

