened, and the LDWF eventually backed out of the project.

In May 1996, the Service contacted the city of Monroe about managing the area if the city bought it. The lake served (and still serves) as the city's secondary source of water, and the city had funds to protect such areas. However, the city had no interest in managing the property. Numerous meetings resulted in a plan to create an overlay refuge on the city's property via a free 99-year lease. In October 1996, the city purchased nearly 1,700 acres of the core area for \$1.725 million. On January 14, 1997, the Monroe City Council voted to lease the property to the Service for 99 years for \$1 to create Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge was formally established on June 16, 1997, when assistant regional director Geoff Haskett signed the lease.

Black Bayou Lake NWR was established for "...the conservation of the wetlands of the nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions..." 16 U.S.C. 3901 (b) (Wetlands Extension Act).

Fee title lands have been purchased since the inception of the Refuge. In 1999, 41 acres were acquired from the city of Monroe. In 2000, another 2,190 acres were purchased from private landowners. An additional 41 acres were acquired from the same landowners in three more purchases from 2001-02. The Service then purchased the old state fish hatchery ponds and their surrounding land (15 acres) from The Nature Conservancy. In 2005, the Service purchased 615 acres of pine habitat from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries on the northeast corner of the Refuge. This land had formerly been a part of the Cities Service Wildlife Management Area.

Clearly, the establishment of Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge was a very complicated process, including the original \$1 lease for an overlay refuge on land (mostly the lake) belonging to the City of Monroe, which required a great deal of negotiation and timely action. These negotiations occurred because of a grass-roots effort of local citizenry. Later purchases of watershed land were from willing sellers, and some of those acquisitions included land-swap deals made with the State of Louisiana. At present, there are still some 1,700 acres that are approved to be acquired for the Refuge—all within the lake's watershed—but for various reasons have not yet been purchased.

As for benefits that the Refuge brings to the northeast Louisiana community, the first and most obvious is water quality. As I mentioned earlier, Black Bayou Lake is a back-up water resource for the City of Monroe. Most of the surrounding property was agricultural land, with its resulting chemical run-off. Since the formation of the Refuge and subsequent purchase of watershed lands, the Service has planted most of the former agricultural land in a mix of bottomland hardwood trees—species that grew naturally in the area in years past because of their ability to survive periodic flooding. Now these low-lying lands and swamps, with their beautiful cypress and water tupelo trees, act as a filter for the water draining into the lake. The lake water, now, is pristine. If you saw it, you would see why it's called "Black Bayou"—tannins in the water resulting from leaves and other

vegetation in the water make the water appear black—but it’s clear and clean. Later I’ll talk about the economic or dollar value of the Refuge to our community, but the value of clean water is, simply, incalculable.

More directly connected with the work of the Friends of Black Bayou, along with the Fish and Wildlife Service, are the recreational and educational benefits accruing to the community because of the Refuge’s existence.

In the realm of concrete local contributions to Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge, FoBB has raised a great deal of money and spent countless volunteer hours to enhance the Refuge. Infrastructure that has added much to the recreational/educational potential there includes the following:

- Renovation of an 1880s planter’s home to be the Refuge Visitors’ Center & Gift Shop (approximately \$500,000 of private donations, \$150,000 of in-kind design and other services, and countless volunteer hours)
- Wildlife Observation Pier, 1,250 feet long, that ties in with a 1-mile asphalt and boardwalk nature trail (funded by a Trails Grant from the State of Louisiana), all handicapped accessible (original 800-foot pier funded largely by International Paper’s grant of \$50,000; pier extension--\$200,000 from various private sources)
- Conservation Learning Center (\$500,000), including a 100-seat classroom fully equipped with audio-visual equipment, a computer lab, and a wetlab for hands-on learning experiences, as well as an exhibit room with huge aquaria for native fish, an indoor pond for small alligators and turtles, and numerous tanks for native snakes and other reptiles and amphibians (funded by a \$200,000 Convention and Visitors Bureau grant and \$150,000 in in-kind architectural design work, along with \$50,000+ private donations, \$35,000 International Paper grants, and FWS Challenge Grant money)
- A bird-watching blind and a photography blind (both handicapped accessible) with paved trails (NFWF grant of \$30,000 plus private donations and volunteer labor)
- 8 miles of unimproved edgewater trail, maintained by a FoBB volunteer along with our one FWS maintenance employee, along with a ¼ mile wildlife challenge trail for children’s fitness activities
- Handicapped-accessible arboretum trail and prairie trail
- Handicapped-accessible wildlife observation deck and connecting walkway (funded largely by grant from CLECO Corp.)
- Wetlands Art Project (funded by Louisiana Division of the Arts grant of \$20,000), at site of old state fish-hatchery ponds, now being further improved for moist-soil management and bird-watching opportunities (funded by legal settlement of \$80,000 plus another \$80,000 matching grant from FWS)
- Eagle Scout projects including an amphitheater, a native plant greenhouse, and a canoe-launching dock

