

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Background Brief

H.R. 3292

Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge

SUMMARY: This legislation would establish the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS: Cat Island, which is also known as Tunica Swamp, is located about 30 miles north of Baton Rouge in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. It is not really an island but a 36,500-acre peninsula comprised of bottomland hardwoods.

Unlike most of the rest of the Mississippi River, Cat Island has never been leveed or altered by a major flood control project. It is one of the few natural areas along the river which still experiences seasonal overflows.

Cat Island contains one of the highest densities of old-growth bald cypress trees in the United States. It has been estimated that many of these trees are between 500 and 1,000 years old, and the Nation's largest cypress tree, which is 17 feet wide with a circumference of 53 feet, resides here. Cat Island also supports a wide variety of vegetation including: hackberry-elm-ash, overcup oak-bitter pecan, and shrub-scrub swamps.

Cat Island is located along the Mississippi River Flyway, which is a major migratory bird corridor for gadwalls, green-winged teals, mallards, ring-necked ducks, and woodcocks. In fact, it has been estimated that these lands provide essential winter habitat for more than 25,000 mallards.

This region is also home for many wading birds such as great egrets, snowy egrets, cattle egrets, glossy ibis, yellow-crowned night herons, black-crowned night herons, green herons, great blue herons, wood stocks, and bittens. Several rookeries are present, and the shallow lakes and flooded farm fields are prime wintering habitat for many shorebirds.

In addition, Cat Island has large populations of bobcat, deer, mink, raccoon, and turkey. Within the 36,500 acres, some of the oldest hunting clubs in Louisiana have, in the past, leased land that has provided excellent wildlife dependent recreational opportunities for thousands of Americans.

In terms of fishery resources, Cat Island has several freshwater lakes that provide outstanding sport fishing. Species found within these lakes include: bream, buffalo, catfish, crappie, gar, and largemouth bass. Crawfishing is also extremely popular. For generations, hunting and fishing has been a traditional and cherished pastime for local residents and tourists.

H.R. 3292 was introduced by Congressman Richard Baker on November 10, 1999. Under the terms of the legislation, the purpose of the refuge would be to: conserve and enhance wetlands; protect and enhance endangered species; promote fish and wildlife-oriented recreational activities; promote increased stewardship of the natural resources through environmental education, interpretation, and other outreach methods; and serve as a general wildlife management unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The bill directs the Secretary of the Interior to acquire by purchase or donation approximately 9,477 acres of land. This property would form the basis of the proposed Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge. The bill authorizes such sums as may be necessary to acquire the necessary lands and waters that will be acquired in the future. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, about 9,500 acres of woodlands, which is the core tract and the highest priority lands within Cat Island, are currently for sale.

In FY'00, Congress appropriated \$500,000 for Cat Island land acquisition. On March 23, 2000, the Migratory Bird

Conservation Commission met in Washington, D.C., and voted to use those funds to purchase 632 acres. The Administration has requested an additional \$4 million for Cat Island in FY'01.

SUBCOMMITTEE ACTION: The Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans held a hearing on H.R. 3292 on March 30, 2000. Testimony was heard from the Honorable Richard H. Baker (R-LA), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and The Timber Company.

ADMINISTRATION POSITION: The Administration has indicated it supports the bill with certain modifications.

AMENDMENTS: Mr. Saxton will offer an amendment in the nature of a substitute that increases the size of the proposed refuge from 9,477 to 36,500 acres and clarifies the purposes for the establishment of the refuge.

STAFF CONTACT: Harry Burroughs (202) 226-0200.

#