

# **ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

## **Reducing Aquatic Rodent Damage Through an Integrated Wildlife Damage Management Program in the State of Louisiana**

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Acronyms..... 4

**Chapter 1: Purpose and Need for Action**

1.0 Introduction..... 5  
1.1 Historical Aquatic Rodent Damage Management ..... 7  
1.2 Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Activity Impacts to the Environment and Society Attitudes.... 8  
1.3 Scope and Purpose of This Environmental Assessment ..... 16  
1.4 Need for ARDM in Louisiana..... 16  
1.5 Proposed Action..... 17  
1.6 Objectives for the Louisiana WS Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management Program..... 17  
1.7 Relationship of This EA to Other Environmental Documents ..... 18  
1.8 Decisions to be Made..... 18  
1.9 Scope of This EA Analysis..... 18  
1.10 Preview of the Remainder of This EA ..... 20

**Chapter 2: Issues and Affected Environment**

2.0 Introduction..... 21  
2.1 Affected Environment..... 21  
2.2 Issues Analyzed in Detail in Chapter 4..... 21  
2.3 Additional Issues Used to Develop Mitigation..... 31  
2.4 Issues Not Considered in Detail with Rationale ..... 34

**Chapter 3: Alternatives**

3.0 Introduction..... 39  
3.1 Alternatives Considered, Including the Proposed Action..... 40  
3.2 Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management Approaches Used by WS ..... 41  
3.3 Activities by WS to Alleviate Beaver, Muskrat, and Nutria Damage in Louisiana..... 45  
3.4 Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management Methods Authorized for Use or Recommended by WS..... 46  
3.5 Methodologies Considered but Deemed Impractical, Ineffective, or Unsafe at the Present Time ..... 48  
3.6 Alternatives Considered But Not in Detail, With Rationale..... 50  
3.7 Mitigation and SOPs for Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management ..... 53

**Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences**

4.0 Introduction..... 56  
4.1 Environmental Consequences..... 56  
4.2 Issues Analyzed in Detail ..... 57  
4.3 Summary of Louisiana WS’ Impacts ..... 72

<b>Chapter 5: List of Consultants, Reviewers, and Preparers .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Appendix A: Literature Cited .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Appendix B: Authority and Compliance .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Appendix C: Criteria for Beaver Dam Breaching/Removal .....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Appendix D: Methods Used or Recommended by Louisiana WS for Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management.....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Appendix E: Federal and State List of Threatened and Endangered Species .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Appendix F: Analysis of Potential Impacts on Threatened and Endangered Species .....</b>	<b>106</b>

## ACRONYMS

ADC	Animal Damage Control
APHIS	Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
ARD	Aquatic Rodent Damage
ARDM	Aquatic Rodent Damage Management
AVMA	American Veterinary Medical Association
BCAP	Beaver Control Assistance Program
BO	Biological Opinion
CDFG	California Department of Fish and Game
CEQ	Council on Environmental Quality
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CWA	Clean Water Act
EA	Environmental Assessment
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EJ	Environmental Justice
EPA	United States Environmental Protection Agency
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
FIFRA	Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act
FY	Fiscal Year
HSUS	Humane Society of the United States
IWDM	Integrated Wildlife Damage Management
LDAF	Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry
LDWF	Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
MIS	Management Information System
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NOA	Notices of Availability
NRCS	Natural Resource and Conservation Service
NWP	Nationwide Permit
PETA	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
T&E	Threatened and Endangered
USACE	United States Army Corps of Engineers
USC	United States Code
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
WS	Wildlife Services

## Chapter 1: PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, wildlife habitat has been substantially changed as human populations expand and land is used for human needs. These human uses and needs often compete with wildlife, which increases the potential for conflicting human/wildlife interactions. In addition, segments of the public desire protection for all wildlife. This protection can create localized conflicts between human and wildlife activities. The Animal Damage Control (ADC) Program Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) summarizes the relationship in American culture of wildlife values and wildlife damage in this way (United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) 1997):

*“Wildlife has either positive or negative values, depending on varying human perspectives and circumstances . . . Wildlife is generally regarded as providing economic, recreational and aesthetic benefits . . . and the mere knowledge that wildlife exists is a positive benefit to many people. However . . . the activities of some wildlife may result in economic losses to agriculture and damage to property . . . Sensitivity to varying perspectives and value is required to manage the balance between human and wildlife needs. In addressing conflicts, wildlife managers must consider not only the needs of those directly affected by wildlife damage but a range of environmental, sociocultural and economic considerations as well.”*

Wildlife damage management is the science of reducing damage or other problems caused by wildlife and recognized as an integral part of wildlife management (The Wildlife Society 1992). Wildlife Services (WS) uses an Integrated Wildlife Damage Management (IWDM) approach, known as Integrated Pest Management (WS Directive 2.105<sup>1</sup>). IWDM is described in Chapter 1:1-7 of the EIS (USDA 1997). Integrated Pest Management is a combination of methods which may be used or recommended for use to reduce wildlife damage. These methods may include alteration of cultural practices and habitat and behavioral modification to prevent or reduce damage. The reduction of wildlife damage may require that the local populations of offending animal(s) be reduced through lethal means.

Biological carrying capacity is the land or habitat limit for supporting healthy populations of wildlife without degradation to animal health or the environment over an extended period of time (Decker and Purdy 1988). Wildlife acceptance capacity, or cultural carrying capacity, is the limit of human tolerance for wildlife or the maximum number of a given species that can coexist compatibly with local human populations (Decker and Purdy 1988). These terms are especially important in urban areas because they define the sensitivity of a local community to a specific wildlife species. For any given wildlife damage situation, there will be varying thresholds of

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<sup>1</sup> WS Policy Manual - Provides guidance for WS' personnel to conduct wildlife damage management activities through Program Directives. WS Directives referenced in this EA can be found in the manual but will not be referenced in the Literature Cited Appendix.

tolerance by those directly and indirectly affected by the damage. This threshold of damage is a primary limiting factor in determining the wildlife acceptance capacity. While Louisiana has a biological carrying capacity to support more than the current number of beaver (*Castor canadensis*), nutria (*Myocastor coypus*), and muskrats (*Ondatra zibethicus*), the wildlife acceptance capacity is often much lower. Once the wildlife acceptance capacity is met or exceeded, people will begin to implement wildlife population management and damage reduction methods, including lethal management methods, to alleviate property damage and to protect public health and safety.

This environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of the potential environmental effects of a proposed Louisiana WS beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management program to achieve a balance between the biological carrying capacity and cultural carrying capacity. This analysis relies mainly on existing data contained in published documents (Appendix A), including the ADC Final EIS (USDA 1997). USDA (1997) may be obtained by contacting the USDA, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), WS Operational Support Staff at 4700 River Road, Unit 87, Riverdale, MD 20737-1234.

WS is the federal agency directed by law and authorized to protect American resources from damage associated with wildlife (Act of March 2, 1931, as amended 46 Stat. 1486; 7 United States Code (USC) 426-426c and the Rural Development, Agriculture, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 1988, Public law 100-102, Dec. 27, 1987. Stat. 1329-1331 (7 USC 426C)). To fulfill this Congressional direction, WS activities are conducted to prevent or reduce wildlife damage caused to agricultural, industrial, and natural resources, property, and public health and safety. WS' activities are conducted on private and public lands in cooperation with federal, state, and local agencies; private organizations; and individuals. Wildlife damage management is not based on punishing offending animals; however, this is one means of reducing damage and used as part of the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992). The imminent threat of damage or loss of resources is often sufficient for individual actions to be initiated. The need for action is derived from the specific threats to resources or the public.

Normally, according to APHIS procedures for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), individual wildlife damage management actions may be categorically excluded (7 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 372.5(c), 60 Fed. Reg. 6,000- 6,003, (1995)). WS has decided in this case to prepare this EA to facilitate planning, interagency coordination, and streamlining of program management, and to clearly communicate with the public the analysis of individual and cumulative impacts. In addition, this EA has been prepared to evaluate and determine if there are any potentially significant or cumulative impacts from the proposed and planned IWDM program. All wildlife damage management that would take place in Louisiana would be undertaken according to relevant laws, regulations, policies, orders, and procedures, including the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Notice of the availability of this document will be published in newspapers consistent with the agency's NEPA procedures.

WS is a cooperatively funded, service-oriented program from which other governmental agencies and entities may request assistance. Before any wildlife damage management is conducted, Cooperative Agreements, Agreements for Control, or other comparable documents

are completed. As requested, WS cooperates with land and wildlife management agencies to reduce wildlife damage effectively and efficiently according to applicable federal, state, and local laws and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between WS and other agencies. WS' mission, developed through its strategic planning process, is: 1) *“to provide leadership in wildlife damage management in the protection of America’s agricultural, industrial and natural resources, and 2) to safeguard public health and safety.”* WS' Policy Manual reflects this mission and provides guidance for engaging in wildlife damage management through:

- Training of wildlife damage management professionals;
- Development and improvement of strategies to reduce losses and threats to humans from wildlife;
- Collection, evaluation, and dissemination of management information;
- Informing and educating the public on how to reduce wildlife damage;
- Providing data and a source for limited-use management materials and equipment, including pesticides (USDA 1999).

## **1.1 HISTORICAL AQUATIC RODENT DAMAGE MANAGEMENT**

Historically, populations of aquatic rodents were managed by subsistence, commercial hunting, and trapping (Hill 1976, Woodward 1983, Novak 1987a, Lowery 1975, fur harvest records of the LA Department of Wildlife and Fisheries). Pelts of beaver, muskrat, and nutria were the mainstay of many fur markets. The meat of all three has been used for human consumption, primarily by subsistence hunters and trappers; however, muskrat and nutria have been promoted as table fare in restaurants. Meat from some of these species has also been used to produce food for pets and pen-raised alligators. Following the decimation of the beaver population in the late 1800's and early 1900's, number of beaver trappers declined. By the time beaver numbers had recovered and trapping seasons were re-opened, the number of beaver trappers and demand for short-haired fur had declined. Consequently, little beaver trapping was done. Absence of an adequate beaver harvest, an abundance of suitable habitat, and insignificant non-human predation resulted in beaver populations reaching levels where the animals were considered pests (Woodward 1983, Woodward et al. 1985). Likewise, declines in fur prices in the early 1980's created favorable conditions for increases in the population of nutria and beaver and associated problems.

A variety of attempts have been made to reduce damage caused by beaver and nutria. For example, many parish and county governments have appropriated money to fund bounty programs in an attempt to stem problems related to an increasing beaver population. These usually failed because there is no way to guarantee the origin of beaver turned in for a bounty payment; some trappers were being compensated for beaver caught outside of the area covered by the bounty program, including those that may have been caught out of state. Bounty trappers, who are profit driven, also direct efforts to animals that are the easiest to catch, often leaving those that require too much time and effort. The State of Louisiana has implemented a nutria bounty program for the protection of marshes in the southern part of the state. Licensed trappers and hunters, with permission of the landowners and enrollment in the highly regulated program, can receive monetary compensation for each nutria taken.

In North Carolina, a cooperative program between various agencies attempted to reduce beaver damage by allowing trappers to harvest more valuable furs (Woodward 1983). This cooperative program showed promise but failed due to the decline in the fur markets in the early 1980's. A similar beaver cooperative also failed in Mississippi. In North Carolina and Mississippi, WS now manages state-mandated cooperative beaver damage management programs that are funded with Federal, State, and local dollars. In other states, WS conducts individual beaver damage management programs with citizens, industry, State and Federal agencies, and local governments. In all cases, WS conducts beaver damage management activities to protect agriculture, forestry, drainages, highway infrastructure, private property, threatened and endangered species and other natural resources, and human health and safety. Since 1999, cooperatively funded beaver control programs in several eastern states, including Louisiana, protected an estimated \$23.4 million in resources valued by humans. (USDA APHIS WS; GPRA reports 1999 through 2003).

## **1.2 BEAVER, NUTRIA, AND MUSKRAT ACTIVITY IMPACTS TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETAL ATTITUDES**

### **1.2.1 Benefits of Beaver**

Beaver are found throughout most of North America including Canada, Alaska, all 48 contiguous states, and northern portions of Mexico (Deems and Pursley 1978). Once considered nearly extinct (Seton 1953, Hill 1976, Wesley 1978), its status has changed, and beaver are now viewed as a pest species in many southeastern states (Hill 1976, 1982, Dickson 2001). Although beaver may cause extensive damage, they can be beneficial in many situations, especially where their activities do not compete with human use of the land or property (Wade and Ramsey 1986). Positive ecological influences on wetland habitats (Arner et al. 1967a, b, Reese and Hair 1976) and economic gains from fur production (Moore and Martin 1949, Hill 1974, Arner and Dubose 1978a, b) make beaver important animals in the United States. Opinions and attitudes of individuals, communities, and organizations vary greatly and are primarily influenced and formed by the positive and negative experiences of the person or entity expressing the judgement (Hill 1982). Property ownership, options for public and private land use, and effects on adjacent property impact public attitudes toward beaver (Hill 1982). In many cases, the associated problems exceed the derived benefits, resulting in a need for beaver damage management.

Woodward et al. (1976) found that 24% of landowners who reported beaver activity on their property indicated benefits to having beaver ponds on their land. However, many landowners desire assistance with beaver pond management (Hill 1976, Lewis 1979, Woodward et al. 1985). Some of the benefits of beaver ponds include activities such as photography, trapping, hunting, and fishing. Beaver ponds also can provide a potential water source for livestock, and the ecological value of beaver ponds in the natural environment can be important. For example, beaver ponds contribute to the stabilization of water tables, help reduce rapid run-off from rain (Wade and Ramsey 1986), and serve



as basins for the entrapment of streambed silt and eroding soil (Hill 1982). These wetland ecosystems also function as sinks, helping to filter nutrients and reduce sedimentation, thereby maintaining the quality of nearby water systems (Arner and Hepp 1989).

Beaver may increase habitat diversity by flooding and opening forest habitats which result in greater interspersion of successional stages and subsequently increases the floral and faunal diversity of a habitat (Hill 1982, Arner and Hepp 1989). Creation of standing water, edge, and plant diversity, all in close proximity, results in excellent wildlife habitat (Hill 1982). Beaver created impoundments also are attractive to warm water fishes (Hanson and Campbell 1963, Pullen 1967). The resulting wetland habitat may be beneficial to some fish, reptiles, amphibians, waterfowl, shorebirds, and furbearers such as muskrats, otter, and mink (Arner and DuBose 1982, Naimen et al. 1986, Miller and Yarrow 1994).

Habitat modification by beaver, primarily dam building and tree cutting, can benefit many species of wildlife (Jenkins and Busher 1979, Arner and DuBose 1982, Hill 1982, Arner and Hepp 1989, Medin and Clary 1990, Medin and Clary 1991). Beaver impoundments can provide aesthetic and recreational opportunities for wildlife observation through the attractiveness of habitat diversity and environmental education (Wade and Ramsey 1986). In addition, beaver ponds may be beneficial to threatened and endangered (T&E) species. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) estimates that up to 43% of T&E species rely directly or indirectly on wetlands for their survival (Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (EPA 1995). In Louisiana, beaver ponds over three years in age were found to have developed plant communities which increase their value as nesting and brood rearing habitat for wood ducks (Arner and DuBose 1982). Reese and Hair (1976) found that beaver pond habitats were highly attractive to a large number of birds year-round and that the value of the beaver pond habitat to waterfowl was minor when compared to other species of birds (Novak 1987a).

### **1.2.2 Benefits of Muskrats**

Muskrats are a native, North American aquatic rodent and the largest microtine rodent in the United States. Muskrats live in aquatic habitats and are well adapted for swimming. Large hind feet of muskrats are partially webbed with stiff hairs aligning the toes. Tails are laterally flattened and almost as long as body length. Muskrats have a stocky appearance, with small eyes and very short, rounded ears. Front feet, which are much smaller than hind feet, are adapted primarily for digging and feeding. The overall length of adult muskrats is usually from 18 to 24 inches.

Muskrats are most abundant in the southern half of Louisiana, but are found scattered in suitable habitat throughout the state inhabiting creeks, rivers, lakes, ponds, coastal marshes, and drainage ditches. Muskrats prefer areas with a steady water level and feed primarily on cattails (*Typha* spp.), bulrushes (*Scirpus* spp.), and aquatic grasses in freshwater, and (*Scirpus olneyi*) in coastal marshes. Historically, muskrats have been the most heavily utilized furbearer in North America with 6-20 million harvested annually

since about 1935 (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987). Muskrats not only have economic value from the sale of their meat and pelt, but they are an indigenous species to North America that fill an important niche in the ecosystem. Muskrats provide opportunities for recreation and satisfaction to people that like to observe wildlife in a natural setting. In the prairie pothole region of the U.S. and Canada, muskrats clear or open small areas through feeding and house building in otherwise dense cattail marshes. The small openings create nesting and brood rearing habitat for nesting waterfowl.

### **1.2.3 Benefits of Nutria**

Nutria are large, dark colored, semi-aquatic rodents that are native to South America. The dense grayish underfur is overlaid by long, glossy guard hairs that vary in color from dark brown to yellowish brown. Nutria have short legs and robust, highly arched bodies that are approximately 24 inches in length at maturity. Forepaws have four well developed, clawed toes and one vestigial toe. Four of the five clawed toes on the hind feet are interconnected by webbing; the fifth outer toe is free. Hind legs of nutria are much larger than forelegs. Nutria tails are round, range from 13 to 16 sixteen inches in length, and are scantily haired. Male nutria are slightly larger than female nutria with an average weight for either sex about 12 pounds. Male and female nutria may grow to 20 and 18 pounds, respectively. Nutria are currently found throughout Louisiana with the highest concentrations located in the southern half along or near the coastal marsh.

Nutria, which are native to Central and South America, were introduced with the “fur ranching” trade, which subsequently failed. The species became established in the wild after accidental and intentional releases prior to 1950. In some areas, nutria were released to control aquatic weeds (Wade and Ramsey 1986, Kinler et al. 1987). Newly-established feral populations of nutria were initially regarded as a new fur resource by trappers and conservation agencies. The species provided a means of income for hunters and trappers through the sale of meat and fur. From 1977 to 1984 approximately \$7.3 million worth of nutria fur was harvested in the United States (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987, Kinler 1987). Nutria also provide a major food source for wild alligators in Louisiana (Valentine et al. 1972, Wolfe et al. 1987).

### **1.2.4 Damage from Beaver Activities**

Beaver are an important part of the wildlife heritage of Louisiana. In Louisiana, the reintroduced beaver population exhibited a recovery pattern similar to many states and Canadian provinces. This beaver population expansion has created a negative economic impact in North America (Novak 1987a).

Identifying beaver damage is generally easy. Most beaver-caused damage is a result of dam building, bank burrowing, tree cutting and girdling, obstructing overflow structures and spillways, and flooding. Some cases of beaver damage include state highways being flooded, reservoir dams being destroyed by bank dens and burrows, and train derailments being caused by continued flooding and burrowing of railroad beds (Miller and Yarrow

1994). Flooding associated with beaver dams has threatened housing developments and caused the destruction of small bridges and culvert crossings. Miller (1983) estimated that the annual damage in the United States was \$75-\$100 million. The value of beaver damage is perhaps greater than that of any other single wildlife species in the United States. Economic damage was estimated to have exceeded \$4 billion in the southeastern United States over a 40-year period (Arner and Dubose 1979). In some southeastern States, losses from beaver damage have been estimated from \$3 to 5 million annually (Miller and Yarrow 1994), with timber losses being reported as the most common type of damage (Hill 1982). Fowler (1994) estimated that beaver impacted \$14 million of industrial forest lands in Louisiana during 1993. Tracts of bottomland hardwood timber up to several thousand acres in size may be lost due to normal beaver activity (Miller and Yarrow 1994). Surveys in North Carolina and Alabama indicate the majority of landowners with beaver damage on their property desire damage management via beaver removal (Hill 1976, Lewis 1979, Woodward et al. 1985). Loker et al. (1999) found that suburban residents also may desire lethal management methods to resolve beaver damage conflicts. Such conflicts, which are viewed as “damage,” result in adverse impacts that often outweigh benefits (Miller and Yarrow 1994).

Beaver activities also destroy critical habitat types (e.g. free-flowing water, riparian areas, and bird roosting and nesting areas) which are important to many wildlife species, including certain species of fish and mussels. Patterson (1951) and Avery (1992) reported that the presence of beaver dams can negatively affect fisheries. Beaver dams may adversely affect stream ecosystems by increasing sedimentation in streams, and thereby negatively affect wildlife that depend on clear water.

Beaver impacts on trout habitat have been a major concern of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the general public since as early as 1950. Patterson (1951) found that beaver impoundments in the Peshtigo River Watershed caused significant negative impacts to trout habitat by raising water temperatures, destroying immediate bank cover, changing water and soil conditions, and silting of spawning areas. Studies from other areas also reported negative aspects of beaver impoundments in regard to trout habitat (Sayler 1935, Cook 1940, Sprules 1940, Bailey and Stevens 1951). Evans (1948) suggested a continued increase in beaver populations in Minnesota would probably result in deterioration of trout streams. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources guidelines for management of trout stream habitat stated that beaver dams are a major source of damage to trout streams (White and Brynildson 1967, Churchill 1980). More recent studies have documented improvements to trout habitat upon removal of beaver dams. Avery (1992) found that wild brook trout populations improved significantly following the removal of beaver dams from tributaries of some streams. Species abundance, species distribution, and total biomass of non-salmonids also increased following the removal of beaver dams (Avery 1992).

Increased soil moisture both within and surrounding beaver-flooded areas can result in reduced timber growth and mast production and increased bank destabilization. These habitat modifications can conflict with human land or resource management objectives

and can oppress some plants and animals, including T&E species. The Louisiana WS program has conducted beaver damage management activities to protect the Federally-threatened Louisiana pearlshell (*Margaritifera hembeli*), which requires clear, free-flowing water to survive; dams built over pearlshell beds will effectively destroy them (D. LeBlanc, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication).

Beaver often inhabit sites in or adjacent to urban/suburban areas and cut or girdle trees and shrubs in yards, undermine yards and walkways by burrowing, flood homes and other structures, destroy pond and reservoir dams by burrowing into levees, gnaw on boat houses and docks, and cause other damage to private and public property (Wade and Ramsey 1986). Additionally, roads and railroads may be damaged by saturation from beaver flooding or by beaver burrowing. Consequently, roadbed and railroad bed integrity is compromised. Beaver also cause an assortment of damage such as flooding of cropland, pasture, and timberland; feeding on crops such as corn, soybeans, sorghum; interfering with irrigation systems and water level control structures; and causing washouts of ponds and levees (Hill 1982, Woodward 1983, Wade and Ramsey 1986, Miller and Yarrow 1994).

Beaver numbers are not significantly affected by predators. Consequently, populations may have to be managed by humans. WS beaver damage management efforts in Louisiana are primarily conducted for the purpose of minimizing damage to public roadways, urban and suburban properties, agricultural and timber resources, and railroad infrastructures (Table 1.1). In some cases, efforts are aimed at protecting critical wildlife habitat, which is degraded due to beaver related flooding and dam building. WS' personnel use a variety of methods for reducing beaver damage, which allows for greater flexibility and increased opportunity to successfully implement an effective damage control strategy for each request for assistance that is received (see Appendix D).

Table 1.1. Combined number of direct control (DC) and technical assistance (TA) projects involving beaver, nutria, and muskrats conducted by Louisiana WS from 1998 thru 2003.

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
# DC Projects	557	624	475	491	610	452
# TA Projects	132	133	194	191	189	262
Acreage Worked*	45,686	69,895	75,323	103,190	99,065	65,851
% Acre of State	0.1637	0.2505	0.27	0.3699	0.3551	0.236

\*Louisiana WS records a cooperator's total acreage when entering into an agreement. Acreage worked is about 5% of a cooperator's total acreage.

### 1.2.5 Damage from Muskrat Activities

Damage caused by muskrats is usually not a major problem, but can be important in some situations (Wade and Ramsey 1986), such as in aquacultural systems. Economic loss is often associated with muskrat feeding and burrowing into banks, dikes, levees,

shorelines, and dams associated with ponds, lakes, and drainages (Perry 1982, Miller 1994, Linzey 1998). In some states damage may be as much as \$1 million per year (Miller 1994). Elsewhere, economic losses caused by muskrats may be limited and confined primarily to burrowing or feeding on desirable plants in farm ponds. In such areas, cost of the damage often outweighs value of the muskrat population.

Burrowing activity can seriously weaken man-made dams and levees (Perry 1982) causing them to leak or burst. Loss of water from irrigated areas or flooding may lead to loss of crops (Wade and Ramsey 1986). Entrances to burrows are normally underwater and may not be evident until serious damage has occurred. Associated burrows and dens can erode along the shorelines of lakes and create washouts of associated properties when they collapse, posing a hazard to humans, livestock, and equipment used on site.

Crop damage is often characterized by plant cutting. Crops that may be eaten include corn, alfalfa, carrots, rice, and soybeans (Perry 1982). Muskrats also eat many species of wetland plants (Linzey 1998) When muskrats become over-populated in marshy regions, they may consume all vegetation, including the roots, to form an “eat-out.” This scar remains upon the marsh for a number of years (O’Neil 1949), and, in some cases, may never recover. “Eat-outs” destroy habitat for both muskrats and other wildlife. Marsh damage from muskrats is inevitable when areas heavily populated by muskrats are under-trapped (Lynch et al. 1947).

WS muskrat damage management efforts in Louisiana are primarily conducted for the purposes of minimizing damage to urban and suburban properties and agricultural resources.

### **1.2.6 Damage from Nutria Activities**

Nutria are almost entirely herbivorous and eat animal material (mostly insects) incidentally. Freshwater mussels and crustaceans are occasionally eaten in some parts of their range. Nutria feed on valuable wetland vegetation and cultivated crops such as sugar cane and rice (Wade and Ramsey 1986). The bark of trees such as black willow (*Salix nigra*) and bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) may be eaten in winter months when more preferred herbaceous vegetation is dormant. Nutria also cause damage by eating lawn grasses found adjacent to aquatic habitats. Nutria are opportunistic feeders and eat approximately 25 % of their body weight daily (LeBlanc 1994).