Funding for these and other projects came from a combination of FoBB-generated corporate grants (including several large grants from International Paper), NFWF grants, Monroe-West Monroe Convention and Visitors Bureau grants, State grants, City contributions, a legal settlement designated for FoBB for the purpose of water-quality projects, Refuge shop sales, and countless private donations—along with occasional matching federal contributions and maintenance costs.

The extraordinary cooperative efforts between local citizenry and the Service have resulted in

useful and attractive infrastructure that has made the Refuge accessible to a variety of people including the physically handicapped, school children, families, fitness buffs, scientists, college students, wildlife photographers, hunters and fishers, hikers, meditators, and others. Our Refuge averages over 38,000 visitors per year. Of those, approximately 9,000 are there for fishing and about 2,000 for hunting. The other 27,000 are non-consumptive visitors such as photographers, walkers, and bird-watchers.

Over the past three years we have averaged approximately 5,000 participants per year in environmental education programs, approximately 2,500 in interpretive programs, and 2,600 at special events. School groups have come from at least ten different school districts and many private schools and home school associations. We hold several teacher workshops every year. In 2010 we had nine teacher workshops with teachers from many school districts attending. For several years, we have hosted teacher workshops as part of the Math and Science Partnership programs through the University of Louisiana at Monroe and Louisiana Tech. Furthermore, university classes in biology, geology and geography are often held at the Refuge, and several biology research projects have been centered at the Refuge.

With financial support from Friends of Black Bayou, a fourth grade science teacher was contracted over two summers to correlate the 20+ activities that we offer regularly at the refuge to the environmental science, life science and science-by-inquiry State Grade-Level Expectations for the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 7th grades. When teachers request an educational field experience at Black Bayou Lake NWR, they can select activities from our correlations list in order to emphasize concepts that best meet the needs of their class. The customized field experiences can introduce new concepts or reinforce things that have already been introduced in the classroom. The Refuge staff strives to provide fun, experiential learning opportunities that get the students into the natural world.

Teachers and school administrators both recognize the value of our environmental education program, which is evidenced by the many school groups that come out during the fall and the packed schedule of groups in the spring. We always have schools in the spring that we cannot accommodate because every available day is scheduled. Some days we have different groups morning and afternoon. We have repeat teachers who schedule spring field experiences at the beginning of the school year to be sure they can bring their classes. We have schools that bring entire grades and schedule several days in a row to give all their students the opportunity to come to the Refuge. We also have schools that bring students for multiple field experiences during one school year, which they believe has contributed to improvements in their schools' standardized test scores in science (see attached letter from a local science teacher).

But educational experiences at the Refuge are not limited to school classes. Our staff and volunteers, along with college biology majors and others hired as interns by Friends of Black Bayou, assist in interpretive programs for all ages and a variety of groups. Civic groups often visit and experience educational programs, as do scout and church groups. Last summer I assisted one of our interns in presenting two week-long day camps for children, so I know how much that experience meant to those children. One special child caught his first catfish, and it appeared to be just about as big as he was. Additionally, the Refuge interpretive naturalist regularly presents such programs as night hikes and other educational activities for families. Significantly, many of these programs are cooperative efforts with the volunteer Environmental Education Director of Friends of Black Bayou, herself a retired biology professor and the wife of our founding manager, Kelby Ouchley.

