ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

AQUATIC RODENT DAMAGE MANAGEMENT IN MISSISSIPPI

Prepared by:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (USDA)
ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH INSPECTION SERVICE (APHIS)
WILDLIFE SERVICES (WS)

In cooperation with:

TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY (TVA)

February 2015

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ACRONYMS

AMDUCA	Animal Medicinal Drug Use Clarification Act
APHIS	Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CEQ	Council on Environmental Quality
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CWA	Clean Water Act
CWCS	Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy
EA	Environmental Assessment
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EPA	United States Environmental Protection Agency
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FIFRA	Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act
FLIR	Forward Looking Infrared
FR	Federal Register
FY	Fiscal Year
IC	Intracardiac
IV	Intravenous
MDAC	Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce
MDEQ	Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality
MDWFP	Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NRP	Natural Resources Plan
NWP	Nationwide Permit
NWRC	National Wildlife Research Center
PL	Public Law
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
T&E	Threatened and Endangered
TVA	Tennessee Valley Authority
USC	United States Code
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Services
WS	Wildlife Services

CHAPTER 1: PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 PURPOSE

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Wildlife Services (WS)[1] program in Mississippi continues to receive requests for assistance or anticipates receiving requests for assistance to resolve or prevent damage occurring to agricultural resources, natural resources, and property, including threats to human safety, associated with beaver (*Castor canadensis*), muskrats (*Ondatra zibethicus*), and nutria (*Myocastor coypus*). This document will collectively refer to those mammal species as aquatic rodents. Individual damage management projects conducted by the WS program could be categorically excluded from further analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), in accordance with APHIS implementing regulations for the NEPA (7 CFR 372.5(c), 60 FR 6000-6003). The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) also continues to experience damage and threats of damage associated with aquatic rodents at facilities or properties they own or manage in Mississippi. The TVA could request the assistance of WS to manage damage or threats of damage at those facilities and properties.

The purpose of this Environmental Assessment (EA) is to evaluate the cumulative effects of WS' actions conducted to manage damage and threats to agricultural resources, property, natural resources, and people caused by aquatic rodent species. This EA will evaluate previous and anticipated future actions taken by WS to address damage caused by aquatic rodents in order to determine if those effects could have a significant impact on the environment. Actions taken by WS would be a part of a coordinated program between WS, the TVA, and the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) and WS would base those actions on the goals and directives[2] of the program. Proposed WS actions would occur when other entities request assistance and would be subject to the constraints of available funding and workforce. Since aquatic rodent species occur statewide in Mississippi and are present in the State throughout the year, the proposed approaches to managing damage and threats of damage may occur in any location across the State of Mississippi at any time of the year.

The EA evaluates the need for action to manage damage associated with aquatic rodents in Mississippi, the potential issues associated with managing damage, and the environmental consequences of conducting different alternatives to meet the need for action. WS and the TVA initially identified the issues and developed alternative approaches to managing damage caused by aquatic rodents in consultation with the MDWFP. The MDWFP has regulatory authority to manage populations of aquatic rodent species in the State. To assist with identifying additional issues and alternatives, WS and the TVA will make this EA available to the public for review and comment prior to the issuance of a Decision[3].

WS previously developed an EA that addressed WS' activities to manage damage associated with aquatic rodents. Based on the analyses in that EA, WS signed a Decision and Finding of No Significant Impact for the proposed action alternative. The proposed action alternative implemented a program that integrates a variety of methods. WS and the TVA are preparing this EA to: 1) facilitate planning, 2) promote interagency coordination, 3) streamline program management, 4) clearly communicate to the public the analysis of individual and cumulative impacts of proposed activities, and 5) determine if there

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[1]The WS program is authorized to protect agriculture and other resources from damage caused by wildlife through the Act of March 2, 1931 (46 Stat. 1468; 7 USC 426-426b) as amended, and the Act of December 22, 1987 (101 Stat. 1329-331, 7 USC 426c).

[2]At the time of preparation, WS' Directives occurred at the following web address:

[3]After the development of the EA by WS and the TVA and after public involvement in identifying new issues and alternatives, WS will issue a Decision. Based on the analyses in the EA after public involvement, WS will make a decision to publish a Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement or WS will issue a Finding of No Significant Impact notice to the public in accordance to the NEPA and the Council of Environmental Quality regulations.

would be any potentially significant or cumulative effects from the alternative approaches developed to meet the need for action. Since this EA will re-evaluate activities conducted under the previous EA, this analysis and the outcome of the Decision issued will supersede the previous EA that addressed managing damage caused by aquatic rodents. The analyses contained in this EA are based on information derived from WS' Management Information System, published documents (see Appendix A), interagency consultations, and public involvement.

This EA will analyze several alternatives to address the need for action and assist in determining if the proposed management of damage associated with aquatic rodents could have a significant impact on the environment for both people and other organisms. This EA will also document and inform the public of the environmental consequences that could occur from implementing the alternatives to comply with the NEPA. In addition, WS, the TVA, and the MDWFP will use this EA to coordinate efforts associated with meeting the need for action.

1.2 NEED FOR ACTION

Some species of wildlife have adapted to and have thrived in human altered habitats. Those species, in particular, are often responsible for the majority of conflicts between people and wildlife. Those conflicts often lead people to request assistance with reducing damage to resources and to reduce threats to human safety. Beaver, muskrat, and nutria are aquatic rodent species that have adapted to habitats near human populations where conflicts between people and those species can occur.

Historically, habitat conditions and exploitation by Native Americans likely limited beaver populations in North America, since climax forest types that historically covered the eastern United States have a relatively low carrying capacity for beaver in comparison with forests in younger growth stages, and beaver were important to Native Americans for food, clothing, tools, and items of trade. Those factors, coupled with the onset of the North American fur trade by Europeans in the early 1600s and the westward advancement of settlement, led to the decline in beaver populations in North America (Lowery 1974, Hill 1976, Woodward 1983, Novak 1987, Baker and Hill 2003). Beaver pelts were the most important item in the early fur trade (Wright 1987). Through overharvesting and loss of habitat, the beaver population in the United States rapidly declined in the late 1800s and early 1900s with beaver nearly trapped to extinction by the late 1890s (Hill 1976, Wesley 1978, Baker and Hill 2003). In the 1700s, beaver harvests remained high, but harvests declined continually during the 1800s and reached a record low between 1900 and 1919 (Novak 1987).

The pelts of beaver, muskrat, and nutria were common in many fur markets and provided economic revenue for many people. In addition, people have used the meat of beaver, muskrat, and nutria for food, primarily by subsistence hunters and trappers; however, some organizations have promoted muskrat and nutria meat as table fare in restaurants. People have also used their meat to produce food for pets and pen-raised alligators. After the formation of federal, state, and provincial wildlife conservation agencies and the enactment of new regulations that controlled beaver harvest, beaver populations began to recover. In addition, many states began restocking programs in the 1920s through the 1950s (Hill 1982, Baker and Hill 2003). Today, beaver occur throughout most of North America, including Canada, Alaska, all 48 contiguous states of the United States, and northern portions of Mexico (Deems and Pursley 1978, Novak 1987, Baker and Hill 2003, Linzey and NatureServe 2013).

Following the decimation of the beaver population in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the number of beaver trappers declined. As beaver populations began to recover and trapping seasons were re-opened, the number of beaver trappers and demand for fur had declined. Consequently, interest in harvesting beaver declined, which allowed the beaver population to expand and continue to increase. Today, beaver occur throughout most of their original range (Hill 1982, Novak 1987, Baker and Hill 2003) and beaver

are now often viewed as a nuisance species because of the damage they can cause (Hill 1976, Hill 1982, Woodward 1983, Woodward et al. 1985, Novak 1987, Dickson 2001, Baker and Hill 2003).

Responding to constituent's complaints and requests in Mississippi, the 1989 Mississippi Legislature created the beaver control advisory board. This board is comprised of the heads of the cooperating state agencies and is mandated to develop a program that ensures the management of beaver damage. In cooperation with the WS program, the advisory board developed the Beaver Control Assistance Program. The Mississippi Department of Transportation, the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC), the Mississippi Forestry Commission, county governments, and private landowners collectively fund the Beaver Control Assistance Program.

Although beaver may cause extensive damage, they can be beneficial in many situations, especially where their activities do not compete with human use of land or property (Wade and Ramsey 1986). Beaver can be ecosystem engineers that construct dams that impound water, trap sediment, and increase the productivity of riparian zones (Rosell et al. 2005). Positive ecological influences on wetland habitats (Arner et al. 1967*a*, Arner et al. 1967*b*, Reese and Hair 1976, Pollock et al. 2004, Pollock et al. 2012, Pollock et al. 2014) and economic gains from fur production (Arner and Dubose 1978*a*, Arner and Dubose 1978*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 judgment (Hill 1982, Baker and Hill 2003). Property ownership, options for public and private land use, and effects on adjacent property impact public attitudes toward beaver (Hill 1982, Baker and Hill 2003). In some situations, the damage and threats caused by beaver outweigh the benefits (Grasse and Putnam 1955, Woodward et al. 1985, Novak 1987, Baker and Hill 2003).

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 request assistance with beaver pond management (Hill 1976, Woodward et al. 1985). Some of the benefits of beaver ponds include activities such as photography, trapping, hunting, and fishing. In agricultural landscapes, beaver ponds can provide a potential water source for livestock. The ecological value of beaver ponds in the natural environment can also be important. For example, beaver ponds can contribute to the stabilization of water tables, help reduce rapid run-off from rain (Wade and Ramsey 1986, Pollock et al. 2014), and serve as basins for the entrapment of streambed silt and eroding soil (Hill 1982, Baker and Hill 2003, Pollock et al. 2014). Beaver ponds can also function as sinks, helping to filter nutrients and reduce sedimentation downstream, which can maintain the quality of nearby water systems (Arner and Hepp 1989). Pollock et al. (2014) proposed using beaver to restore degraded stream ecosystems.

Beaver may increase habitat diversity by flooding and opening forest habitats, which can result in greater interspersion of vegetative successional stages and increase the floral and faunal diversity (Hill 1982, Arner and Hepp 1989, Baker and Hill 2003). Hood and Bayley (2008) found that ponds with beaver had nine times more open-water than when beaver were not present in those same ponds. Creation of standing water, edge habitat, and an increase in plant diversity can result in excellent wildlife habitat (Hill 1982, Baker and Hill 2003, Cooke and Zack 2008). 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, Baker and Hill 2003, Cooke and Zack 2008). The impounding of water by beaver through their dam building activities may be beneficial to some fish, reptiles, amphibians, waterfowl, shorebirds, and furbearers, such as muskrats, river otter (*Lontra canadensis*), and mink (*Neovision vison*) (Arner and DuBose 1982, Naimen et al. 1986, Miller and Yarrow 1994, Stevens et al. 2007). Hood and Larson (2014) found that beaver could alter shallow-water wetlands, which can influence aquatic invertebrate diversity and abundance. Hood and Larson (2015) found that beaver can increase the volume-to-surface area ratio of

impoundments by nearly 50% and can increase the average perimeter edge of water impoundments by over 575% through their digging and channeling behaviors. Beaver created impoundments can also be attractive to warm water fishes (Hanson and Campbell 1963, Pullen 1967). Pollock et al. (2004) concluded that beaver ponds could be an integral part of increasing the production of Coho Salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) in a river basin within Washington. Pollock et al. (2012) also proposed encouraging beaver activities in an Oregon stream system to restore salmon habitat. Stevens et al. (2007) found that beaver created impoundments on small streams in the Boreal Foothills of west-central Alberta in Canada contained a higher number of three species of frogs than those streams with no obstructions.

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. For example, some beaver ponds in Mississippi over three years in age were found to have developed plant communities that increased 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 throughout the year and that the value of the beaver pond habitat to waterfowl was minor when compared to other species of birds (Novak 1987). Cooke and Zack (2008) suggested that beaver dams could be important to creating riparian conditions that foster rich and abundant bird communities in semiarid regions.

Like beaver, muskrats can have an economic value from the sale of their meat and pelt, as well as filling an important niche in the ecosystem. Historically, muskrats have been the most heavily utilized furbearer in North America with six to 20 million harvested annually between the 1930s and 1980s (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987). 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 United States 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.

Nutria, which are native to Central and South America, were introduced with the "*fur ranching*" trade. The establishment of nutria in the wild occurred 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). Trappers and conservation agencies initially regarded newly established feral populations of nutria as a new fur resource. The species provided a means of income for hunters and trappers through the sale of meat and fur. From 1977 to 1984, people harvested approximately $7.3 million worth of nutria fur in the United States (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987, Kinler et al. 1987). However, Lowe et al. (2000) ranked nutria as one of the 100 worst invasive species in the world.

Aquatic rodents can also be potential food sources for many other species of wildlife. Coyotes (*Canis latrans*), black bears (*Ursus americanus*), bobcats (*Lynx rufus*), fishers (*Mustela pennanti*), red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), river otters, mink, and large raptors, such as hawks and owls, can prey on beaver (Tesky 1993, Baker and Hill 2003, Jackson and Decker 2004). Predators of muskrat include great horned owls, barred owls, red-tailed hawks, bald eagles, raccoons, mink, river otter, coyotes, bobcat, red fox, gray fox(*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), Northern pike (*Esox lucius*), largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), snapping turtles (*Chelydra serpentine*), and bullfrogs (*Rana catesbeiana*). Nutria can also provide a major food source for wild alligators (Valentine et al. 1972, Wolfe et al. 1987).

Human perceptions of wildlife, including beaver, muskrat, and nutria, can range drastically. In general, people regard wildlife as providing economic, recreational, and aesthetic benefits. For some people, wildlife holds an intrinsic value. Knowing that wildlife exists in the natural environment provides its own benefit. For other people who have had negative encounters with wildlife resulting in economic losses to agricultural resources, natural resources, property, and even threats to human health and safety, wildlife

may be viewed negatively. Being aware of these varying perspectives will aid managers in finding a balance between the needs of various groups of people and the needs of wildlife. When addressing damage or threats of damage caused by wildlife, managers must consider not only the needs of those people directly affected by wildlife damage but also the environmental, sociocultural, and economic implications of their decisions.

Resolving wildlife damage problems requires consideration of both sociological and biological carrying capacities. The 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. Biological carrying capacity is the land or habitat's ability to support healthy populations of wildlife without degradation to the species' health or their environment during an extended period of time (Decker and Purdy 1988). Those phenomena are especially important because they define the sensitivity of a person or community to a wildlife species. For any given damage situation, there are varying thresholds of tolerance exhibited by those people directly and indirectly affected by the species and any associated damage. This damage threshold determines the wildlife acceptance capacity. While the biological carrying capacity of the habitat may support higher populations of wildlife, in many cases the wildlife acceptance capacity is lower. Once the wildlife acceptance capacity is met or exceeded, people begin to implement population or damage management to alleviate damage or address threats to human health and safety.

Wildlife damage management is the alleviation of damage or other problems caused by or related to the behavior of wildlife and can be an integral component of wildlife management (Berryman 1991, The Wildlife Society 2010). The threat of damage or loss of resources is often sufficient for people to initiate individual actions and the need for damage management can occur from specific threats to resources. Those species have no intent to do harm. They utilize habitats (*e.g.*, feed, shelter, reproduce) where they can find a niche. If their activities result in lost economic value of resources or threaten human safety, people often characterize this as damage. When damage exceeds or threatens to exceed an economic threshold and/or pose a threat to human safety, people often seek assistance with resolving damage or reducing threats to human safety. The threshold triggering a request for assistance is often unique to the individual person requesting assistance and many factors can influence when people request assistance (*e.g.*, economic, social, aesthetics). Therefore, what constitutes damage is often unique to the individual person. What one individual person considers damage, another person may not consider as damage. However, the use of the term "*damage*" is consistently used to describe situations where the individual person has determined the losses associated with wildlife is actual damage requiring assistance (*i.e.*, has reached an individual threshold). Many people define the term "*damage*" as economic losses to resources or threats to human safety; however, "*damage*" could also occur from a loss in the aesthetic value of property and other situations where the behavior of wildlife was no longer tolerable to an individual person.

The need for action to manage damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents in Mississippi arises from requests for assistance[4] received by WS. WS divides the requests to reduce or prevent damage from occurring into four major categories: agricultural resources, natural resources, property, and threats to human safety. In addition, the TVA often experiences damage and threats of damage to property, natural resources, electric system operational reliability, as well as threats to human safety at their facilities. Through review of previous requests for assistance, WS and the TVA have determined that aquatic rodent species are most likely to be responsible for causing damage in those four categories in Mississippi.

[4]WS would only conduct aquatic rodent damage management after receiving a request for assistance. Before initiating damage management activities, WS and the cooperating entity would sign a Memorandum of Understanding, work initiation document, or another comparable document that would list all the methods the property owner or manager would allow WS to use on property they owned and/or managed.

Table 1.1 lists WS' technical assistance projects involving aquatic rodent damage or threats of damage to those four major resource types in Mississippi from the federal fiscal year[5] (FY) 2009 through FY 2013. As shown in Table 1.1, WS has conducted 1,658 technical assistance projects in Mississippi from FY 2009 through FY 2013 associated with those aquatic rodent species addressed in this assessment. Nearly 98% of the technical assistance projects conducted by WS have involved beaver. Technical assistance provides information and recommendations on activities to alleviate aquatic rodent damage that the requester could conduct without WS' direct involvement in managing or preventing the damage. Table 1.1 does not include direct operational assistance projects conducted by WS where a person requested WS' assistance through the direct application of methods. This EA discusses technical assistance and direct operational assistance activities further in Chapter 3.

Table 1.1 – Technical assistance projects conducted by WS from FY 2009 through FY 2013†

	Fiscal Year					
Species	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**TOTAL**
Beaver	353	388	261	282	338	**1,622**
Muskrat	0	3	0	2	5	**10**
Nutria	7	5	5	2	7	**26**

†Information provided in the table includes technical assistance projects only and does not include direct operational assistance projects that WS conducted. See Chapter 3 for further discussion on technical assistance and direct operational assistance.

Between FY 2009 and FY 2013, WS verified and cooperators reported approximately $15.6 million in damages and losses from beaver, nutria, and muskrat in Mississippi (see Table 1.2). On properties owned or managed by people requesting assistance from WS, aquatic rodents caused nearly $10.3 million in damage to roads and bridges from FY 2009 through FY 2013 with over $4.0 million in economic damages to timber resources. Damage to timber was primarily associated with beaver, where dams built by beaver impounded water that caused areas to flood, which can result in the death of trees if inundation occurs for extended periods. Overall, aquatic rodents caused nearly $1.3 million in damages to dams, ditches, agricultural resources, and other resources, primarily from aquatic rodents burrowing into embankments and from flooding.

Table 1.2 – Losses to resources caused by aquatic rodents in Mississippi, FY 2009-FY 2013

	Economic Loss[1] by Fiscal Year					
Resource	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**TOTAL**
Roads/Bridges	$1,781,107	$2,107,511	$2,820,819	$1,639,346	$1,906,415	**$10,255,198**
Timber	$565,850	$1,240,030	$890,000	$524,394	$802,937	**$4,023,211**
Dams/Ditches	$227,400	$174,850	$199,600	$48,600	$95,850	**$746,300**
Crops	$16,550	$30,850	$2,950	$4,013	$32,423	**$86,786**
Other	$117,900	$181,570	$88,300	$33,394	$35,896	**$457,060**
TOTAL	**$2,708,807**	**$3,734,811**	**$4,001,669**	**$2,249,747**	**$2,873,521**	**$15,568,555**

[1]Resources damaged as reported by a cooperator or verified by WS through site visits

As shown in Table 1.3, the activities of WS to alleviate aquatic rodent damage prevented further damage from occurring to resources on properties where owners or managers requested direct operational assistance from WS. WS' activities prevented over $250 million in additional damages from occurring to roads, bridges, timber, dams, ditches, agricultural crops, and other resources. WS' activities to alleviate

[5]The federal fiscal year begins on October 1 and ends on September 30 the following year.

aquatic rodent damage prevented over $219 million in damages to roads and bridges from FY 2009 through FY 2013.

WS periodically updates the resource values per unit of measure for resource types to remain current and to reflect changes in the value of resources; therefore, the value of resources damaged in FY 2009 may be different from the value for the same resources in FY 2013. For example, the value of 10 acres of hardwood timber that floods from water impounded by a beaver dam during FY 2009 may have a different value for the same 10 acres during FY 2013 because of changes in timber prices.

Table 1.3 – Aquatic rodent damage prevented from WS' activities in Mississippi, FY 2009-FY 2013

Resource	Resources Saved[1] by Fiscal Year					TOTAL
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	
Roads/Bridges	$41,076,789	$45,610,161	$44,726,719	$50,516,284	$37,275,785	**$219,205,738**
Timber	$4,143,072	$5,383,046	$5,475,181	$5,745,043	$3,662,452	**$24,408,794**
Dams/Ditches	$424,200	$777,250	$807,800	$831,200	$288,100	**$3,128,550**
Crops	$70,983	$65,287	$48,178	$11,445	$46,475	**$242,368**
Other	$137,492	$882,658	$1,095,304	$94,216	$978,964	**$3,188634**
TOTAL	**$45,852,536**	**$52,718,402**	**$52,153,182**	**$57,198,188**	**$42,251,776**	**$250,174,084**

[1]The resources that aquatic rodents could have damaged further without WS' involvement in resolving and preventing the initial damage originating from a request for assistance

Miller (1983) estimated that the annual damage in the United States caused by beaver alone was $75 to $100 million. The value of beaver damage is perhaps greater than that of any other single wildlife species in the United States. Arner and Dubose (1982) estimated the economic damage that beaver caused in the southeastern United States exceeded $4 billion over a 40-year period. Aquatic rodent species can cause damage to or pose threats to a variety of resources. In Mississippi, most requests for assistance that WS receives are associated with damage or threats of damage that aquatic rodent species can cause to property. The following subsections of the EA provide more information on aquatic rodent damage to those four categories.

Need for **Mammal Damage Management on TVA Properties and Facilities**

The TVA owns and manages over 293,000 acres in the Tennessee River system. All of these lands support TVA's goals of power generation and transmission, flood control, and economic development of the Tennessee River Valley. The TVA operates hydroelectric dams, coal-fired power plants, nuclear power plants, solar facilities, wind turbine facilities, and combustion turbine sites in Mississippi. The TVA also owns or maintains electrical power substations, switching stations, and the associated transmission lines and rights-of-way easements in Mississippi. In addition, the TVA operates public recreation areas throughout the Tennessee Valley region, including campgrounds, day-use areas, and boat launching ramps.

Aquatic rodent damage occurring at facilities and properties owned or managed by the TVA have primarily affected property, human safety, and electric system operational reliability. Damage and threats of damage primarily occur from aquatic rodents burrowing into earthen levees and dikes used to impound water, which can compromise the integrity of the structures and threaten the safety of people downstream from those impoundments.

Need for Aquatic Rodent Damage Management to Protect Human Health and Safety

Zoonosis (*i.e*., wildlife diseases transmissible to people) can be a major concern of cooperators when requesting assistance with managing threats from aquatic rodents. Individuals or property owners that request assistance with aquatic rodents frequently are concerned about potential disease risks but are unaware of the types of diseases those animals could transmit. In many circumstances, when human health concerns are the primary reason for requesting WS' assistance there may have been no actual cases of transmission of disease to people by aquatic rodents. Thus, the risk of disease transmission would be the primary reason for requesting assistance from WS.

In most cases when human exposure occurs, the presence of a disease vector across a broad range of naturally occurring sources, including occurring in wildlife populations, can complicate determining the origin of the vector. Disease transmission directly from wildlife to people is uncommon. However, the infrequency of such transmission does not diminish the concerns of those people requesting assistance since disease transmission could occur. WS actively attempts to educate the public about the risks associated with disease transmission from wildlife to people through technical assistance and by providing technical leaflets on the risks of exposure.

Beaver, which are carriers of the intestinal parasite *Giardia lamblia*, can contaminate human water supplies and cause outbreaks of the disease Giardiasis in people (Woodward 1983, Beach and McCulloch 1985, Wade and Ramsey 1986, Miller and Yarrow 1994). Giardiasis is an illness caused by a microscopic parasite that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report as one of the most common causes of waterborne disease in people across the United States during the last 15 years (CDC 2012). People can contract giardiasis by swallowing contaminated water or putting anything in their mouth that has touched the fecal matter of an infected animal or person. Symptoms of giardiasis include diarrhea, cramps, and nausea (CDC 2012). Beaver are also carriers of tularemia, a bacterial disease that is transmittable to people through bites by insect vectors, bites of infected animals, or by handling animals or carcasses that are infected (Wade and Ramsey 1986). In cattle ranching sections of Wyoming, Skinner et al. (1984) found that the fecal bacteria count was much higher in beaver ponds than in other ponds, something that can be a concern to ranchers and recreationists.

Beaver 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 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 can dig burrows into embankments with underwater entrances along shorelines and burrowing may not be readily evident until serious damage has occurred. When water levels drop, beaver often expand the entrances of their burrows to keep pace with the retreating water level. In addition, when water levels rise, beaver often expand the entrances upward. Those burrows can collapse when people or animals walk upon them and when crossed over with heavy equipment (*e.g*., mowers, tractors). Beaver damming activity can also create 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) and West Nile Virus (CDC 2000). Furthermore, damming of streams sometimes increases the presence of aquatic snakes, including the poisonous cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*) (Wade and Ramsey 1986).

Although reports of rabies in beaver and muskrats are not common, those species of aquatic rodents have tested positive for rabies in the United States. Between 2008 and 2012, two muskrats and 10 beaver across the United States have tested positive for the rabies virus (see Table 1.4). Beaver infected with the rabies virus have aggressively attacked pets and people (Brakhage and Sampson 1952, CDC 2002, Caudell 2012). In 2001, a beaver tested positive for rabies that was exhibiting aggressive behavior by

charging canoes and kayaks on a river in Florida (CDC 2002). A beaver that tested positive for rabies attacked a person wading in a New York river during 2012 (Caudell 2012). The person suffered six puncture wounds over their body and underwent treatment for rabies (Caudell 2012). No reports of positive rabies tests in nutria have occurred.

Table 1.4 – Muskrat and beaver reported with rabies in the United States, 2008 – 2012†

Species	Year					TOTAL
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Beaver	1	2	0	3	4	**10**
Muskrat	0	1	1	0	0	**2**

†Based on information from Blanton et al. (2009), Blanton et al. (2010), Blanton et al. (2011), Blanton et al. (2012), Dyer et al. (2013)

There are several pathogens and parasites that nutria can transmit to people, livestock, and pets (LeBlanc 1994). However, the role of nutria in the spread of diseases, such as equine encephalomyelitis, leptospirosis, hemorrhagic septicemia (pasteurellosis), paratyphoid, and salmonellosis, is unknown. 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.

Burrowing by muskrats, nutria, and beaver may sometimes threaten earthen dams as they form networks of burrows, which can weaken such structures, causing erosion and failure. Such incidents can threaten the safety and lives of people living downstream from the dam. For that reason, managers of such sites are concerned with preventing excessive burrowing by those animals at dam sites. Much of the damage caused by muskrats is primarily through their burrowing activity (Perry 1982, Miller 1994, Linzey 1998) in dikes, dams, ditches, ponds, and shorelines. Muskrats can dig burrows into banks and levees, which can compromise the integrity of embankments (Perry 1982, Linzey 1998). Muskrats can dig burrows with underwater entrances along shorelines and burrowing may not be readily evident until serious damage has occurred. When water levels drop, muskrats often expand the holes and tunnels to keep pace with the retreating water level. Additionally, when water levels rise muskrats expand the burrows upward. Those burrows can collapse when people or animals walk over them and when heavy equipment (*e.g.*, mowers, tractors) crosses over.

Disease Surveillance and Monitoring

Public awareness and health risks associated with zoonoses (*i.e.*, diseases of animals that are transmissible to people) have increased in recent years. This EA briefly addressed some of the more commonly known zoonotic diseases associated with aquatic rodents. Those zoonotic diseases remain a concern and continue to pose threats to human safety where people encounter aquatic rodents. WS has received requests to assist with reducing damage and threats associated with several aquatic rodent species in Mississippi and could conduct or assist with disease monitoring or surveillance activities for any of the aquatic rodent species addressed in this EA. Most disease sampling would occur ancillary to other wildlife damage management activities (*i.e.*, disease sampling would occur after wildlife have been captured or lethally removed for other purposes).

Need for Aquatic Rodent Damage Management to Alleviate Agricultural Damage

Beaver are the largest member of the Order Rodentia in North America, which consists of species that have upper and lower incisors (teeth) that grow continually. To prevent the overgrowth of the incisors, beaver must wear down their teeth through gnawing. Beaver feed and gnaw on woody vegetation to keep

teeth worn to appropriate levels. This feeding and gnawing behavior often girdles trees and other woody vegetation leading to the death of the vegetation. Beaver also feed on agricultural crops, such as soybeans and corn (Chapman 1949, Roberts and Arner 1984). Where beaver are located near agricultural fields, consumption of crops can be high. During stomach content analyses of beaver, Roberts and Arner (1984) found that the stomachs of 83% of the beaver sampled in the summer near soybean fields contained only soybeans. From FY 2009 through FY 2013, the WS program in Mississippi has received reports of or has verified $242,368 in crop damage from aquatic rodents. Damage is typically from feeding/gnawing or the flooding of crops.

Flooding damage associated with beaver occurs when crops or pastures are inundated causing the death of plants. Flooding can also prevent access of agricultural producers to crops or livestock to forage areas. Beaver dams across irrigation canals can prevent irrigation activities and flood surrounding cropland. Beaver often burrow into earthen embankments of canals, which can weaken the structural integrity of the structure through erosion and by allowing water to seep into the interior of the structure. Beaver damage can lead to the failure of the embankments leading to costly repairs of the embankment and the potential for flooding.

Aquaculture, the cultivation of finfish and invertebrates in captivity, has grown exponentially in the past several decades (Price and Nickum 1995). Economic loss due to muskrat damage can be very high in some areas, particularly in aquaculture producing areas. In some states, damage may be as much as $1 million per year (Miller 1994). Damage to aquaculture resources could occur from the economic losses associated with muskrats killing, consuming, and/or injuring fish and other commercially raised aquatic wildlife. Also of concern to aquaculture facilities is the transmission of diseases by muskrats and beaver from the outside environment to aquaculture facilities, between impoundments, and from facility to facility. Given the confinement of aquatic wildlife inside impoundments at aquaculture facilities and the high densities of those organisms in the impoundments, the introduction of a disease can result in substantial economic losses since the entire impoundment is likely to become infected, which can result in extensive mortality. Although the actual transmission of diseases through transport by muskrats and beaver is difficult to document, large rodents have the capability of spreading diseases through fecal droppings and possibly through other mechanical means such as on fur and feet.

Muskrats eat a variety of natural emergent vegetation (Perry 1982, Linzey 1998) and cultivated crops (Perry 1982). Some of the cultivated crops eaten by muskrats include corn, alfalfa, carrots, rice, and soybeans (Perry 1982). Nutria depredation on crops also occurs (LeBlanc 1994). Crops that nutria have damaged include corn, milo (grain sorghum), sugar and table beets, alfalfa, wheat, barley, oats, peanuts, various melons, and a variety of vegetables from home gardens and truck farms.

Need for Aquatic Rodent Damage Management to Alleviate Natural Resources Damage

Aquatic rodents can also cause damage to natural resources. Natural resources can be those assets belonging to the public that government agencies, as representatives of the people, often manage and hold in trust. Such resources may be plants or animals, including threatened or endangered species, historic properties, or habitats in general. Examples of natural resources in Mississippi may include parks and recreational areas; natural areas, including unique habitats or topographic features; threatened or endangered plants and animals; and any plant or animal populations that the public has identified as a natural resource.

Beaver activities can also destroy habitat (*e.g.*, free-flowing water, riparian areas, and bird roosting and nesting areas), which can be important to many species. Knudson (1962) and Avery (1992) reported that the presence of beaver dams could negatively affect some fisheries. Beaver dams may adversely affect stream ecosystems by increasing sedimentation in streams upstream of the dam; thereby, affecting

wildlife that depend on clear water, such as certain species of fish and mussels. Stagnant water impounded by beaver dams can increase the temperature of water impounded upstream of the dam, which can negatively affect aquatic organisms. Beaver dams can also act as barriers that inhibit movement of aquatic organisms and prevent the migration of fish to spawning areas.

Muskrats are largely herbivores; however, they also eat other animals as part of their diet (Perry 1982). Schwartz and Schwartz (1959), Neves and Odom (1989), and Miller (1994) reported muskrats also ate animal matter including mussels, clams, snails, crustaceans (*e.g.*, crayfish), and young birds. Muskrats may also feed upon fish, frogs, and small turtles. Muskrats could feed upon some mussels and small turtles that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) list as T&E species under the ESA and numerous mussels, snails, crustaceans, fish, frogs, turtles, and birds that muskrats consume could be state listed. For example, Neves and Odom (1989) reported that muskrats appeared to be inhibiting the recovery of some endangered mussel species, and they were likely placing pigtoe mussels in further jeopardy along the Clinch and Holston Rivers in Virginia. Muskrats can negatively affect native vegetation. When muskrats become over-populated an "*eat-out*" may occur which denudes large areas of aquatic vegetation. Those events may result in the feeding area being unsuitable for other wildlife species for a number of years (O'Neil 1949). The loss of vegetation removes food and cover for muskrats and other wildlife. Marsh damage from muskrats is inevitable when areas heavily populated by muskrats are under-trapped (Lynch et al. 1947). While overgrazing of vegetation can be beneficial to some bird species, it can also result in stagnant water, which predisposes the same birds to diseases (Lynch et al. 1947).

Nutria primarily inhabit brackish or freshwater marshes, but are also found in swamps, rivers, ponds, and lakes. Nutria live in dense vegetation, in abandoned burrows, or in burrows they dig along stream banks or shorelines (Wade and Ramsey 1986). Nutria are almost entirely herbivorous and eat animal material (mostly insects) incidentally. In some parts of their range, nutria occasionally eat freshwater mussels and crustaceans. Marshes are generally wetlands frequently or continually inundated with water, characterized by emergent soft-stemmed vegetation that are adapted to saturated soil conditions. The emergent vegetation associated with marsh habitats often form thick, fibrous root mats that stabilizes the underlying soil and acts to catch soil sediments in the water.

The digging and feeding behavior of nutria can be destructive to marsh ecosystems. Nutria forage directly on the emergent vegetation and the vegetative root mat in a wetland, leaving a marsh pitted with digging sites and fragmented with deeply cut swimming canals. When nutria compromise the fibrous vegetative mat, emergent marshlands are quickly reduced to unconsolidated mudflats. The complete loss of emergent vegetation and root mats that occur from nutria are often called "*eat-outs*", where the foraging and digging behavior of nutria completely denude large areas of marsh vegetation. Those denuded areas are devoid of most plant life and essentially become mud flats, providing fewer habitats for the spawning and production of fish and shellfish, birds and other aquatic mammals, and is the greatest direct impact of nutria (Haramis 1997, Haramis 1999, Southwick Associates 2004). The denuding of marsh vegetation can expose the soil and accelerate erosion associated with tidal currents and wave action along with a general lowering of existing elevation levels in marshlands. The loss of vegetation can also facilitate saltwater intrusion into marsh interiors. For example, in Louisiana, nutria have damaged an estimated 100,000 acres of coastal marsh (Kinler et al. 1987). Nutria are opportunistic feeders and eat approximately 25% of their body weight daily (LeBlanc 1994).

Need for Aquatic Rodent Damage Management to Alleviate Property Damage

Aquatic rodents cause damage to a variety of property types in Mississippi each year. Property damage can occur in a variety of ways. Aquatic rodent damage to property occurs primarily through direct damage to structures. Beaver can flood land, roads, and railways. They can girdle trees, consume

landscaping, and burrowing activities may cause damage to earthen dams and roadways. In addition, aquatic rodents crossing runways and taxiways near water bodies can contribute to aircraft strikes risks.

In some situations, the damage and threats caused by beaver outweigh the benefits (Grasse and Putnam 1955, Woodward et al. 1985, Novak 1987). Damage to resources associated with beaver are most often a result of their feeding, burrowing, and dam building behaviors. Beaver cause an estimated $75 to $100 million dollars in economic losses annually in the United States, with total losses in the southeastern United States over a 40-year period estimated to be $4 billion (Novak 1987).

Beaver often will gnaw through trees and other woody vegetation for use in dam building, food caches, and the building of lodges. The girdling and felling of trees and other woody vegetation can cause economic losses, can threaten human safety and property when trees fall, and the loss of trees can be aesthetically displeasing to property owners. The loss of timber (*e.g.*, from flooding, gnawing) is the most common type of damage associated with beaver (Hill 1976, Hill 1982, Woodward et al. 1985, Baker and Hill 2003). Tracts of bottomland hardwood timber up to several thousand acres in size may be lost to beaver activity (Miller and Yarrow 1994). Timber damage caused by beaver in the southeastern United States has been estimated at $2.2 million annually in Mississippi (Arner and Dubose 1982), $2.2 million in Alabama (Hill 1976), and $45 million in Georgia (Godbee and Price 1975). Shwiff et al. (2011) estimated the Beaver Control Assistance Program in the State provided average direct program benefits that ranged from $25 million to $57 million per year between 2005 and 2009.

In addition to damage associated with beaver feeding and gnawing on trees, damage can occur from dam building activities. Beaver dams impound water, which can flood property resulting in economic damage. Flooding from beaver dams can cause damage to roads, impede traffic, inundate timber, weaken earthen embankments, and cause damage to residential and commercial utilities.

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, impounded water may damage roads and railroads by saturating roadbeds or railroad beds. Burrowing by beaver, muskrats, and nutria can compromise the banks of roadbeds and railroad beds. Their burrowing activities can also pose risks to earthen dams that retain water (Federal Emergency Management Agency 2005). The burrowing activities of muskrats likely caused the failure of a levee holding back floodwaters along the Mississippi River. The muskrat burrows likely weakened the structure and caused the levee to collapse (Caudell 2008). In addition, aircraft have struck beaver and muskrats at air facilities in the United States (Dolbeer et al. 2014) and strikes could occur at air facilities in Mississippi.

Damage caused by muskrats is usually not a major problem, but can be important in some situations (Wade and Ramsey 1986), such as in aquaculture systems or when burrowing into earthen embankments. 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, the cost of the damage can often outweigh the benefits of having a muskrat population present in the pond.

Burrowing activity of muskrats can seriously weaken dams and levees (Perry 1982) causing them to leak or collapse. 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.

Nutria can also burrow into the Styrofoam floatation under boat docks and wharves, causing these structures to lean and sink. Nutria burrow under buildings, which may lead to uneven settling or failure of the foundations. Burrows can weaken roadbeds, railroad beds, stream banks, dams, and dikes, which may collapse when rain or high water saturate the soil or when subjected to heavy objects on the surface (*e.g.*, vehicles, farm machinery, or grazing livestock). Rain and wave action can wash out and enlarge collapsed burrows, which can intensify the damage. Nutria girdle fruit, nut, and shade trees and ornamental shrubs. They also dig up lawns and golf courses when feeding on the tender roots and shoots of sod grasses. Gnawing damage to wooden structures is also common. Nutria feed on valuable wetland vegetation and cultivated crops such as sugar cane and rice (Wade and Ramsey 1986). Nutria may feed on the bark of trees, such as black willow (*Salix nigra*) and bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), in winter months when more preferred herbaceous vegetation is dormant.

WS has received numerous requests in the past for assistance in resolving property damage caused by aquatic rodents. As part of the proposed program, WS could provide assistance, upon request, involving target aquatic rodent species to any requester experiencing such damage throughout Mississippi.

1.3 SCOPE OF THIS ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Actions Analyzed

This EA documents the need for managing damage caused by aquatic rodents, the issues associated with meeting that need, and alternative approaches to address those issues and to meet the need for action. WS mission is to provide federal leadership with managing damage and threats of damage associated with wildlife (see WS Directive 1.201). WS would only provide assistance when the appropriate property manager or property owner requested WS' assistance. WS could receive a request for assistance from a property owner or manager to conduct activities on property they own or manage, which could include federal, state, tribal, municipal, and private land within the State of Mississippi.

Appendix B of this EA discusses the methods available for use or recommendation under each of the alternative approaches evaluated[6]. The alternatives and Appendix B also discuss how WS and other entities could recommend or employ methods to manage damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents in the State. Therefore, the actions evaluated in this EA are the use or recommendation of those methods available under the alternatives and the employment or recommendation of those methods by WS to manage or prevent damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents from occurring when requested by the appropriate resource owner or manager. WS' activities that could involve the lethal removal of target aquatic rodent species under the alternatives would only occur when agreed upon by the requester. In addition, lethal removal would only occur by WS when authorized by the MDWFP, when required, and only at levels authorized.

Federal, State, County, City, and Private Lands

[6]Appendix B contains a complete list of chemical and non-chemical methods available for use under the identified alternatives. However, listing methods neither implies that all methods would be used by WS to resolve requests for assistance nor does the listing of methods imply that all methods would be used to resolve every request for assistance.

WS could continue to provide damage management activities on federal, state, county, municipal, and private land in Mississippi when WS receives a request for such services by the appropriate resource owner or manager. In those cases where a federal agency requests WS' assistance with managing damage caused by aquatic rodents on property they own or manage, the requesting agency would be responsible for analyzing those activities in accordance with the NEPA. However, this EA would cover such actions if the requesting federal agency determined the analyses and scope of this EA were appropriate for those actions and the requesting federal agency adopted this EA through their own Decision based on the analyses in this EA. Therefore, the scope of this EA analyzes actions that could occur on federal lands, when requested.

Native American Lands and Tribes

The WS program in Mississippi would only conduct damage management activities on Native American lands when requested by a Native American Tribe. WS would only conduct activities after WS and the Tribe requesting assistance signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a work initiation document, or another similar document. Therefore, the Tribe would determine what activities would be allowed and when WS' assistance was required. Because Tribal officials would be responsible for requesting assistance from WS and determining what methods would be available to alleviate damage, no conflict with traditional cultural properties or beliefs would likely occur. Those methods available to alleviate damage associated with aquatic rodents on federal, state, county, municipal, and private properties under the alternatives analyzed in this EA would be available for use to alleviate damage on Tribal properties when the Tribe requesting WS' assistance approved the use of those methods. Therefore, the activities and methods addressed under the alternatives would include those activities that WS could employ on Native American lands, when requested and when agreed upon by the Tribe and WS.

Period for which this EA is Valid

If the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not warranted based on the analyses associated with this EA, WS would conduct reviews of activities conducted under the selected alternative to ensure those activities occurred within the parameters evaluated in this EA. This EA would remain valid until WS and the TVA, in consultation with the MDWFP determined that new needs for action, changed conditions, new issues, or new alternatives having different environmental impacts must be analyzed. At that time, WS and the TVA would supplement this analysis or conduct a separate evaluation pursuant to the NEPA. Under the alternative analyzing no involvement by WS, no review or additional analyses would occur based on the lack of involvement by WS. The monitoring of activities by WS would ensure the EA remained appropriate to the scope of damage management activities conducted by WS in Mississippi under the selected alternative, including activities conducted on TVA properties, when requested.

Site Specificity

As mentioned previously, WS would only conduct damage management activities when requested by the appropriate resource owner or manager. In addition, WS' activities that could involve the lethal removal of aquatic rodents under the alternatives would only occur when authorized by the MDWFP, when required, and only at levels authorized.

This EA analyzes the potential impacts of aquatic rodent damage management based on previous activities conducted on private and public lands in Mississippi where WS and the appropriate entities entered into a MOU, work initiation document, or another comparable document. The EA also addresses the potential impacts of managing damage caused by aquatic rodents in areas where WS and a cooperating entity could sign additional agreements in the future. Because the need for action would be

to reduce damage and because the program's goals and directives would be to provide services when requested, within the constraints of available funding and workforce, it is conceivable that additional damage management efforts could occur. Thus, this EA anticipates those additional efforts and analyzes the impacts of those efforts as part of the alternatives.

Those aquatic rodent species addressed in this EA occur statewide and throughout the year in the State; therefore, damage or threats of damage could occur wherever those aquatic rodents occur. Planning for the management of aquatic rodent damage must be viewed as being conceptually similar to the actions of other entities whose missions are to stop or prevent adverse consequences from anticipated future events for which the actual sites and locations where they would occur are unknown but could be anywhere in a defined geographic area. Examples of such agencies and programs include fire departments, police departments, emergency clean-up organizations, and insurance companies. Although WS and the TVA could predict some locations where aquatic rodent damage would occur, WS and the TVA could not predict every specific location or the specific time where such damage would occur in any given year. In addition, the threshold triggering an entity to request assistance from WS to manage damage associated with aquatic rodents is often unique to the individual; therefore, predicting where and when WS would receive such a request for assistance would be difficult. This EA emphasizes major issues as those issues relate to specific areas whenever possible; however, many issues apply wherever aquatic rodent damage and the resulting management actions occurs and are treated as such.

Chapter 2 of this EA identifies and discusses issues relating to managing damage caused by aquatic rodents in Mississippi. The standard WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992; see WS Directive 2.201) would be the site-specific procedure for individual actions that WS could conduct in the State (see Chapter 3 for a description of the Decision Model and its application). Decisions made using the model would be in accordance with WS' directives and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) described in this EA, as well as relevant laws and regulations in accordance with WS Directive 2.210. The analyses in this EA would apply to any action that may occur in any locale and at any time within Mississippi. In this way, WS and the TVA believes it meets the intent of the NEPA with regard to site-specific analysis and that this is the only practical way for WS and the TVA to comply with the NEPA and still be able to accomplish its mission.

Summary of Public Involvement

WS, in cooperation with the TVA, initially developed the issues associated with conducting damage management in consultation with the MDWFP. WS and the TVA defined the issues and identified the preliminary alternatives through the scoping process. As part of this process, and as required by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and APHIS implementing regulations for the NEPA, WS and the TVA will make this document available to the public for review and comment. WS and the TVA will make the document available to the public through legal notices published in local print media, through direct notification of parties that have requested notification or that WS and the TVA has identified as having a potential interest in the reduction of threats and damage associated with aquatic rodents in the State. In addition, WS will post this EA on the APHIS website for review and comment.

WS will provide for a minimum of a 30-day comment period for the public and interested parties to provide new issues, concerns, and/or alternatives. Through the public involvement process, WS and the TVA will clearly communicate to the public and interested parties the analyses of potential environmental impacts on the quality of the human environment. WS and the TVA would fully consider new issues, concerns, or alternatives the public identifies during the public involvement period to determine whether WS and the TVA should revisit the EA and, if appropriate, revise the EA prior to issuance of a Decision.

1.4 RELATIONSHIP OF THIS EA TO OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS

WS' Environmental Assessment – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management: WS has previously developed an EA that analyzed the need for action to manage damage associated with aquatic rodents in the State. This EA will address more recently identified changes in activities and will assess the potential environmental impacts of program alternatives based on those changes, primarily a need to evaluate new information. Since this EA will re-evaluate activities conducted under the previous EA to address the new need for action and the associated affected environment, the previous EA that addressed managing damage caused by aquatic rodents will be superseded by this analysis and the outcome of the Decision issued based on the analyses in this EA.

WS' Environmental Assessment – Mammal Damage Management: WS has also prepared a separate EA to evaluate the need to reduce damage associated with other mammal species in the State. WS is currently developing a new EA that will address more recently identified changes in activities associated with mammals and will assess the potential environmental impacts of program alternatives based on a those changes, primarily a need to evaluate new information. Many of the methods available to reduce aquatic rodent damage and threats of damage could also be used to alleviate damage caused by other mammal species, such as foothold traps, cage traps, cable snares, and shooting. In addition, the unintentional removal of non-target species could be similar across program activities. Therefore, this EA will evaluate the potential cumulative effects associated with the alternative approaches evaluated in the EA evaluating the need to manage damage associated with other mammal species in the State.

TVA's Natural Resource Plan (NRP): The TVA has developed an extensive plan to strategically evaluate both renewable and nonrenewable resources and fulfill the responsibilities associated with good stewardship of TVA lands and resources. The NRP is designed to integrate the objectives of six resource areas (biological, cultural, recreation, water, public engagement and reservoir lands planning); provide optimum public use benefit; and balance competing and sometimes conflicting resource uses (TVA 2011*a*).

TVA's Environment Impact Statement Assessing the Natural Resource Plan: The TVA has also prepared an EIS to assess the impacts of the NRP and its reasonable alternatives on the environment. It specifically describes the stewardship programs that are ongoing and are being evaluated for future implementation as part of the NRP; and assesses the potential environmental impacts associated with implementing the various alternatives (TVA 2011*b*).

Mississippi's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS): The MDWFP has developed an extensive wildlife conservation plan that evaluates all species of plant and animal known to exist within the State. This plan identifies all of the species and habitats that are currently listed as endangered, threatened, or species of concern, both federally by the USFWS and at the state level by the MDWFP through the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science (Mississippi Museum of Natural Science 2005). The CWCS creates a comprehensive prioritized list of species in need of conservation and their habitats. WS and the TVA consulted the CWCS as part of this analysis.

1.5 AUTHORITY OF FEDERAL AND STATE AGENCIES

Below are brief discussions of the authorities of WS, the TVA, and other agencies, as those authorities relate to conducting wildlife damage management.

WS' Legislative Authority

The primary statutory authority for the WS program is the Act of March 2, 1931 (46 Stat. 1468; 7 USC 426-426b) as amended, and the Act of December 22, 1987 (101 Stat. 1329-331, 7 USC 426c). The WS program is the lead federal authority in managing damage to agricultural resources, natural resources, property, and threats to human safety associated with animals. WS' directives define program objectives and guide WS' activities when managing damage.