Nutria are an introduced species from South America and often compete for food and space with native furbearers. Nutria primarily inhabit brackish or freshwater marshes, but also are found in swamps, rivers, ponds, and lakes. Dense vegetation, abandoned burrows, and burrows dug along steam banks or shorelines are preferred den sites for nutria (Wade and Ramsey 1986).

Burrowing is the most common type of damage caused by nutria. Burrowing activities of nutria can severely damage levees, dikes, earthen dams, and other structures. Nutria

undermine and dig through water-retaining levees in flooded fields used to produce rice and crawfish in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. Additionally, burrowing activity can weaken flood control levees used to protect low-lying, urban areas. In some cases, tunneling in levees is so extensive that water will flow unobstructed through it, necessitating the complete reconstruction of the structure.

Nutria often burrow into styrofoam used for flotation under boat docks, wharves, and houseboats. This type of damage can destabilize these structures, causing them to lean and possibly sink. Nutria often burrow under buildings and structures which lead to uneven settling or foundation failure. Nutria burrows can weaken road beds, stream banks, dams, and dikes. These resources can collapse when the soil is saturated by rain or high water, or when heavy objects (such as vehicles, farm machinery, or grazing livestock) travel over their surface. Rain and wave action can wash out and enlarge collapsed burrows and compound damage.

Nutria depredation on crops is well documented (LeBlanc 1994). In the United States, sugarcane and rice are the primary crops damaged by nutria. Grazing on rice plants can dramatically reduce yields, and damage can be locally severe. Sugarcane stalks are often gnawed or cut during the growing season, and often only the basal internodes of cut plants are eaten. Other crops that have been damaged by feeding nutria include corn, milo (grain sorghum), sugar and table beets, alfalfa, wheat, barely, oats, peanuts, various melons, and a variety of vegetables from home gardens and truck farms.

Fruit, nut, and shade trees and ornamental shrubs are often girdled by nutria. Nutria also damage lawns and golf courses when digging and feeding on the tender roots and shoots of sod grasses. Gnawing damage to wooden structures is common. Nutria also gnaw on styrofoam floats used to mark the location of traps in commercial crawfish ponds.

At high densities and under certain environmental conditions, nutria foraging can substantially impact natural plant communities. In Louisiana, nutria often feed on coastal marsh vegetation creating “eat-outs” which exacerbate coastal erosion. Coastal erosion in Louisiana is a major environmental issue which has prompted the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to implement an economical incentive program to pay licensed trappers an additional \$4.00 per captured nutria. This program’s objective is to stimulate an annual harvest of 400,000 nutrias, which is considered the necessary annual take to mitigate coastal erosion created by nutria “eat-outs.” In addition to “eat-outs” nutria trails facilitate saltwater intrusion which can be detrimental to certain coastal marsh ecotones. Over-utilization of emergent marsh plants can damage stands of desirable vegetation used by other wildlife species. Nutria prefer grassy arrowhead (*Sagittaria platyphylla*) tubers and may destroy stands propagated as food for waterfowl in artificial impoundments.

WS nutria damage management efforts in Louisiana are primarily conducted for the purpose of minimizing damage to urban and suburban properties, agricultural and timber resources, and other natural resources.

### **1.2.7 Public Health and Safety Risks from Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage**

Beaver and muskrat activity in certain situations can become a threat to public health and safety (e.g. burrowing into or flooding of roadways and railroad beds can result in serious vehicle accidents) (Miller 1983, Woodward 1983). Increased water levels in urban areas resulting from beaver activity can lead to unsanitary conditions and potential health problems by flooding septic systems and sewage treatment facilities (DeAlmeida 1987, Loeb 1994). Beaver damming activity also creates conditions favorable to mosquitoes and can hinder mosquito control efforts or result in population increases of these insects (Wade and Ramsey 1986). While the presence of these insects is largely a nuisance, mosquitoes can transmit diseases, such as encephalitis (Mallis 1982). In addition, beaver, which are carriers of the intestinal parasite *Giardia lamblia*, can contaminate human water supplies and cause outbreaks of the disease, giardiasis, in humans (Woodward 1983, Beach and McCulloch 1985, Wade and Ramsey 1986, Miller and Yarrow 1994). The Centers for Disease Control have recorded at least 41 outbreaks of waterborne giardiasis affecting more than 15,000 people. Beaver also are known carriers of tularemia, a bacterial disease that is transmittable to humans through bites by insect vectors or infected animals or by handling animals or carcasses which are infected (Wade and Ramsey 1986). Skinner et al. (1984) found that in cattle-ranching sections of Wyoming the fecal bacterial count was much higher in beaver ponds than in other ponds, something that can be a concern to ranchers and recreationists. On rare occasions, beaver may contract the rabies virus and attack humans. In February 1999, a beaver attacked and wounded a dog and chased children that were playing near a stream in Vienna, Virginia. Approximately a week later, a beaver was found dead at the site and tested positive for rabies (E. Hodnett, Fairfax Animal Control, personal communication). Furthermore, damming of streams sometimes increases the number of aquatic snakes, including the poisonous cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*) (Wade and Ramsey 1986).

Nutria can be infected with several pathogens and parasites that can be transmitted to humans, livestock, and pets (LeBlanc 1994). The role of nutria in the spread of diseases such as equine encephalomyelitis, leptospirosis, hemorrhagic septicemia (pasteurellosis), paratyphoid, and salmonellosis is not well documented. Nutria also may host a number of parasites, including the nematodes and blood flukes that cause nutria- or swimmers-itch (*Strongyloides myopotami* and *Schistosoma mansoni*, respectively), the protozoan responsible for giardiasis, tapeworms (*Taenia spp.*), and common flukes (*Fasciola hepatica*). The threat of disease may be an important consideration in some situations, such as when livestock drink from water contaminated by nutria feces and urine.

## **1.3 SCOPE AND PURPOSE OF THIS EA**

Scope and purpose of this EA is to evaluate the potential impact of Louisiana's WS aquatic rodent damage management (ARDM) program for protecting agricultural and natural resources, property, roads, bridges, and public health and safety. Aquatic rodent damage problems can occur throughout the State, which results in requests for WS' assistance. Under the Proposed

Action, aquatic rodent damage management could be conducted on private, federal, state, tribal, parish, and municipal lands in Louisiana. Louisiana encompasses 27.9 million acres that is divided into 64 parishes. WS anticipates that the proposed action would occur on no more than 1.0% of the total land in Louisiana (Table 1.1), and would result in no more than 5,000 beavers, 2,500 nutrias, and 1,500 muskrats killed by Louisiana WS annually. Currently Louisiana WS has 6 Wildlife Specialists and 3 Wildlife Biologists conducting IWDM to solve beaver, nutria, and muskrat problems in an effort to alleviate damage Statewide.

#### 1.4 NEED FOR ARDM IN LOUISIANA

The need for action in Louisiana is based on the necessity of a program to protect: 1) agricultural and natural resources, 2) property, 3) roads, bridges and railroads, and 4) public health and safety from beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage and associated economic losses. The Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry employs nine employees who provide assistance to resource owners in Louisiana with beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management. The limited number of private trappers in Louisiana is insufficient to resolve all the beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage experienced by resource owners in Louisiana. Consequently, there is a need for WS to conduct similar activities.

Conflicts between humans and wildlife are common throughout Louisiana. Comprehensive surveys of nutria and muskrat damage in Louisiana have not been conducted to date. However, nutria have damaged an estimated 100,000 acres of coastal marsh in Louisiana (Kinler et al. 2000). Fowler (1994) documented more than \$50 million of beaver damage to a variety of resources in Louisiana. Louisiana WS has compiled verified and reported damage estimates caused by aquatic rodents. These estimates are reported as economic loss (\$) perceived by property and resource owners or managers who requested WS assistance. Damage data obtained from the WS Management Information System (MIS) from 1998 through 2003 are summarized (Table 1.2). These data represent only a portion of the total damage caused by beaver, nutria, and muskrats because not all people who experience such damage request assistance from WS (Loven 1985).

Table 1.2. Combined aquatic rodent damage (ARD), expressed as dollars, reported to Louisiana WS, 1998-2003.

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
ROADS/BRIDGES	\$194,000	\$76,800	\$84,001	\$96,501	\$135,003	\$144,000
TIMBER	\$7,000	\$2,195,600	\$415,651	\$187,301	\$426,901	\$6,700
DAMS/DITCHES	\$114,200	\$131,402	\$238,300	\$302,302	\$378,900	\$209,200
CROPS	\$500	\$3,000	\$50	\$0	\$0	\$0
OTHER	\$17,900	\$4,600	\$6,850	\$13,050	\$19,100	\$7,500
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$333,600</b>	<b>\$2,411,402</b>	<b>\$744,852</b>	<b>\$599,154</b>	<b>\$959,904</b>	<b>\$367,400</b>



## **1.5 PROPOSED ACTION**

The proposed action is for Louisiana WS to continue the current integrated beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management program for the protection of agricultural and natural resources, property, public health and safety, roads, bridges and railroads on all lands in Louisiana where a need exists and a request is received. An IWDM approach would be used, including technical assistance recommendations and operational damage management assistance, and would consider all legal and appropriate ARDM methods used singly or in combination to meet the cooperators' needs for reducing damage. Non-lethal methods include environmental/habitat modification, cultural practices, animal behavior modification, and repellents. Lethal and non-lethal methods include shooting, zinc phosphide bait for muskrats and nutria, leg-hold traps, cage traps, snares, colony traps, snap traps, and body-gripping (e.g., Conibear) traps. Aquatic rodents captured in non-lethal devices (leg-hold traps, snares, cage traps, etc.) would subsequently be euthanized. Beaver dams would be breached/removed using binary explosives or by hand digging. Beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management would be conducted in the State, when requested, on private or public property after an *Agreement for Control* or other comparable document was completed. Management actions would be consistent with other uses of the area and would comply with appropriate federal, state and local laws and in cooperation with other governmental agencies and tribal governments. (See Chapter 3 for a more detailed description of the current program and the proposed action).

## **1.6 OBJECTIVES FOR THE LOUISIANA WS BEAVER, NUTRIA, AND MUSKRAT DAMAGE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

- Resolve as many beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage problems that time, funding, and labor will allow.
- Respond to individual damage complaints within a two week time period.
- Maintain the take of non-target otters (*Lutra canadensis*) below 5% of the total take during beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management operations.

## **1.7 RELATIONSHIP OF THIS EA TO OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS**

### **ADC Programmatic EIS**

WS has issued a final EIS on the National APHIS/WS program (USDA 1997). Pertinent information available in the final EIS has been incorporated by reference into this EA.

## **1.8 DECISIONS TO BE MADE**

Based on the scope of this EA, the decisions to be made are:

- Should WS continue to implement an IWDM strategy, including non-lethal and lethal damage management methods, to meet the objectives for beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management in Louisiana?
- If not, should WS attempt to implement one of the alternatives to an IWDM strategy as

described in the EA?

- Would the proposed action have significant impacts on the quality of the human environment requiring preparation of an EIS?

## **1.9 SCOPE OF THIS EA ANALYSIS**

### **1.9.1 Actions Analyzed**

This EA evaluates planned beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management to protect: 1) property, 2) agricultural and natural resources, 3) roads, bridges, railroads, and 4) public health and safety in Louisiana. Protection of other resources or other program activities will be addressed in other NEPA analyses, as appropriate.

### **1.9.2 Wildlife Species Potentially Protected by Louisiana WS**

Louisiana WS' assistance may be requested to achieve management objectives for wildlife, including T&E species. If other needs are identified, a determination would be made on a case-by-case basis if additional NEPA analysis is needed.

### **1.9.3 American Indian Lands and Tribes**

Currently, Louisiana WS does not have any MOUs with any American Indian tribe. If WS enters into an agreement with a tribe for beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management, this EA would be reviewed and supplemented if appropriate to insure compliance with NEPA. MOUs, agreements, and NEPA compliance would be conducted as appropriate before conducting beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management on tribal lands.

### **1.9.4 Period for which this EA is Valid**

This EA would remain valid until Louisiana WS and other appropriate agencies determine that new needs for action, changed conditions or new alternatives having different environmental effects must be analyzed. At that time, this analysis and document would be supplemented pursuant to NEPA. Review of the EA would be conducted each year to ensure that the EA is sufficient.

### **1.9.5 Site Specificity**

This EA analyzes the potential impacts of beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management and addresses WS ARDM activities on all lands in Louisiana under MOUs, Cooperative Agreements, and or agreements for control and in cooperation with the appropriate public land management agencies. It also addresses the impacts of ARDM on areas where additional agreements may be signed in the future. Because the proposed action is to reduce damage and because the program's goals and directives are to provide services when requested, within the constraints of available funding and workforce, it is

conceivable that additional wildlife damage management efforts could occur. Thus, this EA anticipates this potential expansion and analyzes the impacts of such efforts as part of the program.

Planning for the management of aquatic rodent damage must be viewed as being conceptually similar to Federal or other agency actions whose missions are to stop or prevent adverse consequences from anticipated future events for which the actual sites and locations where they will occur are unknown but could be anywhere in a defined geographic area. Examples of such agencies and programs include fire and police departments, emergency clean-up organizations, insurance companies, etc. Although some of the sites where aquatic rodent damage will occur can be predicted, all specific locations or times where such damage will occur in any given year cannot. This EA emphasizes major issues as they relate to specific areas whenever possible, however, many issues apply wherever aquatic rodent damage and resulting management occurs and are treated as such. The standard WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992) would be the site-specific procedure for individual actions conducted by WS in Louisiana (*see* Chapter 3 for a description of the Decision Model and its application).

The analyses in this EA are intended to apply to any action that may occur *in any locale* and at *any time* within the State of Louisiana. In this way, WS believes it meets the intent of NEPA with regard to site-specific analysis and that this is the only practical way for WS to comply with NEPA and still be able to accomplish its mission.

### **1.9.6 Summary of Public Involvement**

As part of this process, and as required by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and APHIS-NEPA implementing regulations, this document and its Decision are being made available to the public through Notices of Availability (NOA) published in local media and through direct mailings of NOA to parties that have specifically requested to be notified. New issues or alternatives raised after publication of public notices will be fully considered to determine whether the EA and its Decision should be revisited and, if appropriate, revised.

## **1.10 PREVIEW OF THE REMAINDER OF THIS EA**

The remainder of this EA is composed of five (5) chapters and six (6) appendices. Chapter 2 discusses and analyzes the issues and affected environment. Chapter 3 contains a description of each alternative, alternatives not considered in detail, mitigation and SOPs. Chapter 4 analyzes consistency with environmental consequences and the environmental impacts associated with each alternative considered in detail. Chapter 5 contains the list of preparers of this EA. Appendix A is the literature cited used during the preparation of this EA, Appendix B is the authorities for conducting wildlife damage management in Louisiana, Appendix C describes criteria for beaver dam breaching/removal, Appendix D is a detailed description of the methods used for ARDM, and Appendix E is a list of Federally- and State-listed T&E species for Louisiana. Appendix F contains the analysis of potential impacts of ARDM activities on

threatened and endangered species.

## **Chapter 2: ISSUES AND AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 2 contains a discussion of the issues, including issues that received detailed environmental impact analysis in Chapter 4 (Environmental Consequences), issues used to develop mitigation measures and SOPs, and issues not considered in detail, with the rationale. Pertinent portions of the affected environment are included in this chapter in the discussion of issues used to develop mitigation. Additional affected environments are incorporated into the discussion of the environmental impacts in Chapter 4 and the description of the current program in Chapter 3.

### **2.1 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

Upon request for assistance, aquatic rodent damage management could be conducted on private, federal, state, tribal, parish, and municipal lands in Louisiana to protect agricultural and natural resources, property, roads, bridges, railroads, and public health and safety. Areas of the proposed action could include state and interstate highways and roads, and railroads and their rights-of-way where beaver, nutria, and muskrat cause damage. Areas may also include property in or adjacent to subdivisions, businesses, and industrial parks where beaver impound water and gnaw or fell trees. Additionally, affected areas could include rural timberland, cropland, and pasture that experience damage resulting from beaver flooding or gnawing. The proposed action also could include private and public property where aquatic rodents damage dikes, ditches, ponds, and levees, or where feeding causes agricultural crop losses and negative impacts to wildlife, including T&E species.

### **2.2 ISSUES ANALYZED IN DETAIL IN CHAPTER 4**

The following are issues that have been identified as areas of concern requiring consideration in this EA and were used to develop mitigation measures:

1. Effects on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations,
2. Effects on plants and other wildlife species, including T&E species,
3. Effects on public and pet health and safety,
4. Humaneness of methods to be used,
5. Effects on wetlands,
6. Economic losses to property, and
7. Impacts to stakeholders, including aesthetics.

#### **2.2.1 Effects on Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Populations**

Some citizens are concerned that the proposed action or any of the alternatives would result in the extirpation of local beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations or could have cumulative adverse impacts on regional or statewide populations. The most beaver, nutria, and muskrat annually removed by Louisiana WS was 2,430 beaver in 1998, 324 nutria in 1998, and 14 muskrats in

1998. However, based upon current and anticipated increase of work, Louisiana WS expects that no more than 5,000 beaver, 2,500 nutria, and 1,500 muskrats would be removed annually while conducting WS direct control activities within the state. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries has determined that there is no evidence to suggest that human-induced mortality resulting from regulated fur harvest and damage management would be detrimental to the survival of the beaver and muskrat populations in the state of Louisiana. LDWF has implemented an economical incentive program to pay licensed trappers an additional \$4.00 per captured nutria. This program's objective is to stimulate an annual harvest of 400,000 nutrias. This harvest level is considered the necessary annual take to mitigate coastal erosion created by nutria "eat-outs". This harvest level will not eradicate nutria from the state of Louisiana.

## **2.2.2 Effects on Plants and other Wildlife Species, including T&E Species**

A common concern among members of the public and wildlife professionals, including WS' personnel, is that the proposed action or any of the alternatives would result in removing additional wildlife species beyond the scope of the particular project or adversely impact populations of plants or other wildlife, particularly T&E species.

To reduce the risks of adversely affecting non-target species, WS would select damage management methods that are as target-selective as possible or WS would apply such methods in ways to reduce the likelihood of capturing non-target species. Before initiating trapping or control, WS would select sites which are extensively used by the target species and use, as appropriate, baits or lures which are preferred by the target species. WS' mitigation and SOPs are designed to reduce the effects on non-target species and are presented in Chapter 3.

The removal of beaver, nutria, and muskrats and breaching/removing beaver dams on a site could be beneficial to some plant and wildlife species, including T&E species.

### **2.2.2.1 Effects on Non-target Wildlife Species (non-T&E Species)**

Non-target species such as otters, raccoons, alligators, and turtles may occasionally be captured in traps and snares. Healthy, uninjured non-target animals that are captured would be released unharmed on site. A relatively small number of non-target animals may be captured and killed by Louisiana WS annually. Non-target species taken in excess of 5 individuals per year by WS are provided in Table 2.1. As seen in Table 2.1, the number of non-target animals incidentally taken by Louisiana WS from 1998-2003 is far less than the number of animals harvested by licensed individuals during Louisiana's regulated harvest seasons. WS does not expect the rate of its non-target species take to substantially increase above current or past program levels under the proposed action or any of the alternatives. WS has concluded that non-target animals killed by the Louisiana program would have no adverse effects on any native wildlife species population in Louisiana. LDWF concurs that Louisiana WS would have no adverse effects on native wildlife populations in Louisiana (Greg Linscombe, LDWF, personal consultation).

Table 2.1. Estimated state harvest and Wildlife Services take of non-target animals in Louisiana while conducting ARDM from 1998 through 2003.<sup>1</sup>

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Estimated state harvest of American alligators	28,639	32,097	33,678	35,148	33,381	31,452
WS American alligators (killed)	8	7	2	7	2	3
WS American alligators (freed)	6	6	1	10	3	10
Estimated state harvest of muskrats	607	275	392	359	438	2,078
WS muskrats (killed)	7	0	2	0	1	3
WS muskrats (freed)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Estimated state harvest of nutria	114,646	20,110	29,544	24,683	308,160	332,596
WS nutria (killed)	139	94	46	51	50	56
WS nutria (freed)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Estimated state harvest of river otters	2,483	2,872	4,593	2,579	3,932	5,713
WS river otters (killed)	69	53	35	27	37	20
WS river otters (freed)	1	3	1	2	0	0
Estimated state harvest of raccoons	15,441	8,413	14,543	6,198	11,167	10,637
WS raccoons (killed)	27	42	12	27	20	23
WS raccoons (freed)	1	0	4	6	5	9
Estimated state harvest of turtles (lbs)	N/A	61,334	49,045	66,032	17,423	30,142
WS turtles (killed)	25	27	5	27	13	8
WS turtles (freed)	3	3	0	12	4	4

<sup>1</sup>. Other non-target animals were incidentally killed while conducting ARDM activities but not listed unless there were five or more killed per year.

#### 2.2.2.2 Effects on T&E Species (Plants and Animals)

Information provided by the USFWS and LDWF web sites were reviewed to identify potential impacts on Federal- and State-listed T&E species (See Appendix E). Of the species and subspecies currently listed as threatened or endangered under provisions of the ESA, twenty-six occur within the state of Louisiana (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2004). These include three plants, three bivalves, two fish, eight reptiles, six birds, and four mammals. One additional candidate species, the Louisiana pine snake (*Pituophis ruthveni*), also occurs here.

A review of potential impacts of ARDM activities on each of the listed species was conducted by WS (See Appendix F). This analysis took into consideration the direct and indirect effects of available and acceptable aquatic rodent damage control strategies, which include physical exclusion; habitat management via dam removal and water level management; and lethal control using traps, shooting, and zinc phosphide.

Special efforts are made to avoid jeopardizing T&E species through biological evaluations of the potential effects and the establishment of special restrictions or mitigation measures. WS has consulted with the USFWS under Section 7 of the ESA concerning potential impacts of wildlife damage management methods on T&E species and has obtained a Biological Opinion (BO). For

the full context of the BO, see Appendix F of the ADC EIS (USDA 1997). WS also is in the process of reinitiating Section 7 consultation at the program level to assure that potential effects on T&E species have been adequately addressed. Additionally, WS consulted with Lafayette, Louisiana, Field Office of the USFWS Ecological Services Division in preparation of this EA to ensure that potential effects on T&E species were adequately addressed.

WS consulted with the USFWS concerning potential impacts of WS methods on T&E species in Louisiana. The USFWS concurred that Louisiana WS aquatic rodent damage management methods “are not likely to adversely affect threatened or endangered species” in Louisiana (Russell C. Watson, USFWS, April 15, 2005).

WS has concluded that the Louisiana WS aquatic rodent damage management program would have no adverse effects on any state listed T&E wildlife species population in Louisiana. LDWF concurs that Louisiana WS would have no adverse effects on native wildlife populations in Louisiana, including state listed T&E species (Greg Linscombe, LDWF, personal consultation).

### **2.2.2.3 Effects on Native Plant Species**

Removal of beaver, nutria, and muskrats and breaching/removing beaver dams would be beneficial to some native plant species that may be killed by foraging aquatic rodents and beaver related flooding and inundation, e.g., marsh and bottomland hardwood timber. Increased soil moisture associated with excess flooding may result in reduced plant or timber growth and vitality and could be detrimental to some wildlife species through a decrease in mast (e.g., acorn, hickory nut) production.

### **2.2.3 Effects on Public and Pet Health and Safety**

A common concern is whether the proposed action or any of the alternatives pose an increased threat to public and pet health and safety. In particular, there is concern that the methods available for aquatic rodent management, including explosives used in dam removal, may be hazardous to people and pets. A formal risk assessment of WS’s operational management methods found that risks to human safety were low (USDA 1997, Appendix P). Therefore, no adverse affects on human safety from WS’s use of ARDM methods is expected. Another common concern is that continued increases in beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations might threaten public and pet health or safety. WS’ SOPs include measures intended to mitigate or reduce the effects on human and pet health and safety and are presented in Chapter 3.

Firearms and firearm misuse are very sensitive and raise public concern because of issues relating to public safety and accidental injury or death. To ensure safe use and awareness of firearms, WS’ employees who use firearms to conduct official duties are required to attend an approved firearms safety and use training program within 3 months of their appointment and a refresher course every 2 years afterwards (WS Directive 2.615). WS’ employees who use firearms as a condition of employment are required to sign a form certifying that they meet the criteria as stated in the *Lautenberg Amendment* which prohibits firearm possession by anyone who has been convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence.



All chemicals used by WS in Louisiana are regulated by the EPA through the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA), the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, and WS Directives. Based on a thorough Risk Assessment, APHIS concluded that when WS program chemicals are used according to label directions, they are selective to target individuals or populations, and such use has negligible impacts on the environment (USDA 1997).

WS' personnel responsible for use of explosives are required to complete in-depth training and must demonstrate competence and safety with use of explosives. Employees adhere to WS' policies as well as regulations promulgated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; the Occupational Safety and Health Administration; the U.S. Department of Transportation; and the LA State Police with regards to explosives use, storage, safety, and transportation. WS uses binary explosives, which require the mixing of two components for activation. Binary explosives reduce the hazard of accidental detonation during storage and transportation. Storage and transportation of mixed binary explosives are not allowed. When explosives are being used by WS, warning signs are posted to restrict public entry. When beaver dams are near roads or highways, police or other road officials are used to help stop traffic and restrict public entry. Therefore, no adverse affects to public safety are expected from the use of explosives by WS under any alternative.

#### **2.2.4 Humanness of Methods to be Used**

The issue of humaneness and animal welfare as it relates to killing or capturing wildlife is an important and very complex concept that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Schmidt (1989) indicated that vertebrate pest damage management for societal benefits could be compatible with animal welfare concerns if “. . . *the reduction of pain, suffering, and unnecessary death is incorporated in the decision making process.*”

Suffering is described as a “. . . *highly unpleasant emotional response usually associated with pain and distress.*” However, suffering “. . . *can occur without pain . . .*” and “. . . *pain can occur without suffering . . .*” (American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) 1987). Because suffering carries with it the implication of a time frame, a case could be made for “. . . *little or no suffering where death comes immediately . . .*” (California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) 1991), such as shooting.

Defining pain as a component of humaneness in WS' methods appears to be a greater challenge than that of suffering. Pain obviously occurs in animals. Altered physiology and behavior can be indicators of pain, and identifying the causes that elicit pain responses in humans would “. . . *probably be causes for pain in other animals . . .*” (AVMA 1987). However, pain experienced by individual animals probably ranges from little or no pain to significant pain (CDFG 1991).