Speaking of cooperative efforts, I should point out that every year since the Refuge's inception

(1997), we (FoBB) and the FWS staff have presented our FoBB Fall Celebration for the public. This celebration is a big “thank you party” recognizing the community’s generous support of all our efforts at the Refuge, and it is held annually in conjunction with National Wildlife Refuge Week. Along with a free fish fry, we also host a Refuge photography contest, give away canoe rides, lead the children in releasing baby alligator snapping turtles into the lake (eggs hatched in a ULM biology lab from eggs gathered on the Refuge), and provide numerous other educational and fun activities for families (many led by partnering community groups, museums, and businesses). This event has grown from fewer than 100 people in attendance the first year to this year’s crowd of at least 2,500 people. FoBB pays for all the expenses, but money dropped in donation buckets usually comes close to covering the cost. This year we managed to have net expenses of under \$300—and that doesn’t count the memberships that will continue to come in as a result of the good will this event creates in the community.

I’m very pleased to add that the local media—TV, radio, and newspapers—are unfailingly supportive of the Refuge, helping to publicize upcoming events and reporting on events with photos and articles after the fact. If you check the *News-Star*’s website, www.thenewsstar.com, you will find many features, photos, and even a recent video of me paddling a canoe on the lake while talking about the Refuge. The City of Monroe, too, is aware of how much the Refuge contributes to the local quality of life. Recently, one city official contacted me to ask if one of our photo contest winners would mind if the city used four of his winning photos (from our annual photo contest, displayed on our website at www.friendsofblackbayou.org) as part of a display in the brand new airport. Of course, the photographer was pleased to give his permission, so now pictures taken at our Refuge will greet visitors when they get off their planes in Monroe. Obviously, the local Convention and Visitors Bureau (made up of hotels, restaurants, and other businesses catering to tourists and conventioners) believes that Black Bayou Lake NWR is an asset to their efforts: they have now contributed a total of \$260,000 to enhance the Refuge (see attached letter describing their grants).

As for direct economic impact on the area, Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge likely surpasses the national average of over \$4 of local impact for every \$1 of Congressionally appropriated funds. The attached document reflects just the economic impact of visitors to the Refuge; it does not include the impact of federal funds (salaries, maintenance costs, etc.) or funds raised and spent on infrastructure by Friends of Black Bayou. But even noting just the expenditures of nearly 40,000 annual recorded visitors (probably an underestimate) to the Refuge for various purposes, a conservative estimate of their local impact is \$1.5 million, supporting nearly \$1.1 million of household income and nearly 70 full-time-equivalent jobs in the area. And since the refuge’s creation, the total impact has amounted conservatively to over \$85 million to our local economy.

I’ve just told you a lot about our community, our amazing Refuge (which I invite ALL of you to visit) and the impact it has had on our area and its citizens. Without the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s ability to act nimbly and efficiently to create this refuge administratively, it is unclear whether the refuge would be what it is today. I support the FWS in creating refuges administratively for two reasons: I know it works--our refuge is proof, and if our community had not been supportive, the FWS would never have created this refuge, and second, I know that all of you, who represent people like me, have an oversight power over any new refuges that are created. I strongly believe in the three branches of government and the important roles each plays in our society. Your role, with the power of the purse, I believe already gives you the most important seat at the table for our natural resources.

I would also like to extend our full support, as well as that of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, for HR 2236, the Wildlife Refuge System Conservation Semipostal Stamp Act of 2011. The Friends of Black Bayou Lake NWR fully understand the challenges faced by our Refuge and other Refuges in the System due to inadequate funding. This bill would create a new semi postal stamp, modeled after the recently enacted Multi National Species Fund stamp, and would generate additional funding for the operations and maintenance of the Refuge System. This bill would allow our Friends group and other Refuge supporters nationwide to show our support for the entire Refuge System. A voluntary stamp such as this is a way for Refuge supporters to easily support the Refuge System while making a purchase of something most of us still use.

We further support H.R. 3117, the electronic Duck Stamp. Many Friends and Refuge supporters are waterfowl hunters and support an easy way for sportsmen and women to purchase their stamp online. But it's not just for waterfowl hunters--people like me, who are not hunters, purchase a stamp because it is a pass to all national wildlife refuges nationwide and because we know it helps protect the lands, waters and wildlife we care about. With .98 cents of each dollar of the cost of the stamp going to acquire vital lands and waters for the Refuge System, it is simply another way for us to show our support. And although not mentioned in this proposed legislation, we believe the time is right to raise the cost of a Duck Stamp from the current \$15 to \$25. The cost has not changed since 1991, yet the cost of land has dramatically increased. We urge Congress to consider this as the legislation moves forward.

Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of Friends of Black Bayou, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, and the executive committee of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation. And again, please come visit us at Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge. You are always welcome.