Tennessee Valley Authority

The TVA is a federal corporation created by an Act of Congress in May 18, 1933 [48 Stat. 58-59, 16 USC Sec. 831, as amended]. The TVA provides electricity to 9 million people, businesses and industries, and manages 293,000 acres of public land and 11,000 miles of reservoir shoreline in the seven-state Tennessee Valley Region (Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia – an area of 80,000 square miles). The TVA operates 29 hydroelectric dams, 11 coal-fired power plants, three nuclear plants, 11 natural gas-fired power facilities, a pump-storage plant, as well as solar, wind, and other renewable energy production sites that can produce about 34,000 megawatts of electricity, delivered over 16,000 miles of high-voltage power lines. The TVA also provides flood control, navigation, land management, and recreation for the Tennessee River system and works with local utilities and state and local governments to promote economic development across the region.

In Mississippi, the TVA generates electricity at three combustion turbine sites and two solar facilities. The electricity TVA generates is transmitted over 16,000 miles of transmission line across the Valley. TVA also owns or maintains 80 substations and 2,037 circuit miles of transmission lines in Mississippi. The TVA conducts and requests assistance from WS to provide wildlife damage management on land and at facilities owned by the TVA.

United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

The 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 (CWA) with the United States Army Corps of Engineers that established a permit program for the review and approval of water quality standards that directly affect wetlands.

Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks

The MDWFP authority in wildlife management is given within the Mississippi Code Annotated Section 49-1-1 et seq., the official regulations of the Commission of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks and applicable federal laws. This legislation covers general provisions; licenses, permits and stamps; wildlife; fish; and wild animals.

Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce

The Pesticide Program of the MDAC enforces state laws pertaining to the use and application of pesticides. Under the Mississippi Pesticide Application Act (Sections 69-23-101 through 69-23-133) this section monitors the use of pesticides in a variety of pest management situations. It also licenses private and commercial pesticide applicators and pesticide contractors. Under the Mississippi Pesticide Law (Section 69-23-1 through 69-23-27) the program licenses restricted use pesticide dealers and registers all pesticides for sale and distribution in the state of Mississippi.

Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ)

The MDEQ is the State agency that works to protect and improve water resources throughout the State. The mission of the MDEQ "*…is to safeguard the health, safety, and welfare of present and future generations of Mississippians by conserving and improving our environment and fostering wise economic growth through focused research and responsible regulation*". The MDEQ is responsible for reviewing Water Quality Certifications applications required by Section 401.

1.6 COMPLIANCE WITH LAWS AND STATUTES

Several laws or statutes would authorize, regulate, or otherwise affect WS' activities under the alternatives. WS would comply with applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations in accordance with WS Directive 2.210. Below are brief discussions of those laws and regulations that would relate to damage management activities that WS could conduct in the State.

National Environmental Policy Act

All federal actions are subject to the NEPA (Public Law 9-190, 42 USC 4321 et seq.). WS follows the CEQ regulations implementing the NEPA (40 CFR 1500 et seq.) along with the USDA (7 CFR 1b) and the APHIS implementing guidelines (7 CFR 372) as part of the decision-making process. Those laws, regulations, and guidelines generally outline five broad types of activities that federal agencies must accomplish as part of any project: public involvement, analysis, documentation, implementation, and monitoring. The NEPA also sets forth the requirement that all major federal actions be evaluated in terms of their potential to significantly affect the quality of the human environment for the purpose of avoiding or, where possible, mitigating and minimizing adverse impacts. In part, the CEQ, through regulations in 40 CFR, Parts 1500-1508, regulate federal activities that could affect the physical and biological environment. In accordance with regulations of the CEQ and the USDA, the APHIS has published guidelines concerning the implementation of the NEPA (see 44 CFR 50381-50384).

Pursuant to the NEPA and the CEQ regulations, this EA documents the analyses resulting from proposed federal actions, informs decision-makers and the public of reasonable alternatives capable of avoiding or minimizing adverse impacts, and serves as a decision-aiding mechanism to ensure that WS and the TVA infuses the policies and goals of the NEPA into agency actions. WS and the TVA prepared this EA by integrating as many of the natural and social sciences as warranted, based on the potential effects of the alternatives, including the potential direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the alternatives.

Endangered Species Act (ESA)

Under the ESA, all federal agencies will seek to conserve T&E species and will utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of the Act (Sec.2(c)). WS and the TVA conducts consultations with the USFWS pursuant to Section 7 of the ESA 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 will use the best scientific and commercial data available*" (Sec.7 (a)(2)). Evaluation of the alternatives in regards to the ESA will occur in Chapter 4 of this EA.

Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act

The FIFRA and its implementing regulations (Public Law 110-426, 7 USC 136 et. seq.) require the registration, classification, and regulation of all pesticides used in the United States. The EPA is responsible for implementing and enforcing the FIFRA. The EPA and the MDAC regulate pesticides that could be available to manage damage associated with aquatic rodents in the State.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, as amended

The NHPA and its implementing regulations (see 36 CFR 800) require federal agencies to initiate the Section 106 process if an agency determines that the agency's actions are undertakings as defined in Section 800.16(y) and, if so, whether it is a type of activity that has the potential to cause effects on historic properties. If the undertaking is a type of activity that does not have the potential to cause effects on historic properties, assuming such historic properties were present, the agency official has no further obligations under Section 106. None of the aquatic rodent damage management methods described in this EA that would be available cause major ground disturbance, any physical destruction or damage to property, any alterations of property, wildlife habitat, or landscapes, nor would involve the sale, lease, or transfer of ownership of any property. In general, the use of such methods also do not have the potential to introduce visual, atmospheric, or audible elements to areas that could result in effects on the character or use of historic properties. Therefore, the methods that would be available under the alternatives would not generally be the types of methods that would have the potential to affect historic properties. If WS and/or the TVA planned an individual activity with the potential to affect historic resources under an alternative selected because of a decision on this EA, WS and/or the TVA would conduct the site-specific consultation, as required by Section 106 of the NHPA, as necessary.

The use of noise-making methods, such as firearms, at or in close proximity to historic or cultural sites for the purposes of removing wildlife have the potential for audible effects on the use and enjoyment of historic property. However, WS would only use such methods at a historic site at the request of the owner or manager of the site to resolve a damage problem, which means such use, would be to benefit or protect the historic property. A built-in minimization factor for this issue is that virtually all the methods involved would only have temporary effects on the audible nature of a site and could be ended at any time to restore the audible qualities of such sites to their original condition with no further adverse effects. WS and/or the TVA would conduct site-specific consultation as required by the Section 106 of the NHPA, as necessary, in those types of situations.

The Native American Graves and Repatriation Act of 1990

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (Public Law 101-106, 25 USC 3001) requires federal agencies to notify the Secretary of the Department that manages the federal lands upon the discovery of Native American cultural items on federal or tribal lands. Federal agencies are to discontinue work until the agency has made a reasonable effort to protect the items and notify the proper authority.

Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (21 USC 360)

This law places administration of pharmaceutical drugs, including those immobilizing drugs used for wildlife capture and handling, under the Food and Drug Administration.

Controlled Substances Act of 1970 (21 USC 821 et seq.)

This law requires an individual or agency to have a special registration number from the United States Drug Enforcement Administration to possess controlled substances, including controlled substances used for wildlife capture and handling.

Animal Medicinal Drug Use Clarification Act of 1994

The Animal Medicinal Drug Use Clarification Act (AMDUCA) and its implementing regulations (21 CFR 530) establish several requirements for the use of animal drugs, including those animal drugs used to capture and handle wildlife in damage management programs. Those requirements are: (1) a valid "*veterinarian-client-patient*" relationship, (2) well defined record keeping, (3) a withdrawal period for animals that have been administered drugs, and (4) identification of animals. A veterinarian, either on staff or on an advisory basis, would be involved in the oversight of the use of animal capture and handling drugs under any alternative where WS could use those immobilizing and euthanasia drugs. Veterinary authorities in each state have the discretion under this law to establish withdrawal times (*i.e.*, a period after a drug was administered that must lapse before an animal may be used for food) for specific drugs. Animals that people might consume within the withdrawal period must be identifiable (*e.g.*, use of ear tags) and labeled with appropriate warnings.

Clean Water Act (Section 401)

As required by Section 401 of the CWA (see 33 USC 1341), an applicant for a permit issued pursuant to Section 404 of the CWA must also possess a permit from the state in which the discharge originates or will originate, when applicable. The MDEQ is responsible for reviewing Water Quality Certifications applications required by Section 401 of the Clean Water Act.

Clean Water Act (Section 404)

Section 404 (see 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 United States Army Corps of Engineers unless the specific activity is exempted in 33 CFR 323 or covered by a nationwide permit by 33 CFR 330.

Food Security Act

The Wetland Conservation provision (Swampbuster) of the 1985 (16 USC 3801-3862), 1990 (as amended by Public Law 101-624), and 1996 (as amended by Public Law 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 because 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 five consecutive years and wetland characteristics return, the cropland is considered abandoned and then becomes a wetland subject to regulations under Swampbuster and Section 404 of the CWA.

Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended (16 USC 1451-1464, Chapter 33; Public Law 92-583, October 27, 1972; 86 Stat. 1280).

This law established a voluntary national program within the Department of Commerce to encourage coastal states to develop and implement coastal zone management plans. Subsequent to federal approval of their plans, the Department of Commerce could award grants for implementation purposes. In order to be eligible for federal approval, each state's plan was required to define boundaries of the coastal zone, identify uses of the area to be regulated by the state, determine the mechanism (criteria, standards or regulations) for controlling such uses, and develop broad guidelines for priorities of uses within the coastal zone. In addition, this law established a system of criteria and standards for requiring that federal actions occur in a manner consistent with the federally approved plan. The standard for determining consistency varied depending on whether the federal action involved a permit, license, financial assistance, or a federally authorized activity. As appropriate, WS would conduct a consistency determination to assure management actions would be consistent with the State's Coastal Zone Management Program.

Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act

Congress enacted this law in 1990 to fund wetland enhancement along the Gulf Cost of the United States by protecting and restoring coastal wetlands. People also refer to this Act as the Breaux Act.

Flood Plain Management – Executive Order 11988

Executive Order 11988 requires federal agencies to avoid to the extent possible the long and short-term adverse effects associated with the occupancy and modification of flood plains and to avoid direct and indirect support of floodplain development wherever there is a practicable alternative. In accomplishing this objective, "*each agency shall provide leadership and shall take action to reduce the risk of flood loss, to minimize the impact of floods on human safety, health, and welfare, and to restore and preserve the natural and beneficial values served by flood plains in carrying out its responsibilities*".

Protection of Wetlands – Executive Order 11990

Executive Order 11990 was signed to "*minimize the destruction, loss or degradation of wetlands and to preserve and enhance the natural and beneficial values of wetlands*". To meet those objectives, Executive Order 11990 requires federal agencies to consider alternatives to wetland sites, in planning their actions, and to limit potential damage, if a federal agency cannot avoid an activity affecting a wetland.

Environmental Justice in Minority and Low Income Populations - Executive Order 12898

Executive Order 12898 promotes the fair treatment of people of all races, income levels, and cultures with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Environmental justice is the pursuit of equal justice and protection under the law for all environmental statutes and regulations without discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Executive Order 12898 requires federal agencies to make environmental justice 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. This EA will evaluate activities addressed in the alternatives for their potential impacts on the human environment and compliance with Executive Order 12898.

WS would use only legal, effective, and environmentally safe damage management methods, tools, and approaches. The EPA through the FIFRA, the MDAC, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, MOUs with land managing agencies, and WS' Directives would regulate chemical methods that could be available for use by WS pursuant to the alternatives and the TVA would allow to be used on properties they own or manage. WS and the TVA would properly dispose of any excess solid or hazardous waste. WS and the TVA do not anticipate the alternatives would result in any adverse or disproportionate environmental impacts to minority and low-income persons or populations. In contrast, the alternatives may benefit minority or low-income populations by reducing threats to public health and safety and property damage.

Protection of Children from Environmental Health and Safety Risks - Executive Order 13045

Children may suffer disproportionately for many reasons from environmental health and safety risks, including the development of their physical and mental status. WS and the TVA make it a high priority to identify and assess environmental health and safety risks that may disproportionately affect children. WS and the TVA have considered the impacts that this proposal might have on children. The proposed

activities would occur by using only legally available and approved methods where it is highly unlikely that activities conducted pursuant to the alternatives would adversely affect children. For these reasons, WS and the TVA conclude that it would not create an environmental health or safety risk to children from implementing the alternatives. Additionally, the need for action identified a need to reduce threats to human safety, including risks to children; therefore, cooperators could request WS' assistance with reducing threats to the health and safety of children posed by aquatic rodents.

Invasive Species - Executive Order 13112

Executive Order 13112 establishes guidance for federal agencies to use their programs and authorities to prevent the spread or to control populations of invasive species that cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health. The Order states that each federal agency whose actions may affect the status of invasive species shall, to the extent practicable and permitted by law: 1) reduce invasion of exotic species and the associated damages, 2) monitor invasive species populations and provide for restoration of native species and habitats, 3) conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction, and 4) provide for environmentally sound control and promote public education of invasive species. Pursuant to Executive Order 13112, the National Invasive Species Council has designated the nutria as meeting the definition of an invasive species.

Wildlife Definitions and Interpretations (Mississippi Code Annotated §49-7-1, as amended)

Section 49-7-1 of the Mississippi Code of 1972 defines those mammal species that are considered game species, fur-bearing species, and nuisance animals. Of those species addressed in this EA, only the muskrat is considered a fur-bearing species. Nutria and beaver are classified as nuisance animals (Public Notice LE4-3779). Nuisance animals may be taken at any time subject to certain provisions.

Administrative Scientific Collecting Permit

This regulation authorizes WS' employees in Mississippi to work within road right of ways to implement the Beaver Control Assistance Program as well as define required trap check regulations. It allows the agency to collect fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals in the State of Mississippi for the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science. Collections are to be made by chemicals, firearms, traps, and possibly electro-shocking. A yearly report of animals taken is required and submitted to the Museum.

1.7 DECISIONS TO BE MADE

Based on agency relationships, MOUs, and legislative authorities, WS is the lead agency for this EA, and therefore, responsible for the scope, content, and decisions made. The TVA owns and operates numerous electrical power generation sites and transmission structures within Mississippi, including electrical substations and transmission lines. In addition, the TVA manages lands within the State for recreational, natural, and cultural resources. Many of these sites experience damage associated with aquatic rodents within the State. The TVA would be the primary decision-maker for activities occurring on sites owned or managed by the TVA. As the authority for the management of aquatic rodent populations in the State, the MDWFP was involved in the development of the EA and provided input throughout the EA preparation process to ensure an interdisciplinary approach according to the NEPA and agency mandates, policies, and regulations. The MDWFP is responsible for managing wildlife in the State of Mississippi, including those aquatic rodents addressed in this EA. The MDWFP establishes and enforces regulated hunting and trapping seasons in the State. WS' activities to reduce and/or prevent aquatic rodent damage in the State would be coordinated with the MDWFP, which would ensure the MDWFP has the opportunity to incorporate any activities WS' conducts into population objectives established for aquatic rodent populations in the State.

Based on the scope of this EA, the decisions to be made are: 1) should WS conduct aquatic rodent damage management to alleviate damage when requested, 2) should WS conduct disease surveillance and monitoring in aquatic rodent populations when requested, 3) should WS implement an integrated methods approach, including technical assistance and direct operational assistance, to meet the need for action in Mississippi, 4) if not, should WS attempt to implement one of the alternatives to an integrated methods strategy, and 5) would the proposed action or the other alternatives result in potential effects to the environment requiring the preparation of an EIS.

CHAPTER 2: AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ISSUES

Chapter 2 contains a discussion of the issues, including issues that will receive detailed environmental impact analysis in Chapter 4 (Environmental Consequences), issues that have driven the development of SOPs, and issues that WS and the TVA did not consider in detail, with rationale. Pertinent portions of the affected environment will be included in this chapter in the discussion of issues. Additional descriptions of the affected environment occur during the discussion of the environmental effects in Chapter 4.

2.1 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Beaver, nutria, and muskrats are semi-aquatic species that are closely associated with aquatic habitats. Those aquatic rodent species addressed in this EA are capable of utilizing a variety of aquatic habitats in the State. Those aquatic rodents addressed in this EA occur throughout the year across the State where suitable aquatic habitat exists for foraging and shelter. Damage or threats of damage caused by those aquatic rodent species could occur statewide in Mississippi wherever those aquatic rodents occur. However, damage management would only be conducted by WS when requested by a landowner or manager and only on properties where a MOU, work initiation document, or another comparable document were signed between WS and a cooperating entity.

The ideal beaver habitat consists of ponds, small lakes with muddy bottoms, and meandering streams, but can consist of artificial ponds, reservoirs, and drainage ditches that contain nearby food sources (Novak 1987). In the southern United States, beaver eat a large variety of woody foods, including loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*), sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), southern sweetbay (*Magnolia virginiana*), and spruce pine (*Pinus glabra*). The analysis of beaver stomach contents in Mississippi identified 42 species of trees, 36 genera of herbaceous plants, 4 types of woody vines, and many species of grass (Graminae) (Roberts and Arner 1984). Some of the common forbs eaten by beaver across the southern United States includes rice cutgrass (*Leersia oryzoides*), golden club (*Orontium aquaticum*), switchgrass (*Arundinaria tecta*), poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), soybean (*Glycine max*), and pondweed (*Potamogeton* spp.) (Novak 1987). In Mississippi, beaver occur throughout the State where suitable aquatic habitats are available.

The habitat requirements of muskrats are extremely flexible but they must have a source of permanent water and a protected area for shelter and raising young, such as a lodge built of vegetation or a den burrowed into banks (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987). Muskrats are 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 other aquatic grasses in freshwater and in coastal marshes. For example, along the coast of Louisiana, the highest densities of muskrats occurred in brackish marshes containing three-cornered sedge (*Scirpus olneyi*) (O'Neil 1949, Palmisano 1972).

Nutria and muskrats have similar habitat requirements and generally, consist of areas with a source of permanent water and sufficient aquatic plant communities. Nutria occur along rivers, lakes, lagoons,

marshes, and swamp areas with freshwater and brackish plant communities (Kinler et al. 1987). Nutria are currently found throughout Mississippi with the highest concentrations located in the southern half of the State along or near the coastal marsh.

Mississippi encompasses 48,432 square miles (31 million acres), which consists of 46,923 square miles (30 million acres) of land area and 1,509 square miles (1 million acres) of water (United States Census Bureau 2010). Upon receiving a request for assistance, WS could conduct activities to reduce aquatic rodent damage or threats of damage on federal, state, tribal, municipal, and private properties in Mississippi. Areas where damage or threats of damage could occur include, but would not be limited to agricultural fields, vineyards, orchards, farmyards, dairies, ranches, livestock operations, aquaculture facilities, fish hatcheries, grain mills, grain handling areas, railroad yards, waste handling facilities, industrial sites, natural resource areas, park lands, and historic sites; state and interstate highways and roads; railroads, railroad beds, and their right-of-ways; property in or adjacent to subdivisions, businesses, and industrial parks; timberlands, croplands, and pastures; private and public property where burrowing aquatic rodents cause damage to structures, dams, dikes, ditches, ponds, and levees; public and private properties in rural/urban/suburban areas where aquatic rodents cause damage to landscaping and natural resources, property, and are a threat to human safety through the spread of disease. The area would also include airports and military airbases where aquatic rodents were a threat to human safety and to property; areas where aquatic rodents negatively affect wildlife, including T&E species; and public property where aquatic rodents were negatively affecting historic structures, cultural landscapes, and natural resources. Chapter 4 also contains additional information on the affected environment.

In addition, activities under the relevant alternatives could occur at facilities owned or managed by the TVA when aquatic rodents addressed in this assessment damage or pose threats of damage to property, to natural resources, to human safety, or to the reliability of electric system transmission. WS could conduct damage management activities at any of the three combustion turbine sites owned by the TVA in Mississippi known as the Caledonia, Southaven, and Kemper sites. The Caledonia Plant occupies 120 acres near Steens, Mississippi. The Southaven Plant occupies 118 acres in Desoto County, Mississippi while the Kemper Plant occupies 197 acres in Kemper County, Mississippi near the City of DeKalb. The TVA also operates two solar facilities in Mississippi on the campuses of the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi and a location at Mississippi State University in Starkville, Mississippi. The TVA also owns or manages 76 electrical substations and 2,038 circuit miles of transmission lines in Mississippi.

WS could also conduct activities to reduce damage or threats of damage on recreational, natural, and cultural lands owned or managed by the TVA. The TVA owns 90 miles of public shoreline on Pickwick Reservoir in northeastern Mississippi that provides camping, fishing, boating, swimming, and other recreational opportunities. The TVA also owns and manages 1,700 acres of public land in Mississippi adjacent to Pickwick Reservoir.

Environmental Status Quo

As defined by the NEPA implementing regulations, the "*human environment shall be interpreted comprehensively to include the natural and physical environment and the relationship of people with that environment*" (40 CFR 1508.14). Therefore, when a federal action agency analyzes their potential impacts on the "*human environment*", it is reasonable for that agency to compare not only the effects of the federal action, but also the potential impacts that occur or could occur in the absence of the federal action by a non-federal entity. This concept is applicable to situations involving federal assistance to reduce damage associated with wildlife species.

Neither state nor federal laws protect some wildlife species, such as most non-native invasive species. State authority or law manages most aquatic rodent species without any federal oversight or protection. In some situations, with the possible exception of restrictions on methods (*e.g.*, firearms restrictions, pesticide regulations), unprotected wildlife species and certain resident wildlife species are managed with little or no restrictions, which allows anyone to lethally remove or take those species at any time when they are committing damage. In Mississippi, the MDWFP has the authority to manage aquatic rodent populations in the State.

When a non-federal entity (*e.g.*, agricultural producers, municipalities, counties, private companies, individuals, or any other non-federal entity) takes an action to alleviate aquatic rodent damage or threat, the action is not subject to compliance with the NEPA due to the lack of federal involvement in the action. Under such circumstances, the environmental baseline or status quo would be an environment that includes those resources as other non-federal entities manage or affect those resources in the absence of the federal action. Therefore, in those situations in which a non-federal entity has decided that a management action directed towards aquatic rodents should occur and even the particular methods that should be used, WS' involvement in the action would not affect the environmental status quo since the entity could take the action in the absence of WS' involvement. WS' involvement would not change the environmental status quo if the requester had conducted the action in the absence of WS' involvement in the action.

A non-federal entity could lethally remove aquatic rodents to alleviate damage without the need for a permit when those species are non-native or are unregulated by the MDWFP. For example, landowners or their designees can remove beaver and nutria that are causing damage to their property without the need for a permit from the MDWFP. In addition, other entities could remove aquatic rodents to alleviate damage during the hunting and/or trapping season, and/or through the issuance of permits by the MDWFP. In addition, most methods available for resolving damage associated with aquatic rodents would also be available for use by other entities. Therefore, WS' decision-making ability would be restricted to one of three alternatives. WS could take the action using the specific methods as decided upon by the non-federal entity, provide technical assistance only, or take no action. If WS' takes no action, another entity could take the action anyway using the same methods without the need for a permit, during the hunting or trapping season, or through the issuance of a permit by the MDWFP. Under those circumstances, WS would have virtually no ability to affect the environmental status quo since the action would likely occur in the absence of WS' direct involvement.

Therefore, based on the discussion above, it is clear that in those situations where a non-federal entity has obtained the appropriate permit or authority, and has already made the decision to remove or otherwise manage aquatic rodents to stop damage with or without WS' assistance, WS' participation in carrying out the action would not affect the environmental status quo.

2.2 ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH AQUATIC RODENT DAMAGE MANAGEMENT

Issues are concerns regarding potential adverse effects that might occur from a proposed action. Federal agencies must consider such issues during the NEPA decision-making process. Initially, WS and the TVA developed the issues related to managing damage associated with aquatic rodents in Mississippi in consultation with the MDWFP. In addition, WS and the TVA will invite the public to review and comment on the EA to identify additional issues.

Chapter 4 discusses the issues, as those issues relate to the possible implementation of the alternatives, including the proposed action. WS and the TVA evaluated, in detail, the following issues:

Issue 1 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on Target Aquatic Rodent Populations

A common issue when addressing damage caused by wildlife are the potential impacts of management actions on the populations of target species. Lethal and non-lethal methods would be available to resolve wildlife damage or threats to human safety.

Non-lethal methods could disperse or otherwise make an area unattractive to target species, which could reduce the presence of those species at the site and potentially the immediate area around the site where an entity employed those methods. Employing lethal methods could remove a single aquatic rodent or those aquatic rodents responsible for causing damage or posing threats to human safety. Therefore, the use of lethal methods could result in local population reductions in the area where damage or threats were occurring. The number of individual animals from a target species that WS could remove from the population using lethal methods would be dependent on the number of requests for assistance received, the number of individual aquatic rodents involved with the associated damage or threat, and the efficacy of methods employed.

The analysis will measure the number of individual animals lethally removed in relation to that species abundance to determine the magnitude of impact to the populations of those species from the use of lethal methods. Magnitude may be determined either quantitatively or qualitatively. Determinations based on population estimates, allowable harvest levels, and actual harvest data would be quantitative. Determinations based on population trends and harvest trend data, when available, would be qualitative.

In addition, many of the aquatic rodent species addressed in this EA can be harvested in the State during annual hunting and/or trapping seasons and can be addressed using available methods by other entities in the State when those species cause damage or pose threats of damage when permitted by the MDWFP, when required. Therefore, any damage management activities conducted by WS under the alternatives addressed would be occurring along with other natural processes and human-induced events, such as natural mortality, human-induced mortality from private damage management activities, damage management activities from other agencies, counties, or municipal governments, mortality from regulated harvest, and human-induced alterations of wildlife habitat.

Under certain alternatives, WS could employ methods available to resolve damage and reduce threats to human safety that target an individual animal of an aquatic rodent species or a group of animals after applying the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992; see WS Directive 2.201) to identify possible techniques. Chapter 4 analyzes the effects on the populations of target aquatic rodent populations in the State from implementation of the alternatives addressed in detail, including the proposed action. Information on aquatic rodent populations and trends are often available from several sources including the fur harvest reports, damage complaints, ground surveys, aerial surveys, and published literature.

Issue 2 - Effects on Non-target Wildlife Species Populations, Including T&E Species

The issue of non-target species effects, including effects on T&E species, arises from the use of non-lethal and lethal methods identified in the alternatives. The use of non-lethal and lethal methods has the potential to inadvertently disperse, capture, or kill non-target wildlife. Appendix B describes the methods available for use under the alternatives.

There are also concerns about the potential for adverse effects to occur to non-target wildlife from the use of chemical methods. Chemical methods that would be available for use to manage damage or threats associated with those aquatic rodent species addressed in this EA include immobilizing drugs, euthanasia

chemicals, zinc phosphide (muskrats and nutria only)[7], and taste repellents. Chapter 4 and Appendix B further discuss those chemical methods available for use to manage damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents in Mississippi.

The ESA states that all federal agencies *"...shall seek to conserve endangered and threatened species and shall utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of the Act"* [Sec. 7(a)(1)]. WS conducts consultations with the USFWS pursuant to Section 7 of the Act to ensure compliance with the ESA. Consultations are also conducted 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)].

As part of the scoping process for this EA, WS consulted with the USFWS pursuant to Section 7 of the ESA to facilitate interagency cooperation between WS and the USFWS. Chapter 4 discusses the potential effects of the alternatives on this issue.

Issue 3 - Effects of Damage Management Methods on Human Health and Safety

An additional issue often raised is the potential risks to human safety associated with employing methods to manage damage caused by target species. Both chemical and non-chemical methods have the potential to have adverse effects on human safety. WS' employees could use and recommend only those methods that were legally available under each of the alternatives. Still, some concerns exist regarding the safety of methods available despite their legality and selectivity. As a result, this EA will analyze the potential for proposed methods to pose a risk to members of the public. In addition to the potential risks to the public associated with the methods available under each of the alternatives, risks to WS' employees would also be an issue. Injuries to WS' employees could occur during the use of methods, as well as subject to workplace accidents. Selection of methods, under the alternatives, would include consideration for public and employee safety.

The issue of using chemical methods as part of managing damage associated with wildlife relates to the potential for human exposure either through direct contact with the chemical or exposure to the chemical from wildlife that have been exposed. Under the alternatives identified, the use or recommendation of chemical methods could include immobilizing drugs, euthanasia chemicals, repellents, and the rodenticide, zinc phosphide. Zinc phosphide would only be available to manage damage caused by muskrats and nutria. The EPA through the FIFRA and the MDAC through State laws would regulate pesticide use. The United States Drug Enforcement Administration and the United States Food and Drug Administration would regulate immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals. In addition, the use of all chemical methods by WS would be subject to Mississippi laws and WS' Directives.

Immobilizing drugs that could be available include ketamine and Telazol, which are anesthetics (*i.e.*, general loss of pain and sensation) used during the capture of wildlife to eliminate pain, calm fear, and reduce anxiety in wildlife when handling and transporting wildlife. Xylazine is a sedative that wildlife professionals often use in combination with ketamine to calm nervousness, irritability, and excitement in wildlife during the handling and transporting of wildlife. Euthanasia chemicals could include sodium pentobarbital and potassium chloride, all of which WS would administer after anesthetizing an animal.

Currently, there are no chemical repellents registered specifically for aquatic rodents in the State. Repellents often contain different active ingredients with most ingredients occurring naturally in the environment. The most common ingredients of repellents are coyote urine, putrescent whole egg solids,

[7] EPA registration number 56228-06

capsaicin, or sand (Silica) mixed with a non-toxic carrier for application to surfaces. Repellents for animals are not generally restricted-use products; therefore, a person does not need a pesticide applicators license to purchase or apply those products. People generally apply repellents directly to affected resources, which elicits an adverse taste or texture response when the target animal ingests the treated resource or the ingestion of the repellent causes temporary sickness (*e.g.*, nausea). Products containing coyote urine or other odors associated with predatory wildlife are intended to elicit a fright response in target wildlife by imitating the presence of a predatory animal (*i.e.*, wildlife tend to avoid areas where predators are known to be present). If repellents were registered for use in the State to reduce damage caused by aquatic rodents, WS could employ or recommend for use those repellents that were available (*i.e.*, registered with the EPA pursuant to the FIFRA and registered with the MDAC).

Another concern would be the potential for immobilizing drugs used in animal capture and handling to cause adverse health effects in people that hunt or trap and consume the species involved. Among the species that WS could capture and handle under the proposed action, this issue would be a primary concern for wildlife species that people hunt and consume as food.

WS could also use binary explosives to remove or breach beaver dams in the State, when requested. Binary explosives require the mixing of two components for activation. WS' employees would keep the two components separated until ready for use at a beaver dam. WS has formed an Explosives Safety Committee composed of qualified WS' personnel that is responsible for developing explosives safety and security for WS, conducting explosives training, and certifying WS' explosives specialists.

Most methods available to alleviate damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents would be non-chemical methods. Non-chemical methods may include cultural methods, limited habitat modification, animal behavior modification, and other mechanical methods. Changes in cultural methods could include changes in crop rotations or conducting structural repairs. Limited habitat modification would be practices that alter specific characteristics of a localized area, such as removing bushes to eliminate food or shelter locations or planting vegetation that was less palatable to certain aquatic rodent species. Animal behavior modification methods would include those methods designed to disperse aquatic rodents from an area through harassment or exclusion. Behavior modification methods could include pyrotechnics, propane cannons, barriers, electronic distress calls, effigies, Mylar tape, and lasers. Exclusion or barriers may be the wrapping the trunks of desirable trees with woven wire or other material, barrier fencing, or electric fencing. Other mechanical methods could include cage traps, foothold traps, body-gripping traps, cable restraints, shooting, or the recommendation that hunters and/or trappers reduce a local population of aquatic rodents during the hunting and/or trapping seasons.

The primary safety risk of most non-chemical methods occurs directly to the applicator or those persons assisting the applicator. However, risks to others do exist when employing non-chemical methods, such as when using firearms, nets, pyrotechnics, or body-gripping traps. Most of the non-chemical methods available to address aquatic rodent damage in Mississippi would be available for use under any of the alternatives and by any entity, when permitted. Chapter 4 further discusses the risks to human safety from the use of non-chemical methods as this issue relates to the alternatives. Appendix B provides a complete list of non-chemical methods available to alleviate damage associated with aquatic rodents.

Another concern is the threat to human safety from not employing methods or not employing the most effective methods to reduce the threats that aquatic rodents can pose. The need for action in Chapter 1 addresses the risks to human safety from diseases associated with certain aquatic rodent populations. The low risk of disease transmission from aquatic rodents does not lessen the concerns of cooperators requesting assistance to reduce threats from zoonotic diseases. Increased public awareness of zoonotic events has only heightened the concern of direct or indirect exposure to zoonoses. Not adequately

addressing the threats associated with potential zoonoses could lead to an increase in incidences of injury, illness, or loss of human life.

Additional concerns occur when inadequately addressing threats to human safety associated with aircraft striking aquatic rodents at airports in the State. Between 1990 and 2013, civil aircraft have at least struck 2 beaver and 25 muskrats at airports in the United States (Dolbeer et al. 2014). Although aircraft strikes involving aquatic rodents occur rarely, aquatic rodents have the potential to cause damage to aircraft, which can threaten the safety of passengers. Limiting or preventing the use of certain methods to address the potential for aircraft striking aquatic rodents could lead to higher risks to passenger safety. Chapter 4 further evaluates those concerns in relationship to the alternatives.

Issue 4 - Effects on the Aesthetic Values of Aquatic Rodents

One issue is the concern that the proposed action or the other alternatives would result in the loss of aesthetic benefits of target aquatic rodents to the public, resource owners, or neighboring residents. People generally regard wildlife 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.

The human attraction to animals likely started when people began domesticating animals. The public today share a similar bond with animals and/or wildlife in general and in modern societies, a large percentage of households have indoor or outdoor pets. However, some people may consider individual wild animals and aquatic rodents as "*pets*" or exhibit affection toward those animals, especially people who enjoy viewing wildlife. Therefore, the public reaction can be 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/problems between people and wildlife.

Wildlife populations provide a wide range of social and economic benefits (Decker and Goff 1987). Those include direct benefits related to consumptive and non-consumptive uses, indirect benefits derived from vicarious wildlife related experiences, and the personal enjoyment of knowing wildlife exists and contributes to the stability of natural ecosystems (Bishop 1987). Direct benefits are derived from a personal relationship with animals and may take the form of direct consumptive use (*i.e.*, using parts of or the entire animal) or non-consumptive use (*e.g.*, viewing the animal in nature or in a zoo, photographing) (Decker and Goff 1987).

Indirect benefits or indirect exercised values arise without the user being in direct contact with the animal and originate from experiences, such as looking at photographs and films of wildlife, reading about wildlife, or benefiting from activities or contributions of animals (*e.g.*, their use in research) (Decker and Goff 1987). Indirect benefits come in two forms: bequest and pure existence (Decker and Goff 1987). Bequest is providing for future generations and pure existence is merely knowledge that the animals exist (Decker and Goff 1987).

Public attitudes toward wildlife vary considerably. Some people believe that WS should capture and translocate all animals to another area to alleviate damage or threats those animals pose. In some cases, people directly affected 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 wildlife damage management want WS to teach tolerance for damage and threats caused by wildlife, and that people should never kill wildlife. Some of the people who oppose removal of wildlife do so because of human-affectionate bonds with individual

wildlife. Those human-affectionate bonds are similar to attitudes of a pet owner and result in aesthetic enjoyment.

Issue 5 - Humaneness and Animal Welfare Concerns of Methods

The issue of humaneness and animal welfare, as it relates to the killing or capturing of wildlife is an important but very complex concept that people can interpret in a variety of ways. Schmidt (1989) indicated that vertebrate 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.*"

The American Veterinary Medical Association (1987) has previously described suffering as a "*…highly unpleasant emotional response usually associated with pain and distress*." However, suffering "*…can occur without pain…*" and "*…pain can occur without suffering…*". 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 1991). Pain and physical restraint can cause stress in animals and the inability of animals to effectively deal with those stressors can lead to distress. Suffering can occur when a person does not take action to alleviate conditions that cause pain or distress in animals.

Defining pain as a component in humaneness appears to be a greater challenge than that of suffering. Pain obviously occurs in animals. Altered physiology and behavior in animals can be indicators of pain. However, pain experienced by individual animals probably ranges from little or no pain to considerable pain (California Department of Fish and Game 1991).

The American Veterinary Medical Association has previously stated "*...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 using American Veterinary Medical Association accepted methods of euthanasia when killing all animals, including wild and invasive animals. The American Veterinary Medical Association has stated, "[f]*or 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 terms such as killing, collecting, or harvesting, recognizing that a distress- free death may not be possible*" (Beaver et al. 2001).

Pain and suffering, as it relates to methods available for use to manage aquatic rodents has both a professional and lay point of arbitration. Wildlife managers and the public must recognize the complexity of defining suffering, since "*…neither medical nor veterinary curricula explicitly address suffering or its relief*" (California Department of Fish and Game 1991). Research suggests that with some methods (*e.g.*, foothold trap) changes in the blood chemistry of trapped animals indicate the existence of some level of "*stress*" (Kreeger et al. 1990). However, such research has not yet progressed to the development of objective, quantitative measurements of pain or stress for use in evaluating humaneness (Bateson 1991, Sharp and Saunders 2008, Sharp and Saunders 2011).

The decision-making process involves tradeoffs between the above aspects of pain and humaneness. Therefore, humaneness, in part, appears to be a person's perception of harm or pain inflicted on an animal, and 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. Chapter 4 further discusses the issue of humaneness and animal welfare. Chapter 3 discusses SOPs intended to alleviate pain and suffering.

Issue 6 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on the Regulated Harvest of Aquatic Rodents

Another issue commonly identified is a concern that damage management activities conducted by WS would affect the ability of persons to harvest those species during the regulated hunting and trapping seasons either by reducing local populations through the lethal removal of aquatic rodents or by reducing the number of aquatic rodents present in an area through dispersal techniques.

Potential impacts could arise from the use of non-lethal or lethal damage management methods. Non-lethal methods used to alleviate damage caused by those aquatic rodent species could reduce aquatic rodent densities through dispersal in areas where damage or the threat of damage was occurring. Similarly, lethal methods used to reduce damage associated with those aquatic rodents could lower densities in areas where damage was occurring resulting in a reduction in the availability of those species during the regulated harvest season. The use of non-lethal or lethal methods often disperses aquatic rodents from areas where damage was occurring to areas outside the damage area, which could serve to move those aquatic rodent species from those less accessible areas to places accessible to hunters.

Issue 7 – Effects of Beaver Removal and Dam Manipulation on the Status of Wetlands in the State

Wetlands are a valuable component of land-based ecosystems that provide numerous direct and indirect benefits to people and wildlife (*e.g.*, see Costanza et al. 1997, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). Between the 1780s and the 1980s, Dahl (1990) estimated 53% of the original wetland acres in the lower 48 states were lost, primarily from human development. Over that 200-year time span, Dahl (1990) estimated the wetland acres in Mississippi decreased from 9,872,000 acres to 4,067,000 acres, which represents a 59% decline. Beaver, through their building of dams and impounding water can have a unique role in establishing wetlands that not only provide benefit to the beaver, but to people and other wildlife. Wildlife professionals often consider beaver a "*keystone*" species for their ability to manipulate and create their own habitats, which can also provide benefits to other wildlife and people. Beaver may also be an inexpensive way of restoring wetlands or creating new wetlands (*e.g.*, see Hey 1995, Muller-Schwarze and Sun 2003, Buckley et al. 2011).

The issue of WS' potential impacts to wetlands could occur from activities conducted to alleviate damage or threats of damage associated with beaver, primarily from the breaching or removal of beaver dams. Beaver dam breaching or removal during activities to manage damage caused by beaver sometimes occurs in areas inundated by water from water impounded by beaver dams. Dam material usually consists of mud, sticks, and other vegetative material. Beaver dams obstruct the normal flow of water, which can change the preexisting hydrology from flowing or circulating waters to slower, deeper, more expansive waters that accumulate bottom sediment over time. The depth of the bottom sediment behind a beaver dam depends on the length of time water covers an area and the amount of suspended sediment in the water.

Beaver dams, over time, can establish new wetlands. The regulatory definition of a wetland stated by the United States Army Corps of Engineers and the EPA (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."

Therefore, the breaching or removal of a beaver dam could result in the degrading or removal of a wetland, if wetland characteristics exist at a location where a beaver dam occurs. The preexisting habitat (prior to the building of the dam) and the altered habitat (areas flooded by impounded water) have

different ecological values to the fish and wildlife native to the area. Some species may benefit by the addition of a beaver dam that creates a wetland, while the presence of some species of wildlife may decline. For example, some darter species listed as federally endangered require fast moving waters over gravel or cobble beds, which beaver dams can eliminate; thus, reducing the availability of habitat. In areas where bottomland forests were flooded by beaver dams, a change in species composition could occur over time as trees die. Flooding often kills hardwood trees, especially when flooding persists for extended periods, as soils become saturated. Conversely, beaver dams could be beneficial to some wildlife, such as river otter, Neotropical migratory birds, and waterfowl that require aquatic habitats.

If water impounded by a beaver dam persists for an extended period, hydric soils and hydrophytic vegetation could eventually form. This process could 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 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 at least periodically deficient in oxygen because of excessive water content. If those conditions exist, then a wetland has developed that would have different wildlife habitat values than an area of impounded water from more recent beaver activity.

In addition, people often raise concerns regarding the use of lethal methods to remove beaver to alleviate damage or threats. If WS removed beaver from an area and removed or breached any associated beaver dam, the manipulation of water levels by removing/breaching the dam could prevent the establishment of wetlands by preventing water conditions to persist long enough to establish wetland characteristics. If WS removed beaver but left the beaver dam undisturbed, the lack of maintenance to the dam by beaver would likely result in the eventual recession of the impounded water as weathering eroded the dam.

2.3 ISSUES CONSIDERED BUT NOT IN DETAIL WITH RATIONALE

WS and the TVA identified additional issues during the scoping process of this EA. WS and the TVA considered those additional issues but a detailed analysis did not occur for the reasons provided. Discussion of those additional issues and the reasons for not analyzing those issues in detail occur below.

Appropriateness of Preparing an EA (Instead of an EIS) for Such a Large Area

The appropriateness of preparing an EA instead of an EIS was a concern WS and the TVA identified during the scoping process. Wildlife damage management falls within the category of actions in which the exact timing or location of individual activities can be difficult to predict well enough ahead of time to describe accurately such locations or times in an EA or even an EIS. Although WS could predict some of the possible locations or types of situations and sites where some kinds of wildlife damage would occur, the program cannot predict the specific locations or times at which affected resource owners would determine a damage problem had become intolerable to the point that they request assistance from WS. In addition, the WS program would not be able to prevent such damage in all areas where it might occur without resorting to destruction of wild animal populations over broad areas at a much more intensive level than would be desired by most people, including WS and other agencies. Such broad scale population management would also be impractical or impossible to achieve within WS' policies and professional philosophies.

Lead agencies have the discretion to determine the geographic scope of their analyses under the NEPA (Kleppe v Sierra Club, 427 U.S. 390, 414 (1976), CEQ 1508.25). Ordinarily, according to the APHIS procedures implementing the NEPA, WS' individual wildlife damage management actions could be categorically excluded (7 CFR 372.5(c)). The intent in developing this EA has been to determine if the proposed action or the other alternatives could potentially have significant individual and/or cumulative

impacts on the quality of the human environment that would warrant the preparation of an EIS. This EA addresses impacts for managing damage and threats to human safety associated with aquatic rodents in the State to analyze individual and cumulative impacts and to provide a thorough analysis.

In terms of considering cumulative effects, one EA analyzing impacts for the entire State would provide a more comprehensive and less redundant analysis than multiple EAs covering smaller areas. If WS and the TVA made a determination through this EA that the proposed action or the other alternatives could have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, then WS and the TVA would publish a notice of intent to prepare an EIS and this EA would be the foundation for developing the EIS. Based on previous requests for assistance, the WS program in Mississippi would continue to conduct damage management in a very small area of the State where damage was occurring or likely to occur.

WS' Impact on Biodiversity

WS and the TVA do not attempt to eradicate any species of native wildlife in the State. WS and the TVA operate in accordance with federal and state laws and regulations enacted to ensure species viability. WS would use available methods to target individual aquatic rodents or groups of aquatic rodents identified as causing damage or posing a threat of damage. Any reduction of a local population or group is frequently temporary because immigration from adjacent areas or reproduction replaces the animals removed. As stated previously, WS would only provide assistance under the appropriate alternatives after receiving a request to manage damage or threats. Therefore, if WS provided direct operational assistance under the alternatives, WS would provide assistance on a small percentage of the land area of Mississippi. In addition, WS would only target those aquatic rodents identified as causing damage or posing a threat. WS would not attempt to suppress wildlife populations across broad geographical areas at such intensity levels for prolonged durations that significant ecological effects would occur. The goal of WS would not be to manage wildlife populations but to manage damage caused by specific individuals of a species. The management of wildlife populations in the State is the responsibility of the MDWFP and activities associated with many of the aquatic rodent species addressed in the EA require authorization from the MDWFP. Therefore, those factors would constrain the scope, duration, and intensity of WS' actions under the alternatives.

Often of concern with the use of certain methods is that aquatic rodents that WS lethally removes would only be replaced by other aquatic rodents after WS completes activities (*e.g.*, aquatic rodents that relocate into the area) or by aquatic rodents the following year (*e.g.*, increase in reproduction and survivability that could result from less competition). The ability of an animal population to sustain a certain level of removal and to return to pre-management levels demonstrates that limited, localized damage management methods have minimal impacts on species' populations.

Chapter 4 evaluates the environmental consequences of the alternatives on the populations of target and non-target species based on available quantitative and qualitative parameters. The permitting of lethal removal by the MDWFP would ensure cumulative removal levels would occur within allowable levels to maintain species' populations and meet population objectives for each species. Therefore, activities conducted pursuant to any of the alternatives would not adversely affect biodiversity in the State.

A Loss Threshold Should Be Established Before Allowing Lethal Methods

One issue identified through WS' implementation of the NEPA processes is a concern that WS or other entities should establish a threshold of loss before employing lethal methods to resolve damage and that wildlife damage should be a cost of doing business. In some cases, cooperators likely tolerate some damage and economic loss until the damage reaches a threshold where the damage becomes an economic burden. The appropriate level of allowed tolerance or threshold before employing lethal methods would

differ among cooperators and damage situations. In addition, establishing a threshold would be difficult or inappropriate to apply to human health and safety situations. For example, aircraft striking aquatic rodents could lead to property damage and could threaten passenger safety if a catastrophic failure of the aircraft occurred because of the strike. Therefore, addressing the threats of wildlife strikes prior to an actual strike occurring would be appropriate.

In a ruling for Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, et al. vs. Hugh Thompson, Forest Supervisor for the Dixie National Forest, et al., the United States District Court of Utah determined that a forest supervisor could establish a need for wildlife damage management if the supervisor could show that damage from wildlife was threatened (Civil No. 92-C-0052A January 20, 1993). Thus, there is judicial precedence indicating that it is not necessary to establish a criterion such as a percentage of loss of a particular resource to justify the need for damage management actions.

Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Should Not Occur at Taxpayer Expense

An issue identified is the concern that WS should not provide assistance at the expense of the taxpayer or that activities should be fee-based. Funding for WS' activities could occur from federal appropriations, through state funding, and through cooperative funding. Cooperative service agreements with individual property owners or managers could also fund WS' activities. WS receives a minimal federal appropriation for the maintenance of a WS program in Mississippi. The remainder of the WS program would mostly be fee-based. WS would provide technical assistance to requesters as part of the federally funded activities; however, the majority of funding to conduct direct operational assistance in which WS' employees perform damage management activities associated with aquatic rodents would occur through cooperative service agreements between the requester and WS.

Additionally, damage management activities are an appropriate sphere of activity for government programs, since managing wildlife is a government responsibility. Treves and Naughton-Treves (2005) and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (2005) discuss the need for wildlife damage management and that an accountable government agency is best suited to take the lead in such activities because it increases the tolerance for wildlife by those people being impacted by their damage and has the least impacts on wildlife overall.

Cost Effectiveness of Management Methods

The CEQ does not require a formal, monetized cost benefit analysis to comply with the NEPA. Consideration of this issue is not essential to making a reasoned choice among the alternatives WS and the TVA are considering. However, the methods determined to be most effective to reduce damage and threats to human safety caused by aquatic rodents and that prove to be the most cost effective would likely receive the greatest application. As part of an integrated approach and as part of the WS Decision Model, evaluation of methods would continually occur to allow for those methods that were most effective at resolving damage or threats to be employed under similar circumstance where aquatic rodents were causing damage or posing a threat. Additionally, management operations may be constrained by cooperator funding and/or objectives and needs. Therefore, the cost of methods can often influence the availability of methods to resolve damage, which can influence the effectiveness of methods. Discussion of cost effectiveness as it relates to the effectiveness of methods occurs in Chapter 4.

Aquatic Rodent Damage Should be managed by Private Wildlife Control Agents or Trappers

People experiencing damage caused by aquatic rodents could contact wildlife control agents and private trappers to reduce aquatic rodent damage when deemed appropriate by the resource owner. In addition,

WS could refer persons requesting assistance to agents and/or private individuals under all of the alternatives fully evaluated in the EA.

WS Directive 3.101 provides guidance on establishing cooperative projects and interfacing with private businesses. WS would only respond to requests for assistance received and would not respond to public bid notices. When responding to requests for assistance, WS would inform requesters that other service providers, including private entities, might be available to provide assistance.

Effects from the Use of Lead Ammunition in Firearms

Questions have arisen about the deposition of lead into the environment from ammunition used in firearms to remove aquatic rodents. As described in Appendix B, the lethal removal of aquatic rodents with firearms by WS to alleviate damage or threats could occur using a handgun, rifle, or shotgun. In an ecological risk assessment of lead shot exposure in non-waterfowl birds, ingestion of lead shot was identified as the concern rather than just contact with lead shot or lead leaching from shot in the environment (Kendall et al. 1996).

The removal of aquatic rodents by WS using firearms in the State would occur primarily from the use of rifles. However, WS could employ the use of shotguns or handguns to remove some species. To reduce risks to human safety and property damage from bullets passing through aquatic rodents, the use of firearms would be applied in such a way (*e.g*., caliber, bullet weight, distance) to ensure the bullet does not pass through aquatic rodents. Aquatic rodents that were removed using firearms would occur within areas where retrieval of aquatic rodent carcasses for proper disposal is highly likely (*e.g*., at an airport). With risks of lead exposure occurring primarily from ingestion of bullet fragments, the retrieval and proper disposal of aquatic rodent carcasses would greatly reduce the risk of scavengers ingesting lead that carcasses may contain.

However, deposition of lead into soil could occur if, during the use of a firearm, the projectile passed through an aquatic rodent, if misses occurred, or if the retrieval of the carcass did not occur. Laidlaw et al. (2005) reported that, because of the low mobility of lead in soil, all of the lead that accumulates on the surface layer of the soil generally stays within the top 20 cm (about 8 inches). In addition, concerns occur that lead from bullets deposited in soil from shooting activities could contaminate ground water or surface water from runoff. Stansley et al. (1992) studied lead levels in water subject to high concentrations of lead shot accumulation because of intensive target shooting at several shooting ranges. Lead did not appear to "*transport*" readily in surface water when soils were neutral or slightly alkaline in pH (*i.e*., not acidic), but lead did transport more readily under slightly acidic conditions. Although Stansley et al. (1992) detected elevated lead levels in water in a stream and a marsh that were in the shot "*fall zones*" at a shooting range, the study did not find higher lead levels in a lake into which the stream drained, except for one sample collected near a parking lot. Stansley et al. (1992) believed the lead contamination near the parking lot was due to runoff from the lot, and not from the shooting range areas. The study also indicated that even when lead shot was highly accumulated in areas with permanent water bodies present, the lead did not necessarily cause elevated lead levels in water further downstream. Muscle samples from two species of fish collected in water bodies with high lead shot accumulations had lead levels that were well below the accepted threshold standard of safety for human consumption (Stansley et al. 1992).

Craig et al. (1999) reported that lead levels in water draining away from a shooting range with high accumulations of lead bullets in the soil around the impact areas were far below the "*action level*" of 15 parts per billion as defined by the EPA (*i.e.*, requiring action to treat the water to remove lead). The study found that the dissolution (*i.e*., capability of dissolving in water) of lead declines when lead oxides form on the surface areas of the spent bullets and fragments (Craig et al. 1999). Therefore, the lead oxide deposits that form on the surface of bullets and shot serves to reduce the potential for ground or surface

water contamination (Craig et al. 1999). Those studies suggest that, given the very low amount of lead that WS could deposit and the concentrations that would occur from WS' activities to reduce aquatic rodent damage using firearms, as well as most other forms of dry land small game hunting in general, lead contamination of water from such sources would be minimal to nonexistent.

Since those aquatic rodents removed by WS using firearms could be lethally removed by the entities experiencing damage using the same method in the absence of WS' involvement, WS' assistance with removing those aquatic rodents would not be additive to the environmental status quo. The proficiency training received by WS' employees in firearm use and accuracy would increase the likelihood that aquatic rodents were lethally removed humanely in situations that ensure accuracy and that misses occur infrequently, which further reduces the potential for lead to be deposited in the soil from misses or from projectiles passing through carcasses. Based on current information, the risks associated with lead projectiles that WS could contribute to the environment due to misses, the projectile passing through the carcass, or from aquatic rodent carcasses that may be irretrievable would be below any level that would pose any risk from exposure or significant contamination.

A Site Specific Analysis Should be made for Every Location Where Damage Management Would Occur

The underlying intent for preparing an EA is to determine if a proposed action might have a significant impact on the human environment. WS' EA development process is issue driven, meaning issues that were raised during the interdisciplinary process and through public involvement that were substantive, would be used to drive the analysis and determine the significance of the environmental impacts of the proposed action and the alternatives. Therefore, the level of site specificity must be appropriate to the issues listed.

The issues raised during the scoping process of this EA drove the analysis. In addition to the analysis contained in this EA, WS' personnel use the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992) described in Chapter 3 as a site-specific tool to develop the most appropriate strategy at each location. The WS Decision Model is an analytical thought process used by WS' personnel for evaluating and responding to requests for assistance.

As discussed previously, one EA analyzing impacts for the entire State would provide a more comprehensive and less redundant analysis that allows for a better cumulative impact analysis. If a determination were made through this EA that the alternatives developed to meet the need for action could result in a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, then an EIS would be prepared.

CHAPTER 3: ALTERNATIVES

Chapter 3 contains a discussion of the alternatives that WS and the TVA developed to meet the need for action discussed in Chapter 1 and to address the identified issues discussed in Chapter 2. WS and the TVA developed the alternatives based on the need for action using the WS Decision model (Slate et al. 1992). The alternatives will receive detailed environmental impacts analysis in Chapter 4 (Environmental Consequences). Chapter 3 also discusses the rationale behind alternatives considered but not analyzed in detail as well as the SOPs that WS would incorporate into the relevant alternatives.

3.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE ALTERNATIVES

WS and the TVA developed the following alternatives to meet the need for action and address the identified issues associated with managing damage caused by aquatic rodents in the State.

Alternative 1 - Continue the Current Adaptive Integrated Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Program (No Action/Proposed Action)

This alternative would continue the current implementation of an adaptive integrated approach utilizing non-lethal and lethal techniques, when requested, as deemed appropriate using the WS Decision Model, to reduce damage and threats caused by aquatic rodents in Mississippi. A major goal of the program would be to resolve and prevent damage caused by aquatic rodents and to reduce threats to human safety. To meet this goal, WS would continue to respond to requests for assistance with, at a minimum, technical assistance, or when funding was available, operational damage management. Funding could occur through federal appropriations or from cooperative funding. The adaptive approach to managing damage associated with aquatic rodents would integrate the use of the most practical and effective methods to resolve a request for damage management as determined by a site-specific evaluation to reduce damage or threats to human safety for each request. WS would provide city/town managers, agricultural producers, property owners, and others requesting assistance with information regarding the use of appropriate non-lethal and lethal techniques.

Under this alternative, WS could respond to requests for assistance by: 1) taking no action, if warranted, 2) providing only technical assistance to property owners or managers on actions they could take to reduce damages caused by aquatic rodents, or 3) providing technical assistance and direct operational assistance to a property owner or manager experiencing damage. The take of some of the aquatic rodent species addressed in this EA can only legally occur under authorization by the MDWFP and only at levels authorized, unless those aquatic rodent species are afforded no protection, in which case, no authorization for lethal removal would be required. To meet the need for action, the objectives of this alternative would be to assist all of the people requesting WS' assistance, within the constraints of available funding and workforce.

WS could provide property owners or managers requesting assistance with information regarding the use of effective and practical non-lethal and lethal techniques. WS would give preference to non-lethal methods when practical and effective under this alternative (see WS Directive 2.101). Property owners or managers may choose to implement WS' recommendations on their own (*i.e.*, technical assistance), use contractual services of private businesses, use volunteer services of private organizations, use the services of WS (*i.e.*, direct operational assistance), take the management action themselves, or take no further action.

WS would work with those persons experiencing aquatic rodent damage to address those aquatic rodents responsible for causing damage as expeditiously as possible. To be most effective, damage management activities should occur as soon as aquatic rodents begin to cause damage. Once aquatic rodents become familiar with a particular location (*i.e.*, conditioned to an area), dispersing those aquatic rodents or making the area unattractive can be difficult. WS would work closely with those entities requesting assistance to identify situations where damage could occur and begin to implement damage management activities under this alternative as early as possible to increase the likelihood of those methods achieving the level of damage reduction requested by the cooperating entity.

The WS Decision Model would be the implementing mechanism for a damage management program under Alternative 1, which would be adapted to an individual damage situation. This alternative would allow WS to use the broadest range of methods to address damage or the threat of damage. When WS received a request for direct operational assistance, WS would conduct site visits to assess the damage or threats, would identify the cause of the damage, and would apply the Decision Model described by Slate et al. (1992) and WS Directive 2.201 to determine the appropriate methods to resolve or prevent damage. Discussion of the Decision Model and WS' use of the Model under Alternative 1 occurs below. In

addition, WS would give preference to non-lethal methods when practical and effective (see WS Directive 2.101).

Non-lethal methods that would be available for use by WS under this alternative include, but are not limited to minor habitat modification, behavior modification, supplemental feeding, live traps, translocation, exclusionary devices, water control devices for beaver, frightening devices, immobilizing drugs, and chemical repellents (see Appendix B for a complete list and description of potential methods). In addition, WS could remove or breach beaver dams using binary explosives and hand tools. Once the determination was made that removing or breaching a beaver dam was appropriate and the beaver dam could be removed in accordance with the Clean Water Act (see Appendix D), the breaching or removal of the dam could be conducted manually using hand tools or when safe and appropriate, with use of binary explosives. Lethal methods that would be available to WS under this alternative include body-gripping traps, cable restraints, the recommendation of harvest during hunting and/or trapping seasons, euthanasia chemicals, zinc phosphide (muskrats and nutria only), and shooting. Target aquatic rodent species live-captured using non-lethal methods (*e.g.*, live-traps, immobilizing drugs) could be euthanized. In addition, WS could use foothold traps and submersion rods or cables in drowning sets[8]. The lethal control of target aquatic rodents would comply with WS Directive 2.505.

Discussing methods does not imply that all methods would be used or recommended by WS to resolve requests for assistance and does not imply that all methods would be used to resolve every request for assistance. 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. For example, if an entity requesting assistance had already attempted to alleviate damage using non-lethal methods, WS would not necessarily employ those same non-lethal methods, since the previous use of those methods were ineffective at reducing damage or threats to an acceptable level to the requester.

Many lethal and non-lethal methods are intended to be short-term attempts at reducing damage occurring at the time those methods were employed. Long-term solutions to managing aquatic rodent damage could include limited habitat manipulations and changes in cultural practices, which are techniques addressed further below and in Appendix B.

Non-lethal methods can disperse or otherwise make an area unattractive to aquatic rodents causing damage; thereby, reducing the presence of aquatic rodents at the site and potentially the immediate area around the site where non-lethal methods were employed. WS would give preference to non-lethal methods when addressing requests for assistance (see WS Directive 2.101). However, WS would not necessarily employ non-lethal methods to resolve every request for assistance if deemed inappropriate by WS' personnel using the WS Decision Model, especially when the requesting entity had used non-lethal methods previously and found those methods to be inadequate to resolving the damage or threats of damage. WS' employees would use non-lethal methods to exclude, harass, and disperse target wildlife from areas where damage or threats were occurring. When effective, non-lethal methods would disperse aquatic rodents from an area resulting in a reduction in the presence of those aquatic rodents at the site where a person employed those methods. For any management methods employed, the proper timing would be essential in effectively dispersing those aquatic rodents causing damage. Employing methods soon after damage begins or soon after a property owner or manager identifies threats, increases the likelihood that those damage management activities would achieve success in addressing damage. Therefore, coordination and timing of methods would be necessary to be effective in achieving expedient resolution of aquatic rodent damage.

[8]Section 4.1 and Appendix B provides additional information on the use of foothold traps and submersion cables or rods.

Under the Alternative 1, WS could employ only non-lethal methods when determined to be appropriate for each request for assistance to alleviate damage or reduce threats of damage using the WS Decision Model. In some situations, a cooperating entity has tried to employ non-lethal methods to resolve damage prior to contacting WS for assistance. In those cases, the methods employed by the requester were either unsuccessful or the reduction in damage or threats had not reached a level that was tolerable to the requesting entity. In those situations, WS could employ other non-lethal methods, attempt to apply the same non-lethal methods, or employ lethal methods. In many situations, the implementation of non-lethal methods, such as exclusion-type barriers, would be the responsibility of the requester, which means that, in those situations, the only function of WS would be to implement lethal methods, if determined to be appropriate using the WS Decision Model.

WS could employ lethal methods to resolve damage associated with those aquatic rodents identified by WS as responsible for causing damage or threats to human safety under this alternative[9]; however, WS would only employ lethal methods after receiving a request for the use of those methods. Surveys in North Carolina and Alabama indicated the majority of landowners with beaver damage on their property that were surveyed desired damage management via beaver removal (Hill 1976, Woodward et al. 1985). Loker et al. (1999) found that suburban residents also might desire lethal management methods to resolve beaver damage conflicts. Such conflicts that occur between property owners and beaver can result in negative effects that often outweigh the benefits of having beaver on an owner's property (Miller and Yarrow 1994). The use of lethal methods could result in local population reductions in the area where damage or threats were occurring since people could remove individual aquatic rodents from the population. WS and other entities often employ lethal methods to reinforce non-lethal methods and to remove aquatic rodents that WS or other entities identify as causing damage or posing a threat to human safety. The number of aquatic rodents removed from the population using lethal methods under Alternative 1 would be dependent on the number of requests for assistance received, the number of aquatic rodents involved with the associated damage or threat, and the efficacy of methods employed.

Often of concern with the use of lethal methods is that aquatic rodents that were lethally removed would only be replaced by other aquatic rodents either after the application of those methods (*e.g.*, aquatic rodents that relocate into the area) or by aquatic rodents the following year (*e.g.*, increase in reproduction and survivability that could result from less competition). As stated previously, WS would not use lethal methods as population management tools over broad areas. The use of lethal methods would be intended to reduce the number of individuals of a target aquatic rodent species present at a specific location where damage was occurring by targeting those aquatic rodents causing damage or posing threats. The intent of lethal methods would be to manage damage caused by those individuals of an aquatic rodent species and not to manage entire aquatic rodent populations.

WS may recommend aquatic rodents be harvested during the regulated hunting and/or trapping season for those species in an attempt to reduce the number of aquatic rodents causing damage. Managing aquatic rodent populations over broad areas could lead to a decrease in the number of aquatic rodents causing damage. Establishing hunting or trapping seasons and the allowed harvest levels during those seasons is the responsibility of the MDWFP. WS does not have the authority to establish hunting or trapping seasons or to set allowed harvest numbers during those seasons.

[9]The take of some of the aquatic rodent species addressed in this EA could only legally occur under authorization by the MDWFP and only at levels authorized, unless those aquatic rodent species are afforded no protection, in which case, no authorization for lethal removal would be required.

Appendix B contains a complete list of methods available for use under this alternative. However, listing methods neither implies that all methods would be used by WS to resolve requests for assistance nor does the listing of methods imply that all methods would be used to resolve every request for assistance. As part of an integrated approach, WS may provide technical assistance and direct operational assistance to those people experiencing damage associated with aquatic rodents when those persons request assistance from WS.

Technical Assistance Recommendations

Under the Alternative 1, WS would provide technical assistance to those persons requesting assistance with managing damage as part of an integrated approach. Technical assistance would occur as described in Alternative 2 of this EA. From FY 2009 through FY 2013, WS conducted 1,658 technical assistance projects that involved aquatic rodent damage to agricultural resources, property, natural resources, and threats to human safety (see Table 1.1).

Direct Operational Assistance

Operational damage management assistance would include damage management activities that WS' personnel conducted directly or activities that WS' employees supervised. Initiation of operational damage management assistance could occur when the problem could not be effectively resolved through technical assistance alone and there was a written MOU, work initiation document, or other comparable document signed between WS and the entity requesting assistance. The initial investigation by WS' personnel would define the nature, history, and extent of the problem; species responsible for the damage; and methods available to resolve the problem. The professional skills of WS' personnel could be required to resolve problems effectively, especially if chemical methods were necessary or if the problems were complex. To meet the need for action, the objective of WS would be to provide direct operational assistance within two weeks of WS receiving a request for such assistance.

Educational Efforts

Education is an important element of activities because wildlife damage management is about finding balance and coexistence between the needs of people and needs of 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, WS provides lectures, courses, and demonstrations to producers, homeowners, state and county agents, colleges and universities, and other interested groups. WS frequently cooperates with other entities in education and public information efforts. Additionally, WS' employees would continue to write technical papers and provide presentations at professional meetings and conferences so that other wildlife professionals and the public were made aware of recent developments in damage management technology, programs, laws and regulations, and agency policies.

Research and Development

The National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) functions as the research unit of WS by providing scientific information and the development of methods for wildlife damage management, which are effective and environmentally responsible. Research biologists with the NWRC work closely with wildlife managers, researchers, and others to develop and evaluate methods and techniques for managing wildlife damage. Research biologists with the NWRC have authored hundreds of scientific publications and reports based on research conducted involving wildlife and methods.

WS' Decision Making Procedures

The WS Decision Model (see WS Directive 2.201) described by Slate et al. (1992) depicts how WS' personnel would use a thought process for evaluating and responding to damage complaints. WS' personnel would assess the problem and then evaluate the appropriateness and availability (legal and administrative) of strategies and methods based on biological, economic, and social considerations. Following this evaluation, WS' employees would incorporate methods deemed practical for the situation into a damage management strategy. After WS' employees implemented this strategy, employees would continue to monitor and evaluate the strategy to assess effectiveness. If the strategy were effective, the need for further management would end. In terms of the WS Decision Model, most efforts to resolve wildlife damage consist of continuous feedback between receiving the request and monitoring the results of the damage management strategy. The Decision Model is not a written documented process, but a mental problem-solving process common to most, if not all, professions, including WS.

The general thought process and procedures of the WS Decision Model would include the following steps.

1. **Receive Request for Assistance:** WS would only provide assistance after receiving a request for such assistance. WS would not respond to public bid notices.
2. **Assess Problem:** First, WS would make a determination as to whether the assistance request was within the authority of WS. If an assistance request were within the authority of WS, WS' employees would gather and analyze damage information to determine applicable factors, such as what species was responsible for the damage, the type of damage, the extent of damage, and the magnitude of damage. Other factors that WS' employees could gather and analyze would include the current economic loss or current threat (*e.g.*, threat to human safety), the potential for future losses or damage, the local history of damage, and what management methods, if any, were used to reduce past damage and the results of those actions.
3. **Evaluate Management Methods:** Once a problem assessment was completed, a WS' employee would conduct an evaluation of available management methods. The employee would evaluate available methods in the context of their legal and administrative availability and their acceptability based on biological, environmental, social, and cultural factors.
4. **Formulate Management Strategy:** A WS' employee would formulate a management strategy using those methods that the employee determines to be practical for use. The WS employee would also consider factors essential to formulating each management strategy, such as available expertise, legal constraints on available methods, costs, and effectiveness.
5. **Provide Assistance:** After formulating a management strategy, a WS employee could provide technical assistance and/or direct operational assistance to the requester (see WS Directive 2.101).
6. **Monitor and Evaluate Results of Management Actions:** When providing direct operational assistance, it is necessary to monitor the results of the management strategy. Monitoring would be important for determining whether further assistance was required or whether the management strategy resolved the request for assistance. Through monitoring, a WS' employee would continually evaluate the management strategy to determine whether additional techniques or modification of the strategy was necessary.
7. **End of Project:** When providing technical assistance, a project would normally end after a WS' employee provided recommendations or advice to the requester. A direct operational assistance project would normally end when WS' personnel stop or reduce the damage or threat to an acceptable level to the requester or to the extent possible. Some damage situations may require continuing or intermittent assistance from WS' personnel and may have no well-defined termination point, such as aquatic rodents burrowing into levees where non-lethal methods (*e.g.*, rip-rap) were not possible or practical.

Community-based Decision Making

WS could receive requests for assistance from community leaders and/or representatives. In those situations, the WS program in Mississippi under this alternative would follow the "*co-managerial approach*" to solve wildlife damage or conflicts as described by Decker and Chase (1997). Within this management model, WS could provide technical assistance regarding the biology and ecology of aquatic rodents and effective, practical, and reasonable methods available to the local decision-maker(s) to reduce damage or threats. This could include non-lethal and lethal methods. WS and other state and federal wildlife management agencies may facilitate discussions at local community meetings when resources were available. Under this approach, resource owners and others directly affected by aquatic rodent damage or conflicts would have direct input into the resolution of such problems. They may implement management recommendations provided by WS or others, or may request direct operational assistance from WS, other wildlife management agencies, local animal control agencies, or private businesses or organizations.

The community representative(s) and/or decision-maker(s) for the local community would be elected officials or representatives of the communities. The community representative(s) and/or decision-maker(s) who oversee the interests and business of the local community would generally be residents of the local community or appointees that other members of the community popularly elected. This person or persons would represent the local community's interest and make decisions for the local community or bring information back to a higher authority or the community for discussion and decision-making. Identifying the decision-maker for local business communities can be more complex because building owners may not indicate whether the business must manage wildlife damage themselves, or seek approval to manage wildlife from the property owner or manager, or from a governing Board.

Under a community based decision-making process, WS could provide information, demonstration, and discussion on available methods to the appropriate representative(s) of the community and/or community decision-maker(s) that requested assistance, which would help ensure that decisions made by representatives of the community and/or the decision-makers were based on community-based input. WS would only provide direct operational assistance if the local community representative(s) and/or decision-maker(s) requested such assistance and only if the assistance requested was compatible with WS' recommendations.

By involving community representatives and/or community decision-makers in the process, WS could present information that would allow decisions on damage management to involve those individuals that the representatives and/or decision-maker(s) represent. As addressed in this EA, WS could provide technical assistance to the appropriate representative(s) and/or decision-maker(s), including demonstrations and presentation by WS at public meetings to allow for involvement of the community. Requests for assistance to manage damage caused by aquatic rodents often originate from the decision-maker(s) based on community feedback or from concerns about damage or threats to human safety. As representatives of the community, the community representative(s) and/or decision-maker(s) would be able to provide the information to local interests either through technical assistance provided by WS or through demonstrations and presentations by WS on damage management activities. This process would allow WS, the community representative(s), and/or decision-maker(s) to make decisions on damage management activities based on local input. The community leaders could implement management recommendations provided by WS or others, or may request management assistance from WS, other wildlife management agencies, local animal control agencies, or private businesses or organizations.

Decision-makers on Private Property

In the case of private property owners, the decision-maker is the individual that owns or manages the affected property. The decision-maker has the discretion to involve others as to what occurs or does not occur on property they own or manage. Therefore, in the case of an individual property owner or manager, the involvement of others and to what degree others were involved in the decision-making process would be a decision made by that individual. WS could provide direct operational assistance when requested; however, WS would only provide assistance if the requested management actions were in accordance with WS' recommendations.

Decision-makers on Public Property

The decision-maker for local, state, or federal property would be the official responsible for or authorized to manage the public land to meet interests, goals, and legal mandates for the property. WS could provide technical assistance to this person and make recommendations to reduce damage. WS could provide direct operational assistance when requested; however, WS would only provide assistance if the requested management actions were in accordance with WS' recommendations.

Alternative 2 – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

Under this alternative, WS would provide those cooperators requesting assistance with technical assistance only. Similar to Alternative 1, WS could receive requests for assistance from community representatives, private individuals/businesses, or from public entities. Technical assistance would provide those cooperators experiencing damage or threats associated with aquatic rodents with information, demonstrations, and recommendations on available and appropriate methods. The implementation of methods and techniques to resolve or prevent damage would be the responsibility of the requester with no direct involvement by WS. In some cases, WS may provide supplies or materials that were of limited availability for use by private entities (*e.g*., loaning of propane cannons). Technical assistance may be provided through a personal or telephone consultation, or during an on-site visit with the requester. Generally, WS would describe several management strategies to the requester for short and long-term solutions to managing damage. WS would base those strategies on the level of risk, need, and the practicality of their application. WS would use the Decision Model to recommend those methods and techniques available to the requester to manage damage and threats of damage. Those persons receiving technical assistance from WS could implement those methods recommended by WS, could employ other methods not recommended by WS, could seek assistance from other entities, or take no further action.

Under Alternative 2, WS would recommend an integrated approach similar to Alternative 1 when receiving a request for assistance; however, WS would not provide direct operational assistance under this alternative. WS would give preference to non-lethal methods when practical and effective under this alternative (see WS Directive 2.101). WS would base method and technique recommendations on information provided by the individual(s) seeking assistance using the WS Decision Model. In some instances, wildlife-related information provided to the requester by WS would result in tolerance/acceptance of the situation. In other instances, WS would discuss and recommend damage management options. WS would only recommend or loan those methods legally available for use by the appropriate individual. Similar to Alternative 1, those methods described in Appendix B would be available to those persons experiencing damage or threats associated with aquatic rodents in the State; however, immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals would have limited availability to the public and other entities under this alternative and Alternative 3. Under this alternative, appropriately licensed veterinarians or people under their supervision would be the only entities that could use immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals. The EPA has designated zinc phosphide as a restricted use pesticide; therefore, only persons that have completed the requirements for obtaining a pesticide applicators license

issued by the MDAC could purchase zinc phosphide and only licensed pesticide applicators could use zinc phosphide or people under their supervision.

The WS program in the State regularly provides technical assistance to individuals, organizations, and other federal, state, and local government agencies for managing aquatic rodent damage. Technical assistance would include collecting information about the species involved, the extent of the damage, and previous methods that the cooperator had attempted to resolve the problem. WS would then provide information on appropriate methods that the cooperator could consider to resolve the damage themselves. Types of technical assistance projects may include a visit to the affected property, written communication, telephone conversations, or presentations to groups such as homeowner associations or civic leagues. Between FY 2009 and FY 2013, WS has conducted 1,658 technical assistance projects that involved aquatic rodent damage to agricultural resources, property, natural resources, and threats to human safety.

This alternative would place the immediate burden of operational damage management work on the resource owner, other governmental agencies, and/or private businesses. Those persons experiencing damage or were concerned with threats posed by aquatic rodents could seek assistance from other governmental agencies, private entities, or conduct damage management on their own. Those persons experiencing damage or threats could take action using those methods legally available to resolve or prevent aquatic rodent damage as permitted by federal, state, and local laws and regulations or those persons could take no action.

Alternative 3 – No Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Conducted by WS

This alternative would preclude all activities by WS to reduce threats to human health and safety, and to alleviate damage to agricultural resources, property, and natural resources. WS would not provide assistance with any aspect of managing damage caused by aquatic rodents in the State. WS would refer all requests for assistance to resolve damage caused by aquatic rodents to the MDWFP, other governmental agencies, and/or private entities.

Despite no involvement by WS in resolving damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents in the State, those persons experiencing damage caused by aquatic rodents could continue to resolve damage by employing those methods legally available since the removal of aquatic rodents to alleviate damage or threats could occur despite the lack of involvement by WS. The removal of aquatic rodents by other entities could occur after authorization by the MDWFP, when required, and during the hunting and/or trapping seasons. Landowners or their designees can remove beaver and nutria that are causing damage to their property without the need for a permit from the MDWFP. Landowners experiencing damage associated with muskrats could apply for a permit from the MDWFP to remove those muskrats. In addition, property owners or managers experiencing damage could request assistance from other entities (*e.g.*, private trappers, private business). Similar to Alternative 2, those methods described in Appendix B would generally be available to those people experiencing damage or threats associated with aquatic rodents in the State; however, immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals would have limited availability to the public and other entities under this alternative. Under this alternative, appropriately licensed veterinarians or people under their supervision would be the only entities that could use immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals. Zinc phosphide is a restricted use pesticide; therefore, only persons with a pesticide applicators license could purchase zinc phosphide and only licensed pesticide applicators could use zinc phosphide or people under their supervision.

Those people experiencing damage or threats of damage could contact WS; however, WS would immediately refer the requester to the MDWFP and/or to other entities. The requester could contact other entities for information and assistance with managing damage, could take actions to alleviate damage themselves without contacting any entity, or could take no further action.

3.2 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT ANALYZED IN DETAIL WITH RATIONALE

In addition to those alternatives analyzed in detail, WS and the TVA identified several additional alternatives. However, those alternatives will not receive detailed analyses for the reasons provided. Those alternatives considered but not analyzed in detail include:

Non-lethal Methods Implemented Before Lethal Methods

This alternative would require that WS apply non-lethal methods or techniques described in Appendix B to all requests for assistance to reduce damage and threats to safety from aquatic rodents in the State. If the use of non-lethal methods failed to resolve the damage situation or reduce threats to human safety at each damage situation, WS could employ lethal methods to resolve the request. WS would apply non-lethal methods to every request for assistance regardless of severity or intensity of the damage or threat until deemed inadequate to resolve the request. This alternative would not prevent the use of lethal methods by other entities or by those persons experiencing aquatic rodent damage but would only prevent the use of those methods by WS until WS had employed non-lethal methods.

Those people experiencing damage often employ non-lethal methods to reduce damage or threats prior to contacting WS. Verification of the methods used would be the responsibility of WS. No standard exists to determine requester diligence in applying those methods, nor are there any standards to determine how many non-lethal applications are necessary before the initiation of lethal methods. Thus, WS could only evaluate the presence or absence of non-lethal methods. The proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) and the technical assistance only alternative (Alternative 2) would be similar to a non-lethal before lethal alternative because WS would give preference to the use of non-lethal methods before lethal methods (see WS Directive 2.101). Adding a non-lethal before lethal alternative and the associated analysis would not contribute additional information to the analyses in the EA.

Use of Non-lethal Methods Only by WS

Under this alternative, WS would be required to implement non-lethal methods only to resolve damage caused by aquatic rodents in the State. WS would only employ those methods discussed in Appendix B that were non-lethal. No intentional lethal removal of aquatic rodents would occur by WS. The use of lethal methods could continue under this alternative by other entities or by those persons experiencing damage by aquatic rodents. The non-lethal methods used or recommended by WS under this alternative would be identical to those non-lethal methods identified in any of the alternatives.

In situations where non-lethal methods were impractical or ineffective to alleviate damages, WS could refer requests for information regarding lethal methods to the MDWFP, private businesses, or other entities.

Property owners or managers could conduct management using any method that was legal. Property owners or managers might choose to implement WS' non-lethal recommendations, implement lethal methods, or request assistance from a private or public entity other than WS. Property owners/managers frustrated by the lack of WS' assistance with the full range of aquatic rodent damage management techniques may try methods not recommended by WS or use illegal methods (*e.g.*, poisons). In some cases, property owners or managers may misuse some methods or use some methods in excess of what was necessary, which could then become hazardous and pose threats to the safety of people and non-target species.

Using an integrated damage management approach, Alternative 1 incorporates the use of non-lethal methods when addressing requests for assistance. In those instances where non-lethal methods would effectively resolve damage from aquatic rodents, WS would use or recommend those methods Alternative 1. Since non-lethal methods would be available for use under the alternatives analyzed in detail, this alternative would not add to the analyses. Those persons experiencing damage or threats of damage could lethally remove aquatic rodents under any of the alternatives even if WS was limited to using non-lethal methods only.

Use of Lethal Methods Only by WS

This alternative would require the use of lethal methods only to reduce threats and damage associated with aquatic rodents. However, non-lethal methods can be effective in preventing damage in certain instances. Under WS Directive 2.101, WS must consider the use of non-lethal methods before lethal methods. Non-lethal methods have been effective in alleviating aquatic rodent damage in some cases. For example, exclusion methods can be effective at preventing beaver from chewing on and felling trees. In those situations where damage could be alleviated effectively using non-lethal methods, WS would employ or recommend those methods as determined by the WS Decision Model. Therefore, WS did not consider this alternative in detail.

Live-capture and Translocate Aquatic Rodents Only

Under this alternative, WS would address all requests for assistance using live-capture methods or the recommendation of live-capture methods and WS would translocate all aquatic rodents live-captured. The success of translocation efforts would depend on efficiently capturing the target aquatic rodents causing damage and the existence of an appropriate release site (Nielsen 1988). Aquatic rodents would be live-captured using live-traps to alleviate damage. All aquatic rodents live-captured through direct operational assistance by WS would be translocated. Translocation sites would be identified and have to be approved by the MDWFP and/or the property owner where the translocated aquatic rodents would be placed prior to live-capture and translocation. Live-capture and translocation of aquatic rodents could be conducted as part of the alternatives analyzed in detail. However, the translocation of aquatic rodents could only occur under the authority of the MDWFP. Therefore, the translocation of aquatic rodents by WS would only occur as directed by the MDWFP. When requested by the MDWFP, WS could translocate aquatic rodents or recommend translocation under any of the alternatives analyzed in detail, except under the no involvement by WS alternative (Alternative 3). However, other entities could translocate aquatic rodents under Alternative 3, if authorized by the MDWFP.

Translocation may be appropriate in some situations when a species population is low. However, aquatic rodents are abundant in much of the suitable habitat in Mississippi, and translocation is not necessary for the maintenance of viable populations in the State. Because aquatic rodents are abundant in Mississippi, the aquatic rodents that WS translocated and released into suitable habitat would likely encounter other aquatic rodents with established territories. For example, if WS could translocate beaver, the release of beaver into suitable habitat would likely occur in areas where other beaver already occur. Beaver are territorial, and introducing translocated beaver into new areas often disorientates the beaver because they are unfamiliar with their surroundings. Therefore, translocated beaver are often at a disadvantage. Territorial beaver often viciously attack other beaver that people release or that wander into their territories and those injuries sustained during those attacks oftentimes causes the death of translocated beaver (McNeely 1995). Survival of translocated animals is generally very poor due to the stress of translocation, and in many cases, released animals suffer mortality in a new environment (Craven et al. 1998). 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 1987). 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 beaver transplanted 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).

Generally, translocating aquatic rodents that have caused damage to other areas following live-capture would not be effective or cost-effective. Translocation is generally ineffective aquatic rodents are highly mobile and can easily return to damage sites from long distances, aquatic rodents generally already occupy habitats in other areas, and translocation could result in damage problems at the new location. Live-trapping and translocating aquatic rodents is biologically unsound and not cost-efficient (Wade and Ramsey 1986). Translocation of wildlife is also discouraged by WS policy (see WS Directive 2.501) because of the stress to the translocated animal, poor survival rates, threat of spreading diseases, and the difficulties that translocated wildlife have with adapting to new locations or habitats (Nielsen 1988).

In addition, nutria are an invasive species; therefore, translocation of nutria would be inappropriate. Lastly, WS, the MDWFP, and the property owner where the original capture took place could be liable for any property damage caused by translocated aquatic rodents. Therefore, WS and the TVA did not consider this alternative in detail.

Use of Non-lethal Methods and Approved Euthanasia Only

Under this alternative, WS would continue to employ an integrated approach but would only employ non-lethal methods to exclude, harass, or live-capture target aquatic rodents. When deemed appropriate, WS could continue to remove aquatic rodents lethally; however, under this alternative, WS would only use methods that captured target aquatic rodents alive. Once live-captured, target aquatic rodents would be euthanized using methods that meet the definition of euthanasia as defined by the American Veterinary Medical Association. Under this alternative, the only methods that would be available to live-capture beaver would be cable restraints, foothold traps, suitcase traps, and cage traps. For muskrats and nutria, the only live-capture methods that would be available would be floating colony traps, foothold traps, and cage traps. Other non-lethal methods would also be available to resolve damage or threats of damage under this alternative and those methods would be similar to those non-lethal methods described under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1). The methods that would not be available under this alternative would be the use of foothold traps for drowning sets, the use of body-grip traps, zinc phosphide (for muskrats and nutria), and the use of firearms (except firearms could be used once target animals were live-captured).

Euthanasia methods would be restricted to those defined by the American Veterinary Medical Association (2013) as acceptable or conditionally acceptable, and would include sodium pentobarbital, potassium chloride, carbon dioxide, and firearms (once live-captured). This alternative would be similar to Alternative 1 since WS would give preference to the use of non-lethal methods when practical and effective (see WS Directive 2.101). In addition, WS' personnel would be familiar with the euthanasia methods described by the American Veterinary Medical Association and would use those methods to euthanize captured or restrained animals, whenever practicable (see WS Directive 2.430, WS Directive 2.505). Therefore, WS did not consider this alternative in detail.

Reducing Damage by Managing Aquatic Rodent Populations through the Use of Reproductive Inhibitors

Under this alternative, the only method that would be available to resolve requests for assistance by WS would be the recommendation and the use of reproductive inhibitors to reduce or prevent reproduction in aquatic rodents responsible for causing damage. Wildlife professionals often consider reproductive inhibitors for use where wildlife populations are overabundant and where traditional hunting or lethal control programs are not publicly acceptable (Muller et al. 1997). Population dynamic characteristics (*e.g.*, longevity, age at onset of reproduction, population size, and biological/cultural carrying capacity), habitat and environmental factors (*e.g.*, isolation of target population, cover types, and access to target individuals), socioeconomic, and other factors often limit the use and effectiveness of reproductive control as a tool for wildlife population management.

Reproductive control for wildlife could occur through sterilization (permanent) or contraception (reversible). Sterilization could be accomplished through: 1) surgical sterilization (vasectomy, castration, and tubal ligation), 2) chemosterilization, and 3) through gene therapy. Contraception could be accomplished through: 1) hormone implantation (synthetic steroids such as progestins), 2) immunocontraception (contraceptive vaccines), and 3) oral contraception (progestin administered daily).

Population modeling indicates that reproductive control is more efficient than lethal control only for some rodent and small bird species with high reproductive rates and low survival rates (Dolbeer 1998). Additionally, the need to treat a sufficiently large number of target animals, multiple treatments, and population dynamics of free-ranging populations place considerable logistic and economic constraints on the adoption of reproduction control technologies as a wildlife management tool for some species.

Novak (1987) conducted a review of research evaluating chemically induced and surgically induced reproductive inhibition as a method for controlling beaver populations. Research on several reproductive inhibitors proposed for use in beaver population reduction has occurred, including research on quinestrol (17-alpha-ethynyl-estradiol-3-cyclopentylether) and mestranol (Gordon and Arner 1976, Wesley 1978). The use of chemosterilants as a means of managing the reproductive output of beaver has been successful in controlled experiments (Davis 1961, Arner 1964). However, while evidence suggests chemosterilants could 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). Although those methods were effective in reducing beaver reproduction by up to 50%, those methods were not practical or too expensive for large-scale application. Inhibition of reproduction also may affect behavior, physiological mechanisms, and colony integrity (Brooks et al. 1980). Additionally, reproductive control does not alleviate current damage problems (Organ et al. 1996).

Currently, chemical reproductive inhibitors are not available for use to manage aquatic rodent populations. Given the costs associated with live-capturing and performing sterilization procedures on aquatic rodents and the lack of availability of chemical reproductive inhibitors for the management of most aquatic rodent populations, this alternative was not evaluated in detail. If reproductive inhibitors become available to manage aquatic rodent populations and are effective in reducing localized aquatic rodent populations, WS could evaluate use of the inhibitor as a method available to manage damage. The use of reproductive inhibitors would require the approval of the MDWFP.

Compensation for Aquatic Rodent Damage

The compensation alternative would require WS to establish a system to reimburse persons impacted by aquatic rodent damage and to seek funding for the program. Under such an alternative, WS would

continue to provide technical assistance to those persons seeking assistance with managing damage. In addition, WS would conduct site visits to verify damage. Evaluation of this alternative indicates that a compensation only alternative has many drawbacks. Compensation would require large expenditures of money and labor to investigate and validate all damage claims, and to determine and administer appropriate compensation. Compensation most likely would be below full market value and would give little incentive to resource owners to limit damage through improved cultural or other practices and management strategies. In addition, providing compensation would not be practical for reducing threats to human health and safety.

Short Term Eradication and Long Term Population Suppression

An eradication alternative would direct all WS' program efforts toward total long-term elimination of aquatic rodent populations wherever WS initiated a cooperative program in Mississippi. Eradication of native aquatic rodent species is not a desired population management goal of State agencies, WS, or the TVA. WS and the TVA did not consider eradication as a general strategy for managing aquatic rodent damage because WS, the TVA, the MDWFP, and other state or federal agencies with interest in, or jurisdiction over, wildlife oppose eradication of any native wildlife species and eradication is not acceptable to most people.

Suppression would direct WS' program efforts toward managed reduction of certain problem populations or groups. In areas where WS could attribute damage to localized populations of aquatic rodents, WS could decide to implement local population suppression using the WS Decision Model. However, large-scale population suppression would not be realistic or practical to consider as the basis of the WS program. Problems with the concept of suppression would be similar to those described above for eradication. Typically, WS would conduct activities on a very small portion of the sites or areas inhabited or frequented by target species in the State.

Bounties

Most wildlife professionals have not supported payment of funds (bounties) for removing animals suspected of causing damage, or posing threats of damage, for many years (Latham 1960). WS concurs because of several inherent drawbacks and inadequacies in the payment of bounties. Bounties are often ineffective at controlling damage over a wide area, such as across the entire State. The circumstances surrounding the removal of animals are typically arbitrary and completely unregulated because it is difficult or impossible to assure animals claimed for bounty were not lethally removed from outside the area where damage was occurring. In addition, WS does not have the authority to establish a bounty program.

3.3 STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES FOR DAMAGE MANAGEMENT

SOPs improve the safety, selectivity, and efficacy of activities intended to resolve wildlife damage. The WS program in Mississippi uses many such SOPs. WS' personnel would incorporate those SOPs into activities under the appropriate alternatives when addressing aquatic rodent damage and threats in the State.

Some key SOPs pertinent to resolving aquatic rodent damage in the State include the following:

- WS' personnel would consistently use and apply the WS Decision Model, which would identify effective strategies to managing damage and the potential effects of those strategies, when addressing aquatic rodent damage.

- WS' personnel would follow the EPA-approved label directions for all pesticide use. The intent of the registration process for chemical pesticides is to assure minimal adverse effects occur to the environment when entities use chemicals in accordance with label directions.

- WS' personnel would use immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals according to the United States Drug Enforcement Administration and United States Food and Drug Administration guidelines, along with WS' directives and procedures.

- WS' personnel would only use controlled substances registered with the United States Drug Enforcement Administration or the United States Food and Drug Administration.

- WS' employees would follow approved procedures outlined in the WS' Field Manual for the Operational Use of Immobilizing and Euthanizing Drugs (Johnson et al. 2001).

- WS' employees that use controlled substances would receive training to use those substances and would receive certification to use controlled substances.

- WS' employees who use pesticides and controlled substances would participate in State-approved continuing education to keep current of developments and maintain their certifications.

- Pesticide and controlled substance use, storage, and disposal would conform to label instructions and other applicable laws and regulations, and Executive Order 12898.

- WS' personnel involved with specific damage management activities would receive appropriate Material Safety Data Sheets for pesticides and controlled substances.

- All personnel who use firearms would receive safety training according to WS' Directives.

- WS' employees would consider the use of non-lethal methods prior to the use of lethal methods when managing aquatic rodent damage.

- The removal of aquatic rodents by WS under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would only occur when authorized by the MDWFP, when applicable, and only at levels authorized.

- WS' employees would direct management actions toward localized populations, individuals, or groups of target species. WS would not conduct generalized population suppression across the entire State, or even across major portions of Mississippi.

- WS' employees would release non-target animals live-captured in traps unless it was determined that the animal would not survive and/or that the animal could not be released safely.

3.4 ADDITIONAL STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES SPECIFIC TO THE ISSUES

Several additional SOPs are applicable to the alternatives and the issues identified in Chapter 2 including the following:

Issue 1 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on Target Aquatic Rodent Populations

- WS would monitor the lethal removal of aquatic rodents and would report annual removal to the

MDWFP to evaluate population trends and to evaluate the magnitude of WS' removal of aquatic rodents in the State.

- WS would only target those individuals or groups of target species identified as causing damage or posing a threat to human safety.

- WS' personnel would use the WS Decision Model, designed to identify the most appropriate damage management strategies and their impacts, to determine strategies for resolving aquatic rodent damage.

- WS would monitor activities to ensure those activities do not adversely affect aquatic rodent populations in the State.

- WS' personnel would give preference to non-lethal methods when practical and effective.

Issue 2 - Effects on Non-target Wildlife Species Populations, Including T&E Species

- When conducting removal operations via shooting, identification of the target would occur prior to application.

- As appropriate, WS' personnel would use suppressed firearms to minimize noise.

- Personnel would use lures, trap placements, and capture devices that employees would strategically place at locations likely to capture a target animal and minimize the potential of non-target animal captures.

- WS' personnel would release any non-target animals live-captured in cage traps or any other restraining device whenever it was possible and safe to do so.

- Personnel would check live-capture methods in accordance with Mississippi laws and regulations. This would help ensure that WS' personnel could release non-target species in a timely manner.

- WS' employees would dispose of aquatic rodent carcasses retrieved after conducting damage management activities in accordance with WS Directive 2.515.

- WS has consulted with the USFWS and the MDWFP to evaluate activities to resolve aquatic rodent damage and threats to ensure the protection of T&E species.

- WS would monitor activities conducted under the selected alternative, if activities were determined to have no significant impact on the environment and an EIS was not required, to ensure those activities do not negatively affect non-target species.

Issue 3 - Effects of Damage Management Methods on Human Health and Safety

- WS' employees would conduct damage management activities professionally and in the safest manner possible. Whenever possible, employees would conduct damage management activities away from areas of high human activity. If this were not possible, then employees would conduct activities during periods when human activity was low (*e.g.*, early morning).

- WS' personnel would conduct shooting during times when public activity and access to the

control areas were restricted. Personnel involved in shooting operations receive training in the proper and safe application of this method.

- To provide procedures and accountability for WS' use of explosives to remove beaver dams, WS' employees would adhere to WS Directive 2.435.

- All personnel employing chemical methods would receive proper training and certification in the use of those chemicals. All chemicals used by WS would be securely stored and properly monitored to ensure the safety of the public. WS Directive 2.401 and WS Directive 2.430 outline WS' use of chemicals and training requirements to use those chemicals.

- All chemical methods used by WS or recommended by WS would be registered with the EPA, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, the United States Food and Drug Administration and/or the MDAC, as appropriate.

- WS would adhere to all established withdrawal times agreed up by WS, the MDWFP, and veterinarian authorities for aquatic rodents when using immobilizing drugs for the capture of aquatic rodents. Although unlikely, in the event that WS was requested to immobilize aquatic rodents, during a time when harvest of those aquatic rodent species was occurring or during a time where the withdrawal period could overlap with the start of a harvest season, WS would euthanize the animal or mark the animal with a tag. Tags would be labeled with a "*do not eat*" warning and appropriate contact information.

- WS' personnel would dispose of aquatic rodent carcasses retrieved after damage management activities in accordance with WS Directive 2.515.

Issue 4 - Effects on the Aesthetic Values of Aquatic Rodents

- WS' personnel would direct management actions to reduce or prevent damage caused by aquatic rodents toward specific individuals identified as responsible for the damage, identified as posing a threat to human safety, or identified as posing a threat of damage.

- Those entities requesting assistance would agree upon all methods or techniques applied to resolve damage or threats to human safety by signing a work initiation document, MOU, or comparable document prior to the implementation of those methods.

- WS' personnel would give preference to non-lethal methods when practical and effective.

Issue 5 - Humaneness and Animal Welfare Concerns of Methods

- Personnel would receive training in the latest and most humane devices/methods for removing target aquatic rodents causing damage.

- WS' personnel would check methods in accordance with the laws and regulations in Mississippi to address those aquatic rodents live-captured in a timely manner, which would minimize the stress of the animal.

- When deemed appropriate using the WS Decision Model, WS' use of lethal methods would comply with WS' directives (*e.g.*, see WS Directive 2.401, WS Directive 2.430, WS Directive 2.505).

- The NWRC is continually conducting research to improve the selectivity and humaneness of wildlife damage management devices used by personnel in the field.

- WS' personnel would consider the use of non-lethal methods prior to the use of lethal methods when managing aquatic rodent damage.

Issue 6 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on the Regulated Harvest of Aquatic Rodents

- WS' employees would direct management actions to reduce or prevent damage caused by aquatic rodents in the State toward specific individual target animals identified as responsible for the damage, identified as posing a threat to human safety, or identified as posing a threat of damage.

- WS' activities to manage damage and threats caused by aquatic rodents would be coordinated with the MDWFP.

- WS would provide the MDWFP with information on WS' removal of aquatic rodents to alleviate damage, which would ensure the MDWFP has the opportunity to consider WS' removal as part of management objectives for aquatic rodent species in the State.

- WS would monitor activities to ensure those activities do not adversely affect aquatic rodent populations in the State.

Issue 7 – Effects of Beaver Removal and Dam Manipulation on the Status of Wetlands in the State

- WS' personnel would remove beaver dams in accordance with federal and state laws and regulations for environmental protection. WS would conduct beaver dam removal to restore drainage or the stream channel for an area that has not become an established wetland.

- Upon receiving a request to remove beaver dams, WS would visually inspect the dam and the associated water impoundment to determine if characteristics exist at the site that would meet the definition of a wetland under section 404 of the CWA (40 CFR 232.2; see Issue 7 in Section 2.2 of this EA). If wetland conditions were present at the site, WS would notify the entities requesting assistance that a permit might be required to remove the dam and to seek guidance from the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality and the United States Army Corps of Engineers pursuant to Mississippi State Law and the CWA.

CHAPTER 4: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Chapter 4 provides information needed for making informed decisions when selecting the appropriate alternative to address the need for action described in Chapter 1 and the issues described in Chapter 2. This chapter analyzes the environmental consequences of each alternative as that alternative relates to the issues identified. The following resource values in the State are not expected to be significantly impacted by any of the alternatives analyzed: soils, geology, minerals, water quality/quantity, flood plains, wetlands, critical habitats (areas listed in T&E species recovery plans), visual resources, air quality, prime and unique farmlands, aquatic resources, timber, and range. This EA will not consider those resources further.

The activities proposed in the alternatives would have a negligible effect on atmospheric conditions, including the global climate. Meaningful direct or indirect emissions of greenhouse gases would not

occur because of any of the proposed alternatives. Those alternatives would meet the requirements of applicable laws, regulations, and Executive Orders, including the Clean Air Act and Executive Order 13514.

4.1 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES FOR ISSUES ANALYZED IN DETAIL

This section analyzes the environmental consequences of each alternative in comparison to determine the extent of actual or potential impacts on the issues. Therefore, the proposed action/no action alternative (Alternative 1) serves as the baseline for the analysis and the comparison of expected impacts among the alternatives. The analysis also takes into consideration mandates, directives, and the procedures of WS and the MDWFP.

Issue 1 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on Target Aquatic Rodent Populations

Methods available to address aquatic rodent damage or threats of damage in the State that would be available for use or recommendation under Alternative 1 (proposed action) and Alternative 2 (technical assistance only alternative) would either be lethal methods or non-lethal methods. Many of the methods would also be available to other entities under Alternative 3 (no involvement by WS alternative). The only methods that would have limited availability under Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 would be immobilizing drugs, euthanasia chemicals, and zinc phosphide. Under Alternative 2, WS could recommend lethal and non-lethal methods as part of an integrated approach to resolving requests for assistance. Alternative 1 would address requests for assistance received by WS through technical and/or operational assistance where an integrated approach to methods would be employed and/or recommended. Non-lethal methods that would be available to WS under Alternative 1 would include water control devices for beaver, cultural methods, habitat modification, supplemental feeding, behavior modification, live traps, translocation, cable restraints, exclusionary devices, immobilizing drugs, and chemical repellents (see Appendix B for a complete list and description of potential methods).

Non-lethal methods that would be available under all of the alternatives could disperse or otherwise make an area unattractive to aquatic rodents causing damage; thereby, reducing the presence of aquatic rodents at the site and potentially the immediate area around the site where non-lethal methods were employed. WS' employees would give preference to non-lethal methods when addressing requests for assistance under Alternative 1 and Alternative 2 (see WS Directive 2.101). However, WS' employees would not necessarily employ or recommend non-lethal methods to resolve every request for assistance if an employee deemed those methods to be inappropriate using the WS Decision Model. For example, if a cooperator requesting assistance had already used non-lethal methods, WS would not likely recommend or continue to employ those particular methods since their use had already been proven ineffective in adequately resolving the damage or threat.

The continued use of many non-lethal methods can often lead to the habituation of aquatic rodents to those methods, which can decrease the effectiveness of those methods. For any management methods employed, the proper timing would be essential in effectively dispersing those aquatic rodents causing damage. Employing methods soon after damage begins or soon after identifying threats would increase the likelihood those damage management activities would achieve success in addressing damage. Therefore, the coordination and timing of methods would be necessary to be effective in achieving expedient resolution of aquatic rodent damage.

Many non-lethal methods exclude, harass, and disperse target wildlife from areas where damage or threats were occurring. Harassment methods have generally proven ineffective in reducing beaver damage (Jackson and Decker 1993). When effective, non-lethal methods would disperse aquatic rodents from the area resulting in a reduction in the presence of those aquatic rodents at the site. However, aquatic rodents

responsible for causing damage or threats could disperse to other areas with minimal impact on those species' populations. WS' personnel and other entities would not employ non-lethal methods over large geographical areas or apply those methods at such intensity that essential resources (*e.g.*, food sources, habitat) would be unavailable for extended durations or over a wide geographical scope that long-term adverse effects would occur to a species' population. Non-lethal methods would generally have minimal impacts on overall populations of wildlife since individuals of those species were unharmed. The use of non-lethal methods would not have adverse impacts on aquatic rodent populations in the State under any of the alternatives.

A common issue is whether damage management actions would adversely affect the populations of target aquatic rodent species, especially when using lethal methods. WS would maintain ongoing contact with the MDWFP to ensure activities occurred within management objectives for those species. Therefore, the MDWFP would have the opportunity to monitor the total removal of aquatic rodents from all sources and would factor in survival rates from predation, disease, and other mortality data. Ongoing contact with the MDWFP would assure the MDWFP has the opportunity to consider local, state, and regional knowledge of wildlife population trends. As discussed previously, the analysis for magnitude of impact from lethal removal can be determined either quantitatively or qualitatively. Quantitative determinations can use information from population estimates, allowable harvest levels, and actual harvest data. Qualitative determinations can use information on population trends and harvest trend data. Several sources, including published literature and harvest data, can provide information on aquatic rodent populations and trends.

Lethal methods would also be available for use under all the alternatives by WS and/or by other entities. Lethal methods that would be available to address aquatic rodent damage include live-capture followed by euthanasia, shooting, body gripping traps, cable restraints, zinc phosphide (muskrats and nutria only), and the recommendation of harvest during the hunting and/or trapping seasons, where appropriate. In addition, WS could use foothold traps and submersion rods or cables for drowning sets. All of those methods would be available for use by WS or for recommendation by WS under Alternative 1. WS' personnel could employ lethal methods under Alternative 1 to resolve damage only after receiving a request for the use of those methods. Those same methods would also be available for WS to recommend and for other entities to use under Alternative 2. Under Alternative 3, those same lethal methods would continue to be available for use by other entities despite the lack of involvement by WS in damage management activities.

When WS' personnel intend to remove live-captured target animals under Alternative 1, removal would occur pursuant to WS Directive 2.505 and WS Directive 2.430. Under alternative 2, WS could recommend the use of methods to lethally remove live-captured or restrained target animals in accordance with WS Directive 2.505. WS' personnel would not provide assistance under Alternative 3; however, many of those methods available to lethally remove live-captured or restrained animals would continue to be available for use by other entities under Alternative 3.

The use of lethal methods by any entity could result in local population reductions in the area where damage or threats were occurring by removing individual target animals from a population. WS' personnel could employ or recommend lethal methods to remove target animals that WS' employees identify as causing damage or posing a threat to human safety. Therefore, the use of lethal methods could result in local reductions of aquatic rodents in the area where damage or threats were occurring. The number of aquatic rodents removed from the population annually by WS using lethal methods under Alternative 1 would be dependent on the number of requests for assistance received, the number of aquatic rodents involved with the associated damage or threat, and the efficacy of methods employed. The number of aquatic rodents removed by other entities under Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 would be unknown but would likely be similar to the removal that could occur under Alternative 1.

WS' employees and other licensed entities could use the rodenticide zinc phosphide to target specific or localized populations of muskrats and/or nutria where damage or threats of damage were occurring. Products containing zinc phosphide require a restricted-use pesticide applicators license from the MDAC to purchase and to apply those products. According to the EPA, zinc phosphide, when ingested, reacts with the acids in the gut, which releases phosphine gas. Phosphine gas, when inhaled, interferes with cell respiration, which leads to the death of the animal (EPA 1998). Rodenticides containing zinc phosphide are generally restricted-use pesticides, which, if available, could be purchased and applied by appropriately licensed people, and would not be products that were restricted to use by WS only.

The intent of most lethal methods is to reduce the number of aquatic rodents present at a location since a reduction in the number of aquatic rodents at a location could lead to a reduction in damage, which would be applicable whether using lethal or non-lethal methods. The intent of many non-lethal methods would be to harass, exclude, or otherwise make an area unattractive to aquatic rodents, which may disperse or dissuade those aquatic rodents to other areas leading to a reduction in damage at the location. The intent of using lethal methods would be similar to the intent when using non-lethal methods, which would be to reduce the number of aquatic rodents in the area where damage was occurring; thereby, reducing the damage occurring at that location.

The use of firearms could reduce the number of aquatic rodents using a location (similar to dispersing aquatic rodents) by lethally removing those target animals causing damage or posing a threat of damage. WS' employees could also capture aquatic rodents using live-traps and subsequently euthanize those aquatic rodents to reduce the number of aquatic rodents using a particular area where damage was occurring. Similarly, the intent of recommending people harvest aquatic rodents during the regulated hunting and/or trapping season would be to manage those populations in the area where damage was occurring.

Often of concern with the use of lethal methods is that aquatic rodents that were lethally removed would only be replaced by other aquatic rodents either during the application of those methods (*e.g.*, aquatic rodents that relocate into the area) or by aquatic rodents the following year (*e.g.*, increase in reproduction and survivability that could result from less competition). As stated previously, WS would not use lethal methods during direct operational assistance as population management tools over broad areas. WS' personnel could employ lethal methods under Alternative 1 to reduce the number of target animals present at a location where damage was occurring by targeting those animals causing damage or posing threats. The return of aquatic rodents to areas where methods were previously employed does not indicate previous use of those methods were ineffective since the intent of those methods were to reduce the number of aquatic rodents present at a site where damage was occurring or could occur at the time those methods were employed.

The intent when using most lethal methods is to reduce the number of aquatic rodents present at a location since a reduction in the number of aquatic rodents at a location could lead to a reduction in damage, which is applicable whether using lethal or non-lethal methods. The intent of many non-lethal methods would be to harass, exclude, or otherwise make an area unattractive to aquatic rodents, which could potentially dissuade or disperse those aquatic rodents to other areas potentially leading to a reduction in damage at the location. The intent of using lethal methods would be similar to the objective someone is trying to achieve when using non-lethal methods, which would be to reduce the number of aquatic rodents in the area where damage was occurring leading to a reduction in the damage occurring at that location.

Most lethal and non-lethal methods currently available provide only short-term benefits when addressing aquatic rodent damage. Those methods would be employed to reduce damage occurring at the time those methods were employed but do not necessarily ensure aquatic rodents would not return once those

methods were discontinued or after the reproductive season (when young disperse and occupy vacant areas). Long-term solutions to resolving aquatic rodent damage can often be difficult to implement and can be costly. In some cases, long-term solutions involve exclusionary devices, such as fencing, or other practices such as structural repairs. When addressing aquatic rodent damage, long-term solutions generally involve modifying existing habitat or making conditions to be less attractive to aquatic rodents. To ensure complete success, alternative sites in areas where damage was not likely to occur would often times be required to achieve complete success in reducing damage and to avoid moving the problem from one area to another. Modifying a site to be less attractive to aquatic rodents would likely result in the dispersal of those aquatic rodents to other areas where damage could occur or could result in multiple occurrences of damage situations.

Under Alternative 1 and Alternative 2, WS may recommend that property owners or managers allow people to harvest aquatic rodents during the regulated hunting and/or trapping season for those species in an attempt to reduce the number of aquatic rodents causing damage on their properties. Managing localized aquatic rodent populations by allowing hunting and/or trapping could lead to a decrease in the number of aquatic rodents causing damage. Establishing hunting and trapping seasons and the allowed harvest during those seasons is the responsibility of the MDWFP. WS does not have the authority to establish hunting or trapping seasons or to set allowed harvest numbers during those seasons. However, the harvest of those aquatic rodents during hunting and/or trapping seasons in the State would be occurring in addition to any removal that could occur by WS under the alternatives or recommended by WS. In addition, other entities could lethally remove aquatic rodents to alleviate damage or threats of damage under all the alternatives. The total number of individuals from each species that other entities remove to alleviate damage or threats of damage is currently not available. A discussion of the potential impacts on the populations of target aquatic rodent species occurs below for each alternative.

Alternative 1 - Continue the Current Adaptive Integrated Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Program (No Action/Proposed Action)

Under the Alternative 1, WS would continue to provide both technical assistance and direct operational assistance to those persons requesting assistance with managing damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents in the State. WS could employ those methods described in Appendix B in an adaptive approach that would integrate methods to reduce damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents in the State.

The analysis for each of the species includes an estimate of annual removal by WS as compared to statewide population estimates of the species. The estimated statewide population for each species used the best available information. Frequently, current reliable information is not available for a species; therefore, population estimates often use conservative calculations based upon habitat availability and a species use of those habitats.

As discussed previously, the analysis to determine the magnitude of impact from lethal removal can be determined either quantitatively or qualitatively. Population estimates, allowable harvest levels, and actual harvest data are quantitative examples. Population trends and harvest trend data are qualitative example. WS' removal that could occur to alleviate damage or threats of damage under the proposed action (Alternative 1) would be monitored by comparing numbers of animals killed with overall populations or trends in populations to assure the magnitude of removal was maintained below the level that would cause undesired adverse effects to the viability of native species' populations. The potential impacts on the populations of target aquatic rodent species from the implementation of the proposed action (Alternative 1) occur for each species below.

BEAVER POPULATION INFORMATION AND EFFECTS ANALYSIS

The North American beaver is a semi-aquatic mammal occurring in rivers, streams, lakes, reservoirs, and wetlands across North America. Beaver are large, bulky rodents whose most prominent features include a large scaly, paddle-shaped tail and nearly orange colored incisors (Hill 1982). Most adults weigh from 15.8 to 38.3 kg (35 to 50 lbs) with some occasionally reaching more than 45 kg (100 lbs), and are the largest North American rodent (Miller and Yarrow 1994). They range throughout most of Canada and the United States, with the exception of portions of Florida and the desert southwest. Beaver are active throughout most of the year and are primarily nocturnal, but they can be active during daylight hours. Beaver living along a river or large stream generally make bank burrows with multiple underwater entrances. Those in quiet streams, lakes, and ponds usually build dams and a lodge (National Audubon Society 2000). Signs that beaver are present in an area include gnawing around the bases of trees and trees that have fallen because of the gnawing. Beaver strip bark, which is a primary source of food for beaver. Beaver are unique in their ability to create and modify their habitat by building dams (Boyles and Owens 2007).

Fur harvesters trapped beaver extensively during the 19th and part of the 20th century, and as a result, beaver disappeared from much of their range (Novak 1987). Through translocation efforts of state wildlife agencies and the regulation of harvest to protect from overexploitation, beaver currently occupy most of their former range and have exceeded the social carrying capacity in some areas. Dams built and maintained by beaver may flood stands of commercial timber, highways, and croplands. However, the dams also help reduce erosion, and the ponds formed by dams may create a favorable habitat for many forms of life (Hill 1982, Baker and Hill 2003).

Beaver often occur in family groups that consist of two adult parents with two to six offspring from the current or previous breeding season. The average family group ranges from 3.2 to 9.2 individuals (Novak 1987). Reports of beaver abundance often occur in terms of families per kilometer of stream or per square kilometer of habitat. Densities in terms of families per square kilometer have been reported to range from 0.15 to 4.6 beaver (Novak 1987), which is the same as 0.4 to 11.9 beaver per square mile. In streams, Novak (1987) summarized beaver abundance as ranging from 0.31 to 1.5 families per kilometer of stream, which converts to 0.8 to 3.9 families per mile of stream. Novak (1987) stated beaver populations are density dependent, which means that rates of increase generally occur as a population reduction occurs and become less as a population increases toward its carrying capacity[10]. This natural function of most wildlife populations helps to mitigate population reductions. Logan et al. (1996) indicated that wildlife populations held at a level below carrying capacity could sustain a higher level of harvest because of the compensatory mechanisms that cause higher rates of increase in such populations.

Beaver have a relatively low biotic potential due to their small litter size and a long juvenile development period. Population matrix models show that survival of kits (1st year juveniles) and yearlings (2nd year juveniles) is the most critical factor in population viability. Survival of those age classes is partly dependent on the ability of beaver to successfully disperse and re-colonize habitats. Beaver are strong dispersers, and populations can recover quickly from local reductions when dispersal corridors are maintained (Boyles and Owens 2007).

Coyotes, black bears, bobcats, fishers, red fox, river otters, mink, and large raptors, such as hawks and owls, can prey on beaver (Tesky 1993, Baker and Hill 2003, Jackson and Decker 2004). With the exception of coyote, bear, and bobcat predation, most predation likely occurs to kits, yearlings, and young

[10]Carrying capacity is the maximum number of animals that the environment can sustain and is determined by the availability of food, water, cover, and the tolerance of crowding by the species in question.

adults. With little exception, those predator species do not appear to exert significant predation pressure on beaver populations (Baker and Hill 2003).

The current population of beaver in the State is unknown; however, beaver are present in all Mississippi counties, and their population is considered stable to increasing (R. Flynt, MDWFP, pers. comm. 2014). Since population estimates are not currently available, the analysis will derive a population estimate based on the best available information for beaver to provide an indication of the magnitude of removal proposed by WS to alleviate damage and threats of damage. Beaver population estimates often use density data for beaver based on the number of beaver families per a linear unit of measure (*e.g.*, stream miles) or per unit of area (*e.g.*, habitat type) (Baker and Hill 2003). In addition, population estimates depend on the number of individual beaver per family (Novak 1987).

Beaver densities specific to Mississippi are currently not available. As discussed previously, beaver densities per unit of area calculated from other studies in the United States and Canada have ranged from 0.4 beaver families per square mile to a high of 11.9 beaver families per square mile (Novak 1987). Density estimates in the United States and Canada based only on stream miles (*i.e.*, per a linear unit of measure) have ranged from 0.8 beaver colonies per stream mile to 3.9 beaver colonies per stream mile (Novak 1987).

There are over 4.0 million acres of wetlands in Mississippi (Dahl 1990, Hefner et al. 1994), consisting of 2.7 million acres of freshwater wetlands (MDEQ 2014). In addition, an estimated 82,154 miles of streams and rivers occur in Mississippi (MDEQ 2014). To evaluate a worst-case scenario, the estimated statewide beaver population will use the lowest beaver colony density per linear measure derived from other studies of 0.8 beaver colonies per stream mile. If all of the stream and river miles in Mississippi were suitable beaver habitat and if beaver colonies occupied all of those miles, approximately 65,700 beaver colonies would occur along the 82,154 miles of river and streams in the State, which would not include beaver colonies that inhabit wetlands, lakes, ponds, and other aquatic habitats.

The number of beaver per colony is also required to derive a population estimate. However, the average number of beaver per colony in Mississippi is unknown. In Alabama, Wilkinson (1962) estimated the average number of beaver per colony at 4.6 beaver, which is similar to the average of 5.3 beaver per colony in Georgia that Parrish (1960) estimated. From other studies, the average size of beaver colonies has ranged from 3.2 beaver to 9.2 beaver per colony (Novak 1987). Therefore, if there were 65,700 beaver colonies along the rivers and streams of the State and if there were 3.2 beaver per colony, the population inhabiting rivers and streams would be 210,000 beaver. The actual statewide population is likely much larger than 210,000 beaver. The statewide population is likely much larger because the calculated estimate used the lowest density information available for beaver. In addition, the population estimate did not include beaver that could inhabit other aquatic habitats or create their own habitats by impounding water in areas associated with water runoff or storage (*e.g.*, drainage ditches, irrigation canals, storm water structures).

The authority for management of resident aquatic rodent species in Mississippi, including beaver, is the responsibility of the MDWFP. The MDWFP considers beaver to be a "*nuisance wildlife*" species in the State, which allows people to remove beaver throughout the year with no limits on the number of beaver that people can remove. When beaver are causing damage or about to cause damage on private property, the landowner or their designee can remove beaver without a permit anytime of the year.

Between FY 2009 and FY 2013, WS received requests for assistance to manage damage or threats of damage caused by beaver in the State. Requests for assistance associated with beaver were primarily associated with flooding and burrowing damage, along with damage from beaver felling and girdling trees. Based on those requests for assistance to manage damage or threats of damage associated with

beaver, WS employed multiple methods to remove those beaver identified as causing damage or posing a threat of damage (see Table 4.1).

WS primarily employed body-gripping traps to remove beaver from FY 2009 through FY 2013. WS also removed beaver using foothold traps, cable restraints, and firearms between FY 2009 and FY 2013. In addition, WS breached or removed 9,074 beaver dams between FY 2009 and FY 2013, which is an average annual removal of 1,815 beaver dams. In total, WS removed 1,126 dams using binary explosives and breached or removed 7,948 dams using hand tools.

Table 4.1 – Number of beaver WS removed by method in Mississippi, FY 2009 – FY 2013

	Method				
Fiscal Year	**Body Gripping**	**Foothold Trap**	**Cable Restraint**	**Firearm**	**TOTAL**
2009	2,934	177	308	302	**3,721**
2010	3,083	238	330	318	**3,969**
2011	3,002	199	273	306	**3,780**
2012	2,661	105	245	204	**3,215**
2013	2,698	141	186	143	**3,168**

The MDWFP, with management authority over beaver, currently allows people to harvest beaver during annual trapping seasons. On privately owned property where beaver are causing damage, the MDWFP allows the property owner or their designated agent to remove beaver at any time. As shown in Table 4.2, trappers harvested an estimated 53,295 beaver in Mississippi during the trapping season between 2009 and 2013. Landowners and/or their designees are not required to report the number of beaver they removed annually to alleviate damage; therefore, no estimates are available. When compared to the number of beaver that trappers harvested in the State, WS' removal has not exceeded 29.8% of the estimated annual harvest of beaver in the State, and has averaged 25.1% from FY 2009 through FY 2013.

If the beaver population has remained relatively stable at 210,000 beaver in Mississippi, WS' highest level of annual removal that occurred in FY 2010 would represent 1.9% of the estimated population. The highest level of overall removal from fur harvest and WS' removal occurred in 2011 when WS and trappers removed 14,705 beaver. With an estimated 14,705 beaver removed in 2011 and a stable beaver population, the overall removal of beaver would represent 7.0% of the estimated population in the State. The number of beaver removed for damage management by other entities in Mississippi is unknown. However, the MDWFP has determined that there is no evidence to suggest that human mediated mortality resulting from regulated fur harvest and damage management activities, including removal by WS, would be detrimental to the survival of beaver populations in the State of Mississippi (R. Flynt, MDWFP pers. comm. 2014). An allowable harvest level for beaver may be as high as 30% of the population (Novak 1987). The total known removal of beaver in the State has not exceeded 30% of the estimated statewide population of beaver in Mississippi.

Based on previous requests for assistance and in anticipation of receiving additional requests for assistance with managing damage caused by beaver in Mississippi, WS could lethally remove up to 8,000 beaver annually under Alternative 1 (proposed action). Based on a statewide population estimated at 210,000 beaver, the annual lethal removal by WS of up to 8,000 beaver would represent 3.8% of the population. As indicated previously, the actual statewide population of beaver is likely much larger than 210,000 beaver. Therefore, the proposed removal of up to 8,000 beaver annually by WS would likely be a much lower percentage of the actual statewide population.

Combining the highest annual harvest of 11,299 beaver that occurred in 2012 with the annual removal that could occur by WS of 8,000 beaver, the cumulative removal of beaver in the State would represent

9.2% of a statewide beaver population estimated at 210,000 beaver. When combining the highest beaver harvest level that occurred in 2012 with the annual removal that could occur by WS, the cumulative removal would not exceed 30% of the statewide beaver population under a worst-case scenario.

Table 4.2 – Estimated beaver harvest and WS' removal of beaver in Mississippi, 2009 – 2013

Year	Harvest[1,2]	WS' Take[3]	Total Take	WS % Take	% Take of Population[4]
2009	10,544	3,721	**14,265**	26.1%	6.8%
2010	9,359	3,969	**13,328**	29.8%	6.4%
2011	10,925	3,780	**14,705**	25.7%	7.0%
2012	11,299	3,215	**14,514**	22.2%	6.9%
2013	11,168	3,168	**14,336**	22.0%	6.8%
TOTAL	**53,295**	**17,853**	**71,148**	**25.1%**	**6.8%**

[1]Harvest data reported by harvest season that begin in the fall and ends the following spring (*e.g.*, fall 2011 to spring 2012)
[2]Harvest data provided by the MDWFP
[3]WS' take is reported by FY
[4]Based on a statewide beaver population estimated at 210,000 beaver

However, as stated previously, beaver inhabit many other types of aquatic habitats within the State besides rivers and streams and likely occur at higher densities than the densities used to derive the estimate; therefore, the statewide beaver population likely exceeds 210,000 beaver. Therefore, the cumulative removal of beaver annually would likely be a much lower percentage of the actual statewide population. Although the number of beaver that property owners remove annually to alleviate damage or threats of damage is unknown, the actual number of beaver removed annually is not likely occur at a level that would increase cumulative effects. The unlimited harvest allowed by the MDWFP also provides an indication that the statewide density of beaver is sufficient that overharvest is not likely to occur.

Under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1), people could also request WS breach or remove beaver dams to alleviate or prevent flooding damage. In addition, WS could receive requests to install devices to control the water flow through dams to alleviate flooding or install exclusion devices to prevent damming. WS would primarily utilize manual methods (*e.g.*, hands and hand tools) to breach dams. To remove dams, WS could also use manual methods but could employ explosives in some cases. WS anticipates breaching, removing, or installing flow control devices in 3,000 beaver dams as part of an integrated damage management program. When breaching or removing a dam, WS' personnel would discard the building material used to create the dam (*e.g.*, sticks, logs, and other vegetative matter) on the bank or would release those materials to flow downstream. Mud and small materials, such as bark and other plant debris, could also escape downstream and would tend to settle out within a short distance of the dam. Small to medium limbs, along with sediments, may drift further distances downstream. Dam breaching and removal would generally be conducted in conjunction with the removal of beaver responsible for constructing the dam since beaver would likely repair and/or rebuild dams quickly if dams were breached or removed prior to the beaver being removed. Therefore, the removal or breaching of beaver dams would not adversely affect beaver populations in the State since WS would conduct those activities in association with removing beaver from the site; therefore, the removal would be included in the estimated annual removal levels of beaver addressed previously.

MUSKRAT POPULATION INFORMATION AND EFFECTS ANALYSIS

Muskrats build houses, or lodges of aquatic plants, especially cattails, up to 2.4 m (8 feet) in diameter and 1.5 m (5 feet) high. Muskrats build those structures atop piles of roots, mud, or similar support in marshy areas, streams, lakes, or along water banks. They also burrow in stream or pond banks with entrances often above the water line. Another sign of the presence of muskrat includes the presence of feeding platforms that muskrats build out of cut vegetation in water or on ice. These feeding platforms are

marked by discarded or uneaten grasses or reed cuttings and floating blades of cattails, sedges, and similar vegetation located near the banks. This species is most active at dusk, dawn, and at night, but may be visible at any time of the day in all seasons, especially spring. Muskrat are excellent swimmers and spend much of their time in the water. They inhabit fresh, salt, and brackish waters throughout most of Canada and the United States, except for the Arctic regions (National Audubon Society 2000). They occur in marshes, ponds, sloughs, lakes, ditches, streams, and rivers (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987).

Muskrat are prolific and produce three to four litters per year that average five to eight young per litter (Wade and Ramsey 1986), which makes them relatively immune to overharvest (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987). Gestation period varies between 25 and 30 days. Young muskrats can reproduce the spring after their birth. Harvest rates of three to eight animals per acre may be sustainable in muskrat populations (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987). Muskrat home ranges vary from 529 square feet to 11,970 square feet (0.1 to 0.25 acres), with the size of home ranges occupied by muskrats dependent upon habitat quality and population density (Boutin and Birkenholz 1987).

Young muskrats are especially vulnerable to predation. Adult muskrats may also be subject to predation, but rarely in numbers that would lower populations. Predation alone does not appear solve damage problems caused by muskrats (Miller 1994). Predators of muskrat include great horned and barred owls, red-tailed hawks, bald eagles, raccoons, mink, river otter, red fox, gray fox, coyotes, bobcat, Northern pike, largemouth bass, snapping turtles, and bullfrogs. Adult muskrats also occasionally kill young muskrats (Miller 1994).

No population estimates are available in Mississippi for muskrats; however, muskrats occur statewide in suitable habitat. As stated previously, there are over 4.0 million acres of wetlands in Mississippi (Dahl 1990, Hefner et al. 1994), and an estimated minimum of 82,154 miles of streams and rivers (MDEQ 2014).

Since population estimates are not currently available, the analysis will derive a population estimate based on the best available information for muskrats to provide an indication of the magnitude of removal proposed by WS to alleviate damage and threats of damage. Using the acreage of wetlands in Mississippi of 4.0 million acres and using a single muskrat home range of 0.25 acres and assuming only one muskrat occupies a home range with no overlap of ranges, a statewide population could be estimated at 16 million muskrats. However, not all wetlands in the State likely provide suitable habitat for muskrats. If only 25% of the wetland acreage in the State were suitable habitat for muskrats, the estimated population would be 4 million muskrats.

Muskrats are a furbearing species in Mississippi, and seasons and limits for harvest are set by the MDWFP. Trappers can harvest muskrats during annual trappings seasons in the State with no limit on the number of muskrats that trappers can harvest. Between 2009 and 2013, trappers have harvested an estimated 2,457 muskrats in the State. The highest annual harvest by trappers occurred in 2009 when trappers harvested 706 muskrats (see Table 4.3).

WS intentionally removed muskrats to alleviate damage or threats of damage to natural resource and to property between FY 2009 and FY 2013. To alleviate damage at the request of a cooperator, WS lethally removed 93 muskrats intentionally in the State between FY 2009 and FY 2013. In addition, WS removed three muskrats unintentionally during other damage management activities between FY 2009 and FY 2013. The cumulative removal of muskrats by WS from FY 2009 through FY 2013 represented 3.8% of the cumulative known harvest of muskrats in the State. The combined harvest of muskrats during the trapping season between 2009 and 2013 and the lethal removal by WS from FY 2009 and FY 2013 represented 0.01% of a statewide population estimated at four million muskrats. The MDWFP has reported the statewide muskrat population to be stable (R. Flynt, MDWFP pers. comm. 2014) and

determined there is no evidence to suggest that human mediated mortality resulting from regulated fur harvest and damage management would be detrimental to the survival of the muskrat populations in the State of Mississippi.

Table 4.3 – Estimated muskrat harvest and WS' removal of muskrat in Mississippi, 2009 - 2013

Year	Harvest[1,2]	WS' Take[3]	Total Take	WS % Take	% Take of Population[4]
2009	706	16	**722**	2.2%	0.02%
2010	391	6	**397**	1.5%	0.01%
2011	466	21	**487**	4.3%	0.01%
2012	251	11	**262**	4.2%	0.01%
2013	643	42	**685**	6.1%	0.02%
TOTAL	**2,457**	**96**	**2,553**	**3.8%**	**0.01%**

[1]Harvest data reported by calendar year

[2]Harvest data provided by the MDWFP

[3]WS' removal is reported by FY; include non-target removal

[4]Based on a statewide muskrat population estimated at 4 million muskrats

Based on the number of muskrats lethally removed between FY 2009 and FY 2013 and the potential need to address additional requests for assistance associated with muskrats, WS could lethally remove up to 500 muskrats per year as part of an integrated damage management program.

Using a population estimated at four million muskrats, the lethal removal of up to 500 muskrats annually would represent 0.01% of the statewide population. Cumulatively, the removal of up to 500 muskrats by WS and the highest annual harvest of muskrats (706) would represent 0.03% of the estimated statewide population. The cumulative removal of muskrats is not likely to reach a magnitude where adverse effects would occur to the muskrat population. The unlimited removal allowed by the MDWFP provides an indication that the statewide densities of muskrats are sufficient that overharvest is not likely to occur. In addition, most requests for assistance that WS receives would be associated with muskrats that are causing damage in areas where little or no trapping occurs or areas that prohibit public trapping. Damage management activities associated with muskrats would target single animals or localized populations at sites where their presence was causing unacceptable damage to agriculture, human health and safety, natural resources, or property.

NUTRIA POPULATION INFORMATION AND EFFECTS ANALYSIS

The nutria is a large, dark colored, semi-aquatic rodent that is native to South America. People introduced nutria into the United States during the late 1930s (Whitaker, Jr. and Hamilton, Jr., 1998). The nutria is somewhat similar to the native muskrat in appearance. Nutria have small eyes and ears with a tail that is long, scaly, sparsely haired, and round (National Audubon Society 2000). Nutria weigh on average about 12 pounds (Whitaker, Jr. and Hamilton, Jr., 1998).

Nutria primarily inhabit brackish or freshwater marshes, but are also found in swamps, rivers, ponds, and lakes. They live in dense vegetation and in burrows along stream banks or shorelines (Wade and Ramsey 1986). The burrowing activity of nutria can severely damage levees, dikes, earthen dams, and other structures. Nutria feed on terrestrial or aquatic green plants, but also feed on crops adjacent to their habitat. Nutria will consume approximately 25% of their own weight in food each day (Whitaker, Jr. and Hamilton, Jr. 1998).

Nutria females begin breeding in their first year. Breeding can occur at any time during the year. In the right conditions, nutria can produce up to 15 young per year (Whitaker, Jr. and Hamilton, Jr. 1998). In

the wild, the life expectancy of nutria is approximately two years. In Louisiana, fall densities of 18 nutria per acre have been found in floating freshwater marshes, while summer densities of nutria in Oregon along freshwater marshes may reach 56 nutria per acre (LeBlanc 1994). Whitaker, Jr. and Hamilton, Jr. (1998) found nutria densities can range up to 10 nutria per acre. Home ranges for nutria range from 12 to 445 acres (Whitaker, Jr. and Hamilton, Jr. 1998). In Louisiana, LeBlanc (1994) stated the home range of nutria is about 32 acres.

Pursuant to Executive Order 13112, the National Invasive Species Council has designated the nutria as meeting the definition of an invasive species. Lowe et al. (2000) ranked nutria as one of the 100 worst invasive species in the world. Nutria are not considered a native wildlife species in Mississippi. The current population of nutria in the State originated from nutria that people intentionally released to establish populations or from nutria that escaped captivity. Nutria are considered a "*nuisance animal*" that can be removed at any time. The current population of nutria in the State is unknown.

Since population estimates are not currently available, the analysis will derive a population estimate using the best available information for nutria to provide an indication of the magnitude of removal proposed by WS to alleviate damage and threats of damage. As stated previously, there are approximately four million acres of wetlands in Mississippi (Dahl 1990). Of those wetland acres, approximately 64,000 acres are coastal vegetative wetlands (Mississippi Department of Marine Resources 1999). If nutria occupied only the 64,000 acres of coastal vegetative wetlands along the coast of Mississippi and using a density estimate of 10 nutria per acre, a statewide population could be estimated at 640,000 nutria. However, not all coastal wetlands along the coast of the State likely provide suitable habitat for nutria. If only 25% of the coastal wetland acreage in the State were suitable habitat for nutria, the estimated population would be 160,000 nutria.

Table 4.4 shows the total known removal of nutria in Mississippi, including removal by WS, from 2009 through 2013. Between 2009 and 2013, hunters, trappers, and WS have removed 6,496 nutria in the State. From FY 2009 through FY 2013, WS lethally removed 909 nutria in the State. WS' annual removal of nutria has averaged 14.0% of the total known removal of nutria in the State. The highest level of removal by WS occurred in FY 2010 when 233 nutria were removed, which represented 16.6% of the estimated total removal of nutria in the State during 2010.

Table 4.4 – Estimated nutria harvest and WS' removal of nutria in Mississippi, 2009 to 2013

Year	Harvest[1,2]	WS' Take[3,4]	Total Take	WS % Take	% Take of Population[5]
2009	1,560	226	**1,786**	12.7%	0.2%
2010	1,173	233	**1,406**	16.6%	0.1%
2011	939	136	**1,075**	12.7%	0.1%
2012	707	172	**879**	19.6%	0.1%
2013	1,208	142	**1,350**	10.5%	0.1%
TOTAL	**5,587**	**909**	**6,496**	**14.0%**	**0.1%**

[1]Harvest data reported by calendar year
[2]Harvest data provided by the MDWFP
[3]WS' take occurs by FY
[4]Includes the unintentional removal of nutria during other damage management activities
[5]Based on a statewide nutria population estimated at one million nutria
[†]N/A=Information is not available

WS' personnel would only conduct activities after receiving a request by a property owner or property manager for those activities. Therefore, the number of nutria addressed by WS would be dependent on the number of requests received, the number of nutria causing damage or the threat of damage, and the efficacy of methods employed to resolve the damage. WS anticipates that up to 500 nutria could be

lethally removed annually to resolve requests for assistance. In addition, WS could unintentionally remove nutria as non-targets during damage management activities targeting other aquatic rodent species, primarily when targeting beaver. Between FY 2009 and FY 2013, no nutria were lethally removed unintentionally as non-targets by WS; however, WS could remove nutria unintentionally during activities targeting other aquatic rodents.

Executive Order 13112 states that each federal agency whose actions may affect the status of invasive species shall, to the extent practicable and permitted by law; 1) reduce invasion of exotic species and the associated damages, 2) monitor invasive species populations, provide for restoration of native species and habitats, 3) conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction, and 4) provide for environmentally sound control and promote public education on invasive species. WS' would conduct activities pursuant to Executive Order 13112.

WILDLIFE DISEASE SURVEILLANCE AND MONITORING

The ability to efficiently conduct surveillance for and detect diseases is dependent upon rapid detection of the introduced pathogen. Effective implementation of a surveillance system would facilitate planning and execution at regional and state levels, and coordination of surveillance data for risk assessment. It would also facilitate partnerships between public and private interests, including efforts by federal, state, and local governments as well as non-governmental organizations, universities, and other interest groups.

WS' implementation of disease sampling strategies to detect or monitor diseases in the United States would not adversely affect aquatic rodent populations in the State. Sampling strategies that WS could employ would involve sampling live-captured aquatic rodents that WS' personnel could release on site after sampling occurs. The sampling (*e.g.*, drawing blood, tissue sample, collecting fecal samples) and the subsequent release of live-captured aquatic rodents would not result in adverse effects since those aquatic rodents would be released unharmed on site. In addition, the sampling of aquatic rodents that were sick, dying, or harvested by hunters would not result in the additive lethal removal of aquatic rodents that would not have already occurred in the absence of disease sampling. Therefore, the sampling of aquatic rodents for diseases would not adversely affect the populations of any of the aquatic rodents addressed in this EA nor would sampling aquatic rodents result in any lethal removal of aquatic rodents that would not have already occurred in the absence of disease sampling (*e.g.*, hunter harvest).

Alternative 2 – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

WS would not directly affect aquatic rodent populations in the State from a program implementing technical assistance only. However, persons experiencing damage or threats from aquatic rodents may implement methods based on WS' recommendations. Under this alternative, WS would recommend and demonstrate for use both non-lethal and lethal methods legally available for use to resolve aquatic rodent damage. WS' personnel would recommend methods and techniques based on the WS Decision Model using information provided from the requester or from a site visit. Requesters may implement WS' recommendations, implement other actions, seek assistance from other entities, or take no action. However, those people requesting assistance would likely be those people that would implement damage abatement methods in the absence of WS' recommendations.

Under this alternative, those persons experiencing threats or damage associated with aquatic rodents in the State could lethally remove aquatic rodents or request assistance from other entities despite WS' lack of direct involvement in the management action. Therefore, under this alternative, the number of aquatic rodents lethally removed annually would likely be similar to the other alternatives. Removal of aquatic rodents by other entities would likely be similar since removal could occur through the issuance of a permit by the MDWFP, removal of non-native aquatic rodent species could occur without the need for a

permit from the MDWFP, and removal would continue to occur during the harvest season for those species. People can lethally remove beaver and nutria at any time on private property in the State. WS' participation in a management action would not be additive to an action that would occur in the absence of WS' participation.

With the oversight of the MDWFP, it is unlikely that implementation of this alternatives would adversely affect aquatic rodent populations. Under this alternative, WS would not provide any assistance with managing damage. However, other entities could provide direct operational assistance, such as the MDWFP, private entities, and/or private businesses. If direct operational assistance was not available from WS or other entities, it is hypothetically possible that frustration caused by the inability to reduce damage and associated losses could lead to illegal removal, which could lead to real but unknown effects on other wildlife populations. People have resorted to the illegal use of chemicals and methods to resolve wildlife damage issues (*e.g*., see White et al. 1989, USFWS 2001, United States Food and Drug Administration 2003).

Alternative 3 – No Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Conducted by WS

Under this alternative, WS would not conduct damage management activities in the State. WS would have no direct involvement with any aspect of addressing damage caused by aquatic rodents and would provide no technical assistance. No removal of aquatic rodents by WS would occur under this alternative. Aquatic rodents could continue to be lethally removed to resolve damage and/or threats occurring through permits issued by the MDWFP, during the regulated hunting or trapping seasons, or in the case of non-regulated species, removal could occur anytime using legally available methods. Management actions taken by non-federal entities would constitute the *environmental status quo*.

Local aquatic rodent populations could decline, stay the same, or increase depending on actions taken by those persons experiencing aquatic rodent damage. Some resource/property owners may take illegal, unsafe, or environmentally harmful action against local populations of aquatic rodents out of frustration or ignorance. While WS would provide no assistance under this alternative, other individuals or entities could conduct lethal damage management resulting in lethal removal levels similar to Alternative 1 (proposed action).

Since other entities could still remove aquatic rodents under this alternative, the potential effects on the populations of those aquatic rodent species in the State would be similar to the other alternatives for this issue. WS' involvement would not be additive to removal that could occur since the cooperator requesting WS' assistance could conduct aquatic rodent damage management activities without WS' direct involvement. Therefore, any actions to resolve damage or reduce threats associated with aquatic rodents could occur by other entities despite WS' lack of involvement under this alternative.

Issue 2 - Effects on Non-target Wildlife Species Populations, Including T&E Species

As discussed previously, a concern would be the potential impacts to non-target species, including T&E species, from the use of methods to resolve damage caused by aquatic rodents. Discussion on the potential effects of the alternatives on the populations of non-target wildlife species, including T&E species, occurs below.

Alternative 1 - Continue the Current Adaptive Integrated Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Program (No Action/Proposed Action)

The potential for adverse effects to non-targets occurs from the employment of methods to address aquatic rodent damage. Under Alternative 1, WS could provide both technical assistance and direct

operational assistance to those people requesting assistance. The risks to non-targets from the use of non-lethal methods as part of an integrated direct operational assistance program would be similar to those risks to non-targets discussed in the other alternatives.

Personnel from WS would be experienced with managing wildlife damage and would receiving training in the employment of methods, which would allow WS' employees to use the WS Decision Model to select the most appropriate methods to address damage caused by targeted animals and excluding non-target species. To reduce the likelihood of capturing non-target wildlife, WS would employ the most selective methods for the target species, would employ the use of attractants that were as specific to target species as possible, and determine placement of methods to avoid exposure to non-targets. Chapter 3 of this EA discusses the SOPs to prevent and reduce any potential adverse effects on non-targets. Despite the best efforts to minimize non-target exposure to methods during program activities, the potential for WS to disperse or lethally remove non-targets exists when applying both non-lethal and lethal methods to manage damage or reduce threats to safety.

Non-lethal methods have the potential to cause adverse effects to non-targets primarily through exclusion, harassment, and dispersal. Any exclusionary device erected to prevent access of target species also potentially excludes species that were not the primary reason for erecting the exclusion; therefore, exclusion methods potentially could adversely affect non-target species if the area excluded was large enough. The use of auditory and visual dispersal methods to reduce damage or threats caused by aquatic rodents would also likely disperse non-targets in the immediate area the methods were employed. Therefore, non-targets may disperse permanently from an area while employing non-lethal dispersal techniques. However, like target species, the potential impacts on non-target species would likely be temporary with target and non-target species often returning after the cessation of dispersal methods.

Non-lethal methods that use auditory and visual stimuli to reduce or prevent damage elicit fright responses in wildlife. When employing those methods to disperse or harass target species, any non-targets nearby when employing those methods would also likely disperse from the area. Similarly, any exclusionary device constructed to prevent access by target species could also exclude access to some non-target species. The persistent use of non-lethal methods would likely result in the dispersal or abandonment of those areas where non-lethal methods were employed of both target and non-target species. Therefore, any use of non-lethal methods would likely elicit a similar response from both non-target and target species. Although non-lethal methods do not result in the lethal removal of non-targets, the use of non-lethal methods could restrict or prevent access of non-targets to beneficial resources. However, long-term adverse effects would not occur to a species' population since WS would not employ non-lethal methods over large geographical areas or at such intensity levels that resources (*e.g.*, food sources, habitat) would be unavailable for extended durations or over a wide geographical scope. Non-lethal methods would generally have minimal impacts on overall populations of wildlife since individuals of those species were unharmed. Overall, the use of non-lethal methods would not adversely affect populations of wildlife since those methods would often be temporary.

Other non-lethal methods available for use under this alternative would include live traps, nets, water control devices, repellents, and immobilizing drugs. Live traps and nets restrain wildlife once captured; therefore, those methods are live-capture methods. Live traps would have the potential to capture non-target species. Trap and net placement in areas where target species were active and the use of target-specific attractants would likely minimize the capture of non-targets. Attending to traps and nets appropriately would allow the release of any non-targets captured unharmed. Water control devices are systems that allow the passage of water through a beaver dam to manage the level of impounded water. Taylor and Singleton (2014) provide a comprehensive summary of the evolution of water control devices to reduce flooding by beaver. The use or recommendation of water control devices would not adversely non-targets.

Chemical repellents could also be available to reduce aquatic rodent damage. Since FY 2009, WS has not used repellents to reduce aquatic rodent damage in the State. However, WS may recommend or employ commercially available repellents when providing technical assistance and direct operational assistance. WS would only use or recommend those products registered with the EPA pursuant to the FIFRA and registered with the MDAC under this alternative. The active ingredients in many commercially available repellents are naturally occurring substances (*e.g.*, capsaicin, whole egg solids), which are often used in food preparation (EPA 2001). When used according to label instructions, most repellents would be safe since 1) they are not toxic to animals, if ingested; 2) there is normally little to no contact between animals and the active ingredient, and 3) the active ingredients are found in the environment and degrade quickly (EPA 2001). Therefore, the use and recommendation of repellents would not have negative impacts on non-target species when used according to label requirements. Most repellents for aquatic rodents pose a very low risk to non-targets when exposed to or when ingested.

WS could employ immobilizing drugs to handle and transport target aquatic rodent species. WS' personnel would apply immobilizing drugs directly to target animals through hand injection or by projectile (*e.g.*, dart gun). WS would make reasonable efforts to retrieve projectiles containing immobilizing drugs if misses occurred or if the projectile detached from target animals. Therefore, no direct effects to non-target animals would be likely since identification would occur prior to application. Animals anesthetized using immobilizing drugs recover once the animal's body has fully metabolized the drug. Therefore, non-targets that may consume animals that recover are unlikely to receive a dosage that would cause any impairment. When using immobilizing drugs to handle or transport target animals, WS would monitor anesthetized animals until that animal recovers sufficiently to leave the site.

Potential impacts to non-targets from the use of non-lethal methods would be similar to the use of non-lethal methods under any of the alternatives. Non-targets would generally be unharmed from the use of non-lethal methods under any of the alternatives since no lethal removal would occur. Non-lethal methods would be available under all the alternatives analyzed. WS' involvement in the use of or recommendation of non-lethal methods would ensure WS' employees would consider the potential impacts to non-targets when using the WS Decision Model. Potential impacts to non-targets under this alternative from the use of and/or the recommendation of non-lethal methods are likely to be low.

WS could also employ and/or recommend lethal methods under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) to alleviate damage, when WS' personnel deemed those methods were deemed appropriate for use using the WS Decision Model. Lethal methods available for use to manage damage caused by aquatic rodents under this alternative would include the recommendation of harvest during hunting and/or trapping seasons, shooting, body-gripping traps, cable restraints, zinc phosphide (muskrats and nutria only), and euthanasia chemicals, including euthanasia after live-capture. WS could also use foothold traps and submersion cables or rods as a drowning set. Available methods and the application of those methods to resolve aquatic rodent damage is further discussed in Appendix B.

Zinc phosphide is a toxicant used to kill small rodents, lagomorphs, muskrats, and nutria. Zinc phosphide is two to 15 times more toxic to rodents than to carnivores (Hill and Carpenter 1982). Secondary risks appear to be minimal to predators and scavengers that scavenge carcasses of animals killed with zinc phosphide (Tietjen 1976, Hegdal and Gatz 1977, Hegdal et al. 1980, Hill and Carpenter 1982, Johnson and Fagerstone 1994). Risks would be minimal based since 90% of the zinc phosphide ingested by rodents is detoxified in the digestive tract (Hegdal et al. 1980) and 99% of the zinc phosphide residues occur in the digestive tracts, with none occurring in the muscle. In addition, the amount of zinc phosphide required to kill target rodents is not enough to kill most other predatory animals that consume tissue (Johnson and Fagerstone 1994).

In addition, zinc phosphide has a strong emetic action (*i.e.*, causes vomiting) and most non-target animals in research tests regurgitated bait or tissues contaminated with zinc phosphide without succumbing to the toxicant (Hegdal and Gatz 1977, Hegdal et al. 1980, Johnson and Fagerstone 1994). Furthermore, predators tend to eviscerate zinc phosphide-poisoned rodents before eating them or otherwise avoid the digestive tract and generally do not eat the stomach and intestines (Hegdal et al. 1980, Johnson and Fagerstone 1994). Although zinc phosphide baits have a strong, pungent, phosphorous-like odor (garlic like), this characteristic seems to attract rodents, particularly rats, and apparently makes the bait unattractive to some other animals. Many birds appear capable of distinguishing treated from untreated baits and they prefer untreated grain when given a choice (Siegfried 1968, Johnson and Fagerstone 1994). Birds appear particularly susceptible to the emetic effects of zinc phosphide, which would tend to offer an extra degree of protection against bird species dying from the consumption of grain treated with zinc phosphide or, for scavenging bird species, from eating poisoned rodents. Use of rolled oats instead of whole grain also appears to reduce bird acceptance of bait. Uresk et al. (1988) reported on the effects of zinc phosphide on six non-target rodent populations. Uresk et al. (1988) determined that no differences were observed from pretreatment until after treatment in populations of eastern cottontail rabbits and white-tailed jackrabbits (*Lepus townsendii*). However, primary consumption of bait by non-target wildlife could occur and potentially cause mortality. Uresk et al. (1988) reported a 79% reduction in deer mouse populations in areas treated with zinc phosphide; however, the effect was not statistically significant because of high variability in densities and the reduction was not long-term (Deisch et al. 1990).

Ramey et al. (2000) reported that five weeks after treatment, no ring-necked pheasants (*Phasianus colchicus*) had been killed because of zinc phosphide baiting. In addition, Hegdal and Gatz (1977) determined that zinc phosphide did not affect non-target populations and more radio-tracked animals were killed by predators than died from zinc phosphide intoxication (Hegdal and Gatz 1977, Ramey et al. 2000). Tietjen (1976) observed horned larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) and mourning doves (*Zenaida macroura*) on zinc phosphide-treated prairie dog colonies, but observations after treatment did not locate any sick or dead birds, a finding similar to Apa et al. (1991). Uresk et al. (1988) reported that ground-feeding birds showed no difference in numbers between control and treated sites. Apa et al. (1991) further states that zinc phosphide was not consumed by horned larks because: 1) poisoned grain remaining for their consumption was low (*i.e.*, bait was accepted by prairie dogs before larks could consume it), 2) birds have an aversion to black-colored foods, and 3) birds have a negative sensory response to zinc phosphide.

Reduced impacts on birds associated with the use of zinc phosphide have also been reported by Tietjen and Matschke (1982). Deisch et al. (1989) reported on the effect zinc phosphide has on invertebrates. Deisch et al. (1989) determined that zinc phosphide bait reduced ant densities; however, spider mites, crickets, wolf spiders, ground beetles, darkling beetles, and dung beetles were not affected. Wolf spiders and ground beetles showed increases after one year on zinc phosphide treated areas (Deisch 1986). Generally, direct long-term impacts from rodenticide treatments were minimal for the population of insects that were sampled (Deisch et al. 1989). Long-term effects were not directly related to rodenticides, but more to habitat changes (Deisch 1986) as vegetative cover and prey diversity increased without prairie dogs grazing and clipping the vegetation (Deisch et al. 1989). In addition, zinc phosphide treated baits would be placed underground or used in bait stations. The application of baits below ground or in bait stations would limit the direct exposure risks by most non-target species.

Use of zinc phosphide on various types of fruit, vegetable, or cereal baits (*e.g.*, apples, carrots, sweet potatoes, oats, barley) has proven to be effective at suppressing target wildlife populations. All chemicals that could be used by WS would be registered under the FIFRA and administered by the EPA and the MDAC. Specific bait applications would be designed to minimize non-target hazards (Evans 1970). WS' personnel that use chemical methods would be certified as pesticide applicators by the MDAC and would

be required to adhere to all certification requirements set forth in the FIFRA and the Mississippi pesticide control laws and regulations. No chemicals would be used on federal or private lands without authorization from the land management agency or property owner/manager.

The use of firearms would essentially be selective for target species since animals would be identified prior to application; therefore, no adverse impacts would be anticipated from use of this method. Similarly, the use of euthanasia methods would not result in non-target removal since identification would occur prior to euthanizing an animal.

While every precaution would be taken to safeguard against taking non-targets during operational use of methods and techniques for resolving damage and reducing threats caused by aquatic rodents, the use of such methods could result in the incidental lethal removal of unintended species. The unintentional removal and capture of wildlife species during damage management activities conducted under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would primarily be associated with the use of body-gripping traps and in some situations, with live-capture methods, such as foothold traps, cage traps, and cable restraints.

WS' unintentional take of non-targets from FY 2009 through FY 2013 are shown in Table 4.5. Non-target removal by WS occurs primarily during activities to reduce damage associated with beaver in the State. Since FY 2009, WS' unintentional removal included 8 alligators, 299 river otters, 94 raccoons, and 119 turtles in the State during beaver damage management activities. In addition, three muskrats were caught unintentionally while conducting beaver damage management. Since beaver were the target species while conducting those activities, muskrats were considered non-targets. Other non-target species have also been lethally taken by WS during damage management activities in limited situations, including armadillos (*Dasypus novemcinctus*), largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*), swamp rabbits (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*), and a wood duck (*Aix sponsa*).

Table 4.5 – WS' lethal non-target removal by species in Mississippi, FY 2009 - FY 2013

Species	Fiscal Year					TOTAL
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	
American Alligator	0	4	0	2	2	**8**
Armadillo	0	0	2	0	0	**2**
Wood Duck	0	0	1	0	1	**2**
Largemouth Bass	0	0	1	0	0	**1**
Muskrat	1	0	2	0	0	**3**
Swamp Rabbit	1	0	2	0	0	**3**
River Otter	82	73	64	38	42	**299**
Raccoon	30	20	20	10	14	**94**
Virginia Opossum	0	1	0	0	0	**1**
Snapping Turtle	35	28	16	19	17	**115**
Painted Turtle	0	2	0	0	2	**4**
Turtles (other)[1]	5	0	0	2	0	**7**

[1]WS' information tracking systems does not distinguish between all species of turtles

Similar to the analyses of lethal removal on the populations of target species addressed under Issue 1, of primary concern with the unintended removal of non-targets is the magnitude of removal on those species' populations. As shown in Table 4.5, WS' lethal removal of any single species of non-targets since FY 2009 has not exceeded two or three individuals annually, except for American alligators, river otters, raccoons, and turtles. For those species in which WS' unintentional removal did not exceed two or three individuals annually from FY 2009 through FY 2013, WS' removal did not adversely affect those

species' populations based on the limited removal that occurred. Many of the species lethally removed by WS unintentionally can be harvested in the State during regulated hunting and/or trapping seasons. Wood ducks, largemouth bass, muskrats, swamp rabbits, river otters, raccoons, and Virginia opossum are all species in which harvest seasons exist in Mississippi. Impacts associated with the removal of muskrats unintentionally occurred previously during the analysis conducted in Issue 1. The removal of nine-banded armadillos can occur at any time in Mississippi. WS' unintentional removal of those species when compared to the harvest level of those species would be of low magnitude. WS' activities did not limit the ability to harvest those species during the regulated season given the limited removal that occurred by WS.

The previous non-targets lethally removed unintentionally by WS are representative of non-targets that could be lethally removed by WS under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1). Although additional species of non-targets could be lethally removed by WS unintentionally, the removal of individuals from any species would not be likely to increase substantively above the number of non-targets removed annually by WS during previous damage management activities.

The unintentional removal of non-targets would likely be minimal with removal not exceeding one or two individuals of any species. Although non-targets could be lethally removed by WS, removal of individuals from any species is not likely to increase substantively. In addition, the level of removal analyzed for nutria and muskrats that could be lethally removed or live-captured as non-targets was addressed under Issue 1 and the annual anticipated lethal removal of those species included non-target removal that could occur by WS. Therefore, the removal of those species addressed in this EA has been evaluated cumulatively under Issue 1, including removal that could occur when a species was considered a target or non-target. WS would continue to monitor activities, including non-target removal, to ensure the annual removal of non-targets would not result in adverse effects to a species' population. No T&E species have been captured or adversely affected by WS' activities conducted previously in Mississippi.

Alligator Population Impact Analysis

American alligators occur statewide in Mississippi wherever suitable habitat exists but they are more common in the southern two-thirds of the State (MDWFP 2015*a*). The current alligator population in Mississippi is unknown but the MDWFP estimates the statewide population to range from 32,000 to 38,000 alligators (MDWFP 2015*b*). The MDWFP allows people to harvest alligators in certain zones within the State during a portion of each year through a permitting system. The first public waters alligator hunt in Mississippi occurred in 2005-2006 along a 13-mile stretch of the Pearl River. The MDWFP issued 50 permits for the first alligator hunt in 2005-2006 and permittees harvested 30 alligators. From 2007 through 2011, the MDWFP allowed hunting in two open public waterways. Since 2012, the state has been divided into geographically based hunting zones. There were six zones in 2012 and seven zones in 2013 and 2014. In 2013, the first statewide hunting season was offered on public waters in seven geographical permit zones. There were 920 total permits issued in 2013. Additionally, alligator hunting is offered by application for private lands that meet specific criteria in 28 counties. From 2005 through 2014, people harvested 2,755 alligators in the State on public waters through permits issued by the MDWFP (see Table 4.6).

In addition to alligators that permittees harvest in the State, properly licensed nuisance alligator trappers may remove alligators that the MDWFP consider a threat to people, pets, and other resources. The MDWFP issue permits to nuisance alligator trappers to remove 200 to 400 alligators per year to alleviate damage or threats of damage (MDWFP 2014).

As shown in Table 4.7, since FY 2009, WS has lethally removed eight alligators unintentionally while conducting aquatic rodent damage management. In addition, WS live-captured an additional 11 alligators

between FY 2009 through FY 2013 and released those alligators unharmed. The highest annual unintentional removal of alligators by WS occurred in 2010 when WS removed four alligators unintentionally. WS' non-target removal of four alligators during FY 2010 would have represented 0.01% of a statewide population estimated at 32,000 alligators. The cumulative removal by WS of eight alligators from FY 2009 through FY 2013 represented 0.4% of the total number of alligators that permittees harvested on public and private lands in the State from 2009 through 2013. The unintentional removal of four alligators in FY 2010 by WS represented 1.3% of the total number of alligators removed in the State during 2010.

Table 4.6 – Number of alligator harvest permits issued and number harvested on public waters†

Year	Permits Issued	Number Harvested on Public Waters		Year	Permits Issued	Number Harvested on Public Waters
2005	50	30		**2010**	260	224
2006	100	47		**2011**	480	182
2007	200	134		**2012**	810	513
2008	240	130		**2013**	920	671
2009	240	154		**2014**	920	670

†Table does not include alligators that people harvested on private property in the State

If licensed nuisance alligator trappers removed 400 alligators per year to alleviate damage pursuant to permits the MDWFP issued, the cumulative annual removal of alligators in the State could be 1,180 alligators using the highest removal levels from the harvest of alligators of 776 and WS' highest unintentional removal of four alligators. The cumulative harvest of 1,180 alligators would represent 3.7% of a population estimated at 32,000 alligators.

Table 4.7 – Estimated alligator harvest and WS' removal of alligators in Mississippi, 2009- 2013

Year	Harvest[a,b]	WS' Take[c]	Total Take	WS' % Take
2009	213	0	**213**	-
2010	310	4	**314**	1.3%
2011	281	0	**281**	-
2012	617	2	**619**	0.3%
2013	776	2	**778**	0.3%
TOTAL	**2,197**	**8**	**2,205**	**0.4%**

[a]Harvest data reported by calendar year

[b]Harvest data provided by the MDWFP (2015*c*), which includes harvest on public and private lands

[c]WS' take is reported by FY

The USFWS lists the American alligator in Mississippi as threatened due to similarity of appearance with the American crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*)[11]. However, under special rules for alligators (50 CFR 17.429(a)(2)(i)), "*Any employee or agent of....a State conservation agency, who is designated by the agency for such purposes, may, when acting in the course of official duties, take an American alligator*". WS would report any removal of alligators to the MDWFP, including any biological data gathered by WS on the alligator for scientific research purposes, which the MDWFP can use to monitor and establish management objectives for alligators in the State.

[11]The USFWS lists the American crocodile as a threatened species in Florida pursuant to the ESA and endangered elsewhere within its range, which includes parts of Mexico, Central America, and northern portions of South America.

Given the number of alligators harvested in the State, WS' limited removal of alligators has not adversely affected alligator populations nor has the non-target removal of alligators by WS limited the ability to harvest alligators. Based on activities conducted to alleviate aquatic rodent damage, the potential unintentional removal of alligators by WS is not likely to increase substantively above the number of alligators removed unintentionally by WS during previous damage management activities. WS would continue to release alligators live-captured during aquatic rodent damage management activities unless directed by the MDWFP to euthanize those alligators.

River Otter Population Impact Analysis

River otter occur statewide in Mississippi wherever suitable habitat exists. However, the number of otters present in the State is currently unknown. River otters are a state-regulated furbearer in Mississippi with a regulated annual trapping season. During the trapping season, trappers can harvest an unlimited number of otter. During the annual trapping season from 2009 through 2013, trappers in the State harvested 9,891 otters, which is an average annual harvest of 1,978 otters (see Table 4.8).

The current otter population in Mississippi is unknown. During a separate preliminary analysis, WS estimated that cumulatively the program could lethally remove up to 120 river otters annually in the State to alleviate damage caused specifically by river otters and those otters removed unintentionally during other damage management activities (USDA 2015). The analysis also estimated the statewide otter population to range from 8,300 otters to 12,500 otters under a worst-case scenario (USDA 2015). If the lowest derived population estimate were reflective of the actual statewide population of otter in the State, the removal of up to 120 otter by WS would represent 1.5% of the population estimated at 8,300 otter. The removal of up to 120 otter would represent 1.0% of the population estimated at 12,500 otters (USDA 2015).

Table 4.8 – Estimated otter harvest compared to WS' removal of otter in Mississippi, 2009 - 2013

Year	Harvest[a,b]	WS' Take[c]	Total Take	WS % Take
2009	1,690	82	**1,772**	4.6%
2010	1,470	74	**1,544**	4.8%
2011	2,010	64	**2,074**	3.1%
2012	2,362	38	**2,400**	1.6%
2013	2,359	42	**2,401**	1.7%
TOTAL	**9,891**	**300**	**10,191**	**2.9%**

[a]Harvest data reported by trapping season
[b]Harvest data provided by the MDWFP
[c]WS' take is reported by FY; includes intentional and unintentional removal
[†]N/A=Information is not available

Overall, WS' cumulative removal of otter has not exceeded 4.8% of the total number of otter harvested in the State from 2009 through 2013. On average, WS' annual cumulative removal has represented 2.9% of annual harvest of otter in the State. If WS had lethally removed 120 otter annually from FY 2009 through FY 2013, the cumulative removal would have represented 5.7% of the total harvest of otter in the State from 2009 through 2013. The lowest harvest of otter during the annual trapping season from 2009 through 2012 occurred in 2010 when trappers harvested 1,470 otter. If WS had lethally removed 120 otter during FY 2010, WS' cumulative removal would have represented 7.6% of the overall harvest of otter in the State.

The magnitude of WS' cumulative removal of river otters during aquatic rodent damage management activities would be low. Based on the unlimited harvest allowed by the MDWFP during the open otter harvest season and the low magnitude of WS' removal when compared to the total known harvest of otter,

WS' cumulative removal of otters would not adversely affect river otter populations in the State. WS' removal of otter has not limited the ability of those persons interested in harvesting otter during the open season based on the low magnitude of WS' activities on otter populations.

Raccoon Population Impact Analysis

Raccoons occur statewide in Mississippi wherever suitable habitat exists. However, the statewide population of raccoons is currently unknown. A separate preliminary analysis estimated the statewide raccoon population ranged from 47,000 raccoons to 15 million raccoons (USDA 2015). The MDWFP classifies the raccoon as a furbearer in Mississippi with regulated annual hunting and trapping seasons with unlimited take allowed during the length of those seasons, although daily limits may apply during the annual hunting seasons. Table 4.9 shows the number of raccoons that hunters and trappers harvested in the State during the annual hunting and trapping seasons from 2009 through 2011. Raccoon harvest data for the 2012 and the 2013 harvest seasons are currently unavailable. The MDWFP estimates the number of raccoons that hunters and trappers harvest each year using a voluntary survey; therefore, the number represents a minimum harvest that likely occurred. As with other furbearing species, property owners and their agents can lethally remove raccoons to alleviate damage or threats of damage when authorized by the MDWFP through the issuance of a permit. The total number of raccoons that property owners remove annually in the State to alleviate damage or a threat of damage is currently unknown and Table 4.9 does not include removal for damage management purposes by entities other than WS.

During a separate preliminary analysis, WS estimated that cumulatively the program could lethally remove up to 150 raccoons annually in the State to alleviate damage caused specifically by raccoons and those raccoons removed unintentionally during other damage management activities (USDA 2015). If the lowest derived population estimate were reflective of the actual statewide population of raccoons in the State, the removal of up to 150 raccoons by WS would represent 0.3% of the population estimated at 47,000 raccoons (USDA 2015).

As shown in Table 4.9, the highest annual removal of raccoons by WS' occurred in FY 2011 when 117 raccoons were removed unintentionally, which represented 0.1% of the raccoons harvested in the State during the 2011 season. Between 2009 and 2011, WS' cumulative removal of raccoons has averaged 0.1% of the annual harvest of raccoons in the State.

Table 4.9 – Estimated raccoon harvest compared to WS' removal in Mississippi, 2009 – 2013

Year	Type of Harvest		WS' Take[1,2]	TOTAL	WS % of Total
	Hunting	Trapping			
2009	36,658	12,917	63	**49,638**	0.1%
2010	53,854	8,390	62	**62,306**	0.1%
2011	70,857	12,569	117	**83,543**	0.1%
2012	N/A[†]	10,608	37	**N/A**	N/A
2013	N/A	12,396	39	**N/A**	N/A
TOTAL	**161,369**	**56,881**	**318**	**195,487**	**0.1%**

[a]Harvest data reported by harvest season

[b]Harvest data provided by the MDWFP

[c]WS' take is reported by FY; includes the intentional and unintentional removal of raccoons by WS

The magnitude of WS' non-target removal of raccoons during aquatic rodent damage management activities in the State has been low when compared to the annual harvest of raccoons during the regulated hunting and trapping season. WS' limited removal of raccoons has not limited the ability to harvest raccoons during the regulated season.

Turtle Population Impact Analysis

From FY 2009 through FY 2013, WS lethally removed 126 turtles unintentionally during aquatic rodent damage management activities in Mississippi, primarily snapping turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*). WS removed 115 snapping turtles unintentionally between FY 2009 and FY 2013. In addition, WS lethally removed four painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta*) unintentionally during beaver damage management activities. Since FY 2009, WS has live-captured and released 504 snapping turtles, two painted turtles, two musk turtles, three common map turtles (*Graptemys* spp.), and nine other turtles. People can harvest common snapping turtles in Mississippi with no limit on the number of turtles that people can harvest. The annual harvest of common snapping turtles is currently unknown. Similarly, the population of snapping turtles in the State is currently unknown.

The unintentional removal of other turtle species has occurred during aquatic rodent damage management activities. Similar to snapping turtles, the populations of other turtles in the State is currently unknown. The USFWS lists three freshwater species of turtles, the Alabama red-belly turtle (*Pseudemys alabamensis*), ringed map turtle (*Graptemys oculifera*), and the yellow-blotched map turtle (*Graptemys flavimaculata*), as threatened species in Mississippi. In addition, the MDWFP lists the black-knobbed sawback turtle (*Graptemys nigrinoda*), Alabama red-belly turtle, ringed map turtle, and the yellow-blotched map turtle as endangered freshwater turtles in Mississippi. Several marine turtles and the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) are also federal- and State-listed species in Mississippi. No known take of any federal or state listed turtles has occurred by WS during aquatic rodent damage management activities in the Mississippi.

WS' annual removal of turtles since FY 2009 did not reach magnitudes that would adversely affect populations in Mississippi. WS would take precautions to avoid capture of turtles during activities to alleviate damage caused by aquatic rodents. Over 81% of the turtles WS captured unintentionally were alive and WS subsequently released those turtles unharmed. Given that turtle densities in Mississippi are not considered low and the limited removal of turtles of any given species by WS, WS' aquatic rodent damage management activities did not adversely affect turtle populations in Mississippi.

Live-capture and Release of Non-targets

Unintentional non-targets live-captured by WS' during aquatic rodent damage management activities have been released when deemed appropriate for the survival of the animal (see Table 4.10). From FY 2009 through FY 2013, WS caught and released 11 alligators, 9 raccoons, 36 river otters, 504 snapping turtles, two painted turtles, two musk turtles, three map turtles, and 9 other turtles while conducting damage management activities targeting aquatic rodents.

Methods available to resolve and prevent aquatic rodent damage or threats when employed by trained, knowledgeable personnel would be selective for target species. WS would report to the MDWFP any non-target removal to ensure removal by WS was considered as part of management objectives established for those species by the MDWFP. The potential for adverse effects to occur with non-targets would be similar to the other alternatives and would be considered minimal to non-existent based on previous non-target removal.

Table 4.10 – Non-targets captured and released by WS during aquatic rodent damage management activities in Mississippi from FY 2009 through FY 2013

Species	Fiscal Year					TOTAL
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	
American Alligator	1	1	3	1	4	**11**
Raccoon	4	3	2	0	0	**9**
River Otter	1	10	7	8	10	**36**
Snapping Turtle	89	90	119	94	112	**504**
Painted Turtle	0	0	1	0	1	**2**
Musk Turtle	0	0	2	0	0	**2**
Map Turtle	0	0	0	2	1	**3**
Turtles (other)[1]	8	1	0	0	0	**9**

[1]WS' information tracking systems does not distinguish between all species of turtles

As discussed previously, the use of non-lethal methods to address damage or threats would generally be regarded as having no effect on a species' population since those individuals addressed using non-lethal methods would be unharmed and no actual reduction in the number of individuals in a species' population occurs. Similarly, the live-capture and release of non-targets would generally be regarded as having no adverse effects on a species' population since those individuals would be released unharmed and no actual reduction in the number of individuals in a population occurs. Therefore, the live-capture and subsequent releasing of non-targets during damage management activities conducted under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would not result in declines in the number of individuals in a species' population.

T&E Species Effects

Special efforts would be made to avoid jeopardizing T&E species through biological evaluations of the potential effects and the establishment of special restrictions or minimization measures. SOPs to avoid effects to T&E species are described in Chapter 3 of this EA.

Although an exact estimate of aquatic rodent population numbers is not available, aquatic rodents can occur statewide in Mississippi; however, nutria are generally found along the coastal areas of the State and along the Mississippi River floodplain. Damage or threats of damage caused by aquatic rodents could occur statewide in Mississippi wherever they occur. However, WS would only conduct activities to alleviate or prevent damage when a landowner or manager requests such assistance and only on properties where WS and a cooperating entity sign a Memorandum of Understanding, work initiation document, or another comparable document. Therefore, WS has defined the action area as the State of Mississippi, which encompasses the known areas occupied by all of the T&E species listed within the State.

The WS program in Mississippi consulted with the USFWS on the potential effects to threatened or endangered species from managing damage associated with aquatic rodents in 1996 and again in 2001. The USFWS concurred with WS' determinations that activities to manage damage associated with aquatic rodents would not adversely affect threatened or endangered species in the State. Since those consultations with the USFWS were completed, no incidental take of threatened or endangered species has occurred by WS during activities targeting aquatic rodents. Those methods and activities that WS could conduct under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) have not changed from those activities described during the previous consultation processes.

During the development of this EA, WS reviewed the current list of species designated as threatened or endangered in Mississippi as determined by the USFWS and the National Marine Fisheries Service. WS conducted a review of potential impacts of activities on each of the listed species. The evaluation took into consideration the direct and indirect effects of available methods, including physical exclusion, beaver dam removal/breeching, traps, shooting, and zinc phosphide. WS reviewed the status, critical habitats designations, and current known locations of all T&E species listed as threatened or endangered within Mississippi. In addition, WS reviewed the methods available to manage aquatic rodent damage, the use patterns of those methods, and the areas where previous requests for assistance associated with aquatic rodents have occurred within the State.

For several species listed within the State, WS has determined that the proposed activities "*may affect*" those species but those effects would be solely beneficial, insignificant, or discountable, which would warrant a "*not likely to adversely affect*" determination (see Table 4.11). In addition, WS has made a "*no effect*" determination for several species currently listed in the State based on those methods currently available and based on current life history information for those species (see Table 4.11).

Table 4.11 - List of threatened or endangered species in Mississippi and WS' determination

Common Name	**Scientific Name**	**Status**[†]	**Determination**[‡]
Animals			
Invertebrates			
Alabama Heelsplitter	*Potamilus inflatus*	T	NE
Black Clubshell	*Pleurobema curtum*	E	NE
Ovate Clubshell	*Pleurobema perovatum*	E[*]	NE
Southern Clubshell	*Pleurobema decisum*	E	NE
Cumberlandian Combshell	*Epioblasma brevidens*	E[*]	NE
Southern Combshell	*Epioblasma penita*	E[*]	NE
Fat Pocketbook	*Potamilus capax*	E	NE
Rabbitsfoot	*Quadrula cylindrica cylindrica*	T[*]	NE
Alabama Moccasinshell	*Medionidus acutissimus*	T[*]	MANLAA
Orangenacre Mucket	*Lampsilis perovalis*	T[*]	NE
Sheepnose Mussel	*Plethobasus cyphyus*	E	NE
Snuffbox Mussel	*Epioblasma triquetra*	E	NE
Flat Pigtoe	*Pleurobema marshalli*	E	NE
Stirrupshell	*Quadrula stapes*	E	NE
Heavy Pigtoe	*Pleurobema taitianum*	E	NE
Slabside Pearlymussel	*Pleuronaia dolabelloides*	E[*]	NE
Mitchell's Satyr Butterfly	*Neonympha mitchellii mitchellii*	E	NE
American Burying Beetle	*Nicrophorus americanus*	E	NE
Reptiles			
Green Sea Turtle	*Chelonia mydas*	T	NE
Hawksbill Sea Turtle	*Eretmochelys imbricata*	E	NE
Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle	*Lepidochelys kempii*	E	NE
Leatherback Sea Turtle	*Dermochelys coriacea*	E	NE
Loggerhead Sea Turtle	*Caretta caretta*	T[*]	NE
Gopher Tortoise	*Gopherus polyphemus*	T	MANLAA
Ringed Map Turtle	*Graptemys oculifera*	T	NE
Yellow-blotched Map Turtle	*Graptemys flavimaculata*	T	NE

Eastern Indigo Snake	*Drymarchon corais couperi*	T	NE
Alabama Red-belly Turtle	*Pseudemys alabamensis*	E	NE
Black Pine Snake	*Pituophis melanoleucus lodingi*	C	NE
Amphibian			
Dusky Gopher Frog	*Rana sevosa*	E*	NE
Fish			
Gulf Sturgeon	*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*	T*	NE
Pallid Sturgeon	*Scaphirhynchus albus*	E	NE
Alabama Sturgeon	*Scaphirhynchus suttkusi*	E	NE
Pearl Darter	*Percina aurora*	C	NE
Smalltooth Sawfish	*Pristis pectinata*	E	NE
Bayou Darter	*Etheostoma rubrum*	T	NE
Mammals			
Louisiana Black Bear	*Ursus americanus luteolus*	T*	MANLAA
West Indian Manatee	*Trichechus manatus*	E	NE
Finback Whale	*Balaenoptera physalus*	E	NE
Humpback Whale	*Megaptera novaeangliae*	E	NE
Gray Bat	*Myotis grisescens*	E	NE
Indiana Bat	*Myotis sodalist*	E	NE
Northern Long-eared Bat	*Myotis septentrionalis*	P	NE
Florida Panther	*Puma concolor coryi*	E	NE
Gray Wolf	*Canis lupis*	E	NE
Birds			
Piping Plover	*Charadrius melodus*	T*	NE
Interior Least Tern	*Sterna antillarum*	E	NE
Red-cockaded Woodpecker	*Picoides borealis*	E	MANLAA
Mississippi Sandhill Crane	*Grus canadensis pulla*	E*	NE
Wood Stork	*Mycteria americana*	E	NE
Sprague's Pipit	*Anthus spragueii*	C	MANLAA
Red Knot	*Calidris canutus rufa*	P	NE
Plants			
American Chaffseed	*Schwalbea americana*	E	MANLAA
Price's Potato-bean	*Apios priceana*	T	MANLAA
Louisiana Quillwort	*Isoetes louisianensis*	E	MANLAA
Pondberry	*Lindera melissifolia*	E	MANLAA
White Fringeless Orchid	*Platanthera integrilabia*	C	NE

†T=Threatened; E=Endangered; C=Candidate; P=Proposed

‡NE=No effect; MANLAA=May affect, not likely to adversely affect

*Species with critical habitat designated within Mississippi

WS based the effects determination for each species on several considerations, including the use pattern of methods; the locations and habitats where WS was likely to use methods; and the known geographical extent of the species. The following discussion provides the rationale for WS' effects determination for each species.

Of primary concern regarding the potential effects on all mussel species would be the breaching or removal of beaver dams, which could release debris and sediment downstream of the dam. However, sedimentation would only be a concern if mussels were present immediately downstream of a beaver dam that WS breached or removed since sediments and debris are likely to settle out within a short distance of

the dam. Removing beaver dams could also provide some benefits to mussel species by removing obstructions and returning streams to their natural flow patterns and water temperatures (see Section 1.2). Damage management activities associated with aquatic rodents normally do not occur on large rivers and streams, especially in those portions of the river or stream where mussels are likely to occur, if present. Normally, WS conducts work on smaller tributaries and drainages of main rivers and streams in water less than four feet deep.

Alabama heelsplitter mussel - In Mississippi, this species historically occurred in the Pearl River located in Hancock, Itawamba, Lowndes, Monroe, Noxubee, and Pearl River Counties; however, the heelsplitter likely no longer occurs in the Pearl River. The species normally occurs on the protected side of bars and can be found living at depths of over 20 feet. Siltation may adversely affect juveniles, while adults may survive limited amounts of siltation (USFWS 1992). George et al. (1996) recently found evidence of this species occurring in the West Pearl River drainage in Louisiana. WS concludes the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this mussel based on the historically occurrence of the species in only the Pearl River in Mississippi and the likely absence of the species in the State. In addition, WS based this determination on the use patterns of methods, and activities not occurring directly in large river systems of the State where the mussel is likely to occur, if present.

Black clubshell – Since listing this species, only a single population of the black clubshell was known to exist, which occurred in the East Fork Tombigbee River located in Itawamba and Monroe Counties of Mississippi. However, documentation of this species occurring in that location has not occurred since 1997, despite numerous surveys of historical habitat (USFWS 2009*a*). Based on the known locations of this species, the use patterns of the methods, and the locations where damage management activities occur, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this species.

Ovate clubshell – The ovate clubshell is known to occur in localized areas of the Buttahatchee River in Lowndes and Monroe Counties, and Luxapalila Creek and its tributary Yellow Creek in Lowndes County, Mississippi. Ovate clubshells generally occur in the sand/gravel shoals and runs of small rivers and large streams. Sedimentation and water quality continue to affect this species, along with other events, such as spills, drought, and land use runoff (USFWS 2008*a*). Based on the known locations of this species, the use patterns of the methods, and the locations where damage management activities occur, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this species. In addition, proposed activities would have no effect any designated critical habitat for this species of clubshell in the State.

Southern clubshell – The southern clubshell is known to occur in small, fragmented populations in the East Fork Tombigbee River in Itawamba and Monroe Counties, Luxapalila Creek in Lowndes County, and Buttahatchee River in Monroe and Lowndes Counties, Mississippi. Southern clubshell occurs in sand/gravel/cobble substrate in shoals and runs of small rivers and large streams. Sedimentation and water quality continue to affect this species, along with other events, such as spills, drought, and land use runoff. Several species of shiners were identified as fish hosts for this species (USFWS 2008*a*). Based on the known locations of this species, the use patterns of the methods, and the locations where damage management activities occur, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this species.

Cumberlandian combshell – This species of combshell is known to occur in Bear Creek that runs through Tishimingo County, Mississippi. The Cumberlandian combshell occurs in medium-sized streams and large rivers on shoals and riffles with sand, gravel, cobble, and boulders (USFWS 2004). Given the limited distribution of this species of combshell in the State, the proposed activities would have no effect on the status of the Cumberlandian combshell in Mississippi or any designated critical habitat. If WS

removed beaver dams along Bear Creek in Mississippi, WS would consult with the USFWS pursuant to the ESA to ensure those activities do not affect the status of the combshell in the State.

Southern combshell – This species of combshell continues to occur along a short reach of the Buttahatchee River in Lowndes and Monroe Counties, Mississippi. No evidence of the southern combshell occurring in the Tombigbee and East Fork Tombigbee Rivers has been found since 1980 (USFWS 2009*a*). The Buttahatchee River is a large expansive river that beaver would be unable to dam; therefore, no beaver dam removal activities would occur in the River and the use pattern of methods would have no effect on the status of the combshell. Given the limited distribution of this species of combshell in the State, the proposed activities would have no effect on the status of the southern combshell in Mississippi or any designated critical habitat.

Fat pocketbook pearly mussel - This mussel prefers the sand, mud, and fine gravel bottoms of large rivers. It is found in depths that range from a few inches to 8 feet. The general distribution of the fat pocketbook pearly mussel in Mississippi is along the Mississippi River in Adams, Bolivar, Claiborne, Coahoma, DeSoto, Issaquena, Jefferson, Tunica, Warren, Washington, and Wilkinson Counties. Activities that WS could conduct as part of Alternative 1 do not occur in large rivers and streams. Based on the presence of this mussel species in large rivers where activities do not occur, WS has determined the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this species.

Rabbitsfoot mussel – The rabbitsfoot is a freshwater mussel found in small streams and some large rivers. In Mississippi, the rabbitsfoot is known to occur along stretches of the Tennessee River, Bear Creek, Yazoo River, Big Sunflower River, and Big Black River in Claiborne, Hinds, Madison, Sunflower, Tishomingo, Warren, and Yazoo Counties. Activities to alleviate damage or threats of damage associated with aquatic rodents do not occur on large rivers and streams the size of the Tennessee River, Bear Creek, Yazoo River, Big Sunflower River, and Big Black River. WS conducts most work on smaller tributaries and drainages of main rivers and streams in water less than four feet deep. Based on the use patterns of the methods available and the locations where damage management activities could occur, the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the rabbitsfoot in the State.

Alabama moccasinshell – This mussel species inhabits sand/gravel/cobble shoals with moderate to strong currents in streams and small rivers. The species is known to occur in small, localized areas of the Luxapalila Creek in Lowndes County, Bull Mountain Creek in Itawamba County, Buttahatchee River in Lowndes and Monroe Counties, and the Sipsey Creek in Monroe County. The moccasinshell is very sensitive to sedimentation and erosion, along with chemical runoff, surface mine drainage, water impoundment, and sewage discharge, and channel degradation. Based on the locations where the moccasinshell could occur in the State, damage management activities associated with removing or breaching beaver dams could release sediment downstream from the dam; however, as stated previously, most sediment likely settles out a short distance downstream of the dam. It is unlikely that WS would breach or remove dams in the rivers and creeks where moccasinshells occur; however, WS could be requested to remove or breach dams in areas that feed into those streams and creeks. The amount of sediment released when breaching or removing varies on the size of the impoundment, the amount of sediment retained by the dam, and the method of removing or breaching the dam.

Because sediment released by removing the damage generally settles out a short distance downstream and dam removal not occurring in streams or creeks where the moccasinshell occurs, the amount of sediment entering those creek and stream systems would be insignificant and discountable. Therefore, WS has determined the proposed activities would not likely adversely affect the status of the Alabama moccasinshell in the State. In addition, the proposed action (Alternative 1) would not likely adversely affect any designated critical habitat for the species in the State.

Orangenacre mucket – The orangenacre mucket is known to occur in the Buttahatchee River in Lowndes and Monroe Counties, the Luxapalila Creek in Monroe County, and the East Fork Tombigbee River in Itawamba and Monroe Counties, Mississippi. The mucket occurs in high quality stream and small river habitat on stable sand/gravel/cobble substrate in moderate to swift currents. Based on the known locations of this species, the use patterns of the methods, and the locations where damage management activities occur, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this species. In addition, the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on any designated critical habitat in Mississippi.

Sheepnose mussel - The sheepnose mussel can be found in shallow areas of larger rivers and streams with moderate to swift currents flowing over coarse sand and gravel. In Mississippi, populations of sheepnose mussel are known to occur in the Big Sunflower River along a 12 to 15 mile section upstream of Indianola, Mississippi in Sunflower County (see 77 FR 14914-14949). Based on the known locations of extant populations in the State, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the sheepnose mussel in the State, including any designated critical habitat.

Snuffbox mussel - The snuffbox mussel is a freshwater invertebrate that can be found in small- to medium-sized creeks to larger rivers and in lakes. No extant populations are currently known to occur in Mississippi; however, snuffbox mussels are known to occur in the Tennessee River (see 77 FR 8632-8665), which lies within Tishomingo County, Mississippi. However, that portion of the Tennessee River in Mississippi has been dammed forming Pickwick Lake. Based on the known locations of extant populations in the State, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the snuffbox mussel in the State, including any designated critical habitat.

Flat pigtoe - The flat pigtoe was a freshwater mussels unique to the Tombigdee River system that is now believed to be extinct (USFWS 2009*a*). Based on the current known status of the flat pigtoe, WS' aquatic rodent damage management activities conducted pursuant to the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the pigtoe given the likely extinction of the species.

Stirrupshell – Similar to the flat pigtoe, the stirrupshell (*Quadrula stapes*) was a freshwater mussel unique to the Tombigdee River system that is now believed to be extinct (USFWS 2009*a*). Based on the current known status of the stirrupshell, WS' aquatic rodent damage management activities conducted pursuant to the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the stirrupshell given the likely extinction of the species.

Heavy pigtoe – Historically, the heavy pigtoe was found in the Tombigbee River in Itawamba County and the Buttahatchee River in Lowndes County, Mississippi. However, no heavy pigtoes have been found in those locations since 1980 despite extensive searches. The pigtoe is likely extirpated from the State with the only known population occurring in the Alabama River in Alabama. Based on the likely extirpation of the species from the State and the locations where individuals could occur, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the heavy pigtoe.

Slabside Pearlymussel - The slabside pearlymussel is only known to occur in Mississippi along a stretch of Bear Creek in Tishomingo County (see 78 FR 59269-59287). Given the limited distribution of the pearlymussel in the State, WS' aquatic rodent damage management activities would have no effect on the status of the pearlymussel in Mississippi or any designated critical habitat.

Mitchell's Satyr Butterfly - The Mitchell's satyr butterfly is thought to occur in Itawamba, Prentiss, and Tishomingo Counties in Mississippi. The butterfly appears to be a habitat specialist being found only in fens habitat that are characterized by low-nutrient levels and alkaline water discharged from groundwater

seeps, which are dominated by sedges. The loss of wetland fens appears to be the primary factor in the decline of the butterfly. Based on the isolated populations and the habitats where butterflies could be found, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the butterfly in the State, including any designated critical habitat.

American Burying Beetle - The American burying beetle is not currently known to occur in the State. Based on the absence of the species from the State using current information, the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the beetle and any critical habitat.

Green sea turtle (Nesting) – Like the other sea turtles, the green sea turtle is a marine species that could be found along the coastal waters of the State. However, nesting is not known to occur along the coastal beaches of the State. Aquatic rodent damage management activities are not conducted in marine environments or on sandy nesting beaches; therefore, activities will have no effect on this species.

Hawksbill sea turtle (Nesting) – The hawksbill sea turtle is another marine species that could be found along the coastal waters of the State. However, nesting is not known to occur along the coastal beaches of the State. Aquatic rodent damage management activities are not conducted in marine environments or on sandy nesting beaches; therefore, activities will have no effect on this species.

Kemp's Ridley sea turtle (Nesting) – This sea turtle is a marine species that can be found along the coastal waters of Mississippi. Aquatic rodent damage management activities are not conducted in marine environments or on sandy nesting beaches; therefore, activities will have no effect on this species.

Leatherback sea turtle (Nesting) - This marine species has been observed nesting along the gulf coast states from Texas to Georgia; however, the sea turtle currently only consistently nests along the Florida coast. Aquatic rodent damage management activities are not conducted in marine environments or on sandy nesting beaches; therefore, activities will have no effect on this species.

Loggerhead sea turtle (Nesting) - The loggerhead sea turtle is a marine species that could be found along the coastal areas of the State. Aquatic rodent damage management activities are not conducted in marine environments or on sandy nesting beaches; therefore, activities will have no effect on this species, including any designated critical habitat in the State.

Gopher tortoise - The gopher tortoise is an inhabitant of the southeastern portion of the State, including Clarke, Covington, Forrest, George, Greene, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Jasper, Jefferson Davis, Jones, Lamar, Marion, Pearl River, Perry, Smith, Stone, Walthall, and Wayne Counties. It inhabits well-drained sandy soils associated with an open pine overstory and grassy groundcover. WS believes none of its aquatic rodent damage management activities would adversely affect this species. Benefits to this burrowing species could be realized if removal of beaver and dams prevented flooding of their habitat.

Ringed map turtle – The ringed map turtle generally inhabits clean rivers having a moderate current, an open canopy and numerous beaches and basking logs. Preferred nesting beaches consist of clean, fine-grained sand with a minimum of vegetative cover. This turtle is endemic to the Pearl and Bogue Chitto River drainages in Louisiana and Mississippi. The species is known to occur or is believed to occur in Copiah, Hancock, Hinds, Lawrence, Leake, Madison, Marion, Neshoba, Pearly River, Rankin, Scott, and Simpson Counties. Damage management activities normally do not occur on large rivers and streams. Activities are normally conducted on smaller tributaries and drainages of main rivers and streams in water less than four feet deep. Based on the known distribution of map turtles in Mississippi and the use patterns of the methods, WS has determined the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the ringed map turtle in the State.

Yellow-blotched map turtle – The yellow-blotched map turtle occurs in the Pascagoula River and its larger tributaries, the Escatawpa River, the Leaf River, and the Chickasawhay River. It occasionally occurs in smaller tributaries of the Pascagoula River. The yellow-blotched map turtle occurs or is thought to occur in Clarke, Forrest, George, Greene, Jackson, Jones, Perry, Stone, and Wayne Counties of the State. This species requires rivers with good current and large sandbars for nesting. Damage management activities normally do not occur on large rivers and streams. Based on the known distribution of the yellow-blotched map turtles in Mississippi and the use patterns of the methods, WS has determined the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this map turtle species in the State.

Alabama red-belly turtle - The Alabama red-belly turtle is only known to occur in Mississippi from the lower portions of the coastal streams between the Escatawpa River and the Biloxi River in waters under tidal influence (Mississippi Museum of Natural Resources 2001). Given the limited distribution of the red-belly turtle in the State and the strict habitat requirements, damage management activities conducted pursuant to the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the Alabama red-belly turtle, including any designated critical habitat.

Eastern indigo snake – This large snake is currently found along the southern coastal areas of Alabama, Georgia, and throughout most of Florida. No populations are currently known to occur in Mississippi. The indigo snake relies on a variety of habitats to complete its annual cycle. Eastern indigo snakes depend heavily on gopher tortoise burrows for shelter to escape the winter cold; thus, are commonly found near healthy longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) forest ecosystems. Based on the likely absence of this species from the State, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this species.

Black pine snake - The black pine snake has been listed as a candidate for listing in Mississippi and is now being proposed as a threatened species. The pine snake is known to occur or thought to occur in Covington, Forrest, George, Greene, Harrison, Jackson, Jones, Lamar, Marion, Perry, Stone, and Wayne Counties. Pine snakes can be found in upland longleaf pine forests with sandy, well-drained soils with dense ground cover (USFWS 2013). Given the habitat requirement of the pine snake and the habitat requirements of the species, WS' aquatic rodent damage management activities would have no effect on the status of the pine snake in the State. No snakes of any species have been lethally taken or live captured during aquatic rodent damage management activities conducted by WS.

Dusky gopher frog – The Mississippi gopher frog is only known to occur at one location in Harrison County, Mississippi (see 77 FR 35118-35161). Gopher frogs are found breeding in wetland habitats characterized by ponds that are small (less than 10 acres), ephemeral, and acidic that are located in longleaf pine communities. During the non-breeding season, frogs can be found adjacent to breeding ponds in the longleaf pine forest and prefer areas that are maintained by fires that create open canopy and abundant herbaceous ground cover. Based on the limited range of the gopher frog in the State and the locations where damage management activities could occur under the proposed action (Alternative 1), activities conducted pursuant to the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the gopher frog, including any designated critical habitat. If activities were planned in the area where gopher frogs are known to occur, WS would consult with the USFWS pursuant to Section 7 of the ESA, as necessary.

Gulf sturgeon –This anadromous fish is restricted to the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, and other large drainages. WS would not conduct activities under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) in this type of habitat; therefore, WS believes its activities will have no effect on this species, including any designated critical habitat in the State.

Pallid sturgeon - Pallid sturgeons require large, turbid, free-flowing riverine habitat and are usually found near the bottom of those rivers. This species has been found in the Mississippi River and large tributaries of the Mississippi River. WS would not conduct activities under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) in this type of habitat; therefore, WS believes its activities will have no effect on this species.

Alabama Sturgeon – The Alabama sturgeon was once found in the Tombigbee River in Mississippi; however, the species is not currently known to occur in the State. Based on the likely absence of the species from the State and the riverine habitats the species is known to occur in, WS has determined the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this species.

Pearl Darter - The pearl darter is also listed as a candidate species for listing in Mississippi. Historically, the pearl darter was only known from localized sites in the drainages of the Pearl River and the Pascagoula River in Mississippi and Louisiana. However, no darters have been collected from the Pearl River drainage since 1973, despite sampling efforts and they are considered extirpated from the Pearl River drainage (USFWS 2014). Currently, the pearl darter is believed to occur only in the Pascagoula River drainage, including the Pascagoula, Chickasawhay, Chunky, Leaf, and Bouie Rivers and Okatoma and Black Creeks in Mississippi (USFWS 2014). River habitat where darters have been collected has varied but the species is thought to inhabit rivers and large creeks in areas of moderate current, usually over sandy or gravel substrates at the edges of riffles or deep channels (USFWS 2014). Of concern with aquatic rodent damage management activities is the release of water and particulates from removing beaver dams to alleviate flooding. Although beaver damage management activities could occur along large rivers and creeks, requests for assistance to manage damage are not generally associated with beaver dams. Given the habitat requirements of the pearl darter of large river systems, WS' aquatic rodent damage management will have no effect on the pearl darter.

Smalltooth sawfish - The smalltooth sawfish historically has occurred in the shallow coastal waters of the Gulf of Mexico from Texas to Florida and the shallow coastal areas along the Atlantic Ocean from Florida to New York. WS' activities to resolve damage or threats associated with aquatic rodents are not those that cause major disturbances to habitat or the introduction of pollutants into the waters where sawfish are known to occur. Current populations of smalltooth sawfish are only known to occur off the southern coasts of Florida (National Marine Fisheries Service 2009). Based on the current known range of the smalltooth sawfish being restricted to peninsular Florida, WS' aquatic rodent damage management activities conducted pursuant to the EA would have no effect on the smalltooth sawfish.

Bayou darter - The Bayou darter normally prefers swift, shallow water flowing over course gravel. They prefer larger streams and are not found in small tributaries. They occur only in Bayou Pierre and its larger tributaries (White Oak, Foster, and Turkey creeks) in Copiah, Claiborne, and Hinds Counties. Based on the known locations of this species, the use patterns of the methods, and the locations where damage management activities occur, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of this species.

Louisiana black bear – The Louisiana black bear once occupied forestlands in Louisiana, Mississippi, and eastern Texas, with hardwood forests being the preferred habitat of bears. However, bears can also occur in other forested habitats where sufficient food, water, cover, and denning locations are available in large remote forested areas. Over 80% of the suitable habitat for black bears in Louisiana, Mississippi, and eastern Texas had been cleared for agricultural purposes by the time the bear was listed. With the clearing of suitable habitat, the quality of remaining habitat due to fragmentation and other human activities has been severely reduced (USFWS 2009*b*).

The Louisiana black bear is currently known to occur in southern Mississippi. Although reproduction has been documented to occur in Mississippi recently, critical habitat for Louisiana black bears has only been designated in Louisiana (see 74 FR 10349-10409). WS and many other entities (nuisance wildlife control operators, fur trappers, private landowners and managers) currently conduct aquatic rodent damage management activities in areas where bears could be present. Although a very remote possibility of capturing a bear exists, it has never occurred in Mississippi while targeting aquatic rodents. Based on the use patterns of those methods available to address aquatic rodent damage, and the history of WS and all other entities resulting in no captures of bears, WS does not believe any of its aquatic rodent damage management activities would adversely affect Louisiana black bears. WS' activities may result in beneficial effects to the bear population by protecting habitat from loss due to inundation caused by beaver dams. In addition, although bears are opportunistic foragers, beaver, muskrat, and nutria do not appear to be major food sources for bears (Benson and Chamberlain 2008). Therefore, the removal of those aquatic rodents to alleviate damage would not reduce the availability of a major food source preferred by bears.

West Indian manatee – In Mississippi, manatees occur or thought to occur in Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson Counties along the coast. Manatees are an aquatic species occasionally found in larger drainages that empty into large saltwater bays and lakes or the Gulf of Mexico. WS does not conduct damage management activities in those types of environments; therefore, WS has determined that activities under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on this species, including any designated critical habitat.

Finback whale – The finback whale is a marine species that can be found along the coastal waters of Mississippi. Aquatic rodent damage management activities are not conducted in marine environments; therefore, activities will have no effect on this species.

Humpback whale - The humpback whale is a marine species that can be found along the coastal waters of Mississippi. Aquatic rodent damage management activities are not conducted in marine environments; therefore, activities will have no effect on this species.