Pain and suffering, as it relates to damage management methods, has both a professional and lay point of arbitration. Wildlife managers and the public would be better served to recognize the complexity of defining suffering since “. . . *neither medical nor veterinary curricula explicitly*

*address suffering or its relief*” (CDFG 1991). Research suggests that some methods, such as restraint in leg-hold traps or changes in the blood chemistry of trapped animals, indicate “*stress*” (USDA 1997). However, such research has not yet progressed to the development of objective, quantitative measurements of pain or stress for use in evaluating humaneness.

The AVMA states “... *euthanasia is the act of inducing humane death in an animal*” and “... *the technique should minimize any stress and anxiety experienced by the animal prior to unconsciousness.*” (Beaver et al. 2001).

Some people would prefer AVMA accepted methods of euthanasia to be used when killing all animals, including wild and feral animals. The AVMA states that “*For wild and feral animals, many of the recommended means of euthanasia for captive animals are not feasible. In field circumstances, wildlife biologists generally do not use the term euthanasia, but use terms such as killing, collecting, or harvesting, recognizing that a distress-free death may not be possible.*” (Beaver et al. 2001).

The decision-making process involves tradeoffs between the above aspects of pain and humaneness. An objective analysis of this issue must consider not only the welfare of wild animals, but also the welfare of humans if damage management methods were not used. Therefore, humaneness, in part, appears to be a person's perception of harm or pain inflicted on an animal. People may perceive the humaneness of an action differently. The challenge in coping with this issue is how to achieve the least amount of animal suffering within the constraints imposed by current technology and funding.

WS has improved the selectivity and humaneness of management techniques through research and development. Research is continuing to bring new findings and products into practical use. Until new findings and improved products are proven practical and reliable, a certain amount of animal suffering could occur when some wildlife damage management methods are used. In certain situations non-lethal damage management methods are not practical or effective. Louisiana WS' personnel are experienced and professional in use of management methods to increase humaneness as much as possible under the constraints of current technology, workforce, and funding. Mitigation measures and SOPs used to maximize humaneness are listed in Chapter 3.

Some people are concerned about the humaneness of drowning beaver, nutria, and muskrats while restrained by leg-hold traps. Considerable debate and disagreement among animal activists, veterinarians, wildlife professionals, fur trappers, and nuisance wildlife specialists is apparent. Debate centers around an uncertainty as to whether drowning animals are rendered unconscious by high levels of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and thus insensitive to distress and pain (Ludders et al. 1999). The AVMA identifies drowning as an unacceptable method of euthanasia (Beaver et al. 2001), but provides no literature citations to support this position. Ludders et al. (1999) concluded drowning is not euthanasia based on the animals not dying from CO<sub>2</sub> narcosis, because CO<sub>2</sub> narcosis does not occur until 95 millimeters of mercury in arterial blood is exceeded. Ludders et al. (1999) showed death during drowning is from hypoxia and anoxia, and thus animals experience hypoxemia. Ludders et al. (1999) also concluded that animals that

drown are distressed because of stress related hormones, epinephrine and norepinephrine; therefore, drowning is not euthanasia.

CO<sub>2</sub> causes death in animals by hypoxemia and some animals (i.e. cats, rabbits, and swine) are distressed before death (Beaver et al. 2001). Even though these animals are distressed, the AVMA states this death is an acceptable form of euthanasia (Beaver et al. 2001). Thus, the AVMA does not preclude distress or pain in euthanasia. In fact, the AVMA supports inducing hypoxemia related distress when necessary to reduce total distress, because reducing total distress is a more humane death.

Death by drowning in the classical sense is caused by inhalation of fluid into the lungs and is referred to as wet drowning (Gilbert and Gofton 1982, Noonan 1998). Gilbert and Gofton (1982) reported that all submerged beaver do not die from wet drowning, but die of CO<sub>2</sub> induced narcosis. According to Gilbert and Gofton (1982) and Noonan (1998), the AVMA accepts CO<sub>2</sub> as a suitable form of euthanasia. Gilbert and Gofton (1982) also reported that after beaver were trapped and entered the water struggling occurred for 2-5 minutes followed by a period of reflexive responses. Andrews et al. (1993) reports that with some techniques that induce hypoxia, some animals have reflex motor activity followed by unconsciousness that is not perceived by the animal. Gilbert and Gofton (1982) stated it is unknown how much conscious control actually existed at this stage and anoxia may have removed much of the sensory perception by 5-7 minutes post submersion. However, Gilbert and Gofton (1982) have been criticized because levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the blood were not reported (Ludders et al. 1999) and there was insufficient evidence that the beaver in their study were under a state of CO<sub>2</sub> narcosis when they died (V. Nettles, Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, letter to W. MacCallum, Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, June 15, 1998). Adding to the controversy, Clausen and Ermland (1970) did measure CO<sub>2</sub> in the blood for submersed restrained beaver, yet none of the beaver in the study died. Therefore, Clausen and Ermland (1970) could not determine if beavers die of CO<sub>2</sub> narcosis. However, Clausen and Ermland (1970) were able to demonstrate that CO<sub>2</sub> increased in arterial blood while beaver were submersed and that CO<sub>2</sub> was retained in tissues. While Clausen and Ermland (1970) did measure the amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> in the blood of submersed beaver they did not attempt to measure the analgesic effect of CO<sub>2</sub> buildup to the beaver (V. Nettles, Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, letter to W. MacCallum, Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, June 15, 1998).

When beaver are captured using leg-hold traps with intent to drown, beaver are exhibiting a flight response. Gracely and Sternberg (1999) reported that there is stress-induced analgesia resulting in reduced pain sensitivity during flight and flight responses. Environmental stressors that animals experience during flight or fight activate the same stress-induced analgesia (Gracely and Sternberg 1999).

Use of drowning trap sets has been a traditional wildlife management technique in trapping aquatic mammals such as beaver, nutria, and muskrats. Trapper education manuals and other wildlife damage management manuals written by wildlife biologists recommend drowning sets for leghold traps set for beaver (Howard et al. 1980, Randolph 1988, Bromley et al. 1994, Dolbeer et al. 1994, Miller and Yarrow 1994). In some situations drowning trap sets are the

most appropriate and efficient method available to capture beaver, nutria, and muskrats. For example, a drowning set attachment should be used with leg-hold traps when capturing beaver to prevent the animal from injury while restrained or from escaping (Miller and Yarrow 1994). Animals that drown die relatively quickly (e.g., within minutes) versus the possible stress of being restrained and harassed by people, dogs, and other wildlife before being euthanized. Drowning sets make the captured animal and trap less visible and prevent injury (i.e., bites and scratches) to people who may otherwise approach a restrained animal. Furthermore, some people are offended seeing dead animals and drowning takes the dead animal out of public view. Some sites may be unsuitable for body-gripping traps or snares because of unstable banks, deep water, or substrate conditions. However, these sites would be suitable for leghold traps. In some situations where muskrats occur in high densities, multiple catch colony traps may be the most efficient method to reduce populations and alleviate damage. Therefore, drowning is a humane way of killing muskrats (Gilbert and Gofton 1982) in colony traps.

Given the short time period of a drowning event, possible analgesic effect of CO<sub>2</sub> buildup to beaver, the minimum if any pain or distress on drowning animals, the AVMA's acceptance of hypoxemia as euthanasia and the acceptance of a minimum of pain and distress during euthanasia, acceptance of catching and drowning muskrats approved by International Humane Trapping Standards (Fur Institute of Canada 2000), the conclusion has been drawn that drowning, though rarely used by WS, is acceptable. Some people will disagree and remain unswayed.

### **2.2.5 Effects on Wetlands**

Some people are concerned about the effects of the alternatives on the wetland ecosystem and removal of beaver or breaching/removing beaver dams from an area will result in the loss of wetland habitat and the plant and animal species included in those habitats.

Beaver build dams primarily in smaller riverine wetlands (intermittent and perennial streams and creeks) with dams consisting of mud, sticks, and other vegetative materials. Dams obstruct the normal flow of water and typically change the preexisting wetland hydrology from flowing or circulating waters to slower, deeper, more expansive waters that accumulate bottom sediment. Depth of the bottom sediment depends on the length of time an area is covered by water and the amount of suspended sediment in the water.

WS beaver damage management activities are primarily conducted to alleviate damage to agricultural crops, timber resources, and public property such as roads, bridges, and water management facilities. Activities also are conducted to enhance or reclaim wildlife and stream fishery/mussel habitats. Normal operations of WS routinely incorporate beaver removal with dam breaching/removing and/or installation of water control devices and beaver exclusion devices. Dams are breached/removed by hand when possible, or small charges of binary explosives are used as necessary. No heavy equipment such as backhoes or bulldozers are used by WS in these damage reduction and wildlife enhancement activities. Activities most often take place on small watershed streams, tributary drainages, and ditches and can best be described as small, one-time projects conducted to restore water flow through previously existing channels.

Only that portion of the dam blocking the stream or ditch channel is altered or breached. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has criteria that are implemented by WS during dam breaching/removal activities to minimize any impacts to the water course basin, adjacent riparian areas, or surrounding vegetation (see Appendix C). Projects involving the use of binary explosives are conducted by trained WS' certified explosive specialists. After a blast, any remaining fill material still obstructing the channel is normally washed downstream by water current. The only noticeable side effects from this activity are diluted mud, water, and small amounts of debris from the dam scattered around the blasting site. Considerably less than 10 cubic yards of material would be moved in each of these project activities.

Beaver dams in time can establish new, but different wetlands. The USACE and the EPA regulatory definition of a wetland (40 CFR 232.2) is:

*Those areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or groundwater at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions. Wetlands generally include swamps, marshes, bogs, and similar areas.*

Preexisting and altered habitat have different ecological values to fish and wildlife native to an area. Some species will thrive by the addition of a beaver dam, while others will diminish. For example, some species of Federally-endangered darters require fast moving waters over gravel or cobble beds; beaver dams can degrade these streams, thus reducing the habitat's value for these species. In general, it has been found that wildlife habitat values decline around bottomland beaver impoundments in the southern US, because hardwood trees are killed from flooding and mast production declines. On the other hand, beaver dams can potentially be beneficial to some species such as river otters, neotropical birds, and waterfowl.

If a beaver dam is not breached/removed and water levels remain constant, hydric soils and hydrophytic vegetation eventually form. This process can take anywhere from several months to years depending on preexisting conditions. Hydric soils are those soils that are saturated, flooded, or ponded long enough during the growing season to develop anaerobic conditions in the upper part. In general, hydric soils form much easier where wetlands have preexisted. Hydrophytic vegetation includes those plants that grow in water or on a substrate that is periodically stripped of oxygen as a result of excessive water content. If these conditions are met, a wetland can develop that would have different wildlife habitat values than an area recently impounded by beaver dam activity.

The intent of most dam breaching/removal is not to drain established wetlands. With few exceptions, requests from public entities and private individuals involve dam breaching/removal to return an area back to its preexisting condition. Hydric soils and wetland conditions usually take many years to develop, often greater than 5 years as recognized by Swampbuster provisions. Most beaver dam removal by WS is either exempt from regulation under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) as stated in 33 CFR part 323 or may be authorized under the USACE Nationwide Permit System in 33 CFR part 330. However, breaching/removal of some beaver dams may require landowners obtain Section 404 permits from USACE. WS' personnel

determine the proper course of action upon inspecting a beaver dam impoundment. Appendix C describes the procedures used by WS to assure compliance with the pertinent laws and regulations.

### **2.2.6 Economic Losses to Property**

Some people are concerned about the negative economic impacts that beaver, nutria, and muskrats are having on property. These people are concerned as to whether the proposed action or any of the alternatives would reduce such damage to acceptable levels.

### **2.2.7 Impacts to Stakeholders, including Aesthetics**

Human attraction to animals has been well documented throughout history and started when humans began domesticating animals. The American public is no exception and a large percentage of households have pets. However, some people may consider individual wild animals and birds as “pets” or exhibit affection toward these animals, especially people who enjoy coming in contact with wildlife. Therefore, the public reaction is variable and mixed to wildlife damage management because there are numerous philosophical, aesthetic, and personal attitudes, values, and opinions about the best ways to manage conflicts and problems between humans and wildlife.

Some concern exists that the proposed action or the alternatives would result in loss of aesthetic benefits to the public, resource owners, or neighboring residents. Wildlife generally is regarded as providing economic, recreational, and aesthetic benefits (Decker and Goff 1987), and the mere knowledge that wildlife exists is a positive benefit to many people. Aesthetics is the philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, or the appreciation of beauty. Therefore, aesthetics is truly subjective in nature, dependent on what an observer regards as beautiful.

Wildlife populations provide a range of social and economic benefits (Decker and Goff 1987). These include direct benefits related to consumptive and non-consumptive use (e.g. wildlife-related recreation, observation, harvest, sale), indirect benefits derived from various wildlife related experiences (e.g., reading, television viewing), and the personal enjoyment of knowing wildlife exists and contributes to the stability of natural ecosystems (e.g., ecological, existence, bequest values) (Bishop 1987). Direct benefits are derived from a user’s personal relationship to animals and may take the form of direct consumptive use (using up the animal or intending to) or non-consumptive use (viewing the animal in nature or in a zoo, photography) (Decker and Goff 1987). Indirect benefits or indirect exercised values arise without the user being in direct contact with the animal and come from experiences such as looking at photographs and films of wildlife, reading about wildlife, or benefiting from activities or contributions of animals such as their use in research (Decker and Goff 1987). Indirect benefits come in two forms: (1) bequest which is providing for future generations, and (2) pure existence which is merely knowledge that the animals exist (Decker and Goff 1987).

IWDM provides relief from damage or threats to public health or safety to people who would have no relief from such damage or threats. Many people directly affected by problems and

threats to public health or safety caused by beaver, nutria, or muskrats insist upon aquatic rodent removal from the property or public location when damage is apparent. Some people have an idealistic view and believe that all wildlife should be captured and relocated to another area to alleviate damage or threats to public health or safety. Some people directly affected by the problems caused by wildlife strongly support removal. Individuals not directly affected by the harm or damage may be supportive, neutral, or totally opposed to any removal of wildlife from specific locations or sites. Some people totally opposed to beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management want WS to teach tolerance for damage and threats to public health or safety, and that wildlife should never be killed. Some of the people who oppose removal of wildlife do so because of human-affectionate bonds with individual wildlife. These human-affectionate bonds are similar to attitudes of a pet owner and result in aesthetic enjoyment.

Louisiana WS only conducts beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management at the request of the affected home/property owner or resource manager. If WS received requests from an individual or official for beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management, WS would address the issues/concerns and consideration would be made to explain the reasons why the individual damage management actions would be necessary. Management actions would be carried out in a caring, humane, and professional manner.

## **2.3 ADDITIONAL ISSUES USED TO DEVELOP MITIGATION**

### **2.3.1 National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as Amended, and The Native American Graves and Repatriation Act of 1990**

The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, and its implementing regulations (36 CFR 800), requires federal agencies to: 1) determine whether activities they propose constitute "undertakings" that has the potential to cause effects on historic properties and, 2) if so, to evaluate the effects of such undertakings on such historic resources and consult with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (i.e. State Historic Preservation Office, Tribal Historic Preservation Officers), as appropriate. WS actions on tribal lands would only be conducted at the tribe's request and under signed agreement; thus, the tribes have control over any potential conflict with cultural resources on tribal properties.

Each of the ARDM methods described in this EA that might be used operationally by WS do not cause major ground disturbance, do not cause any physical destruction or damage to property, do not cause any alterations of property, wildlife habitat, or landscapes, and do not involve the sale, lease, or transfer of ownership of any property. In general, such methods also do not have the potential to introduce visual, atmospheric, or audible elements to areas in which they are used that could result in effects on the character or use of historic properties. Therefore, the methods that would be used by WS under the proposed action are not generally the types of activities that would have the potential to affect historic properties. If an individual activity with the potential to affect historic resources is planned under an alternative selected as a result of a decision on this EA, then site-specific consultation as required by Section 106 of the NHPA would be conducted as necessary.

There is potential for audible effects on the use and enjoyment of a historic property when methods such as firearms, explosives or other noise-making methods are used at or in close proximity to such sites. However, such methods would only be used at a historic site at the request of the owner or manager of the site to resolve a damage or nuisance problem, which means such use would be to benefit the historic property. A built-in mitigating factor for this issue is that virtually all of the methods involved would only have temporary effects on the audible nature of a site and can be ended at any time to restore the audible qualities of such sites to their original condition with no further adverse effects. Site-specific consultation as required by Section 106 of the NHPA would be conducted as necessary in those types of situations.

The Native American Graves and Repatriation Act of 1990 provides for protection of American Indian burial sites, human remains, funerary and sacred objects, and establishes procedures for notifying Tribes of any new discoveries.

### **2.3.2 Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898) - *"Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations"***

Environmental Justice (EJ) has been defined as the pursuit of equal justice protection under the law for all environmental statutes and regulations without discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Fair treatment implies that no person or group should endure a disproportionate share of the negative environmental impacts resulting from this country's domestic and foreign policies or programs.

Executive Order 12898 requires federal agencies to make EJ part of their mission, and to identify and address disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects of federal programs, policies, and activities on minority and low-income persons or populations. APHIS plans to implement Executive Order 12898 principally through the provisions of NEPA.

WS' activities are evaluated for their impact on the human environment and compliance with Executive Order 12898 to insure EJ. WS' personnel use wildlife damage management methods as selectively and environmentally conscientiously as possible. All chemicals used by WS in Louisiana are regulated by the EPA through the FIFRA, the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry and by WS Directives. Based on a thorough Risk Assessment, APHIS concluded that when WS program chemicals are used according to label directions, they are selective to target individuals or populations, and such use has negligible impacts on the environment (USDA 1997). It is not anticipated that the proposed action would result in any adverse or disproportionate environmental impacts to minority and low-income persons or populations. In contrast, WS beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management may provide for a safer environment for minority or low-income persons by reducing public health and safety risks.

### **2.3.3 Protection of Children from Environmental Health and Safety Risks (Executive Order 13045)**

Children may suffer disproportionately from environmental health and safety risks for many reasons, including development of physical and mental status. Because WS considers



environmental health and safety risks that may disproportionately affect children as a high priority, impacts that this proposal might have been identified and assessed. The proposed beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management would occur by using only legally available and approved methods where it is highly unlikely that children would be adversely affected. For these reasons, WS concludes that it would not create an environmental health or safety risk to children from implementing this proposed action. In contrast, WS beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management may provide for a safer environment for children by reducing public health and safety risks.

### **2.3.4 Public Concern about the Use of Chemicals**

Much of the public concern over the use of chemicals and toxicants for wildlife damage management is based on an erroneous perception that WS uses non-selective, outdated chemical methodologies. However, chemical methods used and proposed for use by WS have a high degree of selectivity. Currently, use of toxicants by WS in all instances is regulated by the EPA through the FIFRA, the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, by MOUs with other agencies, and by WS Directives. Based on a thorough Risk Assessment, APHIS concluded that, when WS program chemicals are used according to label directions, they are selective for target individuals or populations, and such use has negligible impacts on the environment (USDA 1997). A decision to ban toxicants is outside of WS' authority. WS could elect not to use toxicants, but those registered for use in Louisiana are an integral part of IWDM and their selection for use would follow criteria in the Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992).

## **2.4 ISSUES NOT CONSIDERED IN DETAIL WITH RATIONALE**

### **2.4.1 WS' Impact on Biodiversity**

Louisiana WS beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management is not conducted to eradicate a native wildlife population. WS operates according to international, federal, and state laws and regulations enacted to ensure species viability. In addition, any reduction of a local population or group is frequently temporary because immigration from adjacent areas and/or reproduction replaces the animals removed. The impacts of the current WS program on biodiversity are minor and not significant nationwide, statewide, or regional (USDA 1997). WS operates on a relatively small percentage of the land area of the State (see Section 1.1), and WS' take of any wildlife species analyzed in this EA is a small proportion of the total population and insignificant to the viability and health of the population (see Section 4.3).

### **2.4.2 No Wildlife Damage Management at Taxpayer Expense (wildlife damage management should be fee based)**

Funding for Louisiana WS comes from a variety of sources, in addition to federal appropriations. State, parish, city, private, and other federal agency funds are made available to the WS program under Cooperative Agreements that specify work to be done. Federal, state, and local officials have decided that wildlife damage management should be conducted by appropriating funds. WS was established by Congress as the agency responsible for providing wildlife damage

management to US citizens. Wildlife damage management is an appropriate sphere of activity for government programs, since aspects of wildlife damage management are a government responsibility and authorized and directed by law.

### **2.4.3 Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage should be Managed by Trappers and Nuisance Wildlife Control Agents**

The jurisdiction for managing most resident wildlife, including aquatic rodents (which are furbearers), rests with the LDWF. Number of licensed fur trappers in Louisiana has drastically declined in the past few decades. According to the LDWF, number of trapping licenses sold annually decreased from a peak of 12,069 licenses in 1977 to a low of 871 in 2001, with 1,432 sold in 2003 (Greg Linscombe, LDFW, personal communication).

Fur trappers provide several societal services, including wildlife damage management and assisting the LDWF to manage beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations. One cause for the decline in fur trappers has been lower prices for raw fur since the early 1980's. Consequently, an insufficient number of trappers now exists to manage expanding beaver populations. In addition, many beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage problems occur in urban or developed areas where little or no trapping occurs.

Fur trappers cannot provide year-round, site-specific ARDM services, since the harvest of fur is legal only during the winter. Landowners can hire permitted trappers and wildlife control agents to conduct damage control projects for a fee. Many are unwilling to trap in urban areas because of the potential to catch children and pets or the theft of equipment.

Site-specific damage management has been necessary to protect property, roads, bridges, and agricultural and natural resources. It is the policy of WS to provide professional damage management upon request and verification of damage at site-specific locations. Assistance from Louisiana WS may be requested to achieve management objectives. Typically, damage management involves removing a small number of problematic animals from a localized area. WS works in response to site-specific requests and is not involved in large scale beaver, nutria, or muskrat population reduction over the entire state (See Section 1.3). Targeted aquatic rodents may include those found near sites where damage is occurring.

Some landowners may prefer that a government agency trap beaver, nutria, or muskrats instead of using private trappers or nuisance wildlife control agents, and large landowners with numerous damage sites (i.e. railroads or highway departments) may prefer to use WS because of reduced administrative burdens. Some landowners may prefer to use private trappers or nuisance wildlife control agents instead of WS. Thus, WS ARDM activities would not eliminate opportunities for private trappers or nuisance wildlife control agents.

### **2.4.6 Breaching/Removal of Dams or Use of Water Control Structures**

This issue addresses attempts to alleviate flooding damage by controlling the water level at the site without removing beaver. Dams would either be breached/removed manually or with binary

explosives, but these methods are usually ineffective because beaver will quickly repair or replace the dam (McNeely 1995). Installing and maintaining water control structures or removing beaver dams on a daily or weekly basis may be cost prohibitive, and would not alleviate damage from gnawing or felling of trees or prevent building of dams above and below the installed structures.

Water control devices and pond levelers have been used for many years in many different states, with varying degrees of success (USGAO 2001). Various types of beaver pond levelers have been described (Arner 1964, Roblee 1984, Laramie and Knowles 1985, Lisle 1996) and installation of beaver pond levelers can be effective in reducing flooding in certain situations (Miller and Yarrow 1994, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources 1994, Organ et al. 1996). One study reported water drainage pipes in beaver dams to be effective in only about 5% of flooding situations (Anonymous 1999). Nolte et al. (2000) reported only 50% of installed pond levelers meet landowner objectives and found that pond levelers placed in sites with high beaver activity more frequently failed if installed without implementing population control measures. Ninety-five percent of the successful levelers in this study were at sites that had received some local population control measure either before, after, or before and after the leveler was installed (Nolte et al. 2000). Reasons for lack of success were described as blocking caused by debris or silt and nearby dam building (McNeely 1995). Wood et al. (1994) also acknowledged that pond levelers do not negate the need for reduction of local beaver populations. In Mississippi, beaver often build dams upstream and downstream of water control devices or block the device with mud and debris which renders this method ineffective (B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Suppression or eradication of the local beaver population usually is required for this method to be effective (E. Butler, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication, B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication).

Pond levelers installed to manage wetlands for waterfowl habitat were more successful than levelers installed to provide water relief (Nolte et al. 2000). Water control devices are most effective on wetlands lacking in-stream flow (B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication), but may be ineffective in beaver ponds found in broad, low-lying areas (Organ et al. 1996). They may not be appropriate in streams or ditches with continuous flow because the volume of water is too great for the device to handle, and debris is continuously carried to the site. Water control devices may not be effective during periods of unusually high rainfall or increased water flow, because the device cannot handle the increased volume of water (Anonymous 1999, Wood et al. 1994).

Use of pond levelers or water control devices may require frequent maintenance depending on type of water control device. Continued maintenance is necessary for the device to remain operational because stream flow, leaf fall, floods, and beaver activity will continuously bring debris to the intake of the water control device. Maintenance and upkeep of water control devices can be expensive. Maine WS program estimated annual maintenance costs to be approximately \$350 per water control device (E. Butler, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Mississippi WS program reported that construction and installation of pond levelers cost approximately \$700 (T. Aderman, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Annual cost may be associated with suppressing beaver populations to keep the devices

operational (B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication).

The Beaver Deceiver is a relatively recent water control system that attempts to quiet, calm, and deepen the water around culverts (to reduce the attractiveness to beaver) and exclude beaver from a wide area around the upstream opening of the culvert (Lisle 1996). A critical part of the beaver deceiver strategy is to silence or prevent the sound of running water. The beaver deceiver is a water control system that has been evolving since 1996 and has been effective at controlling some types of beaver flooding. Preservation of the fur resource for recreational trapping is one of the benefits of using beaver deceivers (Lisle 1996).

WS could implement use of water control devices at certain sites as part of an integrated beaver management program. Maine WS installed over 160 water control devices in 1998. The primary purpose of these devices was to minimize flooding damage while leaving beavers for fur trappers to legally harvest (E. Butler, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Mississippi WS program commonly installs water control devices at sites managed for waterfowl and for perpetual water flow (B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Thus, in both Maine and Mississippi, use of water control devices is supplemented by continual removal of beaver from the site, and an additional benefit is received which helps to justify the expense (i.e. reserving beaver for the fur harvest, providing waterfowl habitat). Also, the construction, installation, and maintenance costs of water control devices in Maine and Mississippi are funded, in part, by sources such as state wildlife agencies, county governments, USFWS, or private organizations (E. Butler, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication, B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication).

