

Columbia Bottomlands Project Status July 2017

SUMMARY: The project area covers four Texas Mid-Coast Counties; i.e., Brazoria, Fort Bend, Matagorda and Wharton, which includes four units of the National Wildlife Refuge System; i.e. Big Boggy National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Brazoria NWR, Columbia Bottomlands Unit of San Bernard NWR plus the San Bernard NWR. As shown on the attached map of the project area and table, to date, a total of 60-plus private properties have been acquired by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) by purchase and donation, totaling 36,138.03-acres, at \$50,688,116 market value and now managed as part of the Refuge System. This land preservation project includes numerous major partners i.e., Houston Endowment, Friends of the Brazoria Wildlife Refuges (FOBWR), the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), The Trust For Public Land (TPL), Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, The Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, Houston Sierra Club, Houston Audubon, etc. Funding sources include Houston Endowment Grants to Friends of the Brazoria Wildlife Refuges, 18 fee and/or conservation easement land donations from private landowners, mitigation funds, money donated to acquire lands from oil and gas companies in Texas, plus the use of federal Migratory Bird, Land & Water Conservation Funds, and NAWCA Grants, etc.

In 2016 fee title to three tracts were acquired by the FWS; i.e., the 1,080-acre Westcap property, the 270-acre Freeport LNG property, and the 84.20-acre Willy Family property. The Westcap tract was acquired by TPL and transferred to FWS with Migratory Bird (MBCC) funding. The Freeport LNG tract was owned by Freeport LNG and transferred to FWS as mitigation for their nearby plant development. The Willy Family tract was acquired for \$168,400 by FWS using part of the \$215,000 donation to NFWF Columbia Bottomlands NFWF/FWS land preservation account by Texas Gas Company (TGC). The Friends of the Brazoria Wildlife Refuges (FOBWR) continues to help cover the pre-acquisition land costs; i.e., the market value appraisal reports, title insurance policies, closing costs, and land surveys, for all three of the 2016 purchases.

In 2017, NFWF is working with the CB Project partners on acquiring fee purchase of the remaining properties within the boundary of the San Bernard Refuge, shown on attached maps, using available Houston Endowment/FOBWR pre-acquisition Grant Funds and the \$46,600 remaining donated money from TGC. Following is status and list of these private inholdings that are planned to be approved for purchase at the September Migratory Bird Conservation Commission Meeting (MBCC):

- The Century Assets 5-acre inholding in the Sargent Ventures Unit of the refuge located on the County Road about 1 mile north of the town of Sargent Beach. NFWF contracted the market value appraisal report of the subject property with fee appraiser James Jeffries. The \$92,500 appraised value has been approved and FWS has provided the landowner a purchase agreement to acquire the property with Fiscal year 2017 Migratory Bird Funds.
- The 17.32-acre Olson property inholding located along the County Road in the southeast portion of the San Bernard NWR. Property was also appraised by James Jeffries per contract with NFWF and the \$103,900 value approved and accepted by the landowners. FWS is sending the purchase agreement to the landowners to acquire the property with MBCC September funding.
- NFWF is also working with the Poole/Ducroz landowner's attorneys on their remaining private ownerships within the southeast boundary of the San Bernard Refuge, containing approximately 850-acres, more or less, (as shown on the attached map).

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This land has a complex, long-standing private ownership problem for the San Bernard Refuge since its establishment in the 1970's. This problem is an artifact of the State of Texas original land survey patent errors, private ownership claims, uncertain location of US Army Corps of Engineers Intracoastal Waterway and Spoil Easements on the land, etc. NFWF and the FWS Realty Office are working with the landowners in efforts to obtain current legal descriptions of their ownerships in order to contract market value appraisal reports and obtain approval to acquire the subject lands with future MBCC funding.

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Activity is also underway to acquire tracts of land in the Big Boggy and Brazoria National Wildlife Refuges:

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- At the recent request from FWS, the NFWF has initiated pre-acquisition steps to acquire approximately 150-acres of Piping Plover Endangered Species Critical Habitat located at Cedar Lake Cut inholding at the San Bernard Refuge in Matagorda County. Because this land is outside of the four-county area stipulated in the Houston Endowment grant, FOBWR has received a \$30,000 from the FWS to help cover preservation costs of the subject lands that may contain numerous private owners with undivided ownership interests and potential claim by the State of Texas, being a former part of Cedar Lakes.
- The Trust for Public Land is working as a partner with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Consultant Tom Smith (NFWF) to acquire the 190 -acre Snow Tract. This is a high priority addition to the Refuge Complex, located just west of the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge. The tract will greatly enhance the public use programs of Brazoria NWR providing excellent birding as well as fresh water fishing and a location for environmental education programs. The Trust for Public Land has the land under contract and the project will be going to the September 6th meeting of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission along with the two other refuge tracts at San Bernard. Houston Endowment funds held by the Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges covered the very extensive and complicated appraisal needed for this project.
- The Alattar tract is an exciting potential acquisition and addition to the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge. This 9,360-acre marsh and prairie landscape is one of the last large intact, pristine marsh systems remaining on the Coast near Houston. The Trust for Public Land is taking the lead on this project. The Galveston Bay Foundation is partnering on this project as well as Tom Smith with NFWF, and the Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges. Currently we are all working together to provide a market value analysis/partial appraisal, which will allow the Trust for Public Land to get the land under a 2-year option agreement. Hopefully the project can be funded from several sources over the next 2 years including Deep Water Horizon funds, Migratory Bird Conservation Funds and other funding from private foundations and individual donors to match public grant funding.
- The Doss Tract is another Trust for Public Land project in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NFWF consultant Tom Smith. The project is a 714- acre marsh and prairie tract adjacent to the Big Boggy National Wildlife Refuge. It will connect the refuge to Lake Austin providing a large area of frontage on the lake. The project has been approved for funding through the Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) process which is part of the Deep -Water Horizon settlement. Because this tract is in Matagorda County, funds from the Houston Endowment grant to the FOBWR will not be used for pre-acquisition discovery activities.
- The Trust for Public Land is leading an effort to preserve marsh, bay, and beach habitats on Follets Island adjacent to the Follets Island Conservation Initiative. The land is on the south shores of Christmas and Drum Bays, and each tract reaches from the gulf to the bay waters. The Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges, with the concurrence of Houston Endowment, have provided approximately \$16,500 from the grant funds for due-diligence appraisals for 3 ownerships on the Island establishing the market value for these tracts. To date, the Trust for Public Land has acquired all three tracts and will be transferring all three, a total of approximately 385 acres, to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for permanent protection as part of the Initiative. This land protection greatly enhances the conservation of the adjacent Refuge lands at the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge, preventing over-development of Follets Island and Christmas and Drum Bays.