Gray bat - The gray bat is currently known to occur in Tishomingo County, Mississippi in the extreme northeast corner of the State. Gray bats are found in caves throughout the year, with hibernation occurring in deep, vertical caves. During the summer, bats roost in caves along rivers in limestone karst areas of the southeastern United States. Based on the known locations of extant populations in the State, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the gray bat in the State, including any designated critical habitat.

Indiana bat – Like the gray bat, the Indiana bat is known in Mississippi from one record that occurred in Tishomingo County. However, the current presence of the species in the State is unknown. The Indiana bat hibernates in caves; however, during warmer months, this bat species roosts within hollow trees and under bark where colonies of up to 100 females can be found. The proposed activities would not result in modifications to any caves and would not disturb any snags or other large trees the bats would utilize. Therefore, WS has concluded that the proposed activities would have no effect on the status of the Indiana bat.

Northern long-eared bat – The USFWS has proposed listing the northern long-eared bat as an endangered species in Mississippi. The northern long-eared bat is a medium-sized bat found throughout much of the eastern United States. In general, the long-eared bat has been more common in the northern portion of their range than the southern and western portion. During the winter, long-eared bats are found in hibernacula that include caves and abandoned mines, where they are found most commonly roosting in small crevices and cracks, but have been observed in abandoned railroad tunnels, storm sewers, hydro-

electric dam facilities, and wells. Where found, long-eared bats often occur in low numbers; however, their inconspicuous nature and preference for roosting in cracks and crevices can make surveying difficult. During the summer, long-eared bats are most commonly found roosting individually or in small colonies underneath bark or in cavities or crevices of live trees and snags. However, bats have also been observed roosting in caves, mines, and man-made structures, such as buildings, barns, park pavilions, sheds, cabins, and under the eaves of buildings, behind window shutters, and bat houses, during the summer. There are no summer records of long-eared bats in Mississippi (see 78 FR 61046-61080). The primary factor influencing the possible listing of the long-eared bat is the presence of white-nose syndrome, which has caused severe population declines. Based on the use patterns of methods available to alleviate damage caused by aquatic rodents and the locations where aquatic rodent damage management activities would likely occur, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the long-eared bat in Mississippi and any designated critical habitat, if the USFWS listed the species.

Florida panther – The Florida panther does not currently occur in the State. Based on the absence of the species from the State using current information, the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the panther and any critical habitat.

Gray wolf - The gray wolf does not currently occur in the State. Based on the absence of the species from the State using current information, the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the wolf and any critical habitat.

Piping plover – This bird winters along the coast and prefers tidal flats for feeding and sandy beaches for roosting. Plovers occur or thought to occur in Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson Counties along the coastal areas of the State. WS does not conduct damage management activities in those types of habitats; therefore, WS has determined activities would have no effect on this species, including any designated critical habitat.

Interior least tern – This species has been found on sand bars along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. WS would not conduct damage management activities under Alternative 1 (proposed action) on sandy beaches and sand bars this species prefers as nesting habitat; therefore, WS has determined the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the species.

Red-cockaded woodpecker – This species requires open stands of mature pine trees, primarily longleaf pine, for nest cavity construction. Red-cockaded woodpeckers occur primarily in the southern half of the State with some breeding occurring or thought to be occurring in Yalobusha, Oktibbeha, and Noxubee Counties in the northern portion of the State. The removal of beaver dams may protect nesting habitat from being inundated, thus providing positive benefits to the species; therefore, WS has determined that reducing flooding associated with beaver dams could be beneficial and not likely to adversely affect the status of this species in the State.

Mississippi sandhill crane – The Mississippi sandhill crane can only be found on and adjacent to the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge in Jackson County, Mississippi. Mississippi sandhill cranes are non-migratory and many home ranges are no more than a few miles in size. Any activities that WS could conduct in and around the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge would be limited to projects that are being conducted in coordination with and at the request of Refuge personnel. As such, all activities that WS conducts would occur in accordance with intraservice Section 7 consultations completed by the Refuge. Other than requests received directly from the Refuge, all other activities to alleviate aquatic rodent damage in Jackson County, Mississippi would be conducted in areas that are not on or adjacent to Mississippi Sandhill Crane Refuge property. Therefore, WS has determined

Alternative 1 (proposed action) would have no effect on the status of the Mississippi sandhill crane and any designated critical habitat.

Wood stork - Storks utilize freshwater and estuarine wetlands, primarily nesting in cypress or mangrove swamps. They feed in freshwater marshes, tidal creeks, and tidal pools. In Mississippi, wood stork occur or are thought to occur in Clarke, Jasper, Jones, Kemper, Lowndes, Monroe, Noxubee, Oktibbeha, Smith, and Wayne Counties. The proposed activities do not result in habitat destruction or modifications of habitat. Based on the habitat preferences of wood storks and the activities where damage management activities could occur, WS has determined the proposed activities would have no effect on the status of wood storks in the State, including any designated critical habitat.

Sprague's pipit – The Sprague's pipit is considered a candidate species for listing across their range. Their breeding range includes the native prairie regions of Upper Great Plains with their wintering range along the southern edge of the United States from southern Arizona across to southern Louisiana and northern Mexico to northwest Mississippi (see 78 FR 70104-70162). The pipit uses a wider range of grassland habitats on their winter ranges but appear to be strongly associated with native prairie habitats. The primary threats to the Sprague's pipit are habitat conversion (*e.g.*, land conversion, grazing, fire suppression, mowing, fragmentation) and energy development (*e.g.*, oil, gas, wind, roads). The proposed activities would not result in destruction or modification of native prairie habitats; however, impounded water from a beaver dam resulting in the flooding of prairie habitat, the removal or breaching of the beaver dam to alleviate flooding could be beneficial to pipits that arrive during the winter. Based on the potential beneficial effects associated with alleviate flooding associated with water impounded by a beaver dam, WS has determined the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) could provide some benefit to the pipit but would not likely adversely affect the status of the species.

Red Knot - The USFWS has also proposed listing the red knot as a threatened species. During the breeding season, red knots occur in the extreme northern artic region. Red knots winter primarily in intertidal marine habitats, especially near coastal inlets, estuaries, and bays. In Mississippi, red knots occur in marine habitats along the coast (Baker et al. 2013). Primary food sources include invertebrates, especially bivalves and crustaceans. Based on the use patterns of the methods available to alleviate damage and the areas where damage management activities could occur in relationship to areas where red knots are likely to occur, WS has concluded the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have no effect on the status of the red knot.

American chaffseed – This plant grows on pimple mounds with well-drained sandy soil imbedded in flat, poorly drained longleaf pine flatwoods savannah and may possibly occur in hilly upland long leaf pine country as well. Historically, two occurrences of American chaffseed were known in Mississippi; however, those locations no longer contain chaffseed. No current locations containing chaffseed exist in Mississippi and the species is likely extirpated from the State. Removal of beaver dams may prevent inundation of the sites where this species could be found or occur; therefore, WS has determined the removal or breaching of beaver dams to alleviate flooding could be beneficial to this species but would not likely adversely affect the status of the species in the State.

Price's potato-bean – In Mississippi, the price's potato-bean exists in four populations, two in Oktibbeha County, and one each in Clay and Lee Counties. The species occurs in well-drained loam soils on old alluvium or over limestone. Removal of beaver dams may prevent inundation of the sites where this species could be found or occur; therefore, WS has determined the removal or breaching of beaver dams to alleviate flooding could be beneficial to this species but would not likely adversely affect the status of the species in the State.

Louisiana quillwort – This species inhabits gravel and sand bars on small and medium size streams. Currently, it is known only from two small populations in the Bogue Chitto drainage of Washington and St. Tammany Parishes. Currently, no aquatic rodent damage management activities occur within this species known range. Beaver management operations may benefit the Louisiana quillwort by preventing dams from inundating the sites on which they live. WS believes aquatic rodent management activities will not adversely affect this species.

Pondberry – This plant prefers seasonally wet low areas among bottomland hardwoods, edges of cypress ponds, and shallow depression ponds of sandhills. In Mississippi, pondberry occurs in or is thought to occur in Bolivar, Sharkey, Sunflower, and Tallahatchie Counties. Because impounded water from beaver dams may flood wet depressions, WS has concluded that removing or breaching beaver dams in those areas could benefit this species by reducing flooding, which would warrant a not likely to adversely affect determination. Additionally, plants are part of the diet of aquatic rodents, so the removal of aquatic rodents could lower risks of feeding on the plant.

White fringeless orchid - The white fringeless orchid has been designated as a candidate for listing in Mississippi by the USFWS. In Mississippi, the orchid is known from two records that were taken in Alcorn County in 1863 and another from Tishomingo County in 1974 (USFWS 2008*b*). The population in Alcorn County is thought to be extirpated. In Tishomingo County, the population where the first county record was described is believed to still be extant with an additional population located in the County since the first record was noted (USFWS 2008*b*). The fringeless orchid can be found in boggy areas at the head of streams and on slopes with water seepage (USFWS 2008*b*). With current populations of orchids in Mississippi only occurring at two sites in Mississippi, WS' aquatic rodent damage management will have no effect on populations in the State. If aquatic rodent damage management activities are conducted in Tishomingo County in the area where orchids are known to occur, WS would consult with the USFWS pursuant to Section 7 of the ESA.

The WS' program in Mississippi would also abide by the following conditions when conducting activities to alleviate the damage that aquatic rodent cause in the State:

- Avoid working in ponds where Mississippi gopher frogs (*Rana capito sevosa*) are known to occur, avoid working in streams with listed mussels, fish, or turtles, and avoid Mississippi sandhill crane nesting areas
- When conducting ground-disturbing activities, the project site should be surveyed for potential roosting locations of T&E bat species, such as culverts, underpasses, caves, abandoned mines and buildings, wells, and snags. Because methods can disturb roosting bats offsite and result in abandonment of an area, activities should be conducted 500 yards away from any identified or potential roosting areas
- In vegetated wetland areas, surveys for Mitchell's satyr butterflies, Price's potato bean, pondberry, and Louisiana quillwort should be conducted, if suitable habitat were present
- Forested areas with suitable habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers should be surveyed
- Areas with suitable soils and vegetation should be surveyed for gopher tortoises
- Louisiana black bear breeding areas have been documented along the Mississippi River and no activities should take place during the breeding season in those locations

Pursuant to Section 7 of the ESA, WS consulted with the USFWS on those effects analysis and determinations. The USFWS concurred with those effects determination made by WS for those species list in Table 4.11 (K. Lunceford, USFWS pers. comm. 2014). In addition, WS has reviewed those species considered threatened or endangered by the Mississippi Museum of Natural Resources (see Appendix C) and determined the proposed action would have no effect on any of those species listed within the State.

Personnel from WS would have the experience and training to identify wildlife correctly and to select the most appropriate methods for capturing or removing targeted animals and excluding non-target species. Non-target animals would be individuals that WS captures or kills unintentionally because of aquatic rodent damage management. To reduce the likelihood of capturing non-target wildlife, WS would employ the most selective methods for the target species, would employ the use of attractants that are as specific to target species as possible, and determine placement of methods to avoid exposure to non-targets. WS' personnel have not captured, killed, or otherwise adversely affected any T&E species during aquatic rodent damage conducted previously within the State.

As described previously, methods available to resolve aquatic rodent damage in Mississippi involve resource management methods, physical exclusion methods, and population management methods. The actual methods applied to resolve requests for assistance would be based on the use of WS' Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992), which allows for an adaptive approach to managing damage or threats of damage. The Decision Model allows WS' personnel to apply site-specific factors into determining the appropriate methods for addressing damage or threats of damage while considering other known factors, such as the likely presence of T&E species in the area where methods would be employed.

Alternative 2 – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

Under a technical assistance alternative, WS would have no direct impact on non-target species, including T&E species. Methods recommended or provided through loaning of equipment could be employed by those persons requesting assistance. Recommendations would be based on the WS Decision Model using information provided by the person requesting assistance or through site visits. Recommendations would include methods or techniques to minimize non-target impacts associated with the methods being recommended or loaned. Methods recommended could include non-lethal and lethal methods as deemed appropriate by the WS Decision Model and as permitted by laws and regulations.

The potential impacts to non-targets under this alternative would be variable and based on several factors. If methods were employed, as recommended by WS, the potential impacts to non-targets would likely be similar to Alternative 1 (proposed action). If recommended methods and techniques were not followed or if other methods were employed that were not recommended, the potential impacts on non-target species, including T&E species would likely be higher compared to the proposed action (Alternative 1).

The potential impacts of harassment and exclusion methods on non-target species would be similar to those described under the proposed action (Alternative 1). Harassment and exclusion methods would be easily obtainable and simple to employ. Since identification of targets would occur when employing shooting as a method, the potential impacts to non-target species would likely be low under this alternative but would be based on the knowledge and experience of the person to identify the target species correctly.

Those persons experiencing damage from aquatic rodents may implement methods and techniques based on the recommendations of WS. The potential for impacts would be based on the knowledge and skill of those persons implementing recommended methods. If those persons experiencing damage do not implement methods or techniques correctly, the potential impacts from providing only technical assistance could be greater than the proposed action (Alternative 1). The incorrect implementation of methods or techniques recommended by WS could lead to an increase in non-target removal when compared to the non-target removal that could occur by WS under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1).

If requesters were provided technical assistance but do not implement any of the recommended actions and conducted no further action, the potential to remove non-targets would be lower when compared to

Alternative 1. If those persons requesting assistance implement recommended methods appropriately and as instructed or demonstrated, the potential impacts to non-targets would be similar to the Alternative 1 (proposed action). If WS made recommendations on the use of methods to alleviate damage but those methods were not implemented as recommended by WS or if those methods recommended by WS were used inappropriately, the potential for lethal removal of non-targets would likely increase under this alternative. Therefore, the potential impacts to non-targets, including T&E species, would be variable under this alternative.

If non-lethal methods recommended by WS under this alternative were deemed ineffective by those people requesting assistance, lethal methods could be employed by those people experiencing damage. Those people requesting assistance would likely be those persons that would use lethal methods since a damage threshold had been met for that individual requester that triggered seeking assistance to reduce damage. The potential impacts on non-targets by those people experiencing damage would be highly variable. People whose aquatic rodent damage problems were not effectively resolved by non-lethal control methods would likely resort to other means of legal or illegal lethal control. This could result in less experienced persons implementing control methods and could lead to greater removal of non-target wildlife than the proposed action (Alternative 1). When those persons experiencing damage caused by wildlife reach a level where assistance does not adequately reduce damage or where no assistance is available, people have resorted to using chemical toxicants that are illegal for use on the intended target species. The illegal use of methods often results in loss of both target and non-target wildlife (*e.g.*, see White et al. 1989, USFWS 2001, United States Food and Drug Administration 2003). The use of illegal toxicants by those persons frustrated with the lack of assistance or assistance that inadequately reduces damage to an acceptable level can often result in the indiscriminate removal of wildlife species.

The ability to reduce negative effects caused by aquatic rodents to wildlife species and their habitats, including T&E species, would be variable under this alternative. The ability to reduce risks would be based upon the skills and abilities of the person implementing damage management actions. It would be expected that this alternative would have a greater chance of reducing damage than Alternative 3 since WS would be available to provide information and advice on appropriately employing methods and reducing the risk of non-target removal.

Alternative 3 – No Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Conducted by WS

Under this alternative, WS would not be directly involved with damage management activities in the State. Therefore, no direct impacts to non-targets or T&E species would occur by WS under this alternative. Aquatic rodents could continue to be lethally removed when authorized by the MDWFP, removal would continue to occur during the regulated harvest seasons, and non-regulated aquatic rodent species could continue to be removed without the need for authorization from the MDWFP. Risks to non-targets and T&E species would continue to occur from those people who implement damage management activities on their own or through recommendations by other federal, state, and private entities. Although some risks could occur from those people that implement aquatic rodent damage management in the absence of any involvement by WS, those risks would likely be low, and would be similar to those risks under the other alternatives.

The ability to reduce negative effects caused by aquatic rodents to other wildlife species and their habitats, including T&E species, would be variable based upon the skills and abilities of the person implementing damage management actions under this alternative.

Issue 3 - Effects of Damage Management Methods on Human Health and Safety

A common concern is the potential adverse effects that methods available could have on human health and safety. The threats to human safety of methods available under the alternatives are evaluated below by each of the alternatives.

Alternative 1 - Continue the Current Adaptive Integrated Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Program (No Action/Proposed Action)

The cooperator requesting assistance would be made aware through a MOU, work initiation document, or a similar document that those methods agreed upon could potentially be used on property owned or managed by the cooperator. Therefore, the cooperator would be made aware of the possible use of those methods on property they own or manage to identify any risks to human safety associated with the use of those methods. Cooperators would be made aware by signing a MOU, work initiation document, or another similar document, which would assist WS and the cooperating entity with identifying any risks to human safety associated with methods at a particular location.

Under the Alternative 1 (proposed action), WS could use or recommend those methods discussed in Appendix B singularly or in combination to resolve and prevent damage associated with aquatic rodents in the State. WS would use the Decision Model to determine the appropriate method or methods that would effectively resolve the request for assistance. Those methods would be continually evaluated for effectiveness and if necessary, additional methods could be employed. Non-lethal and lethal methods could be used under this alternative. WS would continue to provide technical assistance and/or direct operational assistance to those persons seeking assistance with managing damage or threats from aquatic rodents. Risks to human safety from technical assistance conducted by WS would be similar to those risks addressed under Alternative 2. Those non-lethal methods that could be used as part of an integrated approach to managing damage, that would be available for use by WS as part of direct operational assistance, would be similar to those risks associated with the use of those methods under the other alternatives.

Lethal methods available under this alternative would include the use of body-gripping traps, cable restraints, the recommendation of harvest during hunting and/or trapping seasons, shooting, zinc phosphide, and euthanasia chemicals. In addition, target aquatic rodent species live-captured using non-lethal methods (*e.g.*, live-traps, immobilizing drugs) could be euthanized. WS could also use foothold traps and submersion rods or cables for drowning sets. Those lethal methods available under this alternative (or similar products) would also be available under the other alternatives. None of the lethal methods available would be restricted to use by WS only. Euthanasia chemicals would not be available to the public but those aquatic rodents live-captured could be killed using other methods. Other entities (*e.g.*, the MDWFP, veterinarians) could be available to euthanize animals using euthanasia chemicals. Zinc phosphide would only be available to persons with a pesticide applicators license issued by the MDAC.

WS' employees who conduct activities to manage damage caused by aquatic rodents would be knowledgeable in the use of those methods available, the wildlife species responsible for causing damage or threats, and WS' directives. That knowledge would be incorporated into the decision-making process inherent with the WS Decision Model that would be applied when addressing threats and damage caused by aquatic rodents. When employing lethal methods, WS' employees would consider risks to human safety when employing those methods based on location and method. For example, risks to human safety from the use of methods would likely be lower in rural areas that are less densely populated. Consideration would also be given to the location where damage management activities would be conducted based on property ownership. If locations where methods would be employed occur on private

property in rural areas where access to the property could be controlled and monitored, the risks to human safety from the use of methods would likely be less. If damage management activities occurred at public parks or near other public use areas, then risks of the public encountering damage management methods and the corresponding risk to human safety would increase. Activities would generally be conducted when human activity was minimal (*e.g.*, early mornings, at night) or in areas where human activities were minimal (*e.g.*, in areas closed to the public).

The use of live-capture traps, restraining devices (*e.g.*, foothold traps, some cable restraints), and body-gripping traps have been identified as a potential issue. Live-capture traps available for aquatic rodents would typically be walk-in style traps where aquatic rodents enter but are unable to exit. Live-traps, restraining devices, and body-gripping traps would typically be set in situations where human activity was minimal to ensure public safety. Those methods rarely cause serious injury and would only be triggered through direct activation of the device. Therefore, human safety concerns associated with live-traps, restraining devices, and body-gripping traps used to capture wildlife, including aquatic rodents, would require direct contact to cause bodily harm. Therefore, if left undisturbed, risks to human safety would be minimal. Signs warning of the use of those tools in the area could be posted for public view at access points to increase awareness that those devices were being used and to avoid the area, especially pet owners.

Other live-capture devices, such as nets, pose minor safety hazards to the public since use of the device would occur by trained personnel. Lasers also pose minimal risks to the public since application would occur directly to target species by trained personnel, which would limit the exposure of the public to misuse of the method.

Safety issues related to the misuse of firearms and the potential human hazards associated with the use of firearms were issues identified. To help ensure the safe use of firearms and to increase awareness of those risks, WS' employees who use firearms during official duties would be required to attend an approved firearm safety-training course and to remain certified for firearm use must attend a safety-training course in accordance with WS Directive 2.615. As a condition of employment, WS' employees who carry and use firearms are subject to the Lautenberg Domestic Confiscation Law, which prohibits firearm possession by anyone who has been convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence (18 USC § 922(g)(9)). A safety assessment based on site evaluations, coordination with cooperating and local agencies (if applicable), and consultation with cooperators would be conducted before firearms were deemed appropriate to alleviate or reduce damage and threats to human safety when conducting activities. WS would work closely with cooperators requesting assistance to ensure all safety issues were considered before firearms would be deemed appropriate for use. The use of all methods, including firearms, would be agreed upon with the cooperator to ensure the safe use of those methods. The security of firearms would also occur pursuant to WS Directive 2.615.

The recommendation by WS that aquatic rodents be harvested during the regulated hunting and/or trapping season that are established by the MDWFP would not increase risks to human safety above those risks already inherent with hunting or trapping those species. Recommendations of allowing hunting and/or trapping on property owned or managed by a cooperator to reduce aquatic rodent populations, which could then reduce damage or threats, would not increase risks to human safety. Safety requirements established by the MDWFP for the regulated hunting and trapping season would further minimize risks associated with hunting and trapping. Although hunting and trapping accidents do occur, the recommendation of allowing hunting or trapping to reduce localized populations of aquatic rodents would not increase those risks.

The issue of using chemical methods as part of managing damage associated with wildlife relates to the potential for human exposure either through direct contact with the chemical or exposure to the chemical

from wildlife that have been exposed. Under the alternatives identified, the use of chemical methods could include immobilizing drugs, euthanasia chemicals, zinc phosphide, and repellents.

WS' employees would only administer immobilizing drugs to aquatic rodents that have been live-captured using other methods or would administer those drugs through injection using a projectile (*e.g.*, dart gun). WS' employees would use immobilizing drugs to sedate target animals for temporarily handling and/or to transport target animals. Sedating target animals can lessen the distress to the animal from the experience. Drug delivery would occur on site with close monitoring of the animal to ensure proper care of the animal. Immobilizing drugs would be reversible with a full recovery of sedated animals occurring. Drugs used in capturing and handling wildlife that would be available include ketamine, a mixture of ketamine/Xylazine, and Telazol. Appendix B contains a list and description of immobilizing drugs available for use under the identified alternatives.

If aquatic rodents were immobilized for sampling or translocation and released, risks could occur to human safety if harvest and consumption occurred. SOPs employed by WS to reduce risks are discussed in Chapter 3 and in Appendix B. SOPs that would be part of the activities conducted include:

- All immobilizing drugs used in capturing and handling wildlife would be under the direction and authority of state veterinary authorities, either directly or through procedures agreed upon between those authorities and WS.
- As determined on a state-level basis by those veterinary authorities (as allowed by AMDUCA), wildlife hazard management programs may choose to avoid capture and handling activities that utilize immobilizing drugs within a specified number of days prior to the hunting or trapping season for the target species. This practice would avoid release of animals that may be consumed by hunters and/or trappers prior to the end of established withdrawal periods for the particular drugs used. Ear tagging or other marking of animals drugged and released to alert hunters and trappers that they should contact state officials before consuming the animal.
- Most animals administered immobilizing drugs would be released well before hunting/trapping seasons, which would give the drug time to metabolize completely out of the animals' systems before they might be harvested and consumed by people. In some instances, animals collected for control purposes would be euthanized when they were captured within a certain specified time period prior to the legal hunting or trapping season to avoid the chance that they would be consumed as food while still potentially having immobilizing drugs in their systems.

Meeting the requirements of the AMDUCA should prevent any adverse effects to human health with regard to this issue.

Euthanizing chemicals would be administered under similar circumstances to immobilizing drugs and would be administered to animals live-captured using other methods. Euthanasia chemicals would include sodium pentobarbital and potassium chloride. Euthanized animals would be disposed of in accordance with WS Directive 2.515; therefore, would not be available for harvest and consumption. Euthanasia of target animals would occur in the absence of the public to minimize risks, whenever possible.

The recommendation of repellents or the use of those repellents registered for use to disperse aquatic rodents in the State could occur under the proposed action (Alternative 1) as part of an integrated approach to managing aquatic rodent damage. Those chemical repellents that would be available to recommend for use or that could be directly used by WS under this alternative would also likely be available under any of the alternatives. Therefore, risks to human safety from the recommendation of repellents or the direct use of repellents would be similar across all the alternatives. Risks to human safety associated with the use of repellents by WS or the recommendation of repellents by WS is

addressed under the technical assistance only alternative (Alternative 2). Risks to human safety would be similar across all the alternatives. WS' involvement, either through recommending the use of repellents or the direct use of repellents, would ensure that label requirements of those repellents were discussed with those persons requesting assistance when recommended through technical assistance or would be specifically adhered to by WS' personnel when using those chemical methods. Therefore, the risks to human safety associated with the recommendation of or direct use of repellents could be lessened through WS' participation.

When WS received a request to remove a beaver dam, WS' employees would assess the potential for downstream flooding to determine the appropriate removal method. WS would generally breach or remove beaver dams by hand with a rake or power tools (*e.g.*, a winch). WS would normally breach or remove dams through incremental stages of debris removal from the dam that allows water levels to be gradually lowered. Breaching of dams would normally occur to limit the potential for flooding downstream by gradually allowing water levels to lower as more of the dam was breached over time. Depending on the size of the impoundment, water levels could be slowly lowered over several hours or days when breaching dams. When breaching dams, only that portion of the dam blocking the stream or ditch channel would be altered or breached, with the intent of returning water levels and flow rates to historical levels or to a level that eliminates damage threats that would be acceptable to the property owner or resource manager. Similar to breaching dams, the removal of the dam removes the debris impounding water and restores the normal flow of water. WS could also use explosives to breach or remove beaver dams. WS' employee would generally use explosives to remove beaver dams that were too large to remove by hand.

WS' personnel responsible for the use of explosives would be required to complete in-depth training and must demonstrate competence and safety with use of explosives pursuant to the WS Explosives Safety Manual (see WS Directive 2.435). Employees would adhere to WS' policies as well as regulations promulgated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the United States Department of Transportation, and the Mississippi State Police concerning explosives use, storage, safety, and transportation. WS would use binary explosives that require the mixing of two components for activation. Binary explosives reduce the hazard of accidental detonation during storage and transportation since the two components are stored separately. Storage and transportation of mixed binary explosives is prohibited. When explosives were being used by WS, warning signs would be posted to restrict public entry. WS would also contact the appropriate utility resources to identify and mark underground utilities before removing dams with explosives. When beaver dams were near roads or highways, police or other road officials would be used to help stop traffic and restrict public entry.

No adverse effects to human safety have occurred from WS' use of methods to alleviate aquatic rodent damage in the State from FY 2009 through FY 2013. The risks to human safety from the use of non-lethal and lethal methods, when used appropriately and by trained personnel, would be considered low. Based on the use patterns of methods available to address damage caused by aquatic rodents, this alternative would comply with Executive Order 12898 and Executive Order 13045.

Alternative 2 – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

Under this alternative, WS would be restricted to making recommendations on the use of methods and the demonstration of methods to resolve damage. WS would only provide technical assistance to those people requesting assistance with aquatic rodent damage and threats. Although hazards to human safety from non-lethal methods exist, those methods are generally regarded as safe when used by trained individuals who are experienced in their use. Risks to human safety associated with non-chemical methods, such as resource management methods (*e.g.*, crop selection, limited habitat modification,

modification of human behavior), exclusion devices, frightening devices, and cage traps, could be considered low based on their use profile for alleviating damage associated with wildlife. Although some risk of fire and bodily harm exists from the use of pyrotechnics and propane cannons, when used appropriately and in consideration of those risks, those methods could be used with a high degree of safety.

Under this alternative, the availability of immobilizing drugs and euthanasia chemicals would be limited. Immobilizing drugs used in capturing and handling wildlife could be administered under the direction and authority of state veterinary authorities, either directly or through procedures agreed upon between those authorities and other entities, such as the MDWFP. Without access to immobilizing drugs or euthanizing chemicals, those persons capturing aquatic rodents using live-traps or other live-capture methods would be responsible for euthanizing or handling live-captured captive animals. Since the availability of immobilizing drugs and euthanizing chemicals would be limited under this alternative, a gunshot would likely be the primary method of euthanasia.

The use of chemical methods that are considered non-lethal could be available under this alternative. Chemical methods available would include repellents. There are few chemical repellents registered for use to manage damage caused by aquatic rodents in the State. Most repellents require ingestion of the chemical to achieve the desired effects on target species. Repellents that require ingestion are intended to discourage foraging on vulnerable resources and to disperse aquatic rodents from areas where the repellents were applied. Repellents, when used according to label directions, are generally regarded as safe especially when the ingredients are considered naturally occurring. Some risk of exposure to the chemical would occur to the applicator, as well as others, as the product was applied due to the potential for drift. Some repellents also have restrictions on whether application can occur on edible plants with some restricting harvest for a designated period after application. All restrictions on harvest and required personal protective equipment would be included on the label and if followed, would minimize risks to human safety associated with the use of those products.

The recommendation by WS that aquatic rodents be harvested during the regulated hunting and/or trapping season, which would be established by the MDWFP would not increase risks to human safety above those risks already inherent with hunting and trapping aquatic rodents. Recommendations of allowing hunting or trapping on property owned or managed by a cooperator to reduce local aquatic rodent populations that could then reduce aquatic rodent damage or threats would not increase risks to human safety. Safety requirements established by the MDWFP for the regulated hunting and trapping season would further minimize risks associated with those activities. Although hunting and trapping accidents do occur, the recommendation of allowing hunting or trapping to reduce localized aquatic rodent populations would not increase those risks.

The recommendation of shooting with firearms as a method of direct lethal removal could occur under this alternative. Safety issues do arise related to misusing firearms and the potential human hazards associated with firearms use when employed to reduce damage and threats. When used appropriately and with consideration for human safety, risks associated with firearms would be minimal. If firearms were employed inappropriately or without regard to human safety, serious injuries could occur. Under this alternative, recommendations of the use of firearms by WS would include human safety considerations. Since the use of firearms to alleviate aquatic rodent damage would be available under any of the alternatives and the use of firearms by those persons experiencing aquatic rodent damage could occur whether WS was consulted or contacted, the risks to human safety from the use of firearms would be similar among all the alternatives.

If non-chemical methods were employed according to recommendations and as demonstrated by WS, the potential risks to human safety would be similar to Alternative 1 (proposed action). If methods were

employed without guidance from WS or applied inappropriately, the risks to human safety could increase. The extent of the increased risk would be unknown and variable. Non-chemical methods inherently pose minimal risks to human safety given the design and the extent of the use of those methods.

The cooperator requesting assistance would also be made aware of threats to human safety associated with the use of those methods. SOPs for methods are discussed in Chapter 3 of this EA. Risks to human safety from activities and methods recommended under this alternative would be similar to the other alternatives since the same methods would be available. If misused or applied inappropriately, any of the methods available to alleviate aquatic rodent damage could threaten human safety. However, when used appropriately, methods available to alleviate damage would not threaten human safety. The recommendation of methods by WS to people requesting assistance and the pattern of use recommended by WS would comply with Executive Order 12898 and Executive Order 13045.

Alternative 3 – No Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Conducted by WS

Under this alternative, WS would not be involved with any aspect of managing damage associated with aquatic rodents in the State, including technical assistance. Due to the lack of involvement in managing damage caused by aquatic rodents, no impacts to human safety would occur directly from WS. This alternative would not prevent those entities experiencing threats or damage from aquatic rodents from conducting damage management activities in the absence of WS' assistance. The direct burden of implementing permitted methods would be placed on those people experiencing damage or would require those people to seek assistance from other entities.

Similar to the technical assistance only alternative (Alternative 2), immobilizing drugs, euthanasia chemicals, and zinc phosphide would have limited availability under this alternative to the public. However, zinc phosphide would continue to be available to those persons with the appropriate pesticide applicators license. Since most methods available to resolve or prevent aquatic rodent damage or threats would be available to anyone, the threats to human safety from the use of those methods would be similar between the alternatives. However, methods employed by those persons not experienced in the use of methods or were not trained in their proper use, could increase threats to human safety. Overall, the methods available to the public, when applied correctly and appropriately, would pose minimal risks to human safety.

Issue 4 - Effects on the Aesthetic Values of Aquatic Rodents

Another concern often raised is the potential impact the alternatives could have on the aesthetic value that people often regard for aquatic rodents. The effects of the alternatives on this issue are analyzed below by alternative.

Alternative 1 - Continue the Current Adaptive Integrated Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Program (No Action/Proposed Action)

Under this alternative, methods would be employed that would result in the dispersal, exclusion, or removal of individuals or small groups of aquatic rodents to resolve damage and threats. In some instances where aquatic rodents were dispersed or removed, the ability of interested persons to observe and enjoy those aquatic rodents would likely temporarily decline.

Even the use of exclusionary devices can lead to the dispersal of wildlife if the resource being damaged was acting as an attractant. Thus, once the attractant was removed or made unavailable, the wildlife would likely disperse to other areas where resources would be more vulnerable.

The use of lethal methods would result in temporary declines in local populations resulting from the removal of aquatic rodents to address or prevent damage and threats. The goal under the proposed action (Alternative 1) would be to respond to requests for assistance and to manage those aquatic rodents responsible for the resulting damage. Therefore, the ability to view and enjoy aquatic rodents would remain if a reasonable effort were made to locate aquatic rodents outside the area in which damage management activities were occurring. In most cases, the aquatic rodents removed by WS could be removed by the person experiencing damage or removed by other entities if no assistance was provided by WS.

All activities would be conducted where a request for assistance was received and only after the cooperator and WS had signed a MOU, work initiation document, or similar document. Some aesthetic value would be gained by the removal of aquatic rodents and the return of a more natural environment, including the return of native wildlife and plant species that may be suppressed or displaced by high aquatic rodent densities.

Since those aquatic rodents that would not be removed by WS under this alternative could be removed by other entities, WS' involvement in removing those aquatic rodents would not likely be additive to the number of aquatic rodents that could be removed in the absence of WS' involvement. Other entities could remove aquatic rodents when the MDWFP authorizes the removal, without the need for a permit if the species was unregulated (*e.g.*, beaver and muskrat), or during the regulated hunting or trapping seasons. In addition, entities could request the assistance of other state and federal agencies or seek assistance from private entities to manage damage.

WS' removal of aquatic rodents from FY 2009 through FY 2013 has been of low magnitude compared to the total mortality and populations of those species. WS' activities would not likely be additive to the aquatic rodents that could be lethally removed in the absence of WS' involvement. Although aquatic rodents removed by WS would no longer be present for viewing or enjoying, those aquatic rodents would likely be removed by the property owner or manager if WS were not involved in the action. Removal by the property owner or manager could occur under a permit, during the regulated hunting and trapping seasons, or if the aquatic rodents were unregulated, removal could occur without the need for a permit. Given the limited removal proposed by WS under this alternative when compared to the known sources of mortality of aquatic rodents and the population estimates of those species, WS' aquatic rodent damage management activities conducted pursuant to Alternative 1 (proposed action) would not adversely affect the aesthetic value of aquatic rodents. The impact on the aesthetic value of aquatic rodents and the ability of the public to view and enjoy aquatic rodents under the Alternative 1 (proposed action) would be similar to the other alternatives and would likely be low.

Alternative 2 – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

If those persons seeking assistance from WS were those persons likely to conduct damage management activities in the absence of WS' involvement, then technical assistance provided by WS would not adversely affect the aesthetic value of aquatic rodents in the State similar to Alternative 1. Aquatic rodents could be lethally removed under this alternative by those entities experiencing aquatic rodent damage or threats, which could result in localized reductions in the presence of aquatic rodents at the location where damage was occurring. The presence of aquatic rodents where damage was occurring could be reduced where damage management activities were conducted under any of the alternatives. Even the recommendation of non-lethal methods would likely result in the dispersal of aquatic rodents from the area if those non-lethal methods recommended by WS were employed by those persons receiving technical assistance. Therefore, technical assistance provided by WS would not prevent the aesthetic enjoyment of aquatic rodents since any activities conducted to alleviate aquatic rodent damage could occur in the absence of WS' participation in the action, either directly or indirectly.

Under this alternative, the effects on the aesthetic values of aquatic rodents would be similar to those addressed in Alternative 1 (proposed action). When people seek assistance with managing damage from either WS or another entity, the damage level has often reached an unacceptable threshold for that particular person. Therefore, in the case of aquatic rodent damage, the social acceptance level of those aquatic rodents causing damage has reached a level where assistance has been requested and those persons would likely apply methods or seek those entities that would apply those methods based on recommendations provided by WS or by other entities. Based on those recommendations, methods could be employed by the requester that could result in the dispersal and/or removal of aquatic rodents responsible for damage or threatening safety. If those aquatic rodents causing damage were dispersed or removed by those persons experiencing damage based on recommendations by WS or other entities, the potential effects on the aesthetic value of those aquatic rodents would be similar to the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1). In addition, those persons could contact other entities to provide direct assistance with dispersing or removing those aquatic rodents causing damage.

The potential impacts on aesthetics from a technical assistance program would only be lower than Alternative 1 (proposed action) if those individuals experiencing damage were not as diligent in employing those methods as WS would be if conducting an operational program or if no further action was taken by the requester. If those persons experiencing damage abandoned the use of those methods or conducted no further actions, then aquatic rodents would likely remain in the area and available for viewing and enjoying for those persons interested in doing so. Similar to the other alternatives, the geographical area in which damage management activities could occur would not be such that aquatic rodents would be dispersed or removed from such large areas that opportunities to view and enjoy aquatic rodents would be severely limited.

Alternative 3 – No Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Conducted by WS

Under the no aquatic rodent damage management by WS alternative, the actions of WS would have no impact on the aesthetic value of aquatic rodents in the State. Those people experiencing damage or threats from aquatic rodents would be responsible for researching, obtaining, and using all methods as permitted by federal, state, and local laws and regulations. Aquatic rodents could continue to be dispersed and lethally removed under this alternative in the State. Lethal removal could continue to occur when permitted by the MDWFP through the issuance of permits, removal could occur during the regulated harvest season, and in the case of non-regulated species, removal could occur any time without the need for a permit.

Since aquatic rodents would continue to be lethally removed under this alternative, despite WS' lack of involvement, the ability to view and enjoy aquatic rodents would likely be similar to the other alternatives. The lack of WS' involvement would not lead to a reduction in the number of aquatic rodents dispersed or removed since WS' has no authority to regulate removal or the harassment of aquatic rodents in the State. The MDWFP with management authority over aquatic rodents could continue to adjust all removal levels based on population objectives for those aquatic rodent species in the State. Therefore, the number of aquatic rodents lethally removed annually through harvest and under permits would be regulated and adjusted by the MDWFP

Those people experiencing damage or threats could continue to use those methods they feel appropriate to resolve aquatic rodent damage or threats, including lethal removal or could seek the direct assistance of other entities. Therefore, WS' involvement in managing damage would not be additive to the aquatic rodents that could be dispersed or removed. The impacts to the aesthetic value of aquatic rodents would be similar to the other alternatives.

Issue 5 - Humaneness and Animal Welfare Concerns of Methods

As discussed previously, a common issue often raised is concerns about the humaneness of methods available under the alternatives for resolving aquatic rodent damage and threats. The issues of method humaneness relating to the alternatives are discussed below.

Alternative 1 - Continue the Current Adaptive Integrated Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Program (No Action/Proposed Action)

Under this alternative, WS would integrate methods using the WS Decision Model as part of technical assistance and direct operational assistance. Methods available under this alternative could include non-lethal and lethal methods integrated into direct operational assistance conducted by WS. Under this alternative, non-lethal methods would be used by WS that were generally regarded as humane. Non-lethal methods that would be available include resource management methods (*e.g.*, crop selection, limited habitat modification, modification of human behavior), translocation, exclusion devices, frightening devices, cage traps, foothold traps, nets, immobilizing drugs, and repellents.

As discussed previously, 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.

Some individuals believe any use of lethal methods to resolve damage associated with wildlife is inhumane because the resulting fate is the death of the animal. Others believe that certain lethal methods can lead to a humane death. Others believe most non-lethal methods of capturing wildlife to be humane because the animal is generally unharmed and alive. Still others believe that any disruption in the behavior of wildlife is inhumane. With the multitude of attitudes on the meaning of humaneness and the varying perspectives on the most effective way to address damage and threats in a humane manner, agencies are challenged with conducting activities and employing methods that are perceived to be humane while assisting those persons requesting assistance to manage damage and threats associated with wildlife. The goal of WS would be to use methods as humanely as possible to resolve requests for assistance to reduce damage and threats to human safety. WS would continue to evaluate methods and activities to minimize the pain and suffering of methods addressed when attempting to resolve requests for assistance.

Some methods have been stereotyped as "*humane*" or "*inhumane*". However, many "*humane*" methods can be inhumane if not used appropriately. For instance, a cage trap would generally be considered by most members of the public as "*humane*", since the animal would be alive and generally unharmed. Yet, without proper care, live-captured wildlife in a cage trap could be treated inhumanely if not attended to appropriately.

Therefore, the goal would be to address requests for assistance effectively using methods in the most humane way possible that minimizes the stress and pain to the animal. Overall, the use of resource management methods, harassment methods, and exclusion devices would be regarded as humane when used appropriately. Although some concern arises from the use of live-capture methods, the stress of animals is likely temporary.

Although some issues of humaneness could occur from the use of cage traps, foothold traps, translocation, immobilizing drugs, nets, and repellents, those methods, when used appropriately and by trained personnel, would not result in the inhumane treatment of wildlife. Concerns from the use of those non-lethal methods would be from injuries to animals while those animals were restrained and from the stress of the animal while being restrained or during the application of the method. Pain and physical restraint

can cause stress in animals and the inability of animals to effectively deal with those stressors can lead to distress. Suffering occurs when action is not taken to alleviate conditions that cause pain or distress in animals.

If aquatic rodents were to be live-captured by WS, WS' personnel would be present on-site during capture events or capture devices would be checked frequently to ensure aquatic rodents captured were addressed in a timely manner and to prevent injury. Although stress could occur from being restrained, timely attention to live-captured wildlife would alleviate suffering. Stress would likely be temporary.

Under this alternative, WS could employ lethal methods to alleviate or prevent aquatic rodent damage and threats, when requested. Lethal methods would include shooting, body-gripping traps, cable restraints, euthanasia chemicals, zinc phosphide (muskrats and nutria only), and the recommendation of harvest during hunting and/or trapping seasons. WS could also use foothold traps and submersion cables or rods with drowning sets. In addition, target species live-captured using non-lethal methods could be euthanized by WS. WS' use of lethal control methods under this alternative would follow those required by WS' directives (see WS Directive 2.430, WS Directive 2.505).

The euthanasia methods that WS is considering for use under this alternative for live-captured aquatic rodents are carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, gunshot, and barbiturates or potassium chloride in conjunction with general anesthesia. When used appropriately, the American Veterinary Medical Association (2013) considers those methods to be acceptable forms of euthanasia. The use of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, barbiturates, and potassium chloride for euthanasia would occur after the animal was live-captured and would occur away from public view. Although the American Veterinary Medical Association guideline also lists gunshot as a conditionally acceptable method of euthanasia for free-ranging wildlife, there is greater potential the method may not consistently produce a humane death (American Veterinary Medical Association 2013). WS' personnel that employ firearms to address aquatic rodent damage or threats to human safety would be trained in the proper placement of shots to ensure a timely and quick death.

An issue when dealing with aquatic rodent species is the use of foothold traps to create drowning sets and the humaneness of drowning. There is considerable debate and disagreement among animal interest groups, veterinarians, wildlife professionals, fur trappers, and nuisance wildlife agents on this issue. The debate centers on an uncertainty as to whether the drowning animals are rapidly rendered unconscious by high levels of carbon dioxide and therefore, insensitive to distress and pain (Ludders et al. 1999). The inhalation of carbon dioxide at concentrations of 7.5% can increase the pain threshold and higher concentrations can have a rapid anesthetic effect on animals (American Veterinary Medical Association 2013). For comparison, room air contains approximately 0.04% carbon dioxide (American Veterinary Medical Association 2007).

The American Veterinary Medical Association considers drowning to be an unacceptable method of euthanasia because the death of the animal does not meet their definition of euthanasia (Beaver et al. 2001, American Veterinary Medical Association 2007, American Veterinary Medical Association 2013). Ludders et al. (1999) concluded animals that drowned were distressed because of the presence of high levels of the stress related hormones epinephrine and norepinephrine that were present in their bloodstreams. Ludders et al. (1999) showed death during drowning occurred from hypoxia and anoxia; thus, animals experienced hypoxemia. Ludders et al. (1999) reported carbon dioxide narcosis did not occur in drowning animals until the mercury levels in the arterial blood of animals exceeded 95 millimeters. Therefore, Ludders et al. (1999) also concluded drowning did not meet the definition of euthanasia. This conclusion was based on animals not dying rapidly from carbon dioxide narcosis (Ludders et al. 1999).

Death by drowning in the classical sense is caused by the 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 narcosis induced by carbon dioxide, and the American Veterinary Medical Association has stated the use of carbon dioxide is acceptable (Gilbert and Gofton 1982, Noonan 1998, American Veterinary Medical Association 2013). Gilbert and Gofton (1982) reported that after beaver were trapped and they entered the water, the beaver struggled for two to five minutes, followed by a period of reflexive responses. Andrews et al. (1993) stated 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 they stated anoxia might have removed much of the sensory perception by five to seven minutes post submersion.

However, Gilbert and Gofton (1982) have been criticized because levels of carbon dioxide 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 carbon dioxide narcosis when they died (letter from V. Nettles, D.V.M., Ph.D., Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, to W. MacCallum, MDFW, June 15, 1998). Adding to the controversy, Clausen and Ersland (1970) did measure carbon dioxide in the blood for submersed restrained beaver; yet, none of the beaver in their study died, so Clausen and Ersland (1970) could not determine if beaver died of carbon dioxide narcosis. Clausen and Ersland (1970) demonstrated that carbon dioxide increased in arterial blood while beaver were submersed and carbon dioxide was retained in the tissues. While Clausen and Ersland (1970) did measure the amounts of carbon dioxide in the blood of submersed beaver, they did not attempt to measure the analgesic effect of carbon dioxide buildup to the beaver (letter from V. Nettles, D.V.M., Ph.D., Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, to W. MacCallum, MDFW, June 15, 1998). When beaver were trapped using foothold traps with intent to "*drown*", the beaver exhibit a flight response. Gracely and Sternberg (1999) reported that there is stress-induced analgesia resulting in reduced pain sensitivity during fight or flight responses. Environmental stressors that animals experience during flight or fight activate the same stress-induced analgesia (Gracely and Sternberg 1999).

The use of drowning trap sets has been a traditional wildlife management technique in trapping aquatic rodents, such as beaver and muskrat. Trapper education manuals and other manuals written by wildlife biologists recommend drowning sets for foothold 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 and muskrat. For example, a drowning set attachment should be used with foothold traps when capturing beaver to prevent the animals from injuring themselves 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, along with the trap, less visible and prevents injury from the trapped animal (*i.e.*, bites and scratches) to people who may otherwise approach a restrained animal. Furthermore, the sight of dead animals may offend some people. Drowning places 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 a pond with a soft bottom, but those sites would be suitable for foothold traps.

Although rarely used by WS, WS concludes that using drowning trap sets are acceptable and WS recognizes some people disagree. WS based those conclusions on the short time period of a drowning event, the possible analgesic effect of carbon dioxide buildup, the minimal, if any, pain or distress on drowning animals, the American Veterinary Medical Association acceptance of hypoxemia as euthanasia, and the American Veterinary Medical Association acceptance of a minimum of pain and distress during euthanasia. In addition, the best management practice trapping standards for beaver and muskrat allow for the use of submersion sets (Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies 2014) and the current

acceptance of catching and drowning muskrats and beaver approved by International Humane Trapping Standards (Fur Institute of Canada 2009).

Research and development by WS has improved the selectivity and humaneness of management techniques. Research is continuing to bring new findings and products into practical use. Until new findings and products were found practical, a certain amount of animal suffering could occur when some methods were used in situations where non-lethal damage management methods were not practical or effective. As stated previously, research suggests that some methods, such as restraint in foothold traps or changes in the blood chemistry of trapped animals, indicate "*stress*" (Kreeger et al. 1990). However, such research has not yet progressed to the development of objective, quantitative measurements of pain or stress for use in evaluating humaneness (Bateson 1991, Sharp and Saunders 2008, Sharp and Saunders 2011).

Personnel from WS would be experienced and professional in their use of management methods. Consequently, management methods would be implemented in the most humane manner possible. Many of the methods discussed in Appendix B to alleviate aquatic rodent damage and/or threats in the State could be used under any of the alternatives by those persons experiencing damage regardless of WS' direct involvement. The only methods that may have limited available to those people experiencing damage associated with aquatic rodents would be zinc phosphide, immobilizing drugs, and euthanasia chemicals. Therefore, the issue of humaneness associated with methods would be similar across any of the alternatives since those methods could be employed by other entities in the absence of WS' involvement. Those persons who view a particular method as humane or inhumane would likely continue to view those methods as humane or inhumane under any of the alternatives. SOPs that would be incorporated into WS' activities to ensure methods were used by WS as humanely as possible are listed in Chapter 3.

Alternative 2 – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

The issue of humaneness of methods under this alternative would be similar to the humaneness issues discussed under Alternative 1 (proposed action). This similarity would be derived from WS' recommendation of methods that some people may consider inhumane. WS would not directly be involved with damage management activities under this alternative. However, the recommendation of the use of methods would likely result in the requester employing those methods. Therefore, by recommending methods and thus a requester employing those methods, the issue of humaneness would be similar to Alternative 1 (proposed action). Under Alternative 2, WS would recommend the use of euthanasia methods pursuant to WS Directive 2.505. However, the person requesting assistance would determine what methods to use to euthanize or kill a live-captured animal under Alternative 2.

WS would instruct and demonstrate the proper use and placement of methodologies to increase effectiveness in capturing target aquatic rodent species and to ensure methods were used in such a way as to minimize pain and suffering. However, the efficacy of methods employed by a cooperator would be based on the skill and knowledge of the requester in resolving the threat to safety or damage situation despite WS' demonstration. Therefore, a lack of understanding of the behavior of aquatic rodents or improperly identifying the damage caused by aquatic rodents along with inadequate knowledge and skill in using methodologies to resolve the damage or threat could lead to incidents with a greater probability of being perceived as inhumane. In those situations, the potential for pain and suffering would likely be regarded as greater than discussed in Alternative 1 (proposed action).

Alternative 3 – No Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Conducted by WS

Under this alternative, WS would not be involved with any aspect of aquatic rodent damage management in Mississippi. Those people experiencing damage or threats associated with aquatic rodents could continue to use those methods legally available. Those methods would likely be considered inhumane by those persons who would consider methods proposed under any alternative as inhumane. The issue of humaneness would likely be directly linked to the methods legally available to the public since methods are often labeled as inhumane by segments of society no matter the entity employing those methods.

The humaneness of methods would be based on the skill and knowledge of the person employing those methods. A lack of understanding of the target species or methods used could lead to an increase in situations perceived as being inhumane to wildlife despite the method used. Despite the lack of involvement by WS under this alternative, those methods perceived as inhumane by certain individuals and groups would still be available to the public to use to resolve damage and threats caused by aquatic rodents. Under Alternative 3, euthanasia or killing of live-captured animals would also be determined by those persons employing methods to live-captured wildlife.

Issue 6 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on the Regulated Harvest of Aquatic Rodents

The populations of the aquatic rodent species addressed in this assessment are sufficient to allow for annual harvest seasons that typically occur during the fall and winter. Hunting and trapping seasons are established by the MDWFP. For many aquatic rodent species considered harvestable during hunting and/or trapping seasons, the estimated number of aquatic rodents harvested during the season could be reported by the MDWFP in published reports.

Alternative 1 - Continue the Current Adaptive Integrated Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Program (No Action/Proposed Action)

The magnitude of lethal removal addressed in this alternative would be low when compared to the mortality of those species from all known sources. When WS' proposed removal of aquatic rodents was included as part of the known mortality of those species and compared to the estimated populations, the impact on those species' populations was below the level of removal required to lower population levels.

With oversight of aquatic rodent populations by the MDWFP, the number of aquatic rodents that WS could remove annually would not limit the ability of those persons interested to harvest those aquatic rodent species during the regulated season. All removal by WS would be reported to the MDWFP annually to ensure removal by WS could be incorporated into population management objectives established for aquatic rodent populations. Based on the limited removal proposed by WS and the oversight by the MDWFP, WS' removal of aquatic rodents annually would have no effect on the ability of those persons interested to harvest aquatic rodents during the regulated harvest season.

Alternative 2 – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

Under this alternative, WS would have no direct impact on aquatic rodent populations in the State. If WS recommended the use of non-lethal methods and those non-lethal methods were employed by those persons experiencing damage, aquatic rodents would likely be dispersed from the damage area to areas outside the damage area, which could serve to move those aquatic rodents from those less accessible areas to places accessible to trappers and hunters. Although lethal methods could be recommended by WS under a this alternative, the use of those methods could only occur after the property owner or manager received a permit from the MDWFP or when considered a non-regulated species, could be removed at any time using legally available methods. Lethal removal could also occur during the annual hunting and

trapping season in areas where those activities were permitted. WS' recommendation of lethal methods could lead to an increase in the use of those methods. However, the number of animals that people are authorized to remove and the allowed harvest levels during the regulated hunting/trapping seasons would be determined by the MDWFP. Therefore, WS' recommendation of the use of lethal methods under this alternative would not limit the ability of those persons interested in harvesting aquatic rodents during the regulated season since the MDWFP determines the number of aquatic rodents that may be lethally removed during the hunting/trapping season and under permits.

Alternative 3 – No Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Conducted by WS

WS would have no impact on the ability to harvest aquatic rodents under this alternative. WS would not be involved with any aspect of aquatic rodent damage management. The MDWFP would continue to regulate populations through adjustments of the allowed removal during the regulated harvest season and the continued use of permits.

Issue 7 – Effects of Beaver Removal and Dam Manipulation on the Status of Wetlands in the State

Generally, people consider beaver beneficial where their activities do not compete with human land use or human health and safety (Wade and Ramsey 1986). The opinions and attitudes of individuals, organizations, and communities vary greatly and are primarily influenced and formed by the benefits and/or damage directly experienced by each individual (Hill 1982, Baker and Hill 2003). 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 and desired assistance with beaver pond management (Hill 1976, Woodward et al. 1985). In some situations, the damage and threats caused by beaver outweigh the benefits (Grasse and Putnam 1955, Woodward et al. 1985, Novak 1987).

Concern has been expressed regarding the potential effects of Alternative 1 (proposed action) and the alternatives on wetland ecosystems associated with activities that could be conducted to address beaver damage or threats. Concerns have been raised that removing and/or modifying beaver dams in an area would result in the loss of wetland habitat and the plant and animal species associated with those wetlands. In addition, concerns are often raised regarding the use of lethal methods to remove beaver to alleviate damage or threats. If beaver were lethally removed from an area and any associated beaver dam was removed or breached, the manipulation of water levels by removing/breaching the dam could prevent the establishment of wetlands in areas where water has been impounded by beaver dams for an extended period.

Over time, the impounding of water associated with beaver dams can establish new wetlands. Because beaver dams may involve waters of the United States, the removal of a beaver dam is regulated under Section 404 of the CWA. The United States Army Corps Of Engineers and the EPA regulatory definition of a wetland (40 CFR 232.2) is "[t]*hose 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*."

Although beaver can cause damage to resources, there can be many benefits associated with beaver and beaver activities. Beaver can provide ecological benefits associated with the creation of wetland habitats (*e.g.*, see Munther 1982, Wright et al. 2002, Rosell et al. 2005, Pollock et al. 2007, Fouty 2003, Fouty 2008, Hood and Bayley 2008, Taylor et al. 2009, Pollock et al. 2012, Pollock et al. 2014). Beaver can also provide aesthetic and recreational opportunities for wildlife observation (Wade and Ramsey 1986, Ringleman 1991), improve water quality (Muller-Schwarze and Sun 2003), and provide cultural and economic gains from fur harvest (Hill 1976, McNeely 1995, Lisle 1996, Lisle 2003).

Beaver impoundments can increase surface and groundwater storage, which can help reduce problems with flooding by slowing the downstream movement of water during high-flow events and help to mitigate the adverse effects of drought (Wade and Ramsey 1986, Naiman et al. 1988, Hey and Phillips 1995, Westbrook et al. 2006, Fouty 2003, Fouty 2008). Hood and Bayley (2008) determined that the presence of beaver could help reduce the loss of open water wetlands during warm, dry years. The presence of beaver impoundments in riverine systems of the Rocky Mountains could affect groundwater recharge and the ability of the water table to withstand drought effects (Westbrook et al. 2006). The presence of active beaver lodges accounted for over 80% of the variability in the amount of open water present in the mixed-wood boreal region of east-central Alberta (Hood and Bayley 2008). Hood and Bayley (2008) also found temperature and rainfall influenced the amount of open-water wetlands, but to a much lesser extent than the presence of beaver. During wet and dry years, the presence of beaver was associated with a 9-fold increase in open water area over the same areas when beaver were absent. Hood and Bayley (2008) noted that beaver could mitigate some of the adverse effects of global warming through their ability to create and maintain areas of open water. Beaver ponds and associated wetlands can provide a potential water source for livestock, serve as basins for the entrapment of streambed silt and eroding soil (Hill 1982), and help to filter nutrients from the water; thereby, maintaining the quality of nearby water systems (Arner and Hepp 1989).

Beaver may increase habitat diversity by opening forest habitats via dam building and tree cutting, which can result in a greater mix of plant species, and different-aged plant communities (Hill 1982, Arner and Hepp 1989). The creation of standing water, edge habitat, and plant diversity, all in close proximity, can result in excellent habitat for many wildlife species (Jenkins and Busher 1979, Arner and DuBose 1982, Hill 1982, Arner and Hepp 1989, Medin and Clary 1990, Medin and Clary 1991). The wetland habitat that can be created by beaver ponds can be beneficial to some fish (primarily warm water species), reptiles, amphibians, waterfowl, shorebirds, and furbearers such as muskrats, otter, and mink (Arner and DuBose 1982, Naiman et al. 1986, Miller and Yarrow 1994). For example, in Mississippi, beaver ponds over three years in age were found to have developed plant communities valuable 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 throughout the year and that the value of beaver pond habitat to waterfowl was minor when compared to other species of birds (Novak 1987). Beaver ponds can be beneficial to some T&E species. The USFWS estimates that up to 43% of T&E species rely directly or indirectly on wetlands for their survival (EPA 1995).

Under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1), WS could recommend and/or implement methods to manipulate water levels associated with water impounded by beaver dams to alleviate flooding damage. If the technical assistance alternative was selected, WS could recommend methods to people requesting assistance that could result in the manipulation of water levels associated with water impounded by beaver dams. WS would not be involved with any aspect of activities associated with beaver dams under this alternative. Methods that would generally be available under all the alternatives would include exclusion devices, explosives, and water flow devices (see Appendix B for additional information). However, the availability to breach or remove beaver dams using explosives would be limited under Alternative 2 and Alternative 3, since the property owner or manager seeking to remove or breach a dam would be required to locate a person certified to use explosives to conduct the work. In addition, the use of backhoes or other mechanical methods could be employed by property owners or managers to remove or breach beaver dams under any of the alternatives; however, WS would not operationally employ backhoes or other large machinery to remove or breach dams.

Exclusion devices and water control systems have been used for many years to manipulate the level of water impounded by beaver dams with varying degrees of success (United States General Accounting Office 2001, Taylor and Singleton 2014). Taylor and Singleton (2014) provide a comprehensive

summary of the evolution of flow devices to reduce flooding by beaver. Landowner management objectives play a role in how the efficacy of a level system is perceived (Nolte et al. 2001). Nolte et al. (2001) found that survey respondents classified pond levelers installed to manage wetlands for waterfowl habitat more successful than levelers installed to provide relief from flooding. Langlois and Decker (2004) reported that "*...very few beaver problems...can actually be solved with a water level control device*" with a 4.5% success rate in Massachusetts and a 3% success rate in New York. Nolte et al. (2001) reported only 50% of installed pond levelers in Mississippi met landowner objectives and found that pond levelers placed in sites with high beaver activity more frequently failed if installed without implementing population control measures. Taylor and Singleton (2014) recommended, "*…that natural resource managers avoid using fence systems or pipe systems alone, unless they can be used in areas where maintenance requirements and expected damage are extremely low. Flow devices are not intended to replace lethal control*." Taylor and Singleton (2014) also recommended that flow devices be used "*…as part of integrated management plans where beaver flooding conflicts are expected and where local conditions allow flow-device installation and maintenance*".

Higher success rates have been reported for newer exclusion and water control systems ranging from 87% to 93% (Callahan 2005, Boyles 2006, Simon 2006, Boyles and Owens 2007). Lisle (2003) reported the use of water control devices or a combination of a Beaver Deceiver™ and flow management device virtually eliminated the need for maintenance and beaver removal at 20 sites where clogged culverts and flooded roads had previously been a routine issue.

When using exclusion and water control systems, those methods must be specifically designed to meet the needs of each site (Langlois and Decker 2004). Consequently, devices installed by inexperienced individuals may have a higher failure rate than those installed by a professional (Lisle 1996, Callahan 2003, Boyles 2006, Simon 2006, Spock 2006). Higher success rates reported for newer exclusion and water control devices may be indicative of increased understanding of the kinds of situations where those devices work best. For example, Callahan (2005) noted that exclusion and water control systems installed at culvert sites were more successful than similar systems installed at freestanding dams. Callahan (2003) and Callahan (2005) also provided a list of sites that were not well suited to the use of exclusion or water control devices. Boyles (2006) and Boyles and Owens (2007) reported some of the highest success rates for newer exclusion and water control systems; however, those devices were only tested at culvert sites.

Beaver build dams to raise water levels to meet their needs for security and access to forage. While pond levelers allow for the retention of some water, if the water level does not meet the needs of the beaver, they may move a short distance upstream or downstream and build a new dam, or abandon the area (Callahan 2003, Langlois and Decker 2004). This may merely result in moving the problem to a new landowner or, depending upon site characteristics, the resulting pond may result in new or increased damage problems for the original landowner. McNeely (1995) reported the most common reasons cited for lack of success of water flow devices were clogging caused by debris or silt and beaver construction of additional dams upstream or downstream of the management device. In a study by Callahan (2005), construction of a new dam upstream or downstream of a pond leveler device was the most common cause of failure for free-standing dams (*e.g.*, dams not associated with a culvert or other similar constriction in water flow, 11 of 156 sites). Callahan (2005) also found that insufficient pipe capacity (6 sites), dammed fencing (2 sites), and lack of maintenance (2 sites) were causes for pond leveler failures. Nolte et al. (2001) also reported the need to address problems with dams upstream or downstream of a device. At culvert sites, Callahan (2005) found a lack of maintenance was the primary cause of failure with culvert exclusion devices (4 of 227 sites). Callahan (2005) also found vandalism resulted in the failure of a culvert device at one of the sites. At two culvert sites, Callahan (2005) found dammed fencing reduced or completely impeded the operation of exclusion devices.

Most pond levelers and exclusion devices require maintenance. The amount of maintenance required can vary considerably among sites, depending on site conditions and the type of device (Nolte et al. 2001, Callahan 2005, Boyles 2006, Spock 2006). Stream flow, leaf fall, floods, and beaver activity can continuously bring debris to the intake of a water control device. Ice damage and damage from debris washed downstream during high water events may also trigger the need for maintenance (*e.g*., cleaning out the intake pipe). Although most exclusion and water control devices generally require some level of maintenance, there are reports of devices that have remained effective for a period of years with no maintenance (Nolte et al. 2001). Nolte et al. (2001) reported that post-installation maintenance had been performed by property owners or managers on 70% of the 20 successfully operating Clemson pond levels installed by WS in Mississippi. The most common action was to adjust the riser on the pipe to manipulate water levels. Other maintenance included removal of vegetation and secondary dams built after the installation of the devices. In a survey of individuals who had received assistance with exclusion and water control devices, Simon (2006) found 18 of 36 survey respondents reported maintaining their devices, while installation program staff monitored an additional 10 devices. Of those survey respondents, Simon (2006) found that 61% reported that routine maintenance took 15 minutes or less while 93% reported that maintenance took a half hour or less. Boyles (2006) reported that time spent on device maintenance ranged from one to 4.75 hours per year.

Installation and upkeep of water control devices vary from site to site. For example, transporting materials over long distances in difficult terrain to install devices in remote locations where road access is not available could increase costs compared to the ability to transport materials for installation at a culvert site along a roadway. Callahan (2005) reported that the average cost for an exclusion fence at a culvert was $750 with an average annual maintenance cost of approximately $200. Flexible leveler pipe systems cost an average of $1,000 to install and $100 per year in maintenance, while the average cost to install a combination fence and leveler was $1,400 with approximately $150 per year in maintenance (Callahan 2005). Over a ten-year period, Callahan (2005) estimated the cost of installation and annual maintenance would range from $200 to $290 per year depending on the device installed. Spock (2006) reported that exclusion and/or water control device installation cost ranged from < $600 to over $3,000 dollars, with slightly more than half the systems (58.2%) ranging between $600 and $1,000 to install. In many cases, Spock (2006) found the cost included the first year of maintenance. The more expensive installations tended to be extensive fence and leveler systems or systems with numerous leveler pipes (Spock 2006). Boyles (2006) reported that device installation cost an average of $1,349 per device and $3,180 per site with subsequent annual maintenance cost averaging $19.75 per site per year (Boyles 2006). However, unlike the study by Callahan (2005) the devices evaluated by Boyles (2006) had only been in place for a relatively short time (average time in place 15 months, range 6 to 22 months versus average time in place 36.6 months, range 3 to 75 months). The cost of maintenance may vary over time as site conditions change.

Alternative 1 - Continue the Current Adaptive Integrated Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Program (No Action/Proposed Action)

Manipulation of water levels associated with water impoundments caused by beaver dams could be addressed by WS under this alternative using either dam breaching, dam removal, or the installation of water flow devices, including exclusion devices. Those methods allow dams to be breached or removed to maintain the normal flow of water. Heavy equipment, such as backhoes or bulldozers, would not be used by WS to breach, remove, or install water flow devices. However, heavy machinery could be utilized by a cooperator or their agents. WS may utilize small all-terrain or amphibious vehicles and/or watercraft for transporting personnel, equipment, and supplies to worksites. WS would only remove or breach that portion of the beaver dam blocking the stream or ditch channel.

The breaching or removal of dams could be conducted by hand. Breaching would normally be conducted through incremental stages of debris removal from the dam that allows water levels to be gradually lowered. Breaching of dams would normally occur to limit the potential for flooding downstream by gradually allowing water levels to lower as more of the dam was breached over time. Breaching also minimizes the release of debris and sediment downstream by allowing water to move slowly over or through the dam. Depending on the size of the impoundment, water levels could be slowly lowered over several hours or days when breaching dams. When breaching dams, only that portion of the dam blocking the stream or ditch channel would be altered or breached, with the intent of returning water levels and flow rates to historical levels or to a level that eliminates damage threats that would be acceptable to the property owner or resource manager. Similar to breaching dams, the removal of the dam removes the debris impounding water and restores the normal flow of water.

Beaver dams would generally be breached or removed by hand with a rake. However, explosives would also be available to remove beaver dams. Explosives could potentially be utilized by WS' personnel specially trained and certified to conduct such activities. Explosives are defined as any chemical mixture or device that serves as a blasting agent or detonator. Explosives would generally be used to remove beaver dams that were too large to remove by hand. After a blast, the majority of materials are lifted up and out of the drainage area, away from the water flow. Any remaining fill material still obstructing the channel would normally be 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 those project activities. Explosives would only be used after beaver were removed from the site.

WS' personnel would only utilize binary explosives (*i.e.*, explosives comprised of two parts that must be mixed at the site before they can be detonated as an explosive material) for beaver dam removal, when requested. Binary explosives consist of ammonium nitrate and nitro-methane; however, those two components separated are not classified as explosives until mixed. Therefore, binary explosives would be subject to fewer regulations and controls. However, once mixed, binary explosives would be considered high explosives and subject to all applicable federal and state regulations. Detonating cord and detonators would also be considered explosives and WS would adhere to all applicable state and federal regulations for storage, transportation, and handling. WS' use of explosives and safety procedures would occur in accordance with WS Directive 2.435.

In addition to dam breaching and removal, water flow devices and exclusion methods would also be available for WS to employ during direct operational assistance or to recommend during technical assistance. Several different designs of water flow devices and exclusion methods would be available; however, the intent of all those methods would be to lower water levels by allowing water to flow through the beaver dam using pipes and wire mesh. After installation, beaver dams would be left intact with water levels maintained at desired levels by adjusting the water flow device. Water flow devices and exclusion methods allow beaver to remain at the site and maintain the beaver dam.

Although dams could be breached/removed manually or with binary explosives, those methods can be ineffective because beaver could quickly repair or replace the dam if the beaver were not removed prior to breaching or removing the dam (McNeely 1995). Damage may be effectively reduced in some situations by installing exclusion and water control devices. Exclusion and water control devices can be designed so that the level of the beaver-created water impoundment can be managed to eliminate or minimize damage from flooding while retaining the ecological and recreational benefits derived from beaver impounding water over time. For example, WS may recommend modifications to site and culvert design (Jensen et al. 1999) as a non-lethal way of reducing problems with beaver dams at culverts.

Manipulating water levels impounded by beaver dams under this alternative would generally be conducted to maintain existing stream channels and drainage patterns, and to reduce water levels to alleviate flooding. WS could be requested to assist with manipulation of a beaver dam to alleviate flooding to agricultural crops, timber resources, public property, such as roads and bridges, private property, and water management structures, such as culverts. The intent of breaching or removing beaver dams would not be to drain established wetlands. With few exceptions, requests for assistance received by WS from public and private entities would involve breaching or removing dams to return an area to the condition that existed before the dam had been built, or before the impounded water had been affecting the area long enough for wetland characteristics to become established.

Most activities conducted by WS in Mississippi do not have the potential to affect wetlands, since those activities would not be conducted near or in wetlands. Under this alternative, water levels would be manipulated to return streams, channels, dikes, culverts, and canals to their original function. Most requests to alleviate flooding from impounded water would be associated roads, crops, merchantable timber, pastures, and other types of property or resources that were not previously flooded. Most dams removed would have been created because of recent beaver activity. WS' personnel receive most requests for assistance associated with beaver dams soon after affected resource owners discover damage.

As stated previously, WS could install water control devices or remove up to 3,000 beaver dams annually under this alternative. Upon receiving a request to manipulate the water levels in impoundments caused by beaver dams, WS would visually inspect the dam and the associated water impoundment to determine if characteristics exist at the site that would meet the definition of a wetland under section 404 of the CWA (see 40 CFR 232.2). If wetland conditions were present at the site, the entities requesting assistance from WS would be notified that a permit might be required to manipulate the water levels impounded by the dam and to seek guidance from the MDEQ, the EPA, and/or the United States Army Corps of Engineers pursuant to State laws and the CWA. If the area does not already have hydric soils, it usually takes several years for them to develop and a wetland to become established. This process often takes more than 5 years as indicated by the Swampbuster provision of the Food Security Act. Most beaver dam removal by WS would occur under exemptions stated in 33 CFR parts 323 and 330 of Section 404 of the CWA or parts 3821 and 3822 of the Food Security Act. However, manipulating water levels associated with some beaver dams could trigger certain portions of Section 404 that require landowners to obtain permits from the United States Army Corps of Engineers prior to removing a blockage. WS' personnel would determine the proper course of action upon inspecting a beaver dam impoundment. Appendix D describes the procedures used by WS to assure compliance with the pertinent laws and regulations.

The manipulation of water impoundment levels by WS through dam breaching, dam removal, or installation of water flow devices would typically be associated with dams constructed from recent beaver activity and would not have occurred long enough to take on the qualities of a true wetland (*i.e.* hydric soils, hydrophytic vegetation, and hydrological function). WS' activities associated with beaver dam breaching, beaver dam removal, or the installation of flow control device would only be conducted to restore the normal flow of water through drainages, streams, creeks, canals, and other watercourses where flooding damage was occurring or would occur. Activities most often take place on small watershed streams, tributary drainages, and ditches and those activities can best be described as small, one-time projects conducted to restore water flow through previously existing channels. Beaver dam breaching or removal would not affect substrate or the natural course of streams since only the dam would be breached or removed.

In the majority of instances, beaver dam removal would be accomplished by manual methods (*i.e.*, hand tools). WS' personnel would not utilize heavy equipment, such as trackhoes or backhoes, for beaver dam removal. In some cases, small explosive charges may be used by certified, trained personnel. These

explosives would be placed in a manner to remove only that portion of the dam necessary to alleviate flooding. In addition, explosives are placed to lift and remove debris out from the drainage, stream, or creek flow to prevent unnecessary sediment or debris downstream. In all cases, only the portion of the dam blocking the stream or ditch channel would be breached or removed. In some instances, WS would install water flow devices to manage water levels at the site of a breached beaver dam. From FY 2009 through FY 2013, WS breached or removed 9,074 beaver dams (7,948 by hand and 1,126 by using explosives) during damage management activities associated with beaver. WS would use hand tools to breach or remove dams. Dams could be breached or removed in accordance with exemptions from Section 404 permit requirements established by regulation or as allowed under nationwide permits (NWPs) granted under Section 404 of the CWA (see Appendix D). The majority of impoundments that WS would remove would only be in existence for a few months. Therefore, those impoundments would generally not be considered wetlands as defined by 40 CFR 232.2 and those impoundments would not possess the same wildlife habitat values as established wetlands.

In those situations where a non-federal cooperator had already made the decision to breach or remove a beaver damage to manipulate water levels with or without WS' assistance, WS' participation in carrying out the action would not affect the environmental status quo.

Additional concern has been raised relating to the lethal removal of beaver by WS or the recommendation of lethal methods to alleviate damage or threats of damage under this alternative. Beaver lethally removed could be replaced by other beaver requiring additional assistance later. Houston (1995) indicated that beaver tend to reoccupy vacant habitats. The likelihood that a site would be recolonized by beaver varies depending on many factors. For example, removal of beaver and a beaver dam from a relatively uniform section of irrigation canal may resolve the problem for an extended period because the relatively uniform nature of the canal does not predispose a site to repeat problems. Recolonization would also depend on the proximity and density of the beaver population in the surrounding area. Isolated areas or areas with a lower density of beaver would normally take longer for beaver to recolonize than areas with higher beaver densities. Activities conducted under Alternative 1 (proposed action) would be directed at specific beaver and/or beaver colonies and would not be conducted to suppress the overall beaver population in the State.

In accordance with WS Directive 2.101, preference would be given to non-lethal methods where practical and effective. Although use of exclusion and water control devices could greatly reduce the need for lethal beaver removal, beaver removal may still be needed in some situations even though a flow device or water control system had been installed (Wood et al. 1994, Nolte et al. 2001, Simon 2006, Spock 2006). Callahan (2005) states the trapping of beaver to alleviate damage should occur "*...where a flow device is either not feasible or fails, the water level needs to be drastically lowered, or the landowner wants no beavers or ponds on their property*". Spock (2006) reported that beaver had to be trapped out of one site when an exclusion system was augmented by the installation of a water control device. Lisle (1996) noted that it might be necessary to remove beaver that have learned to dam around exclusion and water control devices. In some instances, trapping during the annual trapping season for beaver continued to occur at or near the area where water control devices were installed but was not prompted by the failure of the devices (Lisle 1996, Simon 2006, Spock 2006).

Exclusion and water control devices may not be the most effective method in specific types of terrain and are not suitable for every site (Wood et al. 1994, Nolte et al. 2001, Langlois and Decker 2004, Callahan 2005). Exclusion devices and water control devices may not be suitable for man-made, uniform channels, such as agricultural drainage ditches and irrigation canals. In addition, exclusion devices and water control devices may not be suitable for reservoirs, areas where human health, property or safety would be threatened with even minor elevation in water level, and areas where the landowner has expressed zero tolerance for beaver activity on their property (Callahan 2003, Callahan 2005, Simon 2006). Water

control devices may be ineffective in beaver ponds in broad, low-lying areas because even a slight increase in water depth can result in a substantial increase in the area flooded (Organ et al. 1996). Exclusion and water control systems would not resolve problems related to beaver construction of bank dens. Depending upon site characteristics, beaver may build bank dens instead of lodges by burrowing into banks, levees, and other earthen impoundments. When bank dens are built in earthen levees or in banks supporting roadways or railroad tracks, they can greatly weaken the earthen structure. Burrowing into embankments can weaken the integrity of impoundments. Burrows allow water to infiltrate embankments, which can allow water to seep through the embankments causing erosion and weakening water impoundments. In those situations, removal of the beaver (either by translocation or by lethal methods) could be the only practical solution to resolve the potential for damage.

Water control devices may also be inappropriate in areas that are managed for aquatic species that need free-flowing water conditions and gravel substrate to survive. The still water and silt that accumulates behind beaver dams can be detrimental to some species. In addition, beaver dams could impede the movement of fish upstream. Avery (2004) found the removal of beaver dams resulted in substantial increases in the stream area where trout could be found. For example, a 9.8-mile treatment zone on the North Branch of the Pemebonwon River in Wisconsin and an additional 17.9 miles of seven tributaries to the treatment section of the river were maintained free of beaver dams since 1986. In 1982, prior to dam removal, wild brook trout were found in only four of the seven tributaries within the treatment zone and at only four of the 12 survey stations. In the spring of 2000, wild brook trout were present in all seven tributaries and at all 12 survey stations (Avery 2004). In some cases, water control devices could be modified to improve fish passage (Close 2003). Although the presence of beaver dams could be detrimental to some species of fish, some fish species may benefit from the presence of a beaver dam (Rosell et al. 2005, Pollock et al. 2007, Taylor et al. 2009, Pollock et al. 2012, Pollock et al. 2014).

Although beaver can serve a valuable role in wetland ecology, the presence of beaver dams in existing wetlands that property owners or managers manage intensively could be a concern to those entities. In those wetlands, property owners or managers often use man-made water control structures to manage the water level in the wetland area in order to maximize habitat value for waterfowl and specific types of wetland-dependent wildlife. Therefore, the presence of beaver dams can impede the use of those structures or cause elevated water levels that are contrary to the objectives of the wetland. While general elevations or reductions in water levels might conceivably be achieved by installing pipe systems through beaver dams in managed wetlands, the devices tend to be more difficult to adjust than man-made water control structures. More importantly, the primary difficulty associated with pipe systems in those situations comes when property owners or managers use drawdowns to achieve wetland management objectives. Drawdowns generally involve reducing the water level until large sections of mudflat are exposed. Many plant species valuable to waterfowl and other wetland bird species need exposed mudflats to sprout. Shorebirds can also use the mudflats to forage for invertebrates. The extent of the water level reduction conflicts with the beaver's desire for water deep enough to provide protection, and water area of sufficient extent to provide relatively easy access to foraging sites. The extent of the water level reduction during a drawdown would likely increase the risk of new dam creation in other locations that may cause new problems (Callahan 2003).

Alternative 2 – Aquatic Rodent Damage Management by WS through Technical Assistance Only

The issues regarding the effects on wetlands under this alternative would likely be similar to those issues discussed under Alternative 1 (proposed action). This similarity would be based on WS' recommendation of methods to manage damage caused by beaver and the recommendation of methods to manage the water impounded by beaver dams. Based on information provided by the person requesting assistance or based on site visits, WS could recommend that a landowner or manager manipulate beaver dams to reduce flooding damage or threats of damage. WS would not be directly involved with conducting activities

associated with the manipulation of beaver dams under this alternative. However, the recommendation of the use of methods would likely result in the requester employing those methods or employing an agent to employ them. Therefore, by recommending methods and thus a requester employing those methods, the potential for those methods to reduce the presence of impounded water would be similar to Alternative 1 (proposed action).

WS could instruct and demonstrate the proper use and placement of flow control and exclusionary devices, as well as recommend the breaching or removal of beaver dams, when appropriate. WS would also assist requesters by providing information on permit requirements and which state and/or federal agencies need to be contacted by the requester to obtain appropriate permits to manipulate the levels of water impounded by beaver dams.

The efficacy of methods employed by a cooperator would be based on the skill and knowledge of the requester or their agent despite WS' recommendations or demonstration. Therefore, a lack of understanding of the behavior of beaver along with inadequate knowledge and skill in using methodologies to resolve flooding could lead to incidents with a greater probability of unforeseen impacts to wetlands. In those situations, the potential for dam manipulation to affect the status of wetlands adversely would likely be regarded as greater than those affects discussed under the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1).

WS would recommend the landowner or manager seek and obtain the proper permits to manipulate water levels impounded by beaver dams under this alternative; however, WS would not be responsible for ensuring that appropriate permits were obtained, proper methods were implemented for manipulating water levels, or for reviewing sites for the presence of T&E species. Those responsibilities would be incurred by the property owner/manager and/or their designated agent who may or may not properly follow WS' recommendations.

Alternative 3 – No Aquatic Rodent Damage Management Conducted by WS

Under this alternative, WS would not be involved with any aspect of managing water levels associated with beaver dam impoundments. Under this alternative, WS would not be involved with any aspect of managing damage associated with beaver in the State, including technical assistance. Due to the lack of involvement in managing damage caused by beaver, no impacts to wetlands would occur directly from WS. This alternative would not prevent those entities experiencing threats or damage due to flooding from manipulating water levels associated with beaver dams in the absence of WS' assistance. Those methods described previously would be available to other entities to breach or remove dams, including explosives and water flow devices. However, the use of explosives to remove dams under this alternative would be limited to those persons trained and licensed to use explosives. A property owner or manager could seek the services of an entity trained and licensed to use explosives to remove beaver dams under this alternative. The direct burden of implementing permitted methods would be placed on those persons experiencing damage.

Since the same methods would be available to resolve or prevent beaver damage or threats related to beaver dams, effects on the status of wetlands in the State from the use of those methods would be similar between the alternatives. However, manipulating water levels by those persons not experienced in identifying wetland characteristics or unaware of the requirement to seek appropriate permits to alter areas considered as a wetland, could increase threats to wetlands and the associated flora and fauna.

4.2 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS OF ALTERNATIVE 1 BY ISSUE

Cumulative impacts, as defined by the 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 Alternative 1 and Alternative 2, WS would address damage associated with aquatic rodents either by providing technical assistance only (Alternative 2) or by providing technical assistance and direct operational assistance (Alternative 1) in the State. WS would be the primary federal agency conducting direct operational aquatic rodent damage management in the State under Alternative 1 and Alternative 2. However, other federal, state, and private entities could also be conducting aquatic rodent damage management in the State.

WS does not normally conduct direct damage management activities concurrently with such agencies or other entities in the same area, but may conduct damage management activities at adjacent sites within the same period. In addition, commercial companies may conduct damage management activities in the same area. The potential cumulative impacts could occur from either WS' damage management program activities over time or from the aggregate effects of those activities combined with the activities of other agencies and private entities. Through ongoing coordination and collaboration between WS, the TVA, and the MDWFP, activities of each agency and the removal of aquatic rodents would be available. Damage management activities in the State would be monitored to evaluate and analyze activities to ensure they were within the scope of analysis of this EA.

The activities proposed in the alternatives would have a negligible effect on atmospheric conditions including the global climate. Meaningful direct or indirect emissions of greenhouse gases would not occur because of any of the proposed alternatives. Those alternatives would meet the requirements of applicable laws, regulations, and Executive Orders including the Clean Air Act and Executive Order 13514.

Issue 1 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on Target Aquatic Rodent Populations

The issue of the effects on target aquatic rodent species arises from the use of non-lethal and lethal methods to address the need for reducing damage and threats. As part of an integrated methods approach to managing damage and threats, WS could apply both lethal and non-lethal methods when requested by those persons experiencing damage.

Non-lethal methods could dissuade, disperse, or otherwise make an area unattractive to aquatic rodents causing damage; thereby, reducing the presence of aquatic rodents at the site and potentially the immediate area around the site where non-lethal methods were employed. WS' employees would give non-lethal methods priority when addressing requests for assistance (see WS Directive 2.101). However, WS would not necessarily employ non-lethal methods to resolve every request for assistance if deemed inappropriate by WS' personnel using the WS Decision Model. For example, if a cooperator requesting assistance, had already attempted to disperse aquatic rodents using non-lethal harassment methods, WS would not necessarily employ those methods again during direct operational assistance since those methods had already been proven to be ineffective in that particular situation. WS and other entities could use non-lethal methods to exclude, harass, and disperse target wildlife from areas where damage or threats were occurring. When effective, non-lethal methods would disperse aquatic rodents from an area resulting in a reduction in the presence of those aquatic rodents at the site where WS or other entities employed those methods. However, aquatic rodents responsible for causing damage or threats would

likely disperse to other areas with minimal impacts occurring to those species' populations. WS would not employ non-lethal methods over large geographical areas or apply those methods at such intensity that essential resources (*e.g.*, food sources, habitat) would be unavailable for extended durations or over a wide geographical scope that long-term adverse effects would occur to a species' population. WS and most people generally regard non-lethal methods as having minimal impacts on overall populations of wildlife since individuals of those species would be unharmed. Therefore, the use of non-lethal methods would not have cumulative effects on aquatic rodent populations in the State.

WS' employees could employ lethal methods to resolve damage associated with those target aquatic rodent species identified by WS as responsible for causing damage or threats to human safety. However, lethal removal by WS would only occur after receiving a request for such assistance and only after the MDWFP authorized WS to remove the target species, when required. Therefore, the use of lethal methods could result in local reductions in the number of target animals in the area where damage or threats were occurring since WS would remove those target individuals from the population. WS would often employ lethal methods to reinforce non-lethal methods and to remove aquatic rodents that have been identified as causing damage or posing a threat to human safety. The use of lethal methods could therefore result in local reductions of aquatic rodents in the area where damage or threats were occurring. The number of aquatic rodents removed from a species' population using lethal methods under the proposed action (Alternative 1) would be dependent on the number of requests for assistance received, the number of aquatic rodents involved with the associated damage or threat, and the efficacy of methods employed.

WS would maintain ongoing contact with the MDWFP to ensure activities were within management objectives for those species. WS would submit annual activity reports to the MDWFP. The MDWFP would have the opportunity to monitor the total removal of aquatic rodents from all sources and could factor in survival rates from predation, disease, and other mortality data.

WS would monitor removal by comparing numbers of animals killed with overall populations or trends in populations to assure the magnitude of removal was below the level that would cause undesired adverse effects to the viability of native species populations. This EA analyzed the potential cumulative impacts on the populations of target aquatic rodent species from the implementation of the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) in Section 4.1.

Evaluation of activities relative to target species indicated that program activities would likely have no cumulative adverse effects on aquatic rodent populations when targeting those species responsible for damage at the levels addressed in this EA. WS' actions would be occurring simultaneously, over time, with other natural processes and human generated changes that are currently taking place. These activities include, but would not be limited to:

- Natural mortality of aquatic rodents
- Mortality through vehicle strikes, aircraft strikes, and illegal harvest
- Human-induced mortality of aquatic rodents through annual hunting and trapping seasons
- Human-induced mortality of aquatic rodents through private damage management activities
- Human and naturally induced alterations of wildlife habitat
- Annual and perennial cycles in wildlife population densities
- Precipitation levels

All those factors play a role in the dynamics of aquatic rodent populations. In many circumstances, requests for assistance arise when some or all of those elements have contrived to elevate target species populations or place target species at a juncture to cause damage to resources. The actions taken to

minimize or eliminate damage would be constrained as to scope, duration, and intensity for the purpose of minimizing or avoiding impacts to the environment. WS would use the Decision Model to evaluate the damage occurring, including other affected elements and the dynamics of the damaging species, to determine appropriate strategies to minimize effects on environmental elements. The Model would allow WS to implement damage management actions and to monitor those actions to adjust/cease damage management actions, which would allow WS to take into consideration other influences in the environment, such as those listed above, in order to avoid cumulative effects on target species (Slate et al. 1992).

With management authority over aquatic rodent populations in the State, the MDWFP could adjust removal levels, including the removal of WS, to ensure population objectives for aquatic rodents were achieved. Consultation and reporting of removal by WS would ensure the MDWFP had the opportunity to consider any activities WS conducts.

WS' removal of aquatic rodents in Mississippi from FY 2009 through FY 2013 was of a low magnitude when compared to the total known removal of those species and the populations of those species. The MDWFP could consider all known removal when determining population objectives for aquatic rodents and could adjust the number of aquatic rodents that could be harvested during the regulated harvest season and the number of aquatic rodents removed for damage management purposes to achieve the population objectives. Any removal of regulated aquatic rodent species by WS would occur at the discretion of the MDWFP. Any aquatic rodent population declines or increases would be the collective objective for aquatic rodent populations established by the MDWFP through the regulation of lethal removal. Therefore, the cumulative removal of aquatic rodents annually or over time by WS would occur at the desire of the MDWFP as part of management objectives for aquatic rodents in the State. No cumulative adverse effects on target and non-target wildlife would be expected from WS' damage management activities based on the following considerations:

Historical outcomes of WS' damage management activities on wildlife

WS would conduct damage management activities associated with aquatic rodents only at the request of a cooperator to reduce damage that was occurring or to prevent damage from occurring and only after methods to be used were agreed upon by all parties involved. WS would monitor activities to ensure any potential impacts were identified and addressed. WS would work closely with resource agencies to ensure damage management activities would not adversely affect aquatic rodent populations and that WS' activities were considered as part of management goals established by those agencies. Historically, WS' activities to manage damage caused by aquatic rodents in Mississippi have not reached a magnitude that would cause adverse effects to aquatic rodent populations in the State.

SOPs built into the WS program

SOPs are designed to reduce the potential negative effects of WS' actions on aquatic rodents, and have been tailored to respond to changes in wildlife populations that could result from unforeseen environmental changes. This would include those changes occurring from sources other than WS. Alteration of activities would be defined through SOPs, and implementation would be insured through monitoring, in accordance with the WS Decision Model (see WS Directive 2.201; Slate et al. 1992).

Issue 2 - Effects on Non-target Wildlife Species Populations, Including T&E Species

Potential effects on non-target species from conducting aquatic rodent damage management arise from the use of non-lethal and lethal methods to alleviate or prevent those damages. The use of non-lethal methods during activities to reduce or prevent damage caused by aquatic rodents has the potential to

exclude, dissuade, disperse, or capture non-target wildlife. However, the effects of non-lethal methods are often temporary and often do not involve the removal (killing) of non-target wildlife species. When using exclusion devices and/or repellents, both target and non-target wildlife can be prevented from accessing the resource being damaged. Since exclusion and repellents do not involve lethal removal, cumulative impacts on non-target species from the use of exclusionary methods or repellents would not occur but would likely disperse those individuals to other areas. Exclusionary methods and repellents can require constant maintenance to ensure effectiveness. Therefore, the use of exclusionary devices and repellents would be somewhat limited to small, high-value areas and not used to the extent that non-targets would be excluded from large areas that would cumulatively impact populations from the inability to access a resource, such as potential food sources or shelter. The use of visual and auditory harassment and dispersion methods would generally be temporary with non-target species returning after the cessation of those activities. Dispersal and harassment do not involve the removal (killing) of non-target species and similar to exclusionary methods would not be used to the extent or at a constant level that would prevent non-targets from accessing critical resources that would threaten survival of a population.

The use of lethal methods or those methods used to live-capture target species followed by euthanasia also have the potential to affect non-target wildlife through the removal (killing) or capture of non-target species. Capture methods used are often methods that would be set to confine or restrain target wildlife after being triggered by a target individual. Capture methods would be employed in such a manner as to minimize the threat to non-target species by placement in those areas frequently used by target wildlife, using baits or lures that are as species specific as possible, and modification of individual methods to exclude non-targets from capture. Most methods described in Appendix B are methods that would be employed to confine or restrain wildlife that would be subsequently euthanized using humane methods. With all live-capture devices, non-target wildlife captured could be released on site if determined to be able to survive following release. SOPs are intended to ensure removal of non-target wildlife was minimal during the use of methods to capture target wildlife.

The use of firearms and euthanasia methods would essentially be selective for target species since identification of an individual would be made prior to the application of the method. Euthanasia methods would be applied through direct application to target wildlife. Therefore, the use of those methods would not affect non-target species.

WS would track and record chemical methods to ensure proper accounting of used and unused chemicals occur. All chemicals would be stored and transported according with WS' Directives and relevant federal, state, and local regulations. Appendix B describes the chemical methods available for use under Alternative 1 (proposed action). WS' personnel would apply repellents directly to the affected resource. Similarly, WS' employees would apply immobilizing drugs or euthanasia chemicals directly to target animals. When using zinc phosphide for muskrats or nutria, WS would pre-bait areas with untreated bait during an acclimation period so target animals would become acclimated to feeding at the location. The acclimation period also allows WS' personnel to observe for non-target activity at the site. If WS' personnel observed non-targets feeding on untreated bait during the acclimation period, WS' personnel would abandon those locations. Per label requirements, baits would consist of apples, carrots, pears, and/or sweet potatoes, which are highly attractive to muskrat and nutria. WS' personnel would place treated baits in areas where non-target exposure would be minimal (*e.g.*, on floating raft) or in areas (*e*.g., beside a den entrance) in accordance with the label requirements. WS' personnel would use all chemical methods according to product labels, which would ensure that proper use would minimize non-target threats. WS' adherence to Directives and SOPs governing the use of chemicals would also ensure non-target hazards would be minimal.

Repellents may be used or recommended by the WS program in Mississippi to manage aquatic rodent damage. The active ingredients in numerous commercial repellents are capsaicin, pepper oil, and

carnivore urine. Characteristics of these chemicals and potential use patterns indicate that no cumulative impacts related to environmental fate would be expected from their use in WS' programs in Mississippi when used according to label requirements.

The amount of chemicals used or stored by WS would be minimal to ensure human safety. All label requirements of repellents and toxicants would be followed to minimize non-target hazards. Based on this information, WS' use of chemical methods, as part of the proposed action (Alternative 1), would not have cumulative impacts on non-targets.

The methods described in Appendix B have a high level of selectivity and could be employed using SOPs to ensure minimal impacts to non-target species. The unintentional removal of wildlife would likely be limited and would not reach a magnitude where adverse effects would occur. Based on the methods available to resolve aquatic rodent damage and/or threats, WS does not anticipate the number of non-targets lethally removed to reach a magnitude where declines in those species' populations would occur. Therefore, removal under the proposed action (Alternative 1) of non-targets would not cumulatively affect non-target species. WS' has reviewed the T&E species listed by the MDWFP, the USFWS, and the National Marine Fisheries Service, and has determined that damage management activities proposed by WS would not likely adversely affect T&E species. Cumulative impacts would be minimal on non-targets from any of the alternatives discussed**.**

Issue 3 - Effects of Damage Management Methods on Human Health and Safety

Non-chemical methods described in Appendix B would be used within a limited period, would not be residual, and do not possess properties capable of inducing cumulative effects on human health and safety. Non-chemical methods would be used after careful consideration of the safety of those persons employing methods and to the public. When possible, capture methods would be employed where human activity was minimal to ensure the safety of the public. Capture methods also require direct contact to trigger ensuring that those methods, when left undisturbed, would have no effect on human safety. All methods would be agreed upon by the requesting entities, which would be made aware of the safety issues of those methods when entering into a MOU, work initiation document, or another comparable document between WS and the cooperating entity. SOPs would also ensure the safety of the public from those methods used to capture or remove wildlife. Firearms used to alleviate or prevent damage, though hazards do exist, would be employed to ensure the safety of employees and the public.

Personnel employing non-chemical methods would continue to be trained to be proficient in the use of those methods to ensure the safety of the applicator and to the public. Based on the use patterns of non-chemical methods, those methods would not cumulatively affect human safety.

Repellents to disperse aquatic rodents from areas of application would be available. Repellents must be registered with the EPA according to the FIFRA and registered with the MDAC. Many of the repellents currently available for use have active ingredients that are naturally occurring and are generally regarded as safe. Although some hazards exist from the use of repellents, hazards occur primarily to the handler and applicator. When repellents were applied according to label requirements, no effects to human safety would be expected. Given the use patterns of repellents, no cumulative effects would occur to human safety.

When using explosives to remove beaver dams, WS would only use binary explosives (see Appendix B). WS' employees who conduct activities using binary explosives would receive training in accordance with WS Directive 2.435. WS personnel who use explosives undergo extensive training and are certified to safely use explosives. WS' employees must adhere to the safe storage, transportation and use policies

and regulations of WS, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Department of Transportation.

WS has received no reports or documented any effects to human safety from WS' aquatic rodent damage management activities conducted from FY 2009 through FY 2013. No cumulative effects from the use of those methods discussed in Appendix B would be expected given the use patterns of those methods for resolving aquatic rodent damage in the State.

Issue 4 - Effects on the Aesthetic Values of Aquatic Rodents

The activities of WS would result in the removal of aquatic rodents from those areas where damage or threats were occurring. Therefore, the aesthetic value of aquatic rodents in those areas where damage management activities were being conducted would be reduced. However, for some people, the aesthetic value of a more natural environment would be gained by reducing aquatic rodent densities, including the return of native species that may be suppressed or dispersed by non-native species.

Some people experience a decrease in aesthetic enjoyment of wildlife because they feel that overabundant species are objectionable and interfere with their enjoyment of wildlife in general. Continued increases in numbers of individuals or the continued presence of aquatic rodents may lead to further degradation of some people's enjoyment of any wildlife or the natural environment. The actions of WS could positively affect the aesthetic enjoyment of wildlife for those people that were being adversely affected by the target species identified in this EA.

Aquatic rodent population objectives would be established and enforced by the MDWFP by regulating harvest during the statewide hunting and trapping seasons after consideration of other known mortality factors. Therefore, WS would have no direct impact on the status of aquatic rodent populations since removal by WS would occur at the discretion of the MDWFP. Since those persons seeking assistance could remove aquatic rodents from areas where damage was occurring when permitted by the MDWFP, WS' involvement would have no effect on the aesthetic value of aquatic rodents in the area where damage was occurring. When damage caused by aquatic rodents has occurred, any removal of aquatic rodents by the property or resource owner would likely occur whether WS was involved with taking the aquatic rodents or not.

In the wild, few animals in the United States have life spans approaching that of people. Mortality is high among wildlife populations and specific individuals among a species may experience death early in life. Mortality in wildlife populations is a natural occurrence and people who form affectionate bonds with animals experience loss of those animals over time in most instances. A number of professionals in the field of psychology have studied human behavior in response to attachment to pet animals (Gerwolls and Labott 1994, Marks et al. 1994, Zasloff 1996, Archer 1999, Ross and Baron-Sorensen 1998, Meyers 2000). Similar observations were probably applicable to close bonds that could exist between people and wild animals. As observed by researchers in human behavior, normal human responses to loss of loved ones proceed through phases of shock or emotional numbness, sense of loss, grief, acceptance of the loss or what cannot be changed, healing, and acceptance and rebuilding which leads to resumption of normal lives (Lefrancois 1999). Those who lose companion animals, or animals for which they may have developed a bond and affection, are observed to proceed through the same phases as with the loss of human companions (Gerwolls and Labott 1994, Boyce 1998, Meyers 2000). However, they usually establish a bond with other individual animals after such losses. Although they may lose the sense of enjoyment and meaning from the association with those animals that die or are no longer accessible, they usually find a similar meaningfulness by establishing an association with new individual animals or through other relational activities (Weisman 1991). Through this process of coping with the loss and

establishing new affectionate bonds, people may avoid compounding emotional effects resulting from such losses (Lefrancois 1999).

Some aquatic rodents with which people have established affectionate bonds may be removed from some project sites by WS. However, other individuals of the same species would likely continue to be present in the affected area and people would tend to establish new bonds with those remaining animals. In addition, human behavior processes usually result in individuals ultimately returning to normalcy after experiencing the loss of association with a wild animal that might be removed from a specific location. WS' activities would not be expected to have any cumulative effects on this element of the human environment.

Issue 5 - Humaneness and Animal Welfare Concerns of Methods

WS would continue to seek new methods and ways to improve current technology to improve the humaneness of methods used to manage damage caused by wildlife. Cooperation with individuals and organizations involved in animal welfare continues to be an agency priority for the purpose of evaluating strategies and defining research aimed at developing humane methods.

All methods not requiring direct supervision during employment (*e.g.*, live traps) would be checked in accordance with Mississippi laws and regulations to ensure any wildlife confined or restrained were addressed in a timely manner to minimize distress of the animal. All euthanasia methods used for live-captured aquatic rodents would be applied according to WS' directives. Shooting would occur in some situations and personnel would be trained in the proper use of firearms to minimize pain and suffering of aquatic rodents removed by this method.

WS would employ methods as humanely as possible by applying SOPs to minimize pain and that allow wildlife captured to be addressed in a timely manner to minimize distress. Through the establishment of SOPs that guide WS in the use of methods to address damage and threats associated with aquatic rodents in the State, the cumulative impacts on the issue of method humaneness would be minimal. All methods would be evaluated to ensure SOPs were adequate and that wildlife captured were addressed in a timely manner to minimize distress.

Issue 6 - Effects of Damage Management Activities on the Regulated Harvest of Aquatic Rodents

As discussed in this EA, the magnitude of WS' aquatic rodent removal for damage management purposes from FY 2009 through FY 2013 was low when compared to the total removal of aquatic rodents and when compared to the estimated statewide populations of those species. Since removal of aquatic rodents is regulated by the MDWFP, removal by WS that could occur annually and cumulatively would occur pursuant to aquatic rodent population objectives established in the State. WS' removal of aquatic rodents (combined removal) annually to alleviate damage would be a minor component to the known removal that occurs annually by other entities.

The populations of several aquatic rodent species are sufficient to allow for annual harvest seasons that typically occur during the fall and winter. Hunting and trapping seasons are established by the MDWFP.

With oversight of aquatic rodent removal, the MDWFP maintains the ability to regulate removal by WS to meet management objectives for aquatic rodents in the State. Therefore, the cumulative removal of aquatic rodents would be considered as part of the MDWFP objectives for aquatic rodent populations in the State.

Issue 7 – Effects of Beaver Removal and Dam Manipulation on the Status of Wetlands in the State

Beaver build dams primarily in smaller riverine streams (intermittent and perennial brooks, streams, and small rivers) and in drainage areas with dams consisting of mud, sticks and other vegetative materials. Their dams obstruct the normal flow of water and typically change the pre-existing hydrology from flowing or circulating waters to slower, deeper, more expansive waters that accumulate bottom sediment behind the dam. The depth of bottom sediment depends on the length of time an area is covered by water and the amount of suspended sediment in the water.

The pre-existing habitat and the altered habitat have different ecological values to the fish and wildlife native to an area. Some species would abound by the addition of a beaver dam, while others would diminish. For example, some fish species require fast moving waters over gravel or cobble beds, which beaver dams can eliminate, thus reducing the habitat's value for these species. In general, it has been found that wildlife habitat values decline around bottomland beaver impoundments because trees are killed from flooding and mast production declines. On the other hand, beaver dams can potentially be beneficial to some species of fish and wildlife such as river otter, neotropical birds, and waterfowl.

If a beaver dam is not breached and water is allowed to stand, hydric soils and hydrophytic vegetation eventually form. This process can take anywhere from several months to years depending on pre-existing conditions. Hydric soils are those soils that are saturated, flooded, or ponded long enough during the growing season to develop anaerobic conditions. 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 at least periodically deficient in oxygen because of excessive water content. If these conditions are met, then a wetland has developed that would have different wildlife habitat values than an area that has been more recently impounded by beaver dam activity.

The intent of most dam breaching is not to drain established wetlands. With few exceptions, requests from public and private individuals and entities that WS receives involve dam breaching to return an area back to its pre-existing condition within a few years after the dam was created. If the area does not have hydric soils, it usually takes many years for them to develop and a wetland to become established. This often takes greater than five years as recognized by the Swampbuster provisions. Most beaver dam removal by WS is either exempt from regulation under Section 404 of the CWA as stated in 33 CFR Part 323 or may be authorized under the United States Army Corps of Engineers Nationwide Permit System in 33 CFR Part 330.

However, the breaching of some beaver dams can trigger certain portions of Section 404 that require landowners to obtain permits from the United States Army Corps of Engineers. WS' personnel determine the proper course of action upon inspecting a beaver dam impoundment.

It should also be noted that beaver created wetlands are dynamic and do not remain in one state for indefinite periods. Large beaver ponds may eventually fill with sediment and create a beaver meadow. Beaver may be removed from an area due to natural predation or they may abandon an area due to lack of food. Once a dam is abandoned, it is subject to natural decay and damage due to weather. The dam would eventually fail and the wetland would return to a flowing stream or brook. WS' beaver management activities may accelerate or modify these natural processes by removing beaver and restoring or increasing water flow; however, they are generally processes that would occur naturally over time.

Muskrat management would usually be intended to maintain or protect existing wetlands by reducing threats to natural and man-made wetlands and associated floral, faunal and T&E communities. Wetlands are often created by natural or man-made dams, dikes, levees and berms that contain standing water or

control drainage, particularly after precipitation events that could result in flooding. Muskrat burrowing activity can degrade the integrity of these structures by allowing water infiltration or by causing erosion by feeding on vegetation intended to stabilize dirt structures. Muskrats are omnivores and feed on a variety of aquatic and terrestrial plants and aquatic animals. At high population densities, they may disrupt or damage natural wetland floral and faunal communities or they may feed on T&E species. WS activities would be intended to protect existing wetlands from damage caused by muskrats.

Therefore, the activities of WS to manage flooding damage by manipulating beaver dams would not be expected to have any cumulative adverse effects on wetlands in Mississippi when conducted in accordance with the CWA and the Swampbuster provision of the Food Security Act.

CHAPTER 5: LIST OF PREPARERS AND PERSONS CONSULTED

5.1 LIST OF PREPARERS

Kristina Casscles Godwin, State Director	USDA-APHIS-Wildlife Services
Ryan Wimberly, Staff Wildlife Biologist	USDA-APHIS-Wildlife Services
Amy Henry, Manager, NEPA Program and Valley Projects	Tennessee Valley Authority

5.2 LIST OF PERSONS CONSULTED

Kathy Lunceford, Biologist	United States Fish, and Wildlife Service
Munther Sahawneh, Chief, Mississippi Branch	United States Army Corps of Engineers
Ricky Flynt, Wildlife Biologist	MDWFP

APPENDIX A
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APPENDIX B

METHODS AVAILABLE FOR RESOLVING OR PREVENTING AQUATIC RODENT DAMAGE IN MISSISSIPPI

The most effective approach to resolving wildlife damage problems would be to integrate the use of several methods, either simultaneously or sequentially. An adaptive plan would integrate and apply practical methods of prevention and reduce damage by aquatic rodents while minimizing harmful effects of damage reduction measures on people, other species, and the environment. An adaptive plan may incorporate resource management, physical exclusion and deterrents, and population management, or any combination of these, depending on the characteristics of specific damage problems.

In selecting damage management techniques for specific damage situations, consideration would be given to the responsible species and the magnitude, geographic extent, duration and frequency, and likelihood of wildlife damage. Consideration would also be given to the status of target and potential non-target species, local environmental conditions and impacts, social and legal aspects, and relative costs of damage reduction options. The cost of damage reduction may sometimes be a secondary concern because of the overriding environmental, legal, and animal welfare considerations. Those factors would be evaluated in formulating damage management strategies that incorporate the application of one or more techniques.

A variety of methods would potentially be available to the WS program in Mississippi relative to the management or reduction of damage from aquatic rodents. Various federal, state, and local statutes and regulations would govern WS' use of methods, including WS' directives. WS would develop and recommend or implement strategies based on resource management, physical exclusion, and wildlife management approaches. Within each approach there may be available a number of specific methods or techniques. The following methods could be recommended or used by the WS program in Mississippi. Many of the methods described would also be available to other entities in the absence of any involvement by WS.

Non-chemical Wildlife Damage Management Methods

Non-chemical management methods consist primarily of tools or devices used to repel, capture, or kill a particular animal or local population of wildlife to alleviate damage and conflicts. Methods may be non-lethal (*e.g.*, fencing, frightening devices) or lethal (*e.g.*, firearms, body gripping traps). If WS' personnel apply those methods, a MOU, work initiation document, or another similar document must be signed by the landowner or administrator authorizing the use of each damage management method. Non-chemical methods used or recommended by WS could include:

> **Exclusion** pertains to preventing access to resources through fencing or other barriers. Fencing of small critical areas can sometimes prevent animals that cannot climb from entering areas of protected resources. Fencing of culverts, drainpipes, and other water control structures can sometimes prevent beaver from building dams that plug those devices. Fencing installed with an underground skirt can prevent access to areas for many aquatic rodent species that dig. Hardware cloth or other metal barriers can sometimes be used to prevent girdling and gnawing of valuable trees and to prevent the entry of aquatic rodents into buildings through existing holes or gaps. Construction of concrete spillways may reduce or prevent damage to dams by burrowing aquatic rodent species. Riprap can also be used on dams and levees to deter aquatic rodents from burrowing. Electric fences of various constructions have been used effectively to reduce damage to various crops by several wildlife species (*e.g.*, see Boggess 1994, Craven and Hygnstrom 1994).

Beaver exclusion and the use of water control devices could be recommended or implemented by WS to alleviate flooding damage without removing beaver under the alternatives. Although beaver dams could be breached/removed manually or with binary explosives, those methods are usually ineffective because beaver quickly repair or replace the dam (McNeely 1995). Damage may be effectively reduced in some situations by installing exclusion and water control devices. Exclusion and water control devices can be designed so that the level of the beaver-created pond can be managed to eliminate or minimize damage while retaining the ecological and recreational benefits derived from beaver ponds. WS could also recommend that modifications occur to culvert design (Jensen et al. 1999) as a non-lethal way of reducing problems with beaver dams at culverts.

Beaver exclusion generally involves the placement of fencing to prevent beaver from accessing water intake areas, such as culverts. A variety of exclusion systems could be recommended or implemented by WS, including the Beaver Deceiver™, Beaver Bafflers™, and pre-dams (Lisle 1996, Brown and Brown 1999, Lisle 1999, Brown et al. 2001, Partington 2002, Lisle 2003). The Beaver Deceiver™ is a fencing system that is installed to prevent beaver blockage of culverts by minimizing environmental cues that stimulate beaver to construct dams, and by making culverts less attractive as dam construction sites (Lisle 1996, Lisle 1999, Lisle 2003). Beaver can be deterred from blocking culverts by the installation of a fence on the upstream end of the culvert. Installation of a fence increases the length of the area that must be dammed to impound water, and if beaver build along the fence, may increase the distance between the beaver and the source of the cues that stimulate damming behavior (*e.g.*, water moving through culvert) (Lisle 1996, Lisle 1999, Lisle 2003, Callahan 2005). Beaver prefer to build dams perpendicular to water flow, so fences can be oriented at odd angles to water flow and can be set so that they do not block the stream channel. Fencing can also be used to cover the up and downstream ends of the culverts to prevent beaver from entering the deceiver from the downstream side of the culvert and to prevent any beaver that might make it past the outer fence from plugging the interior of the culvert. Efforts can also be made to reduce the sound of water flowing through the culvert by raising the water level on the down-stream side of the culvert with dam boards or beaver-made dams; by constructing flumes to replace waterfalls, or, in extreme cases, by resetting the culvert (Lisle 1996). To ensure sufficient water flow through the culvert, Beaver Deceivers™ may be used in combination with water control devices (see discussion on Beaver Deceivers™ below).

Cylindrical exclusion devices like the Beaver Bafflers™ can be attached to culvert openings to reduce the likelihood that beaver plug a culvert by spreading the water intake over a larger area (Brown et al. 2001). While cylindrical exclusion devices can be effective in some situations (Partington 2002), in a study of beaver exclusion and water control devices, cylindrical shapes attached in-line with a culvert had a higher failure rate (40%) than trapezoidal shapes (*e.g.*, Beaver Deceivers™; 3% failure rate) and use of the cylindrical devices was discontinued in favor of trapezoidal fences (Callahan 2005).

Unlike Beaver Deceivers™ and cylindrical fences, pre-dam fences (*e.g.*, deep-water fences, diversion dams) (Brown and Brown 1999) can be designed with the specific intention that the beaver build the dam along the fence. Pre-dam fences can be short semicircular or circular fences that are built in an arc around a water inlet. The fence serves as a dam construction platform that allows beaver to build a dam and pond at the site but prevents beaver from plugging the water intake. If the size of the upstream pond created from the impounded water were not a concern, no further modifications of the pre-dam would be needed. However, in most cases, pre-dams would be used in combination with water control devices to manage the size of the upstream pond to alleviate flooding concerns.

Fence mesh size can be selected to minimize risks to beaver and non-target species. Brown et al. (2001) noted that beaver occasionally became stuck in 6-inch mesh and that the risk of beaver entrapment was lower with 5-inch mesh. Lisle (1999) noted that the size of the mesh on the fence of

the Beaver Deceivers™ (6-inch mesh) was such that it allowed most species to pass through the fence except beaver and big turtles. In some remote areas where vehicular traffic is infrequent, it may be acceptable for animals that cannot pass through the fence mesh to travel across the road. However, for culverts under busy roads, it may be necessary to design special "*doors*" that allow the passage of beaver, large turtles, and other non-targets through the device. For example, T-joints 30 centimeters in diameter have been used to allow access through Beaver Deceiver™ fences. The T-shape reduces the likelihood that beaver can haul woody debris for dam construction inside the device (Lisle 2003). Fence caps would not be attached to the up and down-stream ends of a culvert when it is necessary to allow passage of species like large turtles and beavers through a culvert.

Water control devices (*e.g.*, pond levelers) are systems that allow the passage of water through a beaver dam. The devices could be used in situations where the presence of a beaver pond is desired but it is necessary to manage the level of water in the pond. Various types of water control devices have been described (Arner 1964, Roblee 1983, Roblee 1984, Laramie and Knowles 1985, Miller and Yarrow 1994, Wood et al. 1994, Lisle 1996, Organ et al. 1996, Brown and Brown 1999, Lisle 1999, Brown et al. 2001, Close 2003, Lisle 2003, Simon 2006, Spock 2006, Taylor and Singleton 2014). Taylor and Singleton (2014) provide a comprehensive summary of the evolution of flow devices to reduce flooding by beaver. The devices generally involve the use of one or more pipes installed through the beaver dam to increase the flow of water through the dam. Height and placement of pipes can be adjusted to achieve the desired water level in the beaver pond. Beaver generally only check the dam for leaks, so, when site conditions permit, the inlet of the pipe is placed away from the dam to make the source of the water flow more difficult to detect and decrease the likelihood that beaver will attempt to plug the device. To minimize the sound/sensation of water movement and the associated beaver damming behavior, the end of the pipe may be capped with a series of holes or notches cut in the pipe, which allows water to flow into the pipe. Holes and notches may be placed on the underside of the pipe to reduce the sound of water movement. Alternatively, 90-degree elbow joints can be placed facing downward on the upstream end of the pipes to prevent the noise of running water and attracting beaver. A protective cage can be placed around the upstream end of the inlet pipe to prevent beaver from blocking the pipe and to reduce problems with debris blocking the pipe. As noted above, water control systems can be combined with exclusion devices to prevent beaver from blocking culverts while still maintaining a beaver pond at an acceptable level.

Cultural Methods and Habitat Management includes the application of practices that seek to minimize exposure of the protected resource to damaging animals through processes other than exclusion. Strategies may include minimizing cover where damaging aquatic rodents might hide, manipulating the surrounding environment through barriers or fences to deter animals from entering a protected area, or planting lure crops on fringes of protected crops. Continual destruction of beaver dams and removal of dam construction materials on a daily basis will sometimes cause beavers to move to other locations. Water control devices such as the corrugated plastic drainage tubing (Roblee 1984), 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 control the water in beaver ponds to desirable levels that do not cause damage.

Beaver dam breaching/removal would involve the removal of debris deposited by beaver that impedes the flow of water. Removing or breaching a dam is generally conducted to maintain existing stream channels and drainage patterns, and reduce floodwaters that have affected established silviculture, agriculture, or drainage structures, such as culverts. Beaver dams are made from natural debris such as logs, sticks and mud that beaver take from the immediate area and impound water, creating habitat that they utilize to build lodges and bank dens to raise their young and/or provide protection from predators. The impoundments that WS removes or breaches would typically be created by recent beaver activity and would not have been in place long enough to take on the

qualities of a true wetland (*e.g.*, hydric soils, aquatic vegetation, pre-existing function). Unwanted beaver dams could be removed by hand with a rake or power tools (*e.g.*, a winch), or with explosives. Explosives would be used only by WS' personnel specially trained and certified to conduct such activities, and only binary explosives are used (*i.e.*, they are comprised of two parts that must be mixed at the site before they can be detonated as an explosive material). Beaver dam removal or breaching by hand or with binary explosives would not affect the substrate or the natural course of the stream. Removing or breaching dams would return the area back to its pre-existing condition with similar flows and circulations. Because beaver dams involve waters of the United States, removal is regulated under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (see Appendix D).

Most beaver dam breaching, if considered discharge, would be covered under exemptions in 33 CFR 323 or under a NWP issued pursuant to 33 CFR 330 and do not require a permit. A permit would be required if the beaver dam breaching activity was not covered by a 404 permitting exemption or a NWP and the area affected by the beaver dam was considered a true wetland. The State of Mississippi may require additional permits (see Appendix D). WS' personnel would survey the site or impoundment to determine if conditions exist for classifying the site as a true wetland. If the site appears to have conditions over 3 years old or appeared to meet the definition of a true wetland, the landowner or cooperator would be required to obtain a permit before proceeding (see Appendix D for information that explains Section 404 permit exemptions and conditions for breaching/removing beaver dams).

Supplemental feeding is sometimes used to reduce damage by wildlife, such as lure crops. Food is provided so that the animal causing damage would consume it rather than the resource being protected. In feeding programs, target wildlife would be offered an alternative food source with a higher appeal with the intention of luring them from feeding on affected resources.

Animal behavior modification refers to tactics that deter or repel damaging aquatic rodents and thus, reduce damage to the protected resource. Those techniques are usually aimed at causing target animals to respond by fleeing from the site or remaining at a distance. They usually employ extreme noise or visual stimuli. Unfortunately, many of these techniques are only effective for a short time before wildlife habituate to them (*e.g.*, Conover 1982). Harassment methods have generally proven ineffective in reducing beaver damage (Jackson and Decker 1993). Devices used to modify behavior in aquatic rodents include electronic guards (siren strobe-light devices), propane exploders, pyrotechnics, laser lights, human effigies, effigies of predators, and the noise associated with the discharge of a firearm.

Live Capture and Translocation can be accomplished using hand capture, hand nets, catch poles, cage traps, suitcase type traps, cable restraints, or with foothold traps to capture some aquatic rodent species for the purpose of translocating them for release in other areas. WS could employ those methods in Mississippi when the target animal(s) can legally be translocated or can be captured and handled with relative safety by WS' personnel. Live capture and handling of aquatic rodents poses an additional level of human health and safety threat if target animals are aggressive, large, or extremely sensitive to the close proximity of people. For that reason, WS may limit this method to specific situations and certain species. In addition, moving damage-causing individuals to other locations can typically result in damage at the new location, or the translocated individuals can move from the relocation site to areas where they are unwanted. In addition, translocation can facilitate the spread of diseases from one area to another. Although translocation is not necessarily precluded in all cases, it would be logistically impractical, in most cases, and biologically unwise in Mississippi due to the risk of disease transmission. High population densities of some animals may make this a poor wildlife management strategy for those species. Translocation would be evaluated by WS on a case-by-case basis. Translocation would only occur with the prior authorization of the MDWFP.

Trapping can utilize a number of devices, including foothold traps, cage-type traps, body-gripping traps, and cable restraints.

Foothold Traps can be effectively used to capture aquatic rodents. Foothold traps can be placed beside, or in some situations, in travel ways being actively used by the target species. Placement of traps is contingent upon the habits of the respective target species, habitat conditions, and presence of non-target animals. Effective trap placement and adjustment, and the use and placement of appropriate baits and lures by trained WS' personnel also contribute to the selectivity of foothold traps. An additional advantage is that foothold traps can allow for the on-site release of non-target animals since animals are captured alive. The use of foothold traps requires more skill than some methods. Foothold traps would generally be available for use by the public and other state or federal agencies.

WS could also attach a foothold trap to a submersion cable or rod that WS anchors at the trap set and in deep water. Attaching the trap to the cable or rod with a locking mechanism allows the trap to slide down the cable or rod into deeper water, but prevents a captured animal from returning to the surface. In this type of foothold set, death from drowning or submersion hypoxia occurs in a short time.

Cable Restraints are typically made of wire or cable, and can be set to capture an animal by the neck or body. Cable restraints may be used as either lethal or live-capture devices depending on how or where they are set. Cable restraints set to capture an animal by the neck are usually lethal but stops can be attached to the cable to increase the probability of a live capture depending on the trap check interval. Snares positioned to capture the animal around the body can be a useful live-capture device, but are more often used as a lethal control technique. Snares can incorporate a breakaway feature to release non-target wildlife and livestock where the target animal is smaller than potential non-targets (Phillips 1996). Snares can be effectively used wherever a target animal moves through a restricted travel lane (*e.g.*, trails through vegetation). When an animal moves forward into the loop formed by the cable, the noose tightens and the animal is held. Snares must be set in locations where the likelihood of capturing non-target animals would be minimized.

Cage-type traps come in a variety of styles to live-capture animals. The most commonly known cage traps for aquatic rodents are box traps and suitcase traps. Box traps are usually rectangular and are made from various materials, including metal, wire mesh, plastic, and wood. Box traps are generally portable and easy to set-up.

The disadvantages of using cage traps are: 1) some individual target animals may avoid cage traps; 2) some non-target animals may associate the traps with available food and purposely get captured to eat the bait, making the trap unavailable to catch target animals; 3) cage traps must be checked frequently to ensure that captured animals are not subjected to extreme environmental conditions; 4) some animals will fight to escape and may become injured; and 5) expense of purchasing traps.

Trap monitors are devices that send a radio signal to a receiver if a set trap is disturbed and alerts field personnel that an animal may be captured. Trap monitors can be attached directly to the trap or attached to a string or wire and then placed away from the trap in a tree or shrub. When the monitor is hung above the ground, it can be detected from several miles away, depending on the terrain in the area. There are many benefits to using trap monitors, such as saving considerable time when checking traps, decreasing fuel usage, prioritizing trap checks, and decreasing the need

for human presence in the area. Trap monitors could be used when using cage traps. Trap monitors do not exempt WS from mandatory physical trap checks.

Trap monitoring devices could be employed, when applicable, that indicate when a trap has been activated. Trap monitoring devices would allow personnel to prioritize trap checks and decrease the amount of time required to check traps, which decreases the amount of time captured target or non-targets would be restrained. By reducing the amount of time targets and non-targets are restrained, pain and stress can be minimized and captured wildlife can be addressed in a timely manner, which could allow non-targets to be released unharmed. Trap monitoring devices could be employed where applicable to facilitate monitoring of the status of traps in remote locations to ensure any captured wildlife was removed promptly to minimize distress and to increase the likelihood non-targets could be released unharmed.

Hancock/Bailey Traps (suitcase/basket type cage traps) are designed to live-capture beaver. The trap is constructed of a metal frame that is hinged with springs attached and covered with chain-link fence. The trap's appearance is similar to a large suitcase when closed. When set, the trap is generally baited and opened to allow an animal to enter. When tripped, the panels of the trap close around the animal capturing the animal. One advantage of using the Hancock or Bailey trap is the ease of release of beaver or non-target animals. Beaver caught in Hancock or Bailey traps could also be humanely euthanized. Disadvantages are that those traps are very expensive (>$300 per trap), cumbersome, and difficult to set (Miller and Yarrow 1994). The trap weighs about 25 pounds and is relatively bulky to carry and maneuver. Hancock and Bailey traps can also be dangerous to set (*i.e.*, hardhats are recommended when setting suitcase traps), are less cost and time-efficient than snares, footholds, or body-grip traps, and may cause serious and debilitating injury to river otters (Blundell et al. 1999).

Body-gripping Traps are designed to cause the quick death of the animal that activates the trap. The Conibear™ trap consists of a pair of rectangular wire frames that close like scissors when triggered, killing the captured animal with a quick body blow. For Conibear™ traps, the traps should be placed to ensure the rotating jaws close on either side of the neck of the animal to ensure a quick death. Conibear™ traps are lightweight and easily set. Safety hazards and risks to people are usually related to setting, placing, checking, or removing the traps. Body-gripping traps present a minor risk to non-target animals. Selectivity of body-gripping traps can be enhanced by placement, trap size, trigger configurations, and baits. When using body-gripping traps, risks of non-target capture can be minimized by using recessed sets (placing trap inside a cubby, cage, or burrow), restricting openings, or by elevating traps. For example, Conibear™ traps set to capture beaver can be placed underwater to minimize risks to non-targets. Choosing appropriately sized traps for the target species can also exclude non-targets by preventing larger non-targets from entering and triggering the trap. The trigger configurations of traps can be modified to minimize non-target capture. For example, offsetting the trigger can allow non-targets to pass through Conibear™ traps without capture.

Shooting with firearms is very selective for the target species and would be conducted with rifles, handguns, and shotguns. Methods and approaches used by WS may include use of illuminating devices, bait, firearm suppressors, and night vision/thermal equipment. Shooting is an effective method in some circumstances, and can often provide immediate relief from the problem. Shooting may at times be one of the only methods available to resolve a wildlife problem effectively and efficiently. Shooting would be limited to locations where it is legal and safe to discharge a weapon. A shooting program, especially conducted alone, can be expensive because it often requires many staff hours to complete.

Shooting can also be used in conjunction with an illumination device at night, which is especially useful for nocturnal aquatic rodents. Spotlights may or may not be covered with a red lens, which nocturnal animals may not be able to see, making it easier to locate them undisturbed. Night shooting may be conducted in sensitive areas that have high public use or other activity during the day, which would make daytime shooting unsafe. The use of night vision and Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) devices can also be used to detect and shoot aquatic rodents at night, and is often the preferred equipment due to the ability to detect and identify animals in complete darkness. Night vision and FLIR equipment aid in locating wildlife at night when wildlife may be more active. Night vision and FLIR equipment could be used during surveys and in combination with shooting to remove target aquatic rodents at night. WS' personnel most often use this technology to target aquatic rodents in the act of causing damage or likely responsible for causing damage. Those methods aid in the use of other methods or allow other methods to be applied more selectively and efficiently. Night vision and FLIR equipment allow for the identification of target species during night activities, which reduces the risks to non-targets and reduces human safety risks. Night vision equipment and FLIR devices only aid in the identification of wildlife and are not actual methods of removal. The use of FLIR and night vision equipment to remove target aquatic rodents would increase the selectivity of direct management activities by targeting those aquatic rodents most likely responsible for causing damage or posing threats.

Hunting/Trapping is sometimes recommended by WS to resource owners. WS could recommend resource owners consider legal hunting and trapping as an option for reducing aquatic rodent damage. Although legal hunting/trapping is impractical and/or prohibited in many urban-suburban areas, it can be used to reduce some populations of aquatic rodents.

Chemical Wildlife Damage Management Methods

All pesticides used by WS would be registered under the FIFRA and administered by the EPA and the MDAC. All WS personnel in Mississippi who apply restricted-use pesticides would be certified pesticide applicators by MDAC and have specific training by WS for pesticide application. The EPA and the MDAC require pesticide applicators to adhere to all certification requirements set forth in the FIFRA. Pharmaceutical drugs, including those used in wildlife capture and handling, are administrated by the United States Food and Drug Administration and/or the United States Drug Enforcement Administration.

Chemicals would not be used by WS on public or private lands without authorization from the property owner or manager. The following chemical methods have been proven selective and effective in reducing damage by aquatic rodents.

Ketamine (Ketamine HCl) is a dissociative anesthetic that is used to capture wildlife. It is used to eliminate pain, calm fear, and allay anxiety. Ketamine is possibly the most versatile drug for chemical capture, and it has a wide safety margin (Johnson et al. 2001). When used alone, this drug may produce muscle tension, resulting in shaking, staring, increased body heat, and, on occasion, seizures. Usually, ketamine is combined with other drugs, such as xylazine. The combination of such drugs is used to control an animal, maximize the reduction of stress and pain, and increase human and animal safety.

Telazol is a more powerful anesthetic and usually used for larger animals. Telazol is a combination of equal parts of tiletamine hydrochloride and zolazepam hydrochloride (a tranquilizer). The product is generally supplied sterile in vials, each containing 500 mg of active drug, and when dissolved in sterile water has a pH of 2.2 to 2.8. Telazol produces a state of unconsciousness in which protective reflexes, such as coughing and swallowing, are maintained during anesthesia. Schobert (1987) listed the dosage rates for many wild and exotic animals. Before using Telazol, the size, age, temperament,

and health of the animal are considered. Following a deep intramuscular injection of Telazol, onset of anesthetic effect usually occurs within 5 to 12 minutes. Muscle relaxation is optimum for about the first 20 to 25 minutes after the administration, and then diminishes. Recovery varies with the age and physical condition of the animal and the dose of Telazol administered, but usually requires several hours.

Xylazine is a sedative (analgesic) that calms nervousness, irritability, and excitement, usually by depressing the central nervous system. Xylazine is commonly used with ketamine to produce a relaxed anesthesia. It can also be used alone to facilitate physical restraint. Because xylazine is not an anesthetic, sedated animals are usually responsive to stimuli. Therefore, personnel should be even more attentive to minimizing sight, sound, and touch. When using ketamine/xylazine combinations, xylazine will usually overcome the tension produced by ketamine, resulting in a relaxed, anesthetized animal (Johnson et al. 2001). This reduces heat production from muscle tension, but can lead to lower body temperatures when working in cold conditions.

Sodium Pentobarbital is a barbiturate that rapidly depresses the central nervous system to the point of respiratory arrest. Barbiturates are a recommended euthanasia drug for free-ranging wildlife (American Veterinary Medical Association 2013). Sodium pentobarbital would only be administered after target animals were live-captured and properly immobilized to allow for direct injection. There are United Stated Drug Enforcement Administration restrictions on who can possess and administer this drug. Some states may have additional requirements for personnel training and particular sodium pentobarbital products available for use in wildlife. Certified WS' personnel are authorized to use sodium pentobarbital and dilutions for euthanasia in accordance with United States Drug Enforcement Administration and state regulations. All animals euthanized using sodium pentobarbital and all of its dilutions (*e.g.* Beuthanasia-D, Fatal-Plus) are disposed of immediately through incineration or deep burial to prevent secondary poisoning of scavenging animals and introduction of these chemicals to non-target animals.

Potassium Chloride used in conjunction with prior general anesthesia is used as a euthanasia agent for animals, and is considered acceptable and humane by the American Veterinary Medical Association (2013). Animals that have been euthanized with this chemical experience cardiac arrest followed by death, and are not toxic to predators or scavengers.

Beuthanasia®-D combines pentobarbital with another substance to hasten cardiac arrest. Intravenous (IV) and intracardiac (IC) are the only acceptable routes of injection. As with pure sodium pentobarbital, IC injections with Beuthanasia®-D are only acceptable for animals that are unconscious or deeply anesthetized. With other injection routes, there are concerns that the cardiotoxic properties may cause cardiac arrest before the animal is unconscious. It is a Schedule III drug, which means it can be obtained directly from the manufacturer by anyone with a United States Drug Enforcement Administration registration. However, Schedule III drugs are subject to the same security and record-keeping requirements as Schedule II drugs.

Fatal-Plus® combines pentobarbital with other substances to hasten cardiac arrest. IV is the preferred route of injection; however, IC is acceptable as part of the two-step procedure used by WS. Animals are first anesthetized and sedated using a combination of ketamine/xylazine and once completely unresponsive to stimuli and thoroughly sedated, Fatal-Plus® is administered. Like Beuthanasia®-D, it is a Schedule III drug requiring a United States Drug Enforcement Administration registration for purchase and is subject to the security and record-keeping requirements of Schedule II drugs.

Carbon dioxide is sometimes used to euthanize aquatic rodents that are captured in live traps and when relocation is not a feasible option. Live aquatic rodents are placed in a sealed chamber. Carbon dioxide gas is released into the chamber and the animal quickly dies after inhaling the gas. This method is approved as a euthanizing agent by the American Veterinary Medical Association (2013). Carbon dioxide gas is a byproduct of animal respiration, is common in the atmosphere, and is required by plants for photosynthesis. It is used to carbonate beverages for human consumption and is the gas released by dry ice. The use of carbon dioxide by WS for euthanasia purposes is exceedingly minor and inconsequential to the amounts used for other purposes by society.

Zinc phosphide is an inorganic compound used to control rats, mice, voles, ground squirrels, prairie dogs, nutria, muskrats, feral rabbits, and gophers. Zinc phosphide is a heavy, finely ground gray-black powder that is partially insoluble in water and alcohol. When exposed to moisture, it decomposes slowly and releases phosphine gas (PH_3). When zinc phosphide treated bait encounters acids in the stomach, phosphate (PH_3) gas is released, which may account in a large part for observed toxicity. Animals that ingest lethal amounts of bait usually succumb overnight with terminal symptoms of convulsions, paralysis, coma, and death from asphyxia. If death is prolonged for several days, intoxication that occurs is similar to intoxication with yellow phosphorous, in which the liver is heavily damaged. Prolonged exposure to phosphine can produce chronic phosphorous poisoning.

Although zinc phosphide baits have a strong, pungent, phosphorous-like odor (garlic like), this characteristic seems to attract rodents, particularly rats, and apparently makes the bait unattractive to some other animals. For many uses of zinc phosphide formulated on grain or grain-based baits, pre-baiting is recommended or necessary for achieving good bait acceptance. Primary toxicity risks to non-target species from the direct consumption of treated bait can be minimized by using bait stations to prevent access by non-target species such as birds.

Because zinc phosphide is not stored in muscle or other tissues of poisoned animals, there is no secondary poisoning with this rodenticide. The bait however, remains toxic up to several days in the gut of the dead rodent. Other animals can be poisoned if they eat enough of the gut content of rodents recently killed with zinc phosphide.

Repellents are usually naturally occurring substances or chemicals formulated to be distasteful or to elicit pain or discomfort for target animals when they are smelled, tasted, or contacted. Repellents would not be available for many species that may present damage problems. Repellents are variably effective and depend largely on resource to be protected, time and length of application, and sensitivity of the species causing damage. Again, acceptable levels of damage control would usually not be realized unless repellents were used in conjunction with other techniques.

Explosives are defined as any chemical mixture or device that serves as a blasting agent or detonator. The procedures and accountability for WS' use of explosives for removing beaver dams and training requirements for explosives certification would adhere to WS Directive 2.435. Explosives are generally used to breach beaver dams that are too large to remove by digging using hand tools. Explosives would be used to remove dams after the beaver were removed using other methods. WS would only use binary explosives to remove beaver dams. Binary explosives consist of two components that are contained separately. The two components of binary explosives are ammonium nitrate and nitromethane and are not classified as explosives until the two components are mixed. Therefore, binary explosives are subject to fewer regulations and controls because they are packaged separately. However, once mixed, binary explosives are considered high explosives and subject to all applicable federal and state requirements. When used to remove beaver dams, the two components would not be mixed until ready for use at the site where the dam was located. Detonating cord and detonators are also 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 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 employees and closely supervised by professional wildlife biologists in accordance with WS Directive 2.435. 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.

APPENDIX C
STATE THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES

MISSISSIPPI NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM

Listed Species of Mississippi

- 2015 -

SPECIES NAME	COMMON NAME	GLOBAL RANK	STATE RANK	FEDERAL STATUS	STATE STATUS
BIVALVIA					
Actinonaias ligamentina	Mucket	G5	S1		LE
Cyclonaias tuberculata	Purple Wartyback	G5	S1		LE
Elliptio arctata	Delicate Spike	G3G4	S1		LE
Elliptio dilatata	Spike	G5	S1		LE
Epioblasma brevidens	Cumberlandian Combshell	G1	S1	(LE,XN)	LE
Epioblasma penita	Southern Combshell	G1	S1	LE	LE
Epioblasma triquetra	Snuffbox	G3	S1	LE	LE
Hamiota perovalis	Orange-Nacre Mucket	G2	S1	LT	LE
Medionidus acutissimus	Alabama Moccasinshell	G2	S1	LT	LE
Plethobasus cyphyus	Sheepnose	G3	S1	LE	LE
Pleurobema curtum	Black Clubshell	G1	SX	LE	LE
Pleurobema decisum	Southern Clubshell	G2	S1	LE	LE
Pleurobema marshalli	Flat Pigtoe	GH	SX	LE	LE
Pleurobema perovatum	Ovate Clubshell	G1	S1	LE	LE
Pleurobema rubrum	Pyramid Pigtoe	G2	S1		LE
Pleurobema taitianum	Heavy Pigtoe	G1	SX	LE	LE
Pleuronaia dolabelloides	Slabside Pearlymussel	G2	S1	LE	LE
Potamilus capax	Fat Pocketbook	G1	S1	LE	LE
Potamilus inflatus	Inflated Heelsplitter	G1G2Q	SH	LT	LE
Ptychobranchus fasciolaris	Kidneyshell	G4G5	S1		LE
Quadrula cylindrica cylindrica	Rabbitsfoot	G3T3	S1	LT	LE
Quadrula metanevra	Monkeyface	G4	SX		LE
Quadrula stapes	Stirrupshell	GH	SX	LE	LE
MALACOSTRACA					
Fallicambarus gordoni	Camp Shelby Burrowing Crawfish	G1	S1	C	LE
INSECTA					
Nicrophorus americanus	American Burying Beetle	G2G3	SX	LE	LE
Neonympha mitchellii mitchelli	Mitchell's Satyr	G2T2	S1	LE	LE
OSTEICHTHYES					
Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi	Gulf Sturgeon	G3T2	S1	LT	LE
Scaphirhynchus albus	Pallid Sturgeon	G1	S1	LE	LE
Scaphirhynchus suttkusi	Alabama Sturgeon	G1	SH	LE	LE
Notropis boops	Bigeye Shiner	G5	S1		LE
Notropis chalybaeus	Ironcolor Shiner	G4	S1		LE
Phenacobius mirabilis	Suckermouth Minnow	G5	S1		LE
Phoxinus erythrogaster	Southern Redbelly Dace[1]	G5	S2		LE
Crystallaria asprella	Crystal Darter	G3	S1		LE
Etheostoma blennioides	Greenside Darter	G5	S1		LE
Etheostoma rubrum	Bayou Darter	G1	S1	LT	LE

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Listed Species of Mississippi

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SPECIES NAME	COMMON NAME	GLOBAL RANK	STATE RANK	FEDERAL STATUS	STATE STATUS
Percina aurora	Pearl Darter	G1	S1	C	LE
Percina phoxocephala	Slenderhead Darter	G5	S1		LE
Noturus exilis	Slender Madtom	G5	S1		LE
Noturus munitus	Frecklebelly Madtom	G3	S2		LE
Noturus gladiator	Piebald Madtom	G3	S1		LE
AMPHIBIA					
Rana sevosa	Dusky Gopher Frog	G1	S1	LE	LE
Amphiuma pholeter	One-Toed Amphiuma	G3	S1		LE
Cryptobranchus alleganiensis	Hellbender	G3G4	S1	(PS)	LE
Aneides aeneus	Green Salamander	G3G4	S1		LE
Eurycea lucifuga	Cave Salamander	G5	S1		LE
Gyrinophilus porphyriticus	Spring Salamander	G5	S1		LE
REPTILIA					
Drymarchon corais couperi	Eastern Indigo Snake	G3	SX	LT	LE
Farancia erytrogramma	Rainbow Snake	G5	S2		LE
Heterodon simus	Southern Hognose Snake	G2	SX		LE
Pituophis melanoleucus lodingi	Black Pine Snake	G4T3	S2	C	LE
Caretta caretta	Loggerhead; Cabezon	G3	S1B,SNA	LT	LE
Chelonia mydas	Green Turtle	G3	SNA	(LE,LT)	LE
Eretmochelys imbricata	Hawksbill; Carey	G3	SNA	LE	LE
Lepidochelys kempii	Kemp's Or Atlantic Ridley	G1	S1N	LE	LE
Dermochelys coriacea	Leatherback; Tinglar	G2	SNA	LE	LE
Graptemys flavimaculata	Yellow-Blotched Map Turtle	G2	S2	LT	LE
Graptemys nigrinoda	Black-Knobbed Map Turtle	G3	S2		LE
Graptemys oculifera	Ringed Map Turtle	G2	S2	LT	LE
Pseudemys alabamensis	Alabama Redbelly Turtle	G1	S1	LE	LE
Gopherus polyphemus	Gopher Tortoise	G3	S2	(PS:LT)	LE
AVES					
Charadrius nivosus	Southeastern Snowy Plover	G4T3Q	S2		LE
Charadrius melodus	Piping Plover	G3	S2N	(LE,LT)	LE
Sternula antillarum athalassos	Interior Least Tern[3]	G4T2Q	S2B	(PS:LE)	LE
Calidris canutus	Red Knot	G5	S2N	LT	
Mycteria americana	Wood Stork	G4	S2N	(PS:LT)	LE
Falco peregrinus	Peregrine Falcon	G4	S1N		LE
Grus *canadensis pulla*	Mississippi Sandhill Crane	G5T1	S1	LE	LE
Vermivora bachmanii	Bachman's Warbler	GH	SXB	LE	LE
Thryomanes bewickii	Bewick's Wren	G5	S2B,S3N		LE
Pelecanus occidentalis	Brown Pelican	G4	S1N		LE
Campephilus principalis	Ivory-Billed Woodpecker	GH	SX	LE	LE
Picoides borealis	Red-Cockaded Woodpecker	G3	S1	LE	LE

MISSISSIPPI NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM

Listed Species of Mississippi

- 2015 –

SPECIES NAME	COMMON NAME	GLOBAL RANK	STATE RANK	FEDERAL STATUS	STATE STATUS
MAMMALIA					
Puma concolor coryi	Florida Panther	G5T1	SX	LE	LE
Ursus americanus	Black Bear	G5	S1	(PS)	LE
Ursus americanus luteolus	Louisiana Black Bear	G5T2	S1	LT	LE
Myotis grisescens	Gray Myotis	G3	S1	LE	LE
Myotis sodalis	Indiana Or Social Myotis	G2	S1B	LE	LE
Trichechus manatus	Manatee	G2	SZ	LE	LE
PLANTS [3]					
DICOTYLEDONEAE					
Apios priceana	Price's Potato Bean	G2	S1	LE	
Lindera melissifolia	Pondberry	G2	S2	LE	
Schwalbea americana	Chaffseed	G3	SH	LE	
ISOETOPSIDA					
Isoetes louisianensis	Louisiana Quillwort	G3	S2	LE	

[1] *West Mississippi disjunct populations only.*

[2] *Interior populations nesting along the Mississippi River only.*

[3] *Mississippi has no status concerning endangered plants.*

Cite the list as:

Mississippi Natural Heritage Program, 2015. Listed Species of Mississippi. Museum of Natural Science, Mississippi Dept. of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks, Jackson, MS. 3pp.

APPENDIX D

CRITERIA FOR BEAVER DAM BREACHING/REMOVAL

Beaver dam breaching is generally conducted to maintain existing stream channels and drainage patterns, and reduce flooding. Beaver dams are made from natural debris such as logs, sticks, and mud that beaver take from the area. This portion would be dislodged during a beaver dam breaching operation. The impoundments that WS could remove would normally be from recent beaver activity and would not have been in place long enough to take on the qualities of a true wetland (*i.e*., hydric soils, aquatic vegetation, preexisting function). Beaver dam breaching and removal by hand 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 since the impounded water can be released slowly over time.

Wetlands are recognized by three characteristics: hydric soils, hydrophytic vegetation, and general hydrology. Hydric soils either are 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. In addition, hydric soils may be bluish gray or gray below the surface or brownish black to black and have the smell of rotten eggs. Wetlands also have hydrophytic vegetation present such as cattails, bulrushes, willows, sedges, and water plantains. The final indicator is general hydrology which includes standing and flowing water or waterlogged soils during the growing season; high water marks are present on trees and drift lines of small piles of debris are usually present. Beaver dams usually will develop a layer of organic material at the surface because siltation 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.

When a dam is removed or breached, debris could be discharged into the water. The debris that ends up in the water would be considered "*incidental fallback*" or discharge fill. However, in most beaver dam removal or breaching operations, the material that would be displaced, if considered to be discharge, would be exempt from permit requirements under exemptions in 33 CFR 323 or under the NWP discussed in 33 CFR 330. If beaver dams could not be breached or removed under exemptions in 33 CFR 323 or pursuant to a NWP, then the property owner or manager would be responsible for seeking the necessary permit under Section 401 and Section 404 of the CWA. WS' personnel would survey the beaver dam site and impoundment and determine whether conditions exist suggesting that the area may be a wetland as defined above. In addition, WS' personnel would work to estimate the age of the beaver dam (*e.g*., asking the landowner, using aerial photos). The characteristics of the impoundment and the age of the dam would be used to determine whether Swampbuster, Section 404 permit exemptions, or NWPs allow removal of the dam. If not, the landowner would be required to obtain a Section 404 permit before the dam could be removed. In those cases, the EPA and/or the United States Army Corps of Engineers would be responsible for determining if the beaver dam and associated areas were actual wetlands and if so, whether to issue a permit to remove the dam.

Federal Regulations- United States Army Corps of Engineers

Under Section 404 of the CWA, the Corps of Engineers regulates all waters of the United States. Because beaver dams involve waters of the United States, dam breaching is regulated under Section 404 of the CWA. In most beaver dam breaching operations, the material that is displaced would be exempt from permitting or included in a NWP in accordance with Section 404 of the CWA (see 33 CFR Part 323, 33 CFR 330). 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 jurisdictional based on the Corps of Engineers 1987 Delineation Manual.

The following explains Section 404 exemptions and conditions that pertain to the breaching of beaver dams and are WS' interpretation of the NWPs.

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 silviculture activities where they have been established do not require a permit as long as these drainages do not include the immediate or gradual conversion of a wetland 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 drainage ways 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 drainage way 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 - Nationwide Permit (NWP) Program. The United States Army Corps of Engineers, Chief of Engineers is authorized to grant certain dredge and fill activities on a nationwide basis if they have minimal impact on the environment. The 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 NWPs for any instance of beaver dam breaching 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*".

The United States Army Corps of Engineers reissue the NWPs every 5 years with some modifications to the NWPs and their general conditions. The effective date of the current NWPs is March 19, 2012. These NWPs will expire on March 18, 2017.

NWP 18 - Minor Discharges: This NWP authorizes minor discharges of dredged and fill material, including the breaching of beaver dams, into all waters of the United States provided the activity meets specific criteria. One of the criteria is 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 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 5 cubic yards of backfill into the waters of the United States. Beaver dams periodically may be breached in a special aquatic area, but normally the aquatic site will be returned to normal. However, if beaver dam breaching is going to exceed the noted impact to waters of the United States for the NWP, including wetlands, then an Individual Permit must be obtained from the District Engineer.

NWP 27 - Aquatic Habitat Restoration, Establishment, and Enhancement Activity: This NWP allows for the discharge of dredge and fill in waters of the United States 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 the USFWS or the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service to conduct restoration; a voluntary wetland restoration project documented by Natural Resources Conservation Service; or notify the District Engineer according to "*notification*" procedures. On federal lands, including United States Army Corps of Engineers 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 of a beaver dam would be allowed as long as it was not a true wetland, and for non-federal public and private lands the appropriate agreement, project documentation, or notification is in place.

A quick response immediately resulting from permitting requirements can be critical to the success of minimizing or preventing damage. Exemptions contained in the above regulations or NWPs provide for the breaching of the majority of beaver dams that 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 just a flooded area. The flexibility allowed by these exemptions and NWPs is important for the efficient and effective resolution of many beaver damage problems because damage escalates rapidly in many cases the longer an area remains flooded.