One benefit of water control devices is that a beaver pond can be maintained or improved, so that it provides ecological and recreational benefits, while simultaneously reducing flooding damage. However, water control devices are not applicable or efficient in all damage situations. Landowners consider many factors when determining the course of action to resolve beaver damage problems. For example, landowners must consider the cost of control, the probability that the method will work, the amount of maintenance required, and whether the method is consistent with objectives for the property (Nolte et al. 2000). Water control devices are most effective in specific types of terrains and sites (NYDEC 1997, Wood et al. 1994). They have required frequent maintenance and may be costly to install and maintain (Jensen et al. 1999, NYDEC 1997). Jensen et al. (1999) reported that the initial first-year costs for a Clemson Beaver Pond Leveler and a Pitchfork Guard/Grate, including the costs of materials, installation, and maintenance, were \$1,542 and \$3,688, respectively. The cost of a Beaver Deceiver may range from \$150 - \$1,500, and an additional cost would be applied if pipes were needed at the site (S. Lisle, Penobscot Nation, letter to J. Cromwell, WS, September 7, 2000).

Water control devices could be used or recommended as part of the aquatic rodent damage control program, if appropriate. Louisiana WS provides information on installation of water control devices to those persons requesting assistance. In these situations it is the responsibility of the person requesting assistance to construct and install the device. Louisiana WS direct involvement in the construction and installation of water control devices has been limited with WS installing few such devices for landowners in the state in recent years. If a water control

device is consistent with the landowner's objectives, will alleviate the damage, and if funding is available for installation, then WS would use or recommend their use.

#### **2.4.7 Appropriateness of Preparing an EA (instead of an EIS) for such a Large Area**

Some individuals might question whether preparing an EA for an area as large as the state of Louisiana (approximately 27.9 million acres) would meet the NEPA requirements for site specificity. If in fact a determination is made through this EA that the proposed action would have a significant environmental impact, then an EIS would be prepared. In terms of considering cumulative impacts, one EA analyzing impacts for the entire state may provide a better analysis than multiple EAs covering smaller zones. In addition, Louisiana WS only conducts beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management in a very small proportion of the state where damage is occurring or likely to occur (see Section 1.3). However, damage may occur anywhere in the state (see Section 1.9.5).

## Chapter 3: ALTERNATIVES

### 3.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of seven parts: 1) introduction; 2) description of alternatives considered and analyzed in detail including the Proposed Action (Alternative 3); 3) beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management approaches used by WS; 4) beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage methods authorized for use or recommended; 5) methodologies recommended but deemed impractical, ineffective, or unsafe at the present time; 6) a description of alternatives considered, but eliminated from detailed analysis; and 7) mitigation measures and SOPs. Alternatives were developed for consideration using the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992), Methods of Control (USDA 1997), and “*Risk Assessment of Wildlife Damage Control Methods Used by the USDA Animal Damage Control Program*” (USDA 1997).

The No Action alternative is a procedural NEPA requirement (40 CFR 1502.14(d)) and is a viable and reasonable alternative that could be selected. It serves as a baseline for comparison with the other alternatives. The No Action alternative, as defined here, is consistent with the CEQ (CEQ 1981).

Five alternatives were recognized, developed, and analyzed in detail. Three other alternatives were considered, but not analyzed in detail; supporting rationale is discussed later in this chapter. The five alternatives analyzed in detail are:

**Alternative 1. No WS Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management in Louisiana.** This alternative would result in no assistance from WS in reducing beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage in Louisiana. WS would not provide technical assistance or operational damage management services.

**Alternative 2. Only Lethal Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management.** Under this alternative, only lethal operational damage management and technical assistance would be provided by WS.

**Alternative 3. Fully Integrated Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management for all Public and Private Land (No Action/Proposed Action).** This alternative is the proposed action and is the preferred alternative of WS. This alternative incorporates the use of both non-lethal and lethal methods to manage conflicts associated with beaver, nutria, and muskrats in Louisiana.

**Alternative 4. Technical Assistance Only.** Under this alternative, WS would not conduct operational beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management in Louisiana. The entire program would consist of technical assistance.

**Alternative 5. Non-lethal Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management.** Under this alternative, only non-lethal operational damage management and technical assistance would be provided by WS.

### **3.1 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED, INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION**

#### **3.1.1 Alternative 1. No WS Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management in Louisiana.**

This alternative would result in no assistance from WS in reducing beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage in Louisiana. WS would not provide technical assistance or operational damage management services.

All requests for beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management assistance would be referred to the LDWF, LDAF, local animal control agencies, or private businesses or organizations. Assistance may or may not be available from any of these entities.

#### **3.1.2 Alternative 2. Only Lethal Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management.**

Under this alternative, only lethal operational beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management and technical assistance would be provided by WS. Non-lethal methods, such as snares, leghold traps, and cage traps could be used under this alternative. However all aquatic rodents captured in these non-lethal devices would subsequently be euthanized. Requests for information regarding non-lethal management approaches would be referred to LDWF, LDAF, local animal control agencies, or private businesses or organizations. WS would not remove or breach beaver dams under this alternative. Individuals or agencies might choose to implement WS lethal recommendations; implement non-lethal methods or other methods not recommended by WS; contract for WS damage management services; use contractual services of private businesses; use volunteer services; or take no action.

#### **3.1.3 Alternative 3. Fully Integrated Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management for all Public and Private Land (No Action/Proposed Action).**

WS proposes to administer and continue the current beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management program in the state of Louisiana. An IWDM approach, including technical assistance and operational damage management services, would be implemented to reduce damage associated with beaver, nutria, and muskrat activities to property, roads, bridges, railroads, agricultural and natural resources, and public health and safety on all lands in Louisiana where a need exists and requests are received. An IWDM strategy encompasses use of practical and effective methods of preventing or reducing damage while minimizing harmful effects of damage management measures on humans, target and non-target species, and the environment. Non-lethal methods, such as physical exclusion or habitat modification, would be given first consideration in the formulation of each damage management strategy and would be recommended or implemented when practical and effective before recommending or implementing lethal and non-lethal methods, such as body-grip traps, snares, leg-hold traps, cage type traps, colony traps,

snap traps, shooting, and zinc phosphide bait. Aquatic rodents captured in non-lethal devices (leg-hold traps, snares, cage traps, etc.) would subsequently be euthanized. However, non-lethal methods would not always be applied as a first response to each damage problem. The most appropriate response would often be a combination of non-lethal and lethal methods, or there could be instances where application of lethal methods alone would be the most appropriate strategy. Aquatic rodent damage management would be conducted in the state, when requested, on private or public property after an *Agreement for Control* or other comparable document has been completed and appropriate cooperator funding has been secured. All beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management would be consistent with other uses of the area and would comply with appropriate federal, state, and local laws. Unwanted beaver dams could be removed or breached by hand or with binary explosives under this alternative.

#### **3.1.4 Alternative 4. Technical Assistance Only.**

This alternative would only allow Louisiana WS to provide technical assistance to individuals or agencies requesting beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management in Louisiana. WS would not remove or breach beaver dams under this alternative. Property owners and land managers could implement their own aquatic rodent damage management program, use contractual services of private businesses, use volunteer services, or take no action. This alternative would place the immediate burden of operational damage management work on the property owners and other federal, state, or parish agencies.

#### **3.1.5 Alternative 5. Non-lethal Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management.**

Under this alternative, only non-lethal operational damage management and technical assistance would be provided by WS. Request for information regarding lethal management approaches would be referred to LDWF, LDAF, local animal control agencies, or private businesses or organizations. Individuals or agencies might choose to implement WS non-lethal recommendations, implement lethal methods or other methods not recommended by WS, contract for WS non-lethal damage management services, use contractual services or private businesses, use volunteer services, or take no action. Unwanted beaver dams could be removed or breached by hand or with binary explosives under this alternative.

### **3.2 BEAVER, NUTRIA, AND MUSKRAT DAMAGE MANAGEMENT APPROACHES USED BY WS**

Wildlife damage management is defined as the alleviation of damage or other problems caused by or related to the presence of wildlife (USDA 1997). The wildlife damage management approaches used by WS are described below:

#### **3.2.1 Integrated Wildlife Damage Management (IWDM)**



During more than 80 years of resolving wildlife damage problems, WS has considered, developed, and used numerous methods of reducing damage problems (USDA 1997). WS' efforts have involved the research and development of new methods and the implementation of effective strategies to resolve and prevent wildlife damage.

Usually, the most effective approach to resolving wildlife damage is to integrate use of several methods simultaneously or sequentially. IWDM is the implementation and application of safe and practical methods for the prevention and reduction of damage caused by wildlife and is based on local problem analyses and the informed judgment of trained personnel. WS program applies IWDM, commonly known as Integrated Pest Management (WS Directive 2.105), to reduce damage through the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992).

The philosophy behind IWDM is to implement effective management techniques in a cost-effective manner while minimizing the potentially harmful effects to humans, target and non-target species, and the environment. IWDM draws from the largest possible array of options to create a combination of techniques for the specific situations. IWDM may incorporate cultural practices, habitat modification, animal behavior modification, removal of individual animals, local population reduction, or any combination of these methods depending on the characteristics of the specific damage problems.

### **3.2.2 Integrated Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management Strategies used by WS**

***Technical Assistance Recommendations*** (management decision and implementation is the responsibility of the requester). WS' personnel provide information, instructional sessions, demonstrations, and advice on available beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management techniques. Technical assistance includes demonstrations on the proper use of damage reduction devices (body-grip traps, leg-hold traps, tree guards, etc.) and information on water control devices, wildlife habits and biology, habitat management, and animal behavior modification. Technical assistance is generally provided following an on-site visit or verbal consultation with the requester. Bulletins and leaflets on beaver, nutria, and muskrat biology could be sent to requesters to inform them about aesthetic values of aquatic furbearers, types of damage, and damage management methods. Generally, several management strategies are described to the requester and may include short and long-term solutions to damage problems. These strategies are based on factors such as need and practical application. Technical assistance may require substantial effort by WS' personnel in the decision making process, but the actual damage reduction work is the responsibility of the requester.

***Operational Damage Management Assistance*** (management conducted or supervised by WS' personnel). Operational damage management assistance is implemented when the problem cannot be resolved through technical assistance and when Cooperative Agreements provide for WS' operational assistance. The initial investigation explores

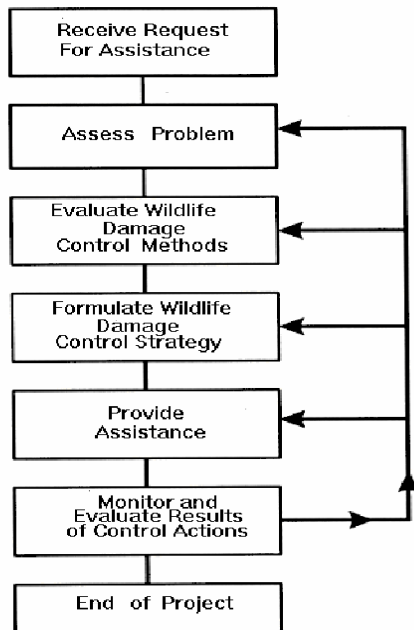
and defines the nature and history of the problem, extent of damage, and the species responsible for the damage. Professional skills of WS' personnel are often required to resolve problems effectively and safely, especially if restricted-use pesticides are required or if the problem requires direct supervision of a wildlife professional. WS considers the biology and behavior of the damaging species, and other factors using the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992). The recommended strategy(ies) may include any combination of preventive actions, generally implemented by the property owner, and corrective actions, generally implemented by WS. Corrective damage management is applying management techniques to stop or reduce ongoing damage. As requested and appropriate, WS' personnel may provide non-lethal and lethal information, conduct demonstrations, or take action to prevent additional losses from reoccurring.

**Education.** Education is an important element of WS' program activities, because wildlife damage management is about finding "balance" or co-existence between the needs of people and wildlife. This is extremely challenging as nature has no balance, but rather, is in continual flux. In addition to the routine dissemination of recommendations and information to individuals or organizations sustaining damage, lectures and demonstrations are provided to farmers, homeowners, and other interested groups. WS frequently cooperates with other agencies in education and public information efforts. Additionally, technical papers are presented at professional meetings and conferences so that WS' personnel, other wildlife professionals, and the public are updated on recent developments in wildlife damage management technology, laws and regulations, and agency policies. WS provides informational leaflets about beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management, biology, and ecology.

### **3.2.3 WS Decision Making**

The procedures used by WS personnel to determine management strategies or methods applied to specific damage problems can be found in USDA (1997). Additionally, the WS Decision Model (Figure 3.1) considers the following factors before selecting or recommending damage management methods and techniques:

- Species responsible for the damage;
- Magnitude, geographic extent, frequency, historical damage, and duration of the problem;
- Status of target and non-target species, including T&E species;
- Local environmental conditions;
- Potential biological, physical, economic, and social impacts;
- Potential legal restrictions; and
- Costs of damage management options.



**Figure 3.1.** WS Decision Model as presented by Slate et al. (1992) for developing a strategy to respond to a request for assistance with human-wildlife conflict.

The decision making process is a procedure for evaluating and responding to damage complaints. WS' personnel are frequently contacted after requesters have tried non-lethal techniques and found them to be inadequate for reducing damage to an acceptable level. WS' personnel assess the problem; evaluate different methods for availability (legal and administrative); and base biological, economic, and social considerations on suitability. Following this evaluation, methods deemed to be practical for the situations are formed into a management strategy. After the management strategy has been implemented, monitoring and evaluation of the strategy is conducted to assess effectiveness of the strategy. If the strategy is effective, the present need for management is ended.

When damage continues intermittently over time, WS' personnel and the requester monitor and re-evaluate the situation. If one method or a combination of methods fails to stop damage, a different strategy may be implemented. In terms of the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992), most damage management efforts consist of a continuous feedback loop between receiving the request and monitoring the results, with the damage management strategy re-evaluated and revised periodically if necessary. The Decision Model is not a written documented process, but a mental problem-solving process common to most, if not all, professions.

### 3.2.4 Local Decision Making Process

WS provides technical assistance to the requester regarding the biology and ecology of beaver, nutria, and muskrats and effective, practical, and reasonable methods to reduce wildlife damage. Technical assistance includes instructions on non-lethal and lethal methods. WS and other state and federal wildlife or wildlife damage management agencies may facilitate discussions at local community meetings when resources are available, and make recommendations. In Louisiana resource owners and others directly affected by beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage or conflicts have direct input into the resolution of such problems. Requesters may implement management recommendations provided by WS or others or request management assistance from WS, other wildlife management agencies, local animal control agencies, or private businesses or organizations.

Local decision makers have the final decision on which available (legally and administratively) methods would be used to solve a human-wildlife conflict. Decision makers also may compare the benefits versus the damage when deciding which methods would be implemented including weighing the cost of implementing each methodology or a series of methodologies. Community leaders, private property owners/managers, and public property owners/managers are often the local decision makers.

### **3.3 ACTIVITIES BY WS TO ALLEVIATE BEAVER AND MUSKRAT DAMAGE IN LOUISIANA**

Louisiana WS assists in protecting the federally-threatened and state-endangered Louisiana pearlshell (*Margaritifera hembeli*), a bivalve occurring only in Louisiana. The species requires fast, cool, highly-oxygenated water for survival. Beaver and beaver dams are removed from streams providing habitat to the Louisiana pearlshell in order to restore water flow and reduce the buildup of bottom sediments, which can smother pearlshell beds.

The Louisiana WS program conducts beaver control activities on several State Wildlife Management areas. These activities protect thousands of acres of valuable timber, recreational land, and wildlife habitat from beaver-related flooding. Public access roads and trails are also protected.

Louisiana WS conducts beaver control activities to protect private timber land. These timbered tracts provide economic, recreational, and aesthetic opportunities to humans and habitat to numerous species, including the federally-threatened Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*).

The Louisiana WS program assists State and Parish governments to minimize beaver damage to roads and bridges, including burrowing and weakening of road embankments caused by flooding. In 2004, WS personnel investigated an incident involving the washing out of a large (30 feet wide by 15 feet deep) section of a state highway that crossed over a stream. Beaver had dammed culverts under the highway, which was eventually weakened by water held behind the dam. Pressure from the ponded water

eventually caused a breach in the road bed, which subsequently washed out and created a significant threat to human safety.

Louisiana WS provided assistance to an electric company experiencing beaver damage. A large-scale power outage was caused when an electrical substation was flooded by beavers. Power was restored after the beaver dams were removed.

Louisiana WS often provides nutria and muskrat control to property owners experiencing damage to pond and lake dams. Nutria and muskrats damage the structural integrity of dams by digging and burrowing. Nutria will also cause significant grazing/digging damage to lawns located adjacent to open water or marshy areas.

Louisiana WS has assisted farmers with problems involving beaver and nutria. Damage has included nutria feeding on several hundred acres of sugarcane worth thousands of dollars. Beaver damage has involved flooding of row crops, such as corn, soybeans, and cotton; damming of drainages; and feeding on soybeans and corn.

Louisiana has worked with private and public interests to protect sewerage and wastewater treatment facilities from nutria and muskrat damage to containment levees and wetland vegetation used in the water purification process.

Louisiana WS is involved in ongoing research investigating ways to reduce nutria numbers in coastal marshes. Nutria are one of the causes of accelerated loss of marshes in south Louisiana.

### **3.4 BEAVER, NUTRIA, OR MUSKRAT DAMAGE MANAGEMENT METHODS AUTHORIZED FOR USE OR RECOMMENDED BY WS**

USDA (1997) describes methods currently used by WS. Several of these were considered in this EA because of their potential use in reducing beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage to roads, bridges, railroads, property, natural and agricultural resources, and public health and safety. A listing and more detailed description of the methods used by Louisiana WS for beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management is found in Appendix D of this EA.

#### **3.4.1 Non-lethal Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management Methods**

*Habitat Management.* Habitat management generally refers to riparian vegetation manipulation to reduce the carrying capacity for beaver, nutria, or muskrats. Habitat management often involves the removal of all woody and aquatic vegetation to eliminate beaver, nutria, and muskrat food sources. However, removal of all food sources would be an extreme and impractical method in most situations. Habitat management also may involve manipulating beaver impoundment water levels to reduce damage or conflict caused by flooding and inundation. Water control devices and pond levelers are installed to regulate the volume of water and can be effective in reducing flooding in certain

situations (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources 1994, Arner 1964, Roblee 1984, Laramie and Knowles 1985, Lisle 1996, Miller and Yarrow 1994, Nolte et al. 2000). Water control devices and pond levelers also are utilized as a means of exclusion at road culverts.

*Exclusion.* Exclusion (e.g., tree wraps, fencing, paint) involves installation of a barrier between beaver, nutria, or muskrats and the protected resources to prevent girdling, burrowing, and gnawing.

*Beaver Dam Breaching/Removal.* Beaver dam breaching/removal involves the removal of water-impeding debris (mud, sticks, vegetation) that is physically deposited by beaver. This material can be removed from beaver dams with binary explosives, mechanical equipment, or hand tools.

*Leg-hold traps.* Leg-hold traps can be effectively used to capture a variety of mammals. Generally all leg-holds traps used to capture aquatic rodents are set in the water and rigged with a drowning mechanism that will immediately dispatch the animal. Effective trap placement, trap adjustment, and selection and placement of appropriate lures contribute to the leg-hold trap's selectivity. All beaver, nutria, and muskrats live-captured in leg-hold traps can be euthanized by shooting.

*Snares.* Snares are live-capture devices consisting of a cable loop and a locking device. Snares are placed in travel ways or areas of high aquatic rodent activity. Snares also are equipped with a swivel to minimize cable twisting and fraying, thus reducing snare breakage. Aquatic rodents live-captured in snares can be euthanized by shooting.

*Colony traps.* Colony traps are multiple catch traps used mainly to capture muskrats. Colony traps are usually set at the entrance of a muskrat den and can be used for kill-trapping or live-trapping muskrats. All muskrats live-captured can be euthanized by shooting.

*Hancock traps/Other Cage Traps.* Hancock or Bailey traps are designed to live-capture beaver. The trap is constructed of a hinged, metal frame covered with chain-link fence. Large springs cause the trap to close when tripped. Trap appearance is similar to a large suitcase when closed. When set the trap is opened into a flattened position to allow an animal to enter. When the trap is tripped, the sides of the trap close around the animal. All beaver live-captured in Hancock traps can be euthanized by shooting. Other types of cage traps (e.g., Havahart, Tomahawk) can be used to live-capture nutria in some situations. Traps are usually set at the damage site and baited with a favorite food. Nutria caught in these traps can be euthanized.

### **3.4.2 Lethal Damage Management Methods**

These methods involve damage management tools specifically applied, in certain situations, to lethally remove beaver, nutria, or muskrat to levels that stabilize, reduce, or

eliminate damage. Amount of removal necessary to achieve a reduction of beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage varies according to the resource protected, habitat, species population, effectiveness of other damage management strategies, and other population factors.

*Shooting.* Shooting is the most selective method for removing target species and may involve the aid of a spotlight. Shooting is conducted with shotguns, rifles, or pistols.

*Body-grip traps.* Body-grip (e.g., Conibear) traps are designed to cause the quick death of the animal that activates the trap. The appropriate size trap can be used for beaver and nutria (generally, 330, 220 Conibear) and are used in aquatic habitats. Body-grip traps are placed at various depths ranging from a few inches to several feet below the water surface. Smaller body-grip traps (generally, 110 Conibear) can be used for muskrats and can be set either in or out of water.

### **3.4.3 Chemical Management Methods**

All chemicals used by Louisiana WS are registered in accordance with FIFRA and State laws. The registration process is administered by the EPA and the LDAF, and, some chemicals are approved for use by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). No chemicals are used on public or private lands without authorization from the land management agency or property owner/manager. There are currently no chemical methods available for beaver damage management.

*Zinc phosphide* is the only chemical method currently authorized for use in controlling nutria and muskrat damage in Louisiana. Zinc phosphide is used on bait at a maximum concentration of about 0.6% active ingredient, as directed by EPA Registration Number 56228-6.

## **3.5 METHODOLOGIES CONSIDERED BUT DEEMED IMPRACTICAL, INEFFECTIVE, OR UNSAFE AT THE PRESENT TIME**

### **3.5.1 Harassment Activities**

Harassment has generally proven ineffective in reducing beaver or muskrat damage problems (Jackson and Decker 1993). Destroying beaver dams and lodges without removing resident beaver rarely resolves damage problems. Beaver usually rebuild dams and lodges in the same vicinity in a very short time. Removal of food supplies to discourage beaver, nutria, or muskrat activity is generally neither feasible nor ecologically desirable.

### **3.5.2 Repellents**

No effective repellents are registered for beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management. However, recent research from the USDA/APHIS/WS/National Wildlife Research Center

has suggested that painting trees with a mixture of 1 quart of sand to 1 gallon of exterior latex paint may prevent beaver and nutria from gnawing and cutting painted trees. If this method is found to be effective, practical, and classified as a “repellent,” it would require registration under the FIFRA and state pesticide control laws. Once registered, WS would then consider using and recommending a paint/sand mixture to reduce damage.

### **3.5.3 Reproduction Control**

A review of research evaluating chemically induced and surgically induced reproductive inhibition as a method for controlling nuisance beaver populations is contained in Novak (1987a). Although these methods were effective in reducing beaver reproduction by up to 50%, methods were not practical or too expensive for large-scale application. Additionally, reproductive control does not alleviate current damage problems (Organ et al. 1996).

Reproduction control methods involve use of chemicals or surgical procedures to inhibit reproduction of beaver, nutria, and muskrats, thus reducing population levels. Chemical sterilants can be classified into one of three types: chemosterilants, immunocontraceptives, and temporary, short term contraceptives. Several reproductive inhibitors have been proposed for use in beaver population reduction, including quonestrol (17-alpha-ethynyl-estradiol-3-cyclopentylether) and mestranol (Gordon and Arner 1976, Wesley 1978). Chemosterilants have been suggested as a means to manage beaver populations (Davis 1961, Arner 1964). However, while chemosterilants have been shown to reduce beaver reproduction in controlled experiments, no practical and effective method for distributing chemosterilants in a consistent way to wild, free ranging beaver populations has been developed or proven (Hill et al. 1977, Wesley 1978). No chemical reproductive inhibitors are currently registered for use on beaver or muskrat damage management in the United States.

As with chemical repellents and toxicants, a reproduction inhibitor could potentially affect non-target wildlife and the environment. Any inhibitor would have to be tested intensively and approved for use. Inhibition of reproduction also may affect behavior, physiological mechanisms, and colony integrity (Brooks et al. 1980). Additional research is needed to test the environmental effects, effects to overall populations, and effects to individual animals. If a technique or chemical becomes registered for use, WS could incorporate it into ARDM in Louisiana.

Currently, no chemical reproductive inhibitors are legal for use for species covered by this EA. For these reasons, this method will not be considered further by Louisiana WS.

## **3.6 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT IN DETAIL, WITH RATIONALE**

### **3.6.1 Eradication and Suppression**

An eradication and suppression alternative would direct all Louisiana WS beaver, nutria,



and muskrat damage management efforts toward planned, total elimination or suppression of these species.

Eradication of beavers or muskrats in Louisiana is not supported by Louisiana WS or LDWF. This alternative was not considered in detail because:

- Louisiana WS opposes eradication of any native wildlife species,
- LDWF opposes eradication of any native Louisiana wildlife species,
- Eradication of a native species would be extremely difficult if not impossible to accomplish, and cost prohibitive, and
- Eradication of native species is not acceptable to most members of the public.

Suppression would direct Louisiana WS program efforts and resources toward managed reduction of certain problem wildlife populations or groups. To consider large-scale population suppression as a goal of the Louisiana WS program is not realistic, practical, or allowable under present WS policy.

### **3.6.2 Population Stabilization through Birth Control**

Under this alternative, beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations would be managed through use of contraceptives. Beaver, nutria, or muskrats would be sterilized or administered contraceptives to limit reproduction. However, chemical or biological contraceptive agents for beaver, nutria or muskrats do not exist. Beaver, nutria, or muskrat contraceptives, chemosterilants, or immunocontraceptives, if delivered to a sufficient number of individuals, could temporarily suppress local breeding populations by inhibiting reproduction. Reduction of local populations would result from natural mortality combined with reduced fecundity. No beaver, nutria, or muskrats would be killed directly with this method, and, treated beaver, nutria, and muskrats would continue to cause damage. Dispersing beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations would probably be unaffected.

Contraceptives for mammals can be grouped into four categories: surgical sterilization, oral contraception, hormone implantation, and immunocontraception (the use of contraceptive vaccines). These measures would require beaver, nutria, or muskrats to receive either single, multiple, or possibly daily treatment to successfully prevent conception. Use of this method would be subject to approval by federal and state agencies. This alternative was not considered in detail because:

- Number of years of implementation before beaver, nutria, or muskrat populations would decline would be large; therefore, damage would continue at the present unacceptable levels for a number of years;
- Surgical sterilization would have to be conducted by licensed veterinarians; therefore, costs would be extremely expensive;
- Live-trapping and chemically treating an effective number of beaver, nutria, or

muskrats would be extremely difficult in order to produce an eventual decline in the population; and

- No chemical or biological agents for beaver, nutria, or muskrat contraception have been approved for use by state and federal regulatory authorities.

Since no effective or legal methods of delivering contraceptives to beaver, nutria, or muskrats exist at this time, use of contraceptives is not a realistic alternative.

### **3.6.3 Compensation for Wildlife Damage Losses**

The compensation alternative would direct all Louisiana WS program efforts and resources toward the verification of losses from beaver, nutria, and muskrats, and to provide monetary compensation for the losses. Louisiana WS activities would not include any operational damage management or technical assistance.

This option is not currently available to Louisiana WS because WS is directed and authorized by law to protect American agricultural and natural resources, property, and public health and safety (Act of March 2, 1931, as amended; and the Rural Development, Agricultural and Related Agencies Appropriation Act of 1988, and the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2001). Analysis of this alternative in USDA (1997) shows that it has the following drawbacks:

- Compensation would not be practical for public health and safety problems;
- Larger expenditures of money to investigate and validate all losses, and determine and administer appropriate compensation would be required;
- Timely responses to all requests to assess and confirm losses would be difficult, and many losses could not be verified;
- Compensation would give little incentive to limit losses through other management strategies;
- Not all resource managers/owners would rely completely on a compensation program; therefore, unregulated lethal control would probably continue and escalate; and
- Neither Congress nor the State of Louisiana has appropriated funds for a compensation program.

### **3.6.4 Bounties**

Bounties can be defined as payments of funds for killing beaver, muskrat, and nutria. No statewide bounties currently exist for beaver and muskrat in Louisiana. However, some parishes and private companies provide cash bounties or private trapper reimbursement. Coastal erosion in Louisiana is a major environmental issue which has prompted the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to implement an economic incentive program to pay licensed trappers an additional \$4.00 per captured nutria. This program's

objective is to stimulate an annual harvest of 400,000 nutria.

Payment of funds for killing beaver and muskrat (bounties) suspected of causing economic loss is not supported by WS, and Louisiana WS does not have authority to establish a bounty program. Bounties are not considered because:

- Bounties are generally not effective in managing wildlife or reducing damage,
- Circumstances surrounding take of animals is largely unregulated, and
- No process exists to prohibit taking of animals from outside the damage management area for compensation purposes.

### **3.6.5 Live-trap and Relocate**

Relocation of problem wildlife species is a technique occasionally used to alleviate wildlife damage problems. However, success of relocation efforts depends on the potential for problem individuals to be captured efficiently and existence of an appropriate relocation site (Nielsen 1988). Relocation may be appropriate in some situations when the population is low. However, aquatic rodents are abundant in much of the suitable habitat in Louisiana, and relocation is not necessary for the maintenance of viable populations. Because beaver are abundant in Louisiana, beaver relocated into suitable habitat are very likely to encounter other beaver with established territories. Beaver are highly territorial, and newly introduced beaver, which are disoriented and at a disadvantage, are often attacked viciously and oftentimes killed from these encounters (McNeely 1995). Survival of relocated animals is generally very poor due to stress of relocation, and in many cases released animals suffer mortality in a new environment (Craven 1992). Courcelles and Nault (1983) found that 50% (n=10) of radio-collared, relocated beaver died, probably from stress or predation resulting from the relocation.

Relocated beaver also may disperse long distances from the release site (Novak 1987a). Hibbard (1958) recorded an average dispersal distance by 17 relocated beaver to be approximately 9 miles in North Dakota, and Denney (1952) reported an average dispersal of 10.4 miles and a maximum dispersal of 30 miles for 26 transplanted beaver in Colorado. Beaver relocated on streams and later recaptured (n=200) moved an average distance of 4.6 miles, and in lake and pothole relocations (n=272) moved an average of 2 miles (Knudsen and Hale 1965). Only 12% of beaver relocated on streams and 33% of beaver relocated on lake and pothole areas remained at the release site (Knudsen and Hale 1965).

Relocation of aquatic rodents causing damage could result in similar damage problems at the release site or dispersal site. In this case, the original damage problem has simply been shifted from one property to another. If Louisiana WS relocated a problem animal, Louisiana WS could possibly be held liable for any subsequent damage caused by that animal.

Live-trapping and relocating aquatic rodents is biologically unsound and not cost-

efficient (Wade and Ramsey 1986). The AVMA, the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, and the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists oppose the relocation of mammals because of disease transmission risks, particularly for small mammals (Center for Disease Control 1990).

For the above stated reasons, Louisiana WS does not support the relocation of aquatic rodents for damage management and will not relocate aquatic rodents within Louisiana.

**3.6.6 Live-capture and Euthanasia Only**

Live-capture and euthanasia of beaver, nutria, and muskrats may be used as part of the IWDM approach to reduce aquatic rodent damage. Snares and suitcase traps could be used to live-capture beaver. While snares are an effective and at times an efficient tool for capturing beaver, use of additional methods (e.g. body-grip traps, shooting, leg-hold traps) may be necessary to reduce damage in a cost-effective manner. Nutria and muskrats could be live-captured in floating colony traps, cage traps, and others, but these traps may be cumbersome and require more time to set than body-grip traps, leg-hold traps, and standard colony traps.

**3.7 MITIGATION AND SOPs FOR BEAVER, NUTRIA, AND MUSKRAT DAMAGE MANAGEMENT**

**3.7.1 Mitigation and SOPs**

Mitigation is any feature of an action that serves to prevent, reduce, or compensate for impacts that otherwise might result from that action. The current WS program, nationwide and in Louisiana, uses many mitigations. Mitigations are discussed in detail in Chapter 5 of USDA (1997). Mitigations incorporated into WS' SOPs and Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5 follow:

- Alternative 1. No WS Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management in Louisiana.
- Alternative 2. Only Lethal Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management.
- Alternative 3. Fully Integrated Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management for all Public and Private Land (No Action/Proposed Action).
- Alternative 4. Technical Assistance Only.
- Alternative 5. Non-Lethal Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management.

**Table 3.1.** Mitigation measures and selected alternatives for beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management in Louisiana.

Mitigation Measures	Alternatives				
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Animal Welfare and Humaneness of Methods Used by WS</b>					
Research on selectivity and humaneness of management practices would be monitored and adopted as appropriate.		X	X	X	X

The Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992) would be used to identify effective biologically and ecologically sound beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management strategies and their impacts.		X	X	X	X
Captured non-target animals would be released unless it is determined by Louisiana WS' personnel that the animal would not survive.		X	X		
Use of traps and snares would conform to current laws and regulations administered by LDWF and Louisiana WS' policy.		X	X		X
Where practical, euthanasia procedures approved by the AVMA that cause minimal pain would be used for live animals.		X	X		X
Use of newly-developed, proven, non-lethal methods would be encouraged when appropriate.			X	X	X
<b>Safety Concerns Regarding WS' ARDM Methods</b>					
All pesticides that are used by WS would be registered with the EPA.		X	X		X
EPA-approved label directions would be followed by WS employees.		X	X		X
The Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992), designed to identify the most appropriate damage management strategies and their impacts, would be used to determine beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management strategies.		X	X	X	X
Beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management conducted on public lands would be coordinated with the management agency.		X	X		X
WS' employees that use pesticides would be trained to use each material and would be certified to use pesticides under EPA approved certification programs.		X	X		X
WS' employees who use pesticides would participate in approved continuing education to keep abreast of developments and maintain their certifications.		X	X		X
Live-traps would be placed so that captured animals would not be readily visible from any road or public area.		X	X		X
Pesticide use, storage, and disposal conforms to label instructions and other applicable laws and regulations, and Executive Order 12898.		X	X		X
Material Safety Data Sheets for pesticides would be provided to all WS' personnel involved with specific damage management activities.		X	X		X
<b>Concerns about Impacts of Damage Management on T&amp;E Species, Species of Special Concern, and Non-target Species.</b>					
WS consulted with the USFWS regarding the nation-wide program and the LA program and would continue to implement all applicable measures identified by the USFWS to ensure protection of T&E species.		X	X		X
Louisiana WS' take would be considered with the statewide "total		X	X		

harvest" (Louisiana WS take and fur harvest) when estimating the impact on wildlife species.					
Management actions would be directed toward localized populations or groups and/or individual offending animals, dependent on the magnitude of the problem.		X	X		X
WS' personnel would be trained and experienced to select the most appropriate method for taking targeted animals and excluding non-target species.		X	X		X
WS would initiate informal consultation with the USFWS following any incidental take of T&E species.		X	X		X

## **CHAPTER 4: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

### **4.0 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 4 provides information for making informed decisions about the beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management program outlined in Chapter 1 and the issues and affected environment discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter consists of: 1) analysis of environmental consequences, 2) analysis of each alternative against the issues considered in detail, and 3) summary of WS' impacts.

### **4.1 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

This section analyzes the environmental consequences using Alternative 3 (the current program) as the baseline when comparing the other alternatives to determine if real or potential impacts are greater, lesser, or the same (Table 4.4). The No Action Alternative is a procedural NEPA requirement (40 CFR 1502.14(d)). The No Action Alternative is a viable and reasonable alternative that could be selected to serve as a baseline for comparison with the other alternatives. The No Action Alternative, as defined here, is consistent with the CEQ (CEQ 1981).

The following resource values within Louisiana would not be adversely impacted by any of the alternatives analyzed: soils, geology, minerals, water quality/quantity, flood plains, wetlands, visual resources, air quality, prime and unique farmlands, aquatic resources, timber, and range. These resources will not be analyzed further.

#### **4.1.1 Social and Recreational Concerns**

Social and recreational concerns are discussed throughout the document as they relate to issues raised during public involvement. Additionally, they are discussed in USDA (1997).

#### **4.1.2 Cumulative and Unavoidable Impacts**

Impacts that are cumulative and unavoidable are discussed in relationship to each wildlife species and environmental impacts are analyzed in this chapter. This EA recognizes that the total annual removal of individual animals from wildlife populations from all sources is cumulative mortality. Analysis of Louisiana WS' take during 1998-2003 and anticipated future WS take, in combination with other mortality, indicates that cumulative impacts are not adversely affecting the viability and health of wildlife populations. It is not anticipated that the Louisiana WS program would result in any adverse cumulative impacts to T&E species, and beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management activities do not jeopardize public health and safety.

#### **4.1.3 Irreversible and Irrecoverable Commitments of Resources**

Other than minor uses of fuels for motor vehicles and electrical energy for office maintenance, no irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources are apparent. Based on these estimates, the Louisiana WS program produces very negligible impacts on the supply of fossil fuels and electrical energy.

## **4.2 ISSUES ANALYZED IN DETAIL**

This section presents the expected consequences of each alternative on each of the issues analyzed in detail.

### **4.2.1 Alternative 1. No WS Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management in Louisiana**

*Effects on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations.* WS would have no impact on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations in Louisiana. Impacts to beaver, nutria, and muskrat would be variable dependent upon actions taken by affected resource owners. Some beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations would continue to increase where trapping and shooting pressure was low and would decline or stabilize where trapping and shooting pressure was adequate. Some resource owners experiencing damage would trap or shoot beaver, nutria, and muskrats, or hire private trappers to conduct the work. However, resource owners would receive no guidance from WS regarding these options. Other resource owners experiencing damage may take illegal or unsafe action against local populations of beaver, nutria, and muskrats out of frustration of continued damage (USDA 1997). Results would be unknown impacts to populations of aquatic furbearers. Overall impacts on statewide beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations would likely be similar to Alternative 3 if affected resource owners lethally removed the damaging beaver, nutria, and muskrats that would no longer be removed by WS.

*Effects on plants and other wildlife species, including T&E species.* In the absence of WS' assistance, some resource owners may attempt to trap beaver, nutria, or muskrats or hire private trappers with little or no trapping experience. These resource owners or trappers would be more likely than WS' personnel to trap non-target species and not report non-target take to regulatory authorities. Other resource owners experiencing damage may take illegal or unsafe action against local populations of beaver, nutria, and muskrats out of frustration of continued damage resulting in unknown impacts to plant and wildlife populations.

One anticipated outcome of no WS beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management program is a likely increase in beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage and associated beaver created impoundments if resource owners did not remove beaver dams. Beaver impoundments would likely have an impact on other wildlife and plant species. Extent and nature of the impacts would depend upon the size of the beaver created impoundment and diversity of plant and animal species in the area. Some species would flourish in the newly created environment, while others would diminish. For example, loss of timber to beaver dams and flooding would reduce the amount of forested habitat available to the



Louisiana black bear, a threatened species; it would temporarily increase habitat for waterfowl, otter, and birds that utilize dead trees for nesting and foraging. The positive effect of beaver activities, including affected species have been summarized in section 1.2.1. Negative effects of beaver impoundments, including effected species, are described in section 1.2.4.

Aquatic rodent damage to native plant species may increase under this alternative unless affected resource owners implement their own aquatic rodent damage management program.

*Effects on public and pet health and safety.* If resource owners did not implement an effective beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management program in the absence of WS, potential for increased risks to public health and safety from unresolved damage situations is apparent. For example, burrowing into or flooding of roadways and railroad beds can result in serious accidents (Woodward 1983, Miller and Yarrow 1994). Beaver and nutria may carry the intestinal parasite *Giardia lamblia*, which can contaminate water supplies and cause outbreaks of the disease Giardiasis in humans (Woodward 1983, Wade and Ramsey 1986, Miller and Yarrow 1994). Nutria and muskrat may also vector diseases and parasites such as leptospirosis (*Leptospira interrogans*) and nutria itch (*Strongyloides myopotami*). Additionally, impounded water behind beaver dams may provide habitat for mosquitoes, which may vector diseases such as encephalitis, and other species (e.g., poisonous snakes) that may pose a hazard to humans.

Additionally, resource owners inexperienced in the safe and proper use of management tools may attempt to inefficiently or illegally resolve beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage problems. Without professional assistance or proper training in the use of damage management tools, potential for increased risks to public and pet safety is possible. Increased risks are associated with the improper or inexperienced use of damage management methods such as trapping, shooting, unregistered pesticides, and dam removal with explosives.

*Humaneness of methods to be used.* This alternative would be considered humane by people that do not believe that WS should use lethal or non-lethal control methods. However, resource/property owners could use lethal and non-lethal methods to reduce beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage in the absence of WS. Impacts on humaneness would depend on the experience of the person implementing the control method. Some animal rights activists may perceive this method as inhumane, because they oppose all lethal methods of wildlife damage management. Some resource/property owners may take illegal action against localized populations of beaver, nutria, or muskrats out of frustration of continued damage. Illegal actions may be less humane than methods used by experienced WS' personnel.

*Effects on wetlands.* WS would have no impact on wetlands. Under this alternative, beaver dam breaching and removal needs would be met by private, state, or local government entities. Some beaver impounded areas that WS would advise against

draining might be drained under private or local government management, which could have adverse effects on wetland habitats in limited circumstances.

*Economic losses to property.* Beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage would likely continue to increase unless an effective damage management program was implemented by non-WS personnel and would likely result in increased occurrences of flooding, burrowing, gnawing, and feeding damage to crops and property.

*Impact to stakeholders, including aesthetics.* Impacts of this alternative to stakeholders would be variable depending on their values and compassion toward wildlife. Resource/property owners receiving damage from beaver, nutria, or muskrats would likely strongly oppose this alternative. Resource/property owners would bear the damage caused by beaver, nutria, and muskrats under this alternative. Animal activists and a minority of environmental activists would prefer this alternative, because activists have a strong moral belief toward killing or using animals for any reason. Some people would not support this alternative because of the enjoyment of seeing beaver, nutria, or muskrats. However, while WS would take no action under this alternative, other individuals or entities could, and likely would, conduct damage management activities resulting in impacts similar to Alternative 3.

#### **4.2.2 Alternative 2. Only Lethal Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management**

*Effects on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations.* This alternative could result in a localized decrease in the beaver, nutria, or muskrat populations at the specific site where the damage management occurs. Even if WS lethally removed beaver, nutria, and muskrats at all project sites, it is not anticipated that more than 5,000 beaver, 2,500 nutria, and 1,500 muskrats would be killed annually by WS. Therefore, impacts on beaver populations are expected to be similar to those described in Alternative 3. New beaver, nutria, or muskrats would likely replace removed beaver and re-inhabit the site. Amount of time until new beaver, nutria, or muskrats move into the area would vary depending on habitat type and quality, time of year, and population densities in the surrounding area.

*Effects on plants and other wildlife species, including T&E species.* Non-target species such as otter, raccoons, alligators, and turtles may occasionally be killed during beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management. Turtles may be caught in some traps and can generally be released alive. WS' impacts on non-target species from capture methods would be similar to those described in Alternative 3.

Removal of beaver, nutria, and muskrats may reduce gnawing and feeding on certain plants and mussels. Reduction in aquatic rodent damage to native plant species would be similar to Alternative 3 when lethal methods are effective in reducing such damage.

WS would not remove or breach beaver dams under this alternative. Impacts related to

beaver dam breaching or removal on native plants and animals would be similar to Alternative 1.

Impacts of WS use of control methods on T&E species would be similar to Alternative 3.

*Effects on public and pet health and safety.* WS impacts on public and pet health and safety from the use of chemical and non-chemical control methods would be similar to alternative 3.

WS' impacts on public and pet health and safety resulting from the reduction of aquatic rodent health and safety risks would be similar to those described in Alternative 3, except in those situations where health and safety risks would be reduced by the use of non-lethal methods, such as removal or breaching of beaver dams or installation of water control structures. Since WS would not implement or recommend non-lethal control methods under this alternative, impacts related to non-lethal methods would be similar to Alternative 1.

*Humaneness of methods to be used.* WS' personnel are experienced and professional in using management methods and tools humanely and effectively. Under this alternative, beaver, nutria, and muskrats would be humanely trapped or shot by experienced WS' personnel using the best methods available. Beaver, nutria, and muskrats live-captured in traps or snares would be euthanized by shooting. Some aquatic rodents may be removed through the use of drowning trap sets and registered toxicants. Some animal activists could perceive these methods as inhumane, because they oppose all lethal methods of damage management.

*Effects on wetlands.* Under this alternative, WS would remove beaver, nutria, and muskrats from a site; however, WS would not remove or breach beaver dams. Therefore, effects on wetlands from dam removal and breaching activities would be similar to Alternative 1.

*Economic losses to property.* Damage to property would be expected to decrease as beaver, nutria, and muskrat are lethally removed from the site. Damage to property is expected to continue or increase in those situations where lethal methods cannot be used to reduce damage. In this case, damage would remain at unacceptable levels unless non-lethal methods are implemented by non-WS personnel.

*Impacts to stakeholders, including aesthetics.* Impacts of this alternative would be variable depending on each stakeholder's values and compassion toward wildlife. This alternative would likely be favored by resource/property owners who are receiving damage if lethal methods reduced damage to acceptable levels. Some resource owners would be saddened if the beaver, nutria, or muskrats were removed. Animal activists and a minority of environmental activists would strongly oppose this alternative because of a strong moral belief in killing or using animals for any reason. Activists believe the benefits from beaver, nutria, and muskrats would outweigh the associated damage.

The ability to view and esthetically enjoy beaver, nutria, or muskrats at a particular site could be limited if the beaver, nutria, or muskrats are removed. However, new animals would most likely re-colonize the site in the future, although the length of time until new beaver, nutria, or muskrats arrive is variable. Re-colonization depends on habitat type and quality, time of year, and population densities of beaver, nutria, and muskrats in surrounding areas. Opportunities to view beaver, nutria, or muskrats are available if a person makes the effort to visit sites with adequate habitat outside of the damage management area.

**4.2.3 Alternative 3. Fully Integrated Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management for all Public and Private Land (No Action/Proposed Action)**

*Effects on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations.* Louisiana WS program removes a small portion of beaver, nutria, and muskrats from the statewide population in Louisiana (Table 4.1) (see Section 1.3). Unlike Alternative 2, the use of exclusion, habitat modification, beaver dam breaching and removal, and water control devices could be used as part of an IWDM approach. Use of water control devices or removal/breaching of dams would have little or no effect on beaver populations.

Amount of time until new beaver, nutria, or muskrats move into the area would vary depending on habitat type and quality, time of year, and population densities in surrounding areas. The following is an analysis of potential impacts on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations in Louisiana.

The authority for management of resident wildlife species in Louisiana is the responsibility of the LDWF. Beavers, nutria, and muskrats are classified as furbearers which have a regulated harvest season; however, beavers and nutria causing damage may be removed by the landowner at any time of the year without a special permit. LDWF compiles and provides information on population trends and take, and uses this information to manage beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations.

**Table 4.1.** Beaver, nutria, and muskrats harvested and percentage take by WS in Louisiana, 1998-2003.

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
# BEAVERS TAKEN BY WS	2,430	1,718	1,842	1,612	1,851	1,985
STATE HARVEST OF BEAVERS	4,914	5,509	6,186	2,806	1,445	2,395
TOTAL HARVEST OF BEAVERS	7,344	7,227	8,028	4,418	3,296	4,380
% WS TAKE	33%	24%	23%	36%	56%	45%
# NUTRIAS TAKEN BY WS	185	102	115	111	78	140
STATE HARVEST OF NUTRIA	114,646	20,110	29,544	24,683	308,160	332,596
TOTAL HARVEST OF NUTRIA	114,831	20,212	29,659	24,794	308,238	332,736

% WS TAKE	< 1%	< 1%	< 1%	< 1%	< 1%	< 1%
# MUSKRAT TAKEN BY WS	7	0	2	3	1	3
STATE HARVEST OF MUSKRAT	607	275	392	359	438	2,078
TOTAL HARVEST OF MUSKRAT	614	275	394	362	439	2,081
% WS TAKE	1%	0%	< 1%	< 1%	< 1%	< 1%

*Beaver Population Information and Impact Analysis.* Beaver occur mostly in family groups that are comprised of 2 adult parents with 2-6 offspring from the current or previous breeding season (Novak 1987a). Average family group size has been documented as ranging from 3.0 to 9.2 beaver (Novak 1987a). Beaver abundance has been reported in terms of families/kilometer of stream or families/square kilometer of habitat. Novak (1987a) summarized reported beaver family abundance as ranging from 0.31 to 1.5 families/kilometer of stream, which converts to 0.5 - 2.4 families/mile of stream. Densities reported in terms of families/square kilometer have been reported to range from 0.15 to 3.9 (Novak 1987a) which is the same as 0.24 to 6.3 families/square mile. Additionally, Novak (1987a) indicates rates of beaver populations are density dependent, which means rates of increase generally increase as a population is reduced and decrease as a population reaches carrying capacity<sup>2</sup>. This is a natural function of most wildlife populations which helps to naturally mitigate population reductions. Studies have reported that beaver fecundity may be density dependent and that lower densities may cause an increase in litter size (Novak 1987a). However, density and dispersal are also reported as a function of many factors such as habitat (water quality, drought conditions, and food), mortality (trapping, predation, and disease), and behavior (territorial activities and intrafamily aggression) (Aleksiuk 1970 as cited in Novak 1987a, Tyurnin 1983 as cited in Novak 1987a, Novak 1987a). Logan et al. (1996) indicated that wildlife populations being held at a level below carrying capacity can sustain a higher level of harvest because of the compensatory mechanisms that cause higher rates of increase in such populations.

No population estimates were available for beavers in Louisiana. Therefore the best available information was used to estimate statewide populations. There are over 8.8 million acres of wetlands in Louisiana (Hefner et al. 1994) including an estimated minimum of 66,000 miles of streams and rivers (USEPA 1998). Using the conservative estimate of 3 beavers per family group and an abundance of 0.5 families per stream mile provided by Novak (1987), the minimum statewide beaver population estimate for Louisiana could be estimated at 99,000 beavers. LDWF reported the statewide beaver population is stable (N. Kinler, LDWF, personal consultation with D. LeBlanc, WS, January 3, 2005) and determined there is no evidence to suggest that human mediated

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<sup>2</sup>Carrying capacity is maximum number of animals the environment can sustain and is determined by food availability, water, cover, and tolerance of crowding by the particular species.

mortality resulting from regulated fur harvest and damage management will be detrimental to the survival of the beaver populations in the state of Louisiana.

The number of beaver lethally taken by WS and fur trappers is shown in Table 4.1 (MIS 1998-2003 and LDWF). The take of 2,430 was the highest number of beavers removed by the Louisiana WS program in one year. Based upon current and anticipated increase in future work, it is anticipated that not more than 5,000 beaver would be killed annually by WS in Louisiana. The ADC final EIS (USDA 1997) determined that beaver populations can withstand an annual harvest rate of up to 30% without declining. As shown in Table 4.1, the cumulative total kill of beavers has been less than 8% of the estimated statewide population in any one year. Thus, the cumulative take appears to be far beneath the level that would begin to cause a decline in the population. WS does not anticipate the annual total statewide lethal take of beaver to exceed 30% of the statewide population. The cumulative impact on the beaver population is therefore considered to be of extremely low magnitude.

Based upon harvest trend data, LDFW oversight and the above information the limited lethal take of beaver by WS should have minimal effects on the beaver population in Louisiana.

*Muskrat Population Information and Impact Analysis.* Muskrats are considered abundant in Louisiana and scattered in suitable habitat throughout the State. Muskrats can be found in marshes, ponds, sloughs, lakes, ditches, streams, and rivers (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987). As described by Perry (1982), muskrat populations are cyclic with muskrats themselves greatly influencing their habitat and its carrying capacity. Population density varies widely and depends upon such factors as phase of population cycle, habitat type and condition, social pressures, competition, harvest, predation, and geographical area (Perry 1982). Muskrats are highly prolific and produce 3-4 litters/year and average 5-8 young/litter (Wade and Ramsey 1986) which are characteristics that make them relatively immune to over harvest (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987). Harvest rates of 3-8/acre have been reported to be sustainable in muskrat populations (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987). Muskrat home ranges have been shown to vary from 529 sq. ft to 11,970 sq. ft. (0.1 to 0.25 acres) with the size of home ranges occupied by muskrats depends on habitat quality and population density (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987).

No population estimates were available for muskrat in Louisiana. Therefore the best available information was used to estimate statewide populations. There are over 8.8 million acres of wetlands in Louisiana (Hefner et al. 1994) including an estimated minimum of 66,000 miles of streams and rivers (USEPA 1998). Using the assumption that 50% of the wetlands support a muskrat population, an average home range of 0.25 acres per muskrat, only 1 muskrat occupies a home range, and no home ranges overlap, a conservative statewide muskrat population could be estimated at over 17.6 million muskrats. LDWF reported the statewide muskrat population is stable (N. Kinler, LDWF, personal consultation with D. LeBlanc, WS, January 3, 2005) and determined there is no evidence to suggest that human mediated mortality resulting from regulated fur harvest

and damage management will be detrimental to the survival of the muskrat populations in the state of Louisiana.

The number of muskrat lethally taken by WS and fur trappers is shown in Table 4.1 (MIS 1998-2003 and LDWF). Muskrats do not cause substantial damage problems in Louisiana and WS only killed 16 for depredation purposes from 1998 – 2003. Additionally, 13 muskrats were taken as non-targets during beaver control activities during the same time period. Based upon current and anticipated increase in future work, it is anticipated that not more than 1,500 muskrats would be killed annually by WS in Louisiana. The ADC final EIS (USDA 1997) determined using qualitative information (population trend indicators and harvest data) that if WS muskrat kill is between 33% and 66% of the total harvest and the muskrat population is considered stable, the magnitude is considered low. Magnitude is defined as a measure of the number of animals killed in relation to their abundance. Using statewide harvest data and the annual take of 1,500 muskrats by WS, the magnitude is considered low for WS lethal take of muskrats in Louisiana.

Based upon harvest trend data, LDFW oversight and the above information the limited lethal take of muskrat by WS should have minimal effects on the muskrat population in Louisiana.

*Nutria Population Information and Impact Analysis.* Nutria are native to South America and became established in the United States after releases in the 1930's and 1940's. Establishment was hoped to promote nutria and subsequent "fur ranching." These introductions and promotion of nutria for fur ranching was a failure. Nutria are currently found throughout Louisiana with the highest concentrations located in the southern half along or near the coastal marsh. Densities of about 18 nutria per acre have been found in floating freshwater marshes (LeBlanc, 1994).

There were an estimated 20 million nutria in the coastal regions of Louisiana in the late 1950s (USGS 2000). No current population estimates were available for nutria in Louisiana. Therefore the best available information was used to estimate statewide populations. There are over 8.8 million acres of wetlands in Louisiana (Hefner et al. 1994) including an estimated 1.9 million acres of estuarine wetlands (saltmarshes and some mangroves). Using the assumption that 75% of the estuarine wetlands support a nutria population, an average density of 10 nutria per acre, a conservative statewide nutria population could be estimated at over 14.2 million nutria. LDWF reported that the nutria population is declining in coastal Louisiana (Greg Linscombe, LDWF, personal consultation) due to an economical incentive program to pay licensed trappers an additional \$4.00 per captured nutria. This program's objective is to stimulate an annual harvest of 400,000 nutrias. This harvest level is considered the necessary annual take to mitigate coastal erosion created by nutria "eat-outs". This harvest level will not eradicate nutria from the state of Louisiana.

Number of nutria taken by WS and fur trappers is shown in Table 4.1 (MIS 1998-2003

and LDWF). Damage caused by nutria to the coastal marsh prompted the LDWF to implement an economical incentive program to pay licensed trappers an additional \$4.00 per captured nutria. This program's objective is to stimulate an annual harvest of 400,000 nutrias. From 1998-2003 Louisiana WS killed 731 nutria for depredation purposes. Additionally, 436 nutria were taken as non-targets during beaver control activities during the same period of time. Based upon current and anticipated increases in future work, it is anticipated that not more than 1,500 nutria would be killed annually by WS in Louisiana. The ADC final EIS (USDA 1997) determined using qualitative information (population trend indicators and harvest data) that if WS nutria kill is less than or equal to 33% of the total harvest, the magnitude is considered low. Magnitude is defined as a measure of the number of animals killed in relation to their abundance. Using the harvest data and the annual take of 1,500 nutria by WS, the magnitude is considered low for WS lethal take of nutria in Louisiana.

Based upon harvest trend data, LDWF oversight and the above information the limited take of nutria by WS should have minimal effects on the nutria population in Louisiana.

*Effects on plants and other wildlife species, including T&E species.* Direct impacts on non-target species occur if WS program personnel were to inadvertently kill, injure, or harass animals that are not target species. In general, these impacts result from the use of methods that are not completely selective for target species. WS personnel are experienced and trained in wildlife identification, and to select the most appropriate methods for taking targeted animals and excluding non-target species. Shooting is virtually 100% selective for the target species; therefore no adverse impacts are anticipated from use of this method. WS personnel use animal lures and set traps and snares in locations that are conducive to capturing target animals while minimizing potential impacts to non-target species. Any non-target species captured unharmed in a live trap would be subsequently released on site. No adverse impacts from the use of registered pesticides are anticipated. Based on a thorough Risk Assessment, APHIS concluded that, when WS program chemical methods are used in accordance with label directions, they are highly selective to target individuals or populations, and such use has negligible effects on the environment (USDA 1997). Mitigation measures designed and implemented to avoid adverse effects on non-target species are described in Chapter 3.

Non-target species, such as otters, alligators, and raccoons may occasionally be taken during beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management. Turtles also may be caught in some traps but can generally be released alive. WS' personnel would minimize non-target takes with careful trap placement and variation in capture methods. Non-target animals taken in excess of 5 individuals per species per year by WS during beaver, nutria, and muskrat management activities during 1998 - 2003 are presented in Table 2.1.

WS does not expect rate of non-target take to substantially increase above current program levels. ADC final EIS (USDA 1997) determined using qualitative information (population trend indicators and harvest data) that if WS' kill is less than or equal to 33% of the total harvest, magnitude is considered low. Magnitude is defined as a measure of



number of animals killed in relation to abundance. Using available harvest data and annual kill by WS, magnitude is considered, and expected to remain, extremely low for WS' non-target take in Louisiana. Therefore, cumulative take appears to be far beneath the level which would begin to cause decline in populations. Any other non-target takes are expected to be minimal (less than 10 individuals/year) and should have no adverse effect on statewide populations. LDWF concurs that Louisiana WS would have no adverse effects on native wildlife populations in Louisiana, including state listed T&E species (Appendix E) (Greg Linscombe, LDWF, personal consultation).

WS consulted with the USFWS concerning potential impacts of WS methods on T&E species in Louisiana. The USFWS concurred that Louisiana WS aquatic rodent damage management methods "are not likely to adversely affect threatened or endangered species" in Louisiana (Russell C. Watson, USFWS, April 15, 2005).

Removal of beaver, nutria, and muskrats may reduce gnawing and feeding on certain native plant and mussel species. This alternative would have the greatest likelihood of reducing such damage since all available methods could be used or recommended.

One anticipated outcome of this Alternative is a slight reduction in beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage and associated beaver created impoundments. Reduction in beaver created impoundments would likely have an impact on other wildlife and plant species. Extent and nature of impacts would depend upon size of beaver created impoundments and diversity of plant and animal species in surrounding areas. Some species would flourish, while others would diminish. Positive and negative impacts of aquatic rodents are discussed in section 1.2.

*Effects on public and pet health and safety.* WS may occasionally use binary explosives to breach or remove beaver dams. WS' personnel that use explosives are required to take and pass in-depth explosives training and be able to demonstrate competence and safety in use of explosives. Explosive specialists adhere to WS' policies and regulations from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the US Department of Transportation with regards to explosives use, storage, and transportation. Binary explosives require two components to be mixed before actuation. The mixing requirement virtually eliminates the hazard of accidental detonation during storage and transportation. Storage and transportation of mixed binary explosives is not allowed. When explosives are used, signs and placards are placed to stop public entry. Where dams are near roads, police or other road officials are used to stop traffic and public entry. Therefore, no adverse effects to public safety are expected from use of explosives by WS.

WS' methods of shooting and trapping pose minimal or no threat to public and pet health and safety. A formal risk assessment of WS's operational management methods found that risks to human safety from WS use of traps and firearms were low (USDA 1997, Appendix P). All firearm safety precautions are followed by WS when conducting ARDM, and WS complies with all laws and regulations governing the lawful use of

firearms. Shooting with shotguns or rifles is sometimes used to reduce beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage when lethal methods are determined to be appropriate. Shooting is selective for target species and may be used in conjunction with spotlights. WS uses firearms to humanely euthanize beavers, nutria, and muskrats caught in live traps. WS' traps are strategically placed to minimize exposure to the public and pets. Appropriate signs are posted on all properties where traps are set to alert the public of trap presence. Body-grip (e.g., Conibear-type) traps used for beaver and nutria are restricted to water sets which further reduce threats to public and pet health and safety.

Firearm use is very sensitive and a public concern because of misuse. To ensure safe use and awareness, WS' employees who use firearms to conduct official duties are required to attend an approved firearms safety and use training program within three months of their appointment and a refresher course every two years afterwards (WS Directive 2.615). WS' personnel who use firearms as a condition of employment, are required to certify meeting criteria as stated in the *Lautenberg Amendment*.

All chemicals used by APHIS-WS are regulated by the EPA through the FIFRA and by WS Directives. Based on a thorough Risk Assessment, APHIS concluded that when WS' program chemicals are used according to label directions, chemicals are selective to target individuals or populations and such use has negligible impacts on the environment (USDA 1997).

This Alternative would allow WS to use or recommend all available and effective damage reduction strategies and methods to reduce threats to public health and safety caused by beaver, nutria, and muskrats and beaver created impoundments. This alternative would have the greatest possibility of successfully alleviating beaver damage such as flooding and burrowing, damage to roads and railroads, risks of giardiasis and other diseases, and possible mosquito borne disease outbreaks.

*Humaneness of methods to be used.* WS' personnel are experienced and professional in use of management methods, and methods are applied humanely. Under this Alternative, beaver, nutria, and muskrats would be trapped or shot by experienced WS' personnel using the best method available. Beaver, nutria, and muskrat live-captured in traps or snares would be euthanized by shooting. Some aquatic rodents may be removed through the use of drowning trap sets and the use of registered toxicants. Animal rights activists may perceive these methods as inhumane because of opposing all lethal methods of damage management. This Alternative allows WS to consider and use non-lethal methods for beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management when appropriate. Therefore, Alternative 3 would be preferred over Alternative 2 by those individuals that consider lethal control methods as inhumane.

*Effects on wetlands.* Beaver dams could be breached or removed by hand or with explosives for the purpose of returning streams, channels, dikes, culverts, and irrigation canals to their original drainage pattern under this Alternative. Beaver dams are removed according to Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. WS breaches/removes most beaver

dams because of flooding in areas such as yards, parks, roads, railroads, timberlands, croplands, pastures, and other types of property or resources that are normally above water. Most dams that WS breaches or removes are created as a result of recent beaver activity. Dams are typically less than one year in age due to WS' personnel receiving most requests soon after resource/property owners discover damage and contact WS. Recently-flooded sites do not possess wetland characteristics, and wildlife habitat values are not the same as established wetlands. Appendix C describes the procedures used by WS to assure compliance with pertinent laws and regulations. For these reasons WS beaver dam removal/breaching activities should have minimal impact on wetlands.

*Economic losses to property.* Property damage would be expected to decrease under this Alternative since all available damage management methods and strategies would be available for WS' use and consideration.

*Impacts to stakeholders, including aesthetics.* Impacts of this Alternative to stakeholders would be variable depending on values toward wildlife and compassion for neighbors. This Alternative would likely be favored by most resource owners who are receiving damage, because it allows for an IWDM approach to resolving damage problems. Most stakeholders without damage also would prefer this Alternative to Alternative 2, because non-lethal methods could be implemented when appropriate to resolve damage problems. Animal activists and a minority of environmental activists would strongly oppose this Alternative, because of strong moral beliefs in killing or using animals for any reason. Activists also believe the benefits from beavers outweigh the associated damage. Possibilities of viewing and aesthetically enjoying beaver, nutria, and muskrat at a particular site could be limited if these animals are removed. However, new animals would most likely re-colonize the site in the future. Length of time until new beaver, nutria, and muskrat arrive is variable, and depends on habitat type and quality, time of year, and population densities of beaver, nutria, and muskrat in surrounding areas. Opportunities to view beaver, nutria, and muskrat are available if efforts are made to visit sites with adequate habitat outside of the damage management area.

#### **4.2.4 Alternative 4. Technical Assistance Only**

*Effects on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations.* WS would have no impact on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations in Louisiana. Impacts to beaver, nutria, and muskrat would be variable dependent upon actions taken by affected resource owners. WS would provide technical advice to those persons requesting assistance. Resource/property owners could use information provided by WS or implement their own damage reduction program without WS' technical assistance. Overall impacts would be similar to Alternative 1.

*Effects on plants and other wildlife species, including T&E species.* When WS' technical advice is requested and followed, negative impacts to plants and wildlife species resulting from the improper use of control methods should be less than Alternative 1. Resource/property owners could use information provided by WS or implement their

own damage reduction program without WS' technical assistance.

Impacts from beaver dam breaching and removal activities would be similar to Alternative 1.

Aquatic rodent damage to native plant species may increase under this alternative unless affected resource owners implement their own aquatic rodent damage management program.

*Effects on public and pet health and safety.* WS would provide technical advice to those persons requesting assistance. Negative impacts to public and pet safety resulting from the improper use of control methods should be less than Alternative 1 when WS' technical advice is followed. Resource/property owners could use information provided by WS or implement damage reduction methods without WS' technical assistance.

Impacts to public and pet safety resulting from the reduction of aquatic rodent damage and conflicts would be similar to Alternative 1.

*Humaneness of methods to be used.* Issues of humaneness, as it relates to WS under this Alternative, are not applicable, because resource/property owners or others would be responsible to implement the damage management methods. WS would provide technical advice to those persons requesting assistance. Resource/property owners could use information provided by WS or implement a damage reduction program without WS' technical assistance. Overall impacts should be less than Alternative 1 when WS' technical advice is requested and followed.

*Effects on wetlands.* WS would have no direct impact on wetlands. WS would provide technical advice to those persons requesting assistance. Resource owners could use the information provided by WS or implement their own damage reduction program without WS technical assistance. Overall impacts should be less than Alternative 1 when WS technical advice is requested and followed.

*Economic losses to property.* WS would provide technical advice to those persons requesting assistance to reduce economic losses. Resource/property owners could use information provided by WS or implement a damage reduction program without WS' technical assistance. Overall impacts would be similar to Alternative 1.

*Impacts to stakeholders, including aesthetics.* WS would provide technical advice to those persons requesting assistance. Resource/property owners could use information provided by WS or implement a damage reduction program without WS' technical assistance. Overall impacts would be similar to Alternative 1.

#### **4.2.5 Alternative 5. Non-lethal Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management**

*Effects on beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations.* No beaver, nutria, or muskrats

would be killed by WS under this Alternative. Beaver, nutria, and muskrat populations could decrease, remain the same, or increase depending on actions taken by others. Use of water control devices or removal of dams by WS would have little or no effect on beaver, nutria, or muskrat populations. If WS' non-lethal methods and recommendations are effective in reducing beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage to acceptable levels, beaver, nutria, and muskrats would not likely be lethally removed by resource owners. However, in situations where damage is not reduced to acceptable levels by non-lethal methods, resource/property owners would likely implement a lethal damage management program resulting in impacts similar to Alternative 1.

*Effects on plants and other wildlife species, including T&E species.* WS lethal take of other wildlife species would not occur under this alternative. However, in the absence of an ARDM program by WS that includes the option of lethal removal of beaver, nutria, and muskrats from damage sites, resource/property owners may attempt to trap and shoot beaver, nutria, and muskrat or contract private trappers with little or no trapping experience resulting in impacts on other wildlife species similar to Alternative 1. Furthermore, in those situations where non-lethal methods do not effectively reduce aquatic rodent damage to plant and wildlife species impacts would be similar to Alternative 1.

Impacts of WS beaver dam removal and breaching activities would be similar to Alternative 3.

Impacts of WS use of non-lethal methods on T&E species would be similar to Alternative 3.

*Effects on public and pet health and safety.* Non-lethal methods, including exclusion and habitat modifications, would not be efficient or effective in resolving many beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage situations. In situations where WS' non-lethal methods and recommendations are ineffective at reducing damage to acceptable levels, impacts would be similar to Alternative 1. In situations where non-lethal methods are effective, impacts would be similar to Alternative 3.

Potential risks to public and pet safety from the use of lethal control methods and non-lethal capture methods by WS would not occur under this alternative. However, in those situations where non-lethal methods do not reduce damage to acceptable levels, non-WS personnel may implement their own control program resulting in impacts similar to Alternative 1.

WS could use binary explosives to breach or remove beaver dams and reduce impacts caused by flooding. WS' personnel that use explosives are required to take and pass in-depth training, and must be able to demonstrate competence and safety in use of explosives. Explosive specialists adhere to WS' policies, regulations from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Department of Transportation with regards to explosives use, storage, and

transportation. Binary explosives require mixing of two components before actuation. Mixing virtually eliminates hazards of accidental detonation during storage and transportation. Storage and transportation of mixed binary explosives is not allowed. When explosives are used, signs or placards are placed to stop public entry. When explosives are used to remove beaver dams near roads, police or other road officials are used to stop traffic and restrict public entry. Therefore, no adverse effects to public safety are expected from use of explosives by WS.

*Humaneness of methods to be used.* Under this Alternative, only non-lethal beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management methods would be implemented by WS. Some animal activists may perceive this approach as humane because animals would not be taken lethally. However, when non-lethal methods are ineffective at reducing damage to acceptable levels, resource/property owners may implement a lethal damage management program or take illegal action against some local populations of beaver, nutria, or muskrats resulting in impacts similar to Alternative 1.

*Effects on wetlands.* Beaver created impoundments could be breached/removed by hand or with explosives by WS for the purpose of returning streams, channels, ditches, and irrigation canals to the original drainage under this alternative. Overall impacts would be similar to Alternative 3.

*Economic losses to property.* This Alternative would not be favored by most resource/property owners who are receiving damage and when non-lethal methods do not reduce damage to acceptable levels. Damage to property would be expected to increase when non-lethal methods are ineffective. Beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage would continue to increase unless an effective damage management program was implemented by people other than WS' personnel and would likely result in increased occurrences of flooding, gnawing, burrowing, and feeding damage to property.

*Impacts to stakeholders, including aesthetics.* While WS would provide non-lethal assistance under this Alternative, other individuals or entities could conduct lethal damage management. Impacts of this Alternative to stakeholders would be variable depending on effectiveness of WS' non-lethal methods and resource/property owner actions. This Alternative would not be favored by most resource/property owners who are receiving damage and when non-lethal methods do not reduce damage. Most stakeholders without damage would prefer this Alternative to Alternative 2, because non-lethal methods would be implemented to resolve damage problems. Some animal activists and a minority of environmental activists would strongly support this Alternative because of a strong moral belief in killing or using animals for any reason. Activists also might believe benefits from aquatic rodents outweigh associated damage. However, if resource/property owners do not accept WS' non-lethal control methods and implement another type of control program, impacts would be similar to Alternative 1.

#### **4.3 SUMMARY OF WS' IMPACTS**

Table 4.2 presents a summary of relative comparisons of the anticipated impacts of each of the alternatives as they relate to each of the major issues identified in Chapter 2.

### **4.3.1 Cumulative Impacts**

Cumulative impacts, as defined by CEQ (40 CFR 1508.7), are impacts to the environment that result from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, regardless of what agency (federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such other actions. Cumulative impacts may result from individually minor, but collectively significant, actions taking place over time.

Under Alternatives 2, 3, 4 and 5, WS would address damage associated with aquatic rodents in a number of situations throughout the State. The WS ARDM program would be the primary federal program with ARDM responsibilities; however, some state and local government agencies may conduct ARDM activities in Louisiana as well. Through ongoing coordination with these agencies, WS is aware of such activities and may provide technical assistance in such efforts. WS does not normally conduct direct damage management activities concurrently with such agencies in the same area, but may conduct management activities at adjacent sites within the same time frame. In addition, commercial pest control companies may conduct ARDM activities in the same area. The potential cumulative impacts analyzed below could occur either as a result of WS ARDM program activities over time, or as a result of the aggregate effects of those activities combined with the activities of other agencies and individuals.

#### **Cumulative Impacts on Wildlife Populations**

Aquatic rodent damage management methods used or recommended by the WS program in Louisiana will likely have no cumulative adverse effects on target and non-target wildlife populations. WS limited lethal take of beaver, nutria and muskrats is anticipated to have minimal impacts on overall populations in the State. When control actions are implemented by WS the potential lethal take of non-target wildlife species is expected to be minimal to non-existent.

#### **Cumulative Impact Potential from Chemical Components**

Aquatic rodent damage management programs, which may include the use of pesticides as a lethal population management component, may have the greatest potential for cumulative impacts on the environment as such impacts relate to deposit of chemical residues in the physical environment and environmental toxicosis. The toxicant Zinc Phosphide could be used by the WS program for the purpose of obtaining lethal effects on nutria and muskrat. This chemical has been evaluated for possible residual effects which might occur from buildup of the chemicals in soil, water, or other environmental sites. Based on use patterns, the chemical and physical characteristics, and factors related to the environmental fate of this pesticides, no cumulative impacts are expected from WS

use of Zinc Phosphide.

### **Cumulative Impact Potential from Non-chemical Components**

Non-chemical methods used or recommended by WS may include exclusion through use of various barriers, habitat modification, trapping, snaring, and shooting. No cumulative impacts from WS use of these methods to take animals are expected, since take would be authorized and/or permitted with LDWF oversight.

### **SUMMARY**

No significant cumulative environmental impacts are expected from any of the listed Alternatives (Table 4.2). With regard to Alternatives 2 and 3, Lethal Removal Only and the Proposed Action, respectively, lethal removal of beaver, nutria, and muskrats by WS would have no adverse affect on beaver, nutria, or muskrat populations in Louisiana. No adverse risk to public or pet health and safety is expected from control methods implemented by WS under Alternatives 2, 3, and 5. However, some persons would likely oppose lethal removal of beaver, nutria, and muskrats under any circumstance. Analyses in this EA indicate that such removals would result in no significant cumulative adverse impacts on the quality of the human environment.



**Table 4.2.** Summary of cumulative environmental impacts and Alternatives presented for ARDM conducted in Louisiana.

	<b>Alternative 1: No WS Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management in Louisiana</b>	<b>Alternative 2: Only Lethal Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management</b>	<b>Alternative 3: Fully Integrated Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management for all Public and Private Land (No Action/Proposed Action)</b>	<b>Alternative 4: Technical Assistance Only</b>	<b>Alternative 5: Non-lethal Beaver, Nutria, or Muskrat Damage Management</b>
<b>Effects on Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Populations</b>	No effects by WS. Populations could increase unless resource owners seek private help.	Possible reduction in local populations, no statewide effect.	Possible reduction in local populations, no statewide effect.	No effects by WS. Populations could increase unless resource owners seek private help.	No effects by WS. Populations could increase unless resource owners seek private help.
<b>Effects on plants and other wildlife species, including T&amp;E Species</b>	No effects by WS. Impacts by non-WS personnel would be variable.	No adverse impact to plant and wildlife species, including T&E species populations.	No adverse impact to plant and wildlife species, including T&E species populations.	No effects by WS. Impacts by non-WS personnel would be variable.	No adverse impacts to plant and wildlife species, including T&E species populations
<b>Effects on Public and Pet Health and Safety</b>	No effects by WS. Continued risk from flooding, burrowing, and diseases. Impacts from control methods by non-WS personnel would be variable.	No threat to public and pet safety from WS control methods. Reduction of risks from flooding, burrowing, and diseases.	No threat to public and pet safety from WS control methods. Reduction of risks from flooding, burrowing, and diseases.	No effects by WS. Continued risk from flooding, burrowing, and diseases. Impacts from control methods by non-WS personnel would be variable.	No threat to public and pet safety from WS control methods. Reduction of risks from flooding, burrowing, and diseases.
<b>Humaneness of Methods to be Used</b>	No effect by WS. Impacts by non-WS personnel would be variable.	Variable. WS uses the most humane methods available. Some activists would oppose all lethal methods.	Variable. WS uses the most humane methods available. Some activists would oppose all lethal methods.	No effect by WS. Impacts by non-WS personnel would be variable.	Variable. Probably considered more humane by most people than lethal methods.
<b>Effects on Wetlands</b>	No effect by WS	No effect by WS.	No probable effect by WS.	No effect by WS.	No probable effect by WS.
<b>Economic Losses to Property</b>	Losses would likely increase	Losses could be reduced or eliminated.	Losses could be reduced or eliminated.	Losses could be reduced or eliminated if resource owners	Losses could be reduced; however, not to the level of

				take action.	Alternative 2 or 3.
<b>Impacts to Stakeholders, including Aesthetics</b>	No effects by WS. Variable, some people prefer this method. People receiving damage probably oppose this alternative.	Variable, those receiving damage would probably favor this alternative if damage could be reduced by lethal methods. Some activists would oppose this alternative.	Variable, those receiving damage would probably favor this alternative. Some activists would oppose this alternative.	No effects by WS. Variable, some people prefer this method. People receiving damage probably oppose this alternative.	Variable, those receiving damage would probably favor this alternative if damage could be reduced by non-lethal methods. Some activists would favor this alternative.

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## **Appendix B Authority and Compliance**

The USDA is authorized by law to protect American agriculture and other resources from damage associated with wildlife. The primary statutory authority for the WS program is the Act of March 2, 1931 (7 USC 426-426c; 46 Stat. 1468), as amended in the FY2001 Agriculture Appropriations Bill, which provides that:

*“The Secretary of Agriculture may conduct a program of wildlife services with respect to injurious animal species and take any action the Secretary considers necessary in conducting the program. The Secretary shall administer the program in a manner consistent with all of the wildlife services authorities in effect on the day before the date of the enactment of the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2001.”*

Since 1931, with the changes in societal values, WS’ policies and programs place greater emphasis on the part of the Act discussing *“bringing (damage) under control”*, rather than *“eradication”* and *“suppression”* of wildlife populations. In 1988, Congress strengthened the legislative mandate of WS with the Rural Development, Agriculture, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act. This Act states, in part:

*“That hereafter, the Secretary of Agriculture is authorized, except for urban rodent control, to conduct activities and to enter into agreements with States, local jurisdictions, individuals, and public and private agencies, organizations, and institutions in the control of nuisance mammals and birds and those mammals and birds species that are reservoirs for zoonotic diseases, and to deposit any money collected under any such agreement into the appropriation accounts that incur the costs to be available immediately and to remain available until expended for Animal Damage Control activities.”*

### **Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries**

LDWF, under the direction of the Governor-appointed Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, is specifically charged in Title 56 of the Louisiana Revised Statutes, Chapter 1, part 1, §1A, to protect, conserve, and replenish the natural resources of the state and the wildlife of the state, including all aquatic life.

The mission of LDWF, as stated in the “LA Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Five-Year Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2003 – 2007”, is to:

*“...manage, conserve, and promote wise utilization of Louisiana’s renewable fish and wildlife resources and their supporting habitats through replenishment, protection, enhancement, research, development, and education for the benefit of current and future generations; to provide opportunities for knowledge of and use and enjoyment of these*

*resources; and to provide a safe environment for the users for the users of these resources.”*

LDWF currently has a MOU with WS. The document establishes a cooperative relationship among WS and LDWF. Responsibilities include planning, coordinating, and implementing policies to address wildlife damage management and facilitating exchange of information.

#### **Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)**

NRCS is responsible for certifying wetlands under the Wetland Conservation provisions of the Food Security Act (16 U.S.C. 3821 and 3822). Topographic maps are available through their offices that identify the presence of wetlands.

#### **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE)**

The COE regulates and permits activities regarding waters of the United States including protection and utilization under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.

#### **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**

EPA is responsible for implementing and enforcing the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) which regulates the registration and use of pesticides. The EPA is also responsible for administering and enforcing the Section 404 program of the Clean Water Act with the COE; this established a permit program for the review and approval of water quality standards that directly impact wetlands.

#### **Compliance with Other Federal and State Statutes**

Several federal laws, state laws, and state statutes regulate WS’ wildlife damage management program activities. WS complies with these laws and statutes and consults and cooperates with other agencies as appropriate.

**National Environmental Policy Act.** Environmental documents pursuant to NEPA must be completed before actions consistent with the NEPA decision can be implemented. WS also coordinates specific projects and programs with other agencies. Purpose of these contacts is to coordinate any wildlife damage management that may affect resources managed by these agencies or affect other areas of mutual concern.

**Endangered Species Act.** It is federal policy, under the ESA, that all federal agencies shall seek to conserve T&E species and shall utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of the Act (Sec. 2(c)). WS conducts Section 7 consultations with the USFWS to use the expertise of the USFWS to ensure that *“any action authorized, funded or carried out by such an agency . . . is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered or threatened species . . . Each agency shall use the best scientific and commercial data available”* (Sec. 7(a)(2)).

**Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act.** FIFRA requires the registration,



classification, and regulation of all pesticides used in the United States. The EPA is responsible for implementing and enforcing FIFRA. All chemical methods integrated into the Louisiana WS program are registered with and regulated by the EPA and Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry. All chemical methods used by WS would be in compliance with labeling procedures and requirements.

**Clean Water Act (Section 404).** Section 404 (33 USC 1344) of the CWA prohibits the discharge of dredged or fill material into waters of the United States without a permit from the USACE unless the specific activity is exempted in 33 CFR 323 or covered by a Nationwide Permit (NP) in 33 CFR 330. Breaching of most beaver dams is covered by these regulations (33 CFR 323 and 330). In addition, a recent court decision, the Tulloch Rule Decision, determined that minimal quantities of material released during excavation activities, such as may occur during beaver dam breaching, may be considered “*incidental fallback*” which would not be governed by Section 404 and is allowed (Wayland and Shaeffer 1997).

**Food Security Act.** The Wetland Conservation provision (Swampbuster) of the 1985 (16 USC 3801-3862), 1990 (as amended by PL 101-624), and 1996 (as amended by PL 104-127) farm bills require all agricultural producers to protect wetlands on the farms they own. Wetlands converted to farmland prior to December 23, 1985, are not subject to wetland compliance provisions even if wetland conditions return as a result of lack of maintenance or management. If prior converted cropland is not planted to an agricultural commodity (crops, native and improved pastures, rangeland, tree farms, and livestock production) for more than 5 consecutive years and wetland characteristics return, the cropland is considered abandoned. Once cropland is considered abandoned, the cropland becomes a wetland subject to regulations under Swampbuster and Section 404 of the CWA. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is responsible for certifying wetland determinations according to this Act.

**Letter of Authorization to Remove State Regulated Nuisance Animals from Private Property.**

This letter authorizes all Louisiana WS employees to remove state regulated nuisance animals from private property. Night shooting is included for all species except T&E species, species of special concern, and white-tailed deer. Also, it includes authorization for scientific collection for determination of depredation problems. (James H. Jenkins, LDWF, letter to Dwight LeBlanc).

## Appendix C

### Criteria for Beaver Dam Breaching/Removal

Beaver dam breaching/removal is generally conducted to maintain existing stream channels and drainage patterns and/or to reduce flood waters. Beaver dams are often made from natural debris such as logs, sticks, and mud. Dams also might contain man-made materials such as tires, plastic pipe, or plywood. Beaver are opportunistic when it comes to materials used for dam building. Approximately the center of the dam or area closest to the existing channel is dislodged during a beaver dam breaching operation. Impoundments that WS removes are normally from recent beaver activity and have not been in place long enough to take on the factors of a true wetland (i.e., hydric soils, hydrophytic vegetation, hydrology). Beaver dam breaching/removal by hand or with binary explosives does not affect the substrate or the natural course of the stream and returns the area back to its preexisting condition with similar flows and circulations. Because beaver dams involve waters of the United States, dam breaching/removal is regulated under Section 404 of the CWA.

Wetlands are recognized by three characteristics: hydric soils, hydrophytic vegetation, and general hydrology. Hydric soils are either composed of, or have a thick surface layer of, decomposed plant materials (muck); sandy soils have dark stains or streaks from organic material in the upper layer where plant material has attached to soil particles. Hydric soils may be bluish gray or gray below the surface or brownish black to black and have the common smell of rotten eggs. Wetlands also have hydrophytic vegetation present such as cattails (*Typha spp.*), bulrushes (*Scirpus spp.*), willows (*Salix spp.*), sedges (*Carex spp.*), and water plantains (Alismataceae). A final indicator is general hydrology which includes standing and flowing water or waterlogged soils during the growing season; high water marks often are present on trees and drift lines of small piles of debris may be seen. Beaver dams usually will develop a layer of organic material at the surface. Silt deposits can occur rapidly, but aquatic vegetation and high water marks (a new high water mark is created by the beaver dam) are usually not present. However, cattails and willows can show up rapidly if they are in the vicinity, but most hydrophytic vegetation takes time to establish.

In most beaver dam breaching/removal operations, the material that is displaced is exempt from permitting or included in a Nationwide Permit (NWP) in accordance with Section 404 of the CWA (33 CFR Part 323). A permit would be required if the impoundment caused by a beaver dam was not covered under a NWP or permitting exemption and was considered a true wetland. WS' biologists and specialists survey the beaver dam site and impoundment to determine if conditions exist for classifying the site as a true wetland. If wetland conditions exist, the landowner or cooperator is asked the approximate age of the dam or how long he/she has known of its presence. This information is useful in determining if Swampbuster, Section 404 permit exemptions, or nationwide permits will allow breaching/removal of the beaver dam. If it is determined that a dam cannot be removed or breached under provisions provided by Swampbusters, 404 permit exemption or NWP, the landowner or cooperator is responsible for obtaining a Section 404 permit before the dam could be breached/removed by WS.

The following explains Section 404 exemptions and conditions that pertain to the breaching/removal of beaver dams.

**33 CFR 323 - Permits For Discharges of Dredged or Fill Material into Waters of the United States.** This regulation provides guidance to determine whether certain activities require permits under Section 404.

**Part 323.4 Discharges not requiring permits.** This section establishes exemptions for discharging certain types of fill into waters of the United States without a permit. Certain minor drainage activities connected with normal farming, ranching, and silvicultural practices do not require a permit as long as these drainages do not include the immediate or gradual conversion of a wetland (i.e., beaver ponds greater than 3 years old) to a non-wetland. Specifically, part (a)(1)(iii)(C)(i) states, “...*fill material incidental to connecting upland drainage facilities (e.g., drainage ditches) to waters of the United States, adequate to effect the removal of excess soil moisture from upland croplands...*”. This indicates that beaver dams that block ditches, canals, or other structures designed to drain water from upland crop fields can be breached without a permit.

Moreover, (a)(1)(iii)(C)(iv) states the following types of activities do not require a permit. “*The discharges of dredged or fill materials incidental to the emergency removal of sandbars, gravel bars, or other similar blockages which are formed during flood flows or other events, where such blockages close or constrict previously existing drainageways and, if not promptly removed, would result in damage to or loss of existing crops or would impair or prevent the plowing, seeding, harvesting or cultivating of crops on land in established use for crop production. Such removal does not include enlarging or extending the dimensions of, or changing the bottom elevations of, the affected drainageway as it existed prior to the formation of the blockage. Removal must be accomplished within one year of discovery of such blockages in order to be eligible for exemption.*” This allows the breaching of beaver dams in natural streams to restore drainage of agricultural lands within one year of discovery.

Part 323.4 (a)(2) allows “*Maintenance, including emergency reconstruction of recently damaged parts, of currently serviceable structures such as dikes, dams, levees, groins, riprap, breakwaters, causeways, bridge abutments or approaches, and transportation structures. Maintenance does not include any modification that changes the character, scope, or size of the original fill design. Emergency reconstruction must occur within a reasonable period of time after damage occurs in order to qualify for this exemption.*” This allows beaver dams to be breached without a permit where they have resulted in damage to roads, culverts, bridges, or levees if it is done in a reasonable amount of time.

**33 CFR 330 - NWP Program.** The USACE, Chief of Engineers is authorized to grant certain dredge and fill activities on a nationwide basis if they have minimal impact on the environment. NWPs are listed in Appendix A of 33 CFR 330 and permittees must satisfy all terms and conditions established to qualify for their use. Individual beaver dam breaching by WS may be covered by any of the following NWPs if not already exempted from permit requirements by the

regulations discussed above. WS complies with all conditions and restrictions placed on NWP for any instance of beaver dam breaching/removal done under a specific NWP.

Nationwide permits can be used **except** in any component of the National Wild and Scenic River System such as waterways listed as an “*Outstanding Water Resource*”, or any water body which is part of an area designated for “*Recreational or Ecological Significance*”.

NWP 3 authorizes the rehabilitation of those structures, such as culverts, homes, and bridges, destroyed by floods and “discrete events,” such as beaver dams, provided that the activity is commenced within 2 years of the date when the beaver dam was established.

NWP 18 allows minor discharges of dredged and fill material, including the breaching of beaver dams, into all waters of the United States provided that the quantity of discharge and the volume of excavated area does not exceed 10 cubic yards below the plane of the ordinary high water mark (this is normally well below the level of the beaver dam) or is in a “special aquatic site” (wetlands, mudflats, vegetated shallows, riffle and pool complexes, sanctuaries, and refuges). The District Engineer must be “notified” (general conditions for notification apply), if the discharge is between 10-25 cubic yards for a single project or the project is in a special aquatic site and less than  $\frac{1}{10}$  of an acre is expected to be lost. If the values are greater than those given, a permit is required. Beaver dams rarely would exceed 2 or 3 cubic yards of backfill into the waters and probably no more than 5 cubic yards would ever be exceeded. Therefore, this stipulation is not restrictive. Beaver dams periodically may be breached in a special aquatic area, but normally the aquatic site will be returned to normal. However, if a true wetland exists, and beaver dam breaching/removal is not allowed under another permit, then a permit must be obtained from the District Engineer.

NWP 27 provides for the discharge of dredge and fill for activities associated with the restoration of wetland and riparian areas with certain restrictions. On non-federal public and private lands, the owner must have: a binding agreement with USFWS or NRCS to conduct restoration; a voluntary wetland restoration project documented by NRCS; or notify the District Engineer according to “notification” procedures. On federal lands, including USACE and USFWS, wetland restoration can take place without any contract or notification. This NWP “...applies to restoration projects that serve the purpose of restoring “natural” wetland hydrology, vegetation, and function to altered and degraded non-tidal wetlands and “natural” functions of riparian areas. This NWP does not authorize the conversion of natural wetlands to another aquatic use...” If operating under this permit, the breaching/removal of a beaver dam would be allowed as long as it was not a true wetland. Non-federal public and private lands require the appropriate agreement, project documentation, or notification to be in place.

A quick response without delays resulting from permitting requirements can be critical to the success of minimizing or preventing aquatic rodent damage. Exemptions contained in the above regulations or NWPs provide for the breaching/removal of the majority of beaver dams that Louisiana WS encounters. The primary determination that must be made by WS’ personnel is whether a beaver impounded area has become a true wetland or is the site just a flooded area. Flexibility allowed by these exemptions and NWPs is important for the efficient and effective

resolution of many beaver damage problems. Damage often escalates the longer an area remains flooded.

## **Appendix D**

### **Methods Used or Recommended by Louisiana WS For Beaver, Nutria, and Muskrat Damage Management**

Resource owners and government agencies have used a variety of techniques to reduce beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage. However, all lethal and non-lethal methods developed to date have limitations based on costs, logistics, and effectiveness. Below is a discussion of beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage management methods currently available to the Louisiana WS program. If other methods are proven effective and legalized for use in Louisiana, incorporation into the Louisiana WS program would then be based upon NEPA compliance.

#### **NON-LETHAL DAMAGE MANAGEMENT METHODS**

##### **Habitat Management**

Habitat management for the reduction of beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage refers to vegetation manipulation to reduce the carrying capacity for beaver, nutria, and muskrats.

##### **Beaver.**

Habitat alteration through forest type conversion might be the most effective long-term method of reducing beaver density in some areas (Payne 1989). Forest management practices that discourage the establishment of willow, sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), and conifers and promote long-lived hardwoods within 200 - 400 feet of streams may reduce beaver populations on those streams. Payne (1989) suggested that reduced food availability might force beaver colonies to move more often. However, this increased movement could increase nuisance complaints. This type of management practice would be conducted by entities other than WS.

Physical factors may have a greater impact on beaver habitat use than food availability, and habitat alteration may have little effect on beaver populations (Beier and Barrett 1987). Habitat management to reduce or stabilize beaver populations has been a component of beaver management recommendations. Habitat management also may involve manipulating beaver impoundment water levels to reduce damage or conflict caused by flooding. Impoundments can be completely drained by breaching beaver dams by hand or with explosives. Water levels also may be lowered by use of a drain tube or leveler placed in a dam (Roblee 1983, Roblee 1984, Laramie and Knowles 1985, Roblee 1987, Miller and Yarrow 1994, Lisle 1996). However, application and success of this strategy has been limited (Nolte et al. 2000). Habitat management to reduce beaver populations has the greatest potential for application on federal, state, and county forest lands. At present, no large-scale and consistent programs exist to deal with this beaver damage management strategy.

Continual breaching of dams and removal of dam construction materials on a daily basis sometimes will cause beaver to move to other locations. Water control devices such as the three-log drain (Roblee 1983), the T-culvert guard (Roblee 1987), wire mesh culvert (Roblee 1983), and the Clemson beaver pond leveler (Miller and Yarrow 1994) can sometimes be used to

regulate water levels in beaver ponds. Additionally, the Beaver Deceiver is a water control system that attempts to quiet, calm, and deepen the water in front of culverts (to reduce the attractiveness to beaver) and exclude beaver from a wide area around the upstream opening of the culvert (Lisle 1996). However, effectiveness of this method has not been evaluated in published documents.

### **Nutria.**

Land that is well drained and free of dense, weedy vegetation is generally unattractive to nutria. Use of “good farming practices”, such as precision land leveling and weed management, can minimize nutria damage in agriculture areas. Any drainage that holds water can be used by nutria as a travel route or home site. Small, contour ditches can help to eliminate low spots and sills and enhance rapid drainage on poorly drained soils.

Grading and bulldozing can destroy active burrows in the banks of steep sided ditches and waterways. In addition, contour bank slopes less than 45° can discourage new burrowing. Eliminating brush, trees, thickets, and weeds from fence lines and turn rows that are adjacent to ditches, drainages, waterways and other wetlands often discourage nutria activities. Burning or removing cleared vegetation from the site also discourages nutria activities. Brush piles left on the ground or in low spots can become ideal summer homes for nutria. This type of management practice would be conducted by entities other than WS.

### **Muskrat.**

One of the best ways to reduce habitat for muskrats is to eliminate aquatic or other suitable foods preferred by muskrats. Habitat alterations to reduce cattail wetlands could reduce the density of muskrats. Where possible, constructing pond dams in a manner that discourage burrowing also will help protect resources. Preventing muskrats from burrowing into dams can be achieved by drawing water levels down in winter and filling burrows with rip-rap. These types of management practices would be conducted by entities other than WS.

### **Explosives**

Explosives are defined as any chemical mixture or device which serves as a blasting agent or detonator. Explosives are generally used to breach beaver dams that are too large to remove by hand digging and after beaver have been removed from a damage situation. Explosives are also used when heavy equipment cannot be moved onto the dam site. Binary explosives consist of ammonium nitrate and nitromethane, which are not classified as explosives until mixed. Therefore, binary explosives are subject to fewer regulations and controls. However, once mixed, binary explosives are considered high explosives and subject to all applicable federal requirements. Detonating cord and detonators are considered explosives and WS must adhere to all applicable State and federal regulations for storage, transportation, and handling. All WS’ explosive specialists are required to attend 30 hours of extensive explosive safety training and spend time with a certified explosive specialist in the field prior to obtaining certification. All blasting activities are conducted by well-trained, certified blasters and closely supervised by

professional wildlife biologists. Explosive handling and use procedures follow the rules and guidelines set forth by the Institute of Makers of Explosives which is the safety arm of the commercial explosive industry in the United States and Canada. WS also adheres to transportation and storage regulations from State and federal agencies such as Occupational Safety and Health Association, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the Department of Transportation.

### **Beaver Dam Breaching/Removal**

Dam breaching involves the removal of beaver-deposited debris that impedes the flow of water. Breaching a beaver dam is generally conducted to maintain existing stream channels, restore drainage patterns, and reduce flood waters that have negatively impacted silvicultural, agricultural, or ranching/farming activities. Beaver dams removed by WS are normally from recent beaver activity, and sites have not had enough time to develop characteristics of a true wetland (i.e., hydric soils, hydrophytic vegetation, hydrological function). Unwanted beaver dams may be removed by hand or with explosives. Explosives are used only by WS' personnel specially trained and certified to conduct such activities. Only binary explosives are used (i.e., they are comprised of two parts that must be mixed before they can be detonated as an explosive material). Because beaver dams involve waters of the United States, removal is regulated under Section 404 of the CWA.

Beaver dam breaching does not affect substrate or natural course of streams. Breaching beaver dams often re-establishes preexisting conditions with similar flows and circulations. Most dam breaching operations, if considered an activity with discharge as defined by Section 404 of the CWA, are covered under 33 CFR 323 or 330 and do not require a permit. A permit would be required if the beaver dam breaching activity is not covered by a 404 permitting exemption or NWP and the area affected by the beaver dam was considered a true wetland. WS' personnel survey the site and determine the apparent age of the dam by characteristics such as aquatic plant communities. If the site appears to have conditions over 3 years old or appears to meet the definition of a true wetland, the landowner or cooperator is required to obtain a permit before proceeding (See Appendix C for information that explains Section 404 permit exemptions and conditions for breaching/removing beaver dams).

### **Water Control Devices**

Pond levelers and water control devices have been used in many different states with varying degrees of success (USGAO 2001). Various types of water control devices have been described (Arner 1964, Roblee 1984, Laramie and Knowles 1985, Lisle 1996). Clemson beaver pond levelers have proven effective in reducing flooding in certain situations if properly maintained (Miller and Yarrow 1994, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources 1994). Nolte et al. (2000) found Clemson beaver pond levelers to be 50% effective in meeting landowner objectives in Mississippi. The Beaver Deceiver is a relatively recent water control system that attempts to quiet, calm and deepen the water around culverts (to reduce the attractiveness to beaver) and exclude beaver from a wide area around the upstream opening of the culvert (Lisle 1996). A critical part of the beaver deceiver strategy is to silence or prevent the sound of running water.



The beaver deceiver is a water control system that has been evolving since 1996 and has been effective at controlling beaver flooding in some situations.

Water control devices generally are of two designs. One design is a perforated pipe passing through the beaver dam, and the second design is a fence erected 15 - 90 feet in front of the culvert to prevent the beaver from blocking the culvert with debris (Lisle 1996, E. Butler, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Erection of a fence could be considered exclusion, but when used in conjunction with a pipe or culvert, is considered a water control device. The second design may have a perforated pipe going from the fence to the culvert to allow water to flow, because the fence may become clogged with debris.

Cost of water control devices is variable depending on number of devices/dam, type of device, materials, and labor. Large dams may need multiple devices to accommodate the volume of water in the flowage. Materials and installation of water control devices can be relatively modest for a three-log drain (Arner 1964), \$500 - \$750 for a single modified Clemson beaver pond leveler (B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication), \$1050 - \$2,300 for a single beaver stop (DCP Consulting, Calgary, Canada, 1996), or over \$1,000 for a Beaver Deceiver. A modified Beaver Deceiver can be constructed for \$250 - \$300; however, annual maintenance costs were estimated at \$350 (E. Butler, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Jensen et al. (1999) reported that the initial costs for a Clemson Beaver Pond Leveler and a Pitchfork Guard/Grate in the first year, including the costs of materials, installation, and maintenance, were \$1,542 and \$3,688, respectively. The cost of a Beaver Deceiver may range from \$150 - \$1,500, and an additional cost would be applied if pipes were needed at the site (S. Lisle, Penobscot Nation, letter to J. Cromwell, WS, September 7, 2000).

Use of pond levelers or water control devices may require frequent maintenance depending on type of water control device. Continued maintenance is often necessary for the device to remain operational because stream flow, leaf fall, floods, and continued beaver activity will continuously bring debris to the water control device. Maintenance and upkeep of water control devices vary from site to site but can be expensive. The Maine WS program estimated annual maintenance costs to be approximately \$350/water control device (E. Butler, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Mississippi WS reported the construction and installation cost of pond levelers to cost approximately \$700 (T. Aderman, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication). Annual costs may also be associated with suppressing beaver populations to keep the devices operational (B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication).

Water control devices are most effective on wetlands lacking in-stream flow (B. Sloan, USDA/APHIS/WS, personal communication), and may be ineffective in beaver ponds in broad, low-lying areas (Organ et al. 1996). Water control devices may not be appropriate in streams or ditches with continuous flow, because the volume of water is too great for the device to handle. Streams and ditches with continuous flow often carry debris to the device and cause drainage problems. Periods of unusually high rainfall or increased water flow may render the devices less effective because of increased water volume (Wood et al. 1994, Anonymous 1999).

## **Exclusion Methods**

Exclusion involves physically preventing beaver, nutria, or muskrats from gaining access to protected resources through fencing or other barriers. Fencing of small critical areas such as around culverts and drain pipes can sometimes prevent plugging by beaver. In situations where girdling or gnawing of trees or shrubs is a concern, fencing can help protect valuable resources. Hardware cloth, metal flashing, or sand/paint mixtures can be used to protect plants. Construction of concrete spillways may reduce or prevent damage to dams. Rip-rap also can be used on dams or levees at times to deter burrowing. Electrical barriers have proven effective in limited situations for excluding mammals and birds. An electrical field through the water in a ditch or other narrow channel, or hot-wire suspended just above the water level in areas protected from public access, have been effective at excluding mammals and birds. Effectiveness of an electrical barrier is extended when used in conjunction with an odor or taste cue that is emitted, because beaver will continue to avoid the area even if the electrical field is discontinued (Kolz and Johnson 1997).

Protecting ornamental or landscape trees from beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage by using hardware cloth or similar material, a sand/paint mixture, or chain-link fence is recommended frequently WS. This method is used most frequently by property and homeowners. It is rarely, if ever, used to prevent large-scale timber or forest damage due to high material costs and labor required to wrap hundreds or thousands of trees in a managed forest. A variety of road culvert screens or fences have been used by county and local highway departments. In most cases the screens do not solve a damage problem, as workforce is still required to remove beaver dam materials from the screen or fence. The main benefit of this technique is to prevent beaver dam materials from being deposited inside the culvert.

### **Live-capture Methods**

**Leg-hold traps** can be effectively used to capture a variety of mammals. Leg-hold traps are either placed beside, or in some situations, in travel ways being actively used by target species. Placement of traps is contingent upon habits of the respective target species, habitat conditions, and presence of non-target animals. Effective trap and lure placement, adjustment, and use by trained WS' personnel contributes to the leg-hold trap's selectivity. An additional advantage is that leg-hold traps can allow for on-site release of non-target animals. Use of leg-hold traps requires more skill than some methods, but leg-hold traps are indispensable in resolving many damage problems. Beaver, nutria, and muskrats live-captured in leg-hold traps can be euthanized by shooting.

**Snares** are capture devices comprised of a cable formed in a loop with a locking device. Snares are often placed in travel ways and equipped with a swivel to minimize cable twisting and breakage. Leg-hold traps can be difficult to keep operational during periods of inclement weather. However, snares are easier and less affected by inclement weather. Target animals are generally caught around the body and later can be euthanized by shooting.

**Hancock traps** (suitcase/basket type cage traps) are designed to live-capture beaver. This type of trap is constructed of a metal frame covered in chain-link fence that is hinged with springs.

Trap appearance is similar to a large suitcase when closed. When set, the trap is opened to allow an animal to enter, and when tripped the sides close around the animal. One advantage of using the Hancock trap is the ease of release of beaver or non-target animals. Disadvantages of these traps are expense (approximately \$275 per trap), cumbersome and bulky size, and difficulty to set (Miller and Yarrow 1994). Hancock traps can also be dangerous for humans to set (i.e., hardhats are recommended when setting suitcase traps), are less cost and time-efficient than snares, leg-holds, and body-grip traps, and may cause serious and debilitating injury to otters (Blundell et al. 1999). Beaver captured in Hancock traps can be euthanized by shooting.

**Colony traps** are multi-catch traps used to either live-capture or drown muskrats. There are various types of colony traps. One common type of colony trap consists of a cylindrical tube of wire mesh with a one-way door on each end (Novak 1987b). Colony traps are set at entrances to muskrat burrows or placed in muskrat travel lanes. Colony traps are effective and relatively inexpensive and easy to construct (Miller 1994). The stovepipe trap, a common type of colony trap, is usually made with sheet metal and may capture two to four muskrats on the first night (Miller 1994). Muskrat live captured in colony traps would be euthanized by shooting.

**Cage traps** are commonly used to catch nutria. Like the Hancock trap, the target animal is caught alive and can be euthanized by shooting. Nontargets that are caught can be released unharmed. These traps are expensive and prone to theft and vandalism.

## **LETHAL DAMAGE MANAGEMENT METHODS**

Lethal damage management involves methods specifically designed to remove beaver, nutria, and muskrats in certain situations to a level that stabilizes, reduces, or eliminates damage. Level of removal necessary to achieve a reduction of beaver, nutria, and muskrat damage varies according to the resource protected, habitat, population, effectiveness of other damage management strategies, and other ecological factors. Despite the numerous damage management methods developed, trapping remains the most effective method of removing beaver and reducing damage (Hill 1976, Hill et al. 1977, Wigley 1981, Weaver et al. 1985). Intensive trapping can eliminate or greatly reduce the beaver populations in limited areas (Hill 1976, Forbus and Allen 1981).

Specific control methods involve removing beaver, with body-grip (e.g., Conibear) and leg-hold traps, snares, and shooting. Muskrats and nutria may be removed with body-grip and leg-hold traps, colony or cage-type traps, snap traps, shooting, or toxicants. However, WS does not relocate beaver, nutria, and muskrats in Louisiana, and all live-captured target animals would be euthanized. Live-capture devices are described in the section above. These specific methods are described in USDA (1997). A formal risk assessment of all mechanical devices used by the WS program in Louisiana can be found in USDA (1997). These techniques are usually implemented by WS' personnel because of technical training required to use such devices.

**Shooting** is the most selective method for removing target species and may involve use of spotlights and shotguns, rifles, or pistols. Shooting is an effective method to remove small numbers of beaver, nutria, or muskrat in damage situations, especially where trapping is not

feasible. Removal of specific animals in the problem area can sometimes provide immediate relief from a problem. Shooting is sometimes utilized as one of the first lethal damage management options because it offers the potential of resolving a problem more quickly and selectively than some other methods, but it does not always work. Shooting may sometimes be one of the only beaver, nutria, or muskrat damage management options available if other factors preclude setting of damage management equipment. WS' personnel receive firearms safety training to use firearms that are necessary for performing damage management duties.

Firearm use is very sensitive and a public concern because of safety issues related to the public and misuse of firearms. To ensure safe use and awareness, WS' employees who use firearms to conduct official duties are required to attend an approved firearms safety and use training program within 3 months of their appointment and a refresher course every 2 years afterwards (WS Directive 2.615). Many WS' employees carry firearms as a condition of employment and are required to certify that they meet the criteria as stated in the *Lautenberg Amendment*. The *Lautenberg Amendment* prohibits firearm possession by anyone who has been convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence.

**Body-grip (e.g., Conibear) traps** are designed to cause the quick death of the animal that activates the trap. The number 330 body-grip trap is generally used for beaver and the number 220 for nutria. Body-grip traps for beaver capture are used exclusively in aquatic habitats, with placement depths varying from a few inches to several feet below the water surface. Smaller Conibear traps, such as those used for muskrats, can be set either in or out of the water. Placement is in travel ways or at lodge or burrow entrances. Animals are captured as they travel through the trap and activate the triggering mechanism. Safety hazards and risks to humans are usually related to setting, placing, checking, or removing the traps. Body-grip traps present a minor risk to non-target animals because of the selectivity of placement in aquatic habitats and below the water surface.

## CHEMICAL MANAGEMENT METHODS

All chemicals used by Louisiana WS are registered under FIFRA and administered by the EPA and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry. No chemicals are used on public or private lands without authorization from the land management agency or property owner/manager. The only chemical method used and/or currently authorized for ARDM use in Louisiana is zinc phosphide.

**Zinc phosphide** is a toxicant registered in Louisiana for use in nutria and muskrat damage management. No toxicants are registered for use on beaver. Use of zinc phosphide on various types of fruit and vegetable baits (e.g., apples, carrots, sweet potatoes) has proven to be effective at suppressing local populations. All chemicals used by Louisiana WS are registered under FIFRA and administered by EPA and Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry. Zinc phosphide is federally registered by APHIS/WS. Specific bait applications are designed to minimize non-target hazards (Evans 1970). Zinc phosphide presents minimal secondary hazard to predators and scavengers. Zinc phosphide is an emetic; therefore, meat-eating animals such as mink, dogs, cats, and raptors regurgitate animals that are killed with zinc phosphide with little or

no effect. During informal consultation on specific projects WS and USFWS determined that, based on where and how the chemical would be used, threatened or endangered species in Louisiana would not be affected (Deborah Fuller USFWS, personal consultation). WS' personnel who supervise and use pesticides are certified as applicators by the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry. Personnel who are not certified are trained by, and work under, the direct supervision of WS certified applicators. They are required to adhere to all requirements for purchase, storage, use, and disposal of these products, as provided by FIFRA and the laws and regulations governing pesticides in the State of Louisiana. No chemicals are used on federal or private lands without authorization from the land management agency or property owner/manager. A quantitative risk assessment, which evaluated potential impacts of WS' use of chemical methods when used according to the label, concluded that no adverse effects are expected from the above (USDA 1997).

## Appendix E

### Federal and State List of Threatened and Endangered Species In Louisiana

COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	FEDERAL STATUS <sup>1</sup>	STATE STATUS <sup>2</sup>
<b>Plants</b>			
American chaffseed	<i>Schwalbea americana</i>	Endangered	
earthfruit	<i>Geocarpon minimum</i>	Threatened	
Louisiana quillwort	<i>Isoetes louisianensis</i>	Endangered	
<b>Invertebrates</b>			
American burying beetle	<i>Nicrophorus americanus</i>		Endangered
fat pocketbook	<i>Potamilus capax</i>		
inflated heelsplitter (a.k.a. Alabama heelsplitter)	<i>Potamilus inflatus</i>	Threatened	Threatened
Louisiana pearlshell	<i>Margaritifera hembeli</i>	Threatened	Endangered
pink mucket	<i>Lampsilis abrupta</i>	Endangered	
<b>Fish</b>			
pallid sturgeon	<i>Scaphirhynchus albus</i>	Endangered	Endangered
Gulf sturgeon	<i>Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi</i>	Threatened	Threatened
<b>Reptiles</b>			
American alligator	<i>Alligator mississippiensis</i>	T(S/A)	
green sea turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	Threatened	Threatened
hawksbill sea turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>	Endangered	Endangered
Kemp's Ridley sea turtle	<i>Lepidochelys kempii</i>	Endangered	Endangered
leatherback sea turtle	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>	Endangered	Endangered
loggerhead sea turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	Threatened	Threatened
gopher tortoise	<i>Gopherus polyphemus</i>	Threatened	Threatened
ringed map turtle (a.k.a. ringed sawback turtle)	<i>Graptemys oculifera</i>	Threatened	Threatened
Louisiana pine snake	<i>Pituophis ruthveni</i>	Candidate	
<b>Birds</b>			
brown pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	Endangered	Endangered
bald eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	Threatened	Endangered
peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		Threatened/Endangered
Attwater's greater prairie chicken**	<i>Tympanuchus cupido attwateri</i>		Endangered
whooping crane**	<i>Grus americana</i>		Endangered
Eskimo curlew**	<i>Numenius borealis</i>		Endangered
piping plover	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>	Threatened	Threatened/Endangered
interior least tern	<i>Sterna antillarum athalassos</i>	Endangered	Endangered
ivory-billed woodpecker**	<i>Campephilus principalis</i>		Endangered
red-cockaded woodpecker	<i>Picoides borealis</i>	Endangered	Endangered
black-capped vireo	<i>Vireo atricapilla</i>	Endangered	
Bachman's warbler**	<i>Vermivora bachmanii</i>		Endangered
<b>Mammals</b>			
manatee	<i>Trichechus manatus</i>		Endangered
blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>		Endangered

humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Endangered	
<b>COMMON NAME</b>	<b>SCIENTIFIC NAME</b>	<b>FEDERAL STATUS<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>STATE STATUS<sup>2</sup></b>
finback whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	Endangered	Endangered
Sei whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>		Endangered
sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		Endangered
American black bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>	T(S/A)	
Louisiana black bear	<i>Ursus americanus luteolus</i>	Threatened	Threatened
Florida panther**	<i>Felis concolor coryi</i>		Endangered

**Sources of status information:**

<sup>1</sup>Federal (Fish and Wildlife Service): <http://www.fws.gov>

<sup>2</sup>State (Department of Wildlife and Fisheries): <http://www.wlf.state.la.us>

\*\*Species believed to be extinct in Louisiana

T(S/A) –Similarity of Appearance to a Threatened Taxon

**Appendix F**  
**Biological Assessment for**  
**Reducing Aquatic Rodent Damage Through an**  
**Integrated Wildlife Damage Management Program**  
**In the State of Louisiana**

**Analysis of Potential Impacts on Threatened and Endangered Species**

**INTRODUCTION**

Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended ((ESA) 16 USC 1531-1543) requires each Federal agency to ensure that its actions will not jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or destroy or modify the species' critical habitat. If one or more protected species are found within the area of a proposed action, then the agency must conduct a biological assessment to determine if that action will adversely affect any listed species. This determination is made in consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Formal consultation is required if the biological assessment concludes that a listed species may be adversely impacted. This biological assessment has been prepared to assist the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Wildlife Services (WS) program to comply with Section 7 of the ESA.

**DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION**

The proposed action is an ongoing management program for the protection of agriculture and other valuable resources from beaver, nutria, and muskrat caused damage. Among resources being protected are crops, timber, roads, publicly-maintained drainages, human health and safety, personal property, and natural resources. The proposed action is part of the ongoing nationwide WS program, which has previously been reviewed under a formal Section 7 consultation between WS and FWS (USDA 1997). This consultation did not evaluate any "may affect" determinations for habitat management methods, which are addressed in this document.

WS presently uses an Integrated Wildlife Damage Management (IWDM) approach, utilizing a variety of methods for managing aquatic rodent damage. This allows WS personnel greater flexibility and more opportunity to tailor an effective damage management strategy for each specific problem that is encountered. In selecting control techniques, consideration is given to the type, magnitude, duration, frequency, and location of damage. Consideration is also given to the status of potential nontarget species. The decision-making steps taken by WS personnel when addressing aquatic rodent damage are documented in the "WS Decision Model," which is discussed in great detail in the "Animal Damage Control Final Environmental Impact Statement (USDA 1997)."

Requests for assistance may be handled through technical assistance or direct control. Technical Assistance may include providing advice, information, recommendations, and material to others



for use in resolving aquatic rodent-caused damage. Most WS direct control efforts for aquatic rodents utilize site-specific lethal control measures. Lethal control is achieved through the use of traps (leghold, body grip, and snares) and shooting. A risk assessment in the EIS addresses the use of these tools and the associated risks. In situations where nonlethal control is determined to be effective, WS utilizes physical exclusion via barriers, baffles, and shields; water levelers; and beaver dam removal, either by hand or with binary explosives.

Traps are set to maximize target catches and minimize catches of nontarget animals. This is accomplished through the selection of specific trap types and trap placement. Barriers and shields are usually used to prevent gnawing damage. Water levelers and beaver baffles are used to protect water flow through culverts or to maintain water levels in beaver ponds at a certain height. Dam removal is normally a one-time, short-term event conducted to restore water flow through small ditches and natural drainages. Only the portion of the dam blocking the drainage is breached. In general, dam removal is usually conducted concurrently with beaver trapping, as part of a comprehensive beaver management program. Dam removal is conducted in accordance with provisions of the Clean Water Act (33 USC 466 et seq.).

Some nonlethal tools are not used by WS because they are biologically unsound, legally questionable, or ineffective (e.g., translocation and frightening). Others are more appropriately used by the person experiencing a beaver problem rather than WS.

## **POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES**

Of the species and subspecies currently listed as threatened or endangered under provisions of the ESA, twenty-four occur within the State of Louisiana (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2004). These include three plants, three bivalves, two fish, seven reptiles, six birds, and three mammals. Fish and Wildlife Service also lists one reptilian candidate species and two species (alligator and black bear) protected under the Similarity of Appearance clause.

A review of potential impacts of aquatic rodent management activities on each of the listed species was conducted by WS. This analysis took into consideration the direct and indirect effects of available and acceptable aquatic rodent damage control strategies, which include physical exclusion; habitat management via dam removal and water level management; and lethal control using traps, shooting, and zinc phosphide.

### **T/E Impact Analysis**

WS believes that none of the listed species' existence would be jeopardized by any control strategy used by WS to protect resources from aquatic rodent damage. Our rationale for this conclusion, by species, follows:

- 1. Louisiana quillwort (*Isoetes louisianensis*).** This species inhabits gravel and sand bars on small and medium sized streams. Currently, it is known only from two small populations in the Bogue Chitto drainage of Washington and St. Tammany Parishes. No operational aquatic rodent control is presently conducted by WS within the

- species' range. Beaver control operations may benefit the Louisiana quillwort by preventing dams from inundating the sites on which they live. No negative impacts to this species would occur from any activities conducted by WS in Louisiana. FWS has previously concluded that no plants would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
2. **Earth fruit (*Geocarpon minimum*)**. No complete range data is available for this species in Louisiana, however, it has been found in Winn Parish. This plant grows on moist sandy soils. WS does not expect that any of its activities will negatively impact this species. Beaver dam removal may benefit earth fruit by removing inundating threats to existing habitat. FWS has previously concluded that no plants would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
  3. **American chaffseed (*Schwalbea americana*)**. This species inhabits open, moist pine flatwoods and fire-maintained savannas. Its one historical record in Louisiana is considered to be erroneous. WS does not expect that any of its activities will negatively impact this species. Beaver dam removal may benefit this species by removing inundating threats to existing habitat. FWS has previously concluded that no plants would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
  4. **Alabama heelsplitter [=Inflated Heelsplitter ] (*Potamilus inflatus*)**. In Louisiana, this species is known from the Amite and Tangipahoa Rivers, which are moderately deep streams. It can be found living at depths of over 20 feet. Juvenile mussels may be killed by siltation. Aquatic rodent control is normally not conducted on streams the size of the Amite and Tangipahoa. Most work is normally conducted on smaller tributaries and drains of main streams, in water that is less than 4 feet deep. WS believes that none of its aquatic rodent management activities would adversely impact this mussel. Dam removal may decrease siltation, which can improve recruitment. FWS has previously concluded that no bivalves would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
  5. **Louisiana pearlshell (*Margaritifera hembeli*)**. This species has been collected only in the Bayou Boeuf drainage in Rapides Parish and the Red River Drainage in Grant Parish. WS is currently conducting beaver control on the Kisatchie National Forest to protect this species. Since this species is sessile, no WS activities will impact this mussel. Dam removal is usually accomplished with hand tools, however, explosives are sometimes used to remove larger dams. Stream segments above and below dams are inspected for pearlshell beds before explosives are used. WS beaver control activities have maintained pearlshell habitat, thus a beneficial effect on this species has been realized. FWS has previously concluded that no bivalves would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
  6. **Pink mucket [=pearlymussel] (*Lamsilis orbiculata*)**. A small population of this mussel is found in Bayou Bartholomew in Morehouse Parish. This species inhabits

medium to large rivers and is most often found in moderate to fast flowing waters at a depth of 1.5 to 25 feet. Since WS rarely conducts aquatic rodent control on large streams, it is unlikely that any negative impacts will occur from using available tools.

FWS has previously concluded that no bivalves would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).

- 7. Fat pocketbook pearly mussel (*Potamilis capax*).** This mussel was recently found in side channels of the lower Mississippi River in Louisiana. Based on the location of the mussel, it is unlikely that any negative impacts will occur from using the available aquatic rodent management tools by WS. FWS (Russ Watson, USFWS, letter dated April 15, 2005) has rendered an opinion that “the fat pocketbook pearly mussel is not likely to be adversely affected by the proposed action.”
- 8. Gulf sturgeon (*Acipenser oyrinchus desotoi*).** This anadromous fish is restricted to the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, and other large drainages. No aquatic rodent management activities being conducted by the WS program would have a negative impact on this species. FWS has previously concluded that no fish would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
- 9. Pallid sturgeon (*Schaphirhynchus albus*).** Pallid sturgeons require large, turbid, free-flowing riverine habitat and are usually found near the bottom. This species has been found in the Mississippi River. Since WS does not conduct any aquatic rodent management activities on this large river, its activities would have no negative impact on the species. FWS has previously concluded that no fish would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
- 10. Hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*).** This marine species would be unaffected by any aquatic rodent damage management conducted by WS in Louisiana. FWS has previously concluded that no species of sea turtle would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997.)
- 11. Leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*).** This marine species would be unaffected by any aquatic rodent damage management conducted by WS in Louisiana. FWS has previously concluded that no species of sea turtle would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997.)
- 12. Loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*).** This marine species would be unaffected by any aquatic rodent damage management conducted by WS in Louisiana. FWS has previously concluded that no species of sea turtle would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997.)
- 13. Green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*).** This marine species would be unaffected by any aquatic rodent damage management conducted by WS in Louisiana. FWS has previously concluded that no species of sea turtle would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997.)

- 14. Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*).** This marine species would be unaffected by any aquatic rodent damage management conducted by WS in Louisiana. FWS has previously concluded that no species of sea turtle would be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997.)
- 15. Ringed map turtle [=ringed sawback turtle] (*Graptemys oculifera*).** This species is only known from the main channel of the Pearl River. At present, WS does not conduct aquatic rodent control activities in this area. Future activities would be restricted to tributaries of the main river. Therefore, no adverse impacts on this species would result from the WS activities.
- 16. Gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).** The gopher tortoise is an inhabitant of the eastern Florida Parishes. It inhabits well-drained sandy soils associated with an open pine overstory and grassy groundcover. WS aquatic rodent management activities would have no negative impact on this species. Benefits to this burrowing species could be realized if removal of beaver and dams prevented or alleviated flooding of their habitat.
- 17. American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*).** Although the alligator population has successfully recovered, it is still protected under the "similarity of appearance" clause. Alligators are commonly found living alongside aquatic rodents in ponds, lakes, streams, and swamps. Occasionally WS will capture an Alligator in a trap or snare set for a beaver. When possible, alligators are released from traps; however, they are occasionally found dead when traps are checked. Due to high alligator populations in Louisiana, aquatic rodent control activities conducted by WS have no significant adverse impacts on the species. FWS has previously concluded that alligators would not be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
- 18. Louisiana pine snake (*Pituophis ruthveni*).** This species inhabits longleaf pine forest in west central Louisiana. It has not been documented in over a decade in this state. Beaver dam removal may benefit the Louisiana pine snake by removing inundation threats to existing habitats. WS does not believe that any of its activities will adversely impact this species.
- 19. Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*).** WS aquatic rodent management activities would have no adverse impacts on bald eagle populations. FWS (USDA 1997) has previously rendered a biological opinion that there is no evidence to indicate that WS activities are having significant adverse impacts on, or are jeopardizing the existence of, bald eagles. Eagles generally inhabit riparian habitat associated with coast, rivers, and lakes and usually nest near bodies of water where it feeds. Aquatic rodent control is usually conducted along small drainages that are mostly covered by a forest canopy.

- 20. Brown pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*).** This is a bird of coastal wetlands. It is unlikely that WS aquatic rodent management activities would have any impact on this species. FWS (USDA 1997) has previously rendered a biological opinion that no aspect of the WS program would affect brown pelicans.
- 21. Piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*).** This species would not be affected by any aquatic rodent management activity conducted by WS. This bird winters along the coast and prefers tidal flats for feeding and sandy beaches for roosting. FWS previously concluded that the piping plover would not be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
- 22. Least tern [interior population] (*Sternus antillarum athalassos*).** This species has been found on sand bars along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Its habitat preferences make it unlikely that this bird would be impacted by aquatic rodent control activities conducted by WS. FWS has previously concluded that least terns would not be adversely impacted by any aspect of the WS program (USDA 1997).
- 23. Red-cockaded woodpecker (*Dendrocopus borealis*).** This species requires open stands of mature pine trees, primarily longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), for nest cavity construction. WS aquatic rodent management projects would have no adverse impact on this species. Removal of beaver dams may protect some cavity trees from inundation, thus providing positive benefits to the species.
- 24. Black-capped vireo (*Vireo atricapilla*).** This small songbird inhabits low thickets and dense shrub oak patches. Beaver dam removal may benefit this species by removing inundation threats to existing habitats. WS does not believe that any of its activities will adversely impact this species.
- 25. Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*).** In 1997, WS re-assessed potential impacts of aquatic rodent management activities on the Louisiana black bear at the request of FWS. This analysis considered direct and indirect effects of available and acceptable aquatic rodent control strategies, which include physical exclusion; habitat management via dam removal and water level management; and lethal control using traps, shooting, and zinc phosphide. At that time, various authorities on black bear were solicited for information relative to potential impacts of the various aquatic rodent management tools available to WS (see “Black Bear Consultants” section of this report). Actions to prevent or minimize adverse impacts were also identified.

The Louisiana black bear is found primarily in the Tensas River Basin, the upper Atchafalaya River Basin, and coastal Iberia and St. Mary Parishes. Preferred habitat consists of forested wetlands, marsh, spoil banks, and upland forests containing soft and hard mast foods, dense escape cover, vegetated dispersal corridors, suitable den trees, and isolation from humans. WS currently conducts and has conducted beaver control projects in known bear habitat. Most significant is the large tract of

bottomland hardwoods in Madison Parish known as “Blue Cat,” which contains the highest known density of this subspecies.

Of greatest concern is the potential impact of WS trapping activities on bears. There is a slight possibility that beaver traps could catch some bears, resulting in their injury or death. Three types of beaver traps are used routinely by WS personnel: snares, leghold traps, and body grip (e.g., Conibear) traps. The first two are primarily live catch devices that allow a trapper the flexibility to destroy or release captured animals. The third trap is a quick-kill trap for small mammals; animals caught by the trap are immobilized and asphyxiated. There have been no reports of Louisiana black bears being caught by trappers using snares, leghold traps, or body grip traps.

None of the consultants previously contacted by WS were concerned about traps having any significant adverse impacts on bears. Some expressed the opinion that lack of beaver control could lead to deterioration of important bear habitat by killing valuable mast-bearing plants, vegetative cover, and den trees. Beaver traps are normally set in water, away from regular bear travel routes; therefore, the likelihood of catching a bear would be remote. Most experts believe that a large bear caught in a trap would probably be strong enough to free itself. A young bear (<100 pounds) might be held by a trap; however, death or serious injury is unlikely. The Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge (TRNWR) has conducted beaver control activities in occupied bear habitat for a number of years. There have been no reported instances of either bears being caught in traps or bears tampering with set traps on TRNWR. Likewise, there have been no reports of bears being caught by private beaver control contractors or WS personnel on the “Blue Cat” tract.

Similarly, shooting of beaver and dam removal would have no impact on bears. Loud noises associated with these activities would be transient and cause no long-lasting impacts. Use of beaver-resistant barriers and water leveler devices would also have no impact on the bear population.

WS would implement several actions to prevent or minimize impacts to black bear. Aquatic trap sets, which are normally unseen and unattractive to bears, would continue to be used. “Break-away” snares, which would allow bear and other large animals to escape unharmed, would be used in bear habitat whenever possible. Beaver, nutria, and muskrat carcasses would be moved away from active trapping sites to avoid attracting scavenging bears; these would be left in other areas as a supplemental food source for bears and other wildlife. No leghold or conibears traps would be set on the tops of dams that are being regularly crossed by bears.

In conclusion, and as was reported in 1997, WS believes that its proposed aquatic rodent management activities would not likely adversely impact Louisiana black bears. Benefits to bear could result from project implementation, including preservation of desirable habitat components.

**26. American black bear (*Ursus americanus*).** This species is protected under the “similarity of appearance” clause. WS believes that its proposed aquatic rodent management activities would not likely adversely impact black bears (see **24. Louisiana black bear**).

**26. Finback whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*).** This marine species would be unaffected by any aquatic rodent damage management activity conducted by WS in Louisiana.

**27. Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*).** This marine species would be unaffected by any aquatic rodent damage management activity conducted by WS in Louisiana.

## CONSULTATIONS

The following wildlife professionals provided information during preparation of the 1997 version of the Louisiana black bear impact analysis, from which this black bear analysis is based. Comments and recommendations they provided were considered and included in this document:

Dr. Mike Pelton, Professor (Retired)	University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Keith Weaver, Wildlife Biologist	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Dr. Richard Pace, Research Biologist	U.S. Department of Commerce
George Chandler, Manager	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Mike Pledger, Biologist	Arkansas Game and Fish Commission
Arlo Kane, Biologist	Florida Game and Fish Commission
Bob Willging, Biologist	Wisconsin Wildlife Services

This Biological Assessment was also reviewed by Deborah Fuller, Biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ecological Services office in Lafayette, LA/