



Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge



Proposed Forest Management Action

1 - What is the project planned for Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge?

- The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is planning to do a hazardous fuel (overly dense forest and shrub vegetation) reduction, invasive plant species control, and wildlife habitat improvement project within a 645 acres area of the old-field pine forest areas (see attached map) on Pinckney Island NWR from mid-2024 through early-2026. We will be using a combination of mechanical treatments (chipping, mulching, saw crews), prescribed fire, invasive species control through herbicide treatment, and planting of longleaf pine seedlings.

2- Why are you conducting this project on Pinckney Island NWR?

- The primary goal is to reduce the flammable vegetation and minimize the threat of wildfires burning in an undesirable situation that could have negative impacts on the refuge through killing of trees and wildlife, threatening visitors, and harming neighboring communities through air quality degradation from un-managed smoke.

3- Why is this currently not considered a “healthy” forest?

- The targeted areas are not necessarily considered to be un-healthy, but they are at risk of an undesirable habitat change if conditions are not managed through mechanical treatment followed by deliberate prescribed fires to remove the flammable vegetation.
- There is an abundance of Chinese tallow tree (also known as popcorn tree), one of the most prolific and negatively impactful invasive species in our area. These trees can severely degrade the overall health of the forest and wetland habitats by transforming a diverse plant habitat into a monoculture tallow forest and altering soil and water chemistry.

4- How might this project affect the wildlife that currently uses the Refuge?

- Some wildlife species may be temporarily displaced during certain phases of the project, but all efforts will be taken to minimize disturbance. Avoiding mechanical work during peak bird nesting season, not working during the bat pupping season, protecting important wetland areas, and adjusting plans if significant wildlife disturbance is observed should ensure negligible effects. The resulting habitats will be improved for most species and local communities will be less likely to be impacted by reduced air quality from wildfire smoke.

5- How long will the project take to complete?

- We plan to have the mechanical treatments completed no later than April 30, 2025 (weather dependent), but a selective herbicide treatment to control invasive species and hand planting of longleaf pine seedlings will continue through January 31, 2026. Occasional maintenance through prescribed fire and invasive species control will continue to be done as needed.

6 - How often will this project close the refuge to visitors? Will this management action result in partial and/or full Refuge closures? And how will I know when the project work will affect my visit to the Refuge?

- We do anticipate some short-term partial closures on those areas being treated. We will communicate to the public early and often as to where those areas will be. Visitors can stay up to date on the project’s status at the refuge website (<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/pinckney-island>) or on Facebook at Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex.

7- What does success look like?

- We consider success to be safely and effectively reducing flammable vegetation by 95% and replacing 95% of the Chinese tallow trees with at least 75% of native grasses. This will result in more healthy, diverse, and resilient forests throughout the refuge. A variety of forest types, including longleaf pine, loblolly pine, and mixed hardwoods, will prevail across the landscape.

Please see example below of local area treatment similar to the proposed action:



Heavy fuel on site at Sea Pines Resort, Hilton Head Island, SC, prior to mechanical treatment (photo credit – David Henderson, Lowcountry Wildlife Specialists)



Reduced fuel on site at Sea Pines Resort, Hilton Head Island, SC, 1 year after mechanical treatment and prescribed burn (photo credit – David Henderson, Lowcountry Wildlife Specialists)

8- Is there a habitat management plan directing this activity?

- Habitat management planning is through a combination of the 2011 Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex, the 2022 Natural Resource Prioritization Phase I Decision Report for Priority Habitats and Resources of Concern for Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge, and consultation with USFWS regional forestry and fire personnel throughout 2023.

9- Have you evaluated alternatives and involved the public according to guidance from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other applicable policies and regulations, such as the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Archeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA)?

- Yes, the Refuge completed a Categorical Exclusion and Compatibility Determination satisfying our obligations under the NEPA. We consulted with USFWS program experts on both the ESA Section 7 and ARPA and will continue to do so as necessary throughout the duration of the project.

10- Where is the funding for this project coming from?

- This project is primarily funded (98%) through the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) with the remaining 2% coming as in-kind contributions from Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex.

11- Is timber harvesting allowed on Pinckney Island NWR?

- Yes, as long as it is “necessary to preserve the use of the real property for the purposes.....used exclusively as a wildlife refuge and as a nature and forest preserve for aesthetic and conservation purposes”.
- Although we are not selling any commodity from this project, the Compatibility Determination is developed for “commercial tree harvesting”. We are using this practice as it is the best mechanical method for midstory flammable fuels reduction, provides the best native understory growth response, allows for the earliest prescribed fire re-entry, and best prepares the sites for planting longleaf pine seedlings. The reason we have not applied these management practices to Pinckney Island NWR in the past was due to lack of project specific funding. We now have a funding commitment through the 2021 BIL to complete this project,

For additional questions concerning this project, please contact Refuge Biologist, Wayne Harris at billy_harris@fws.gov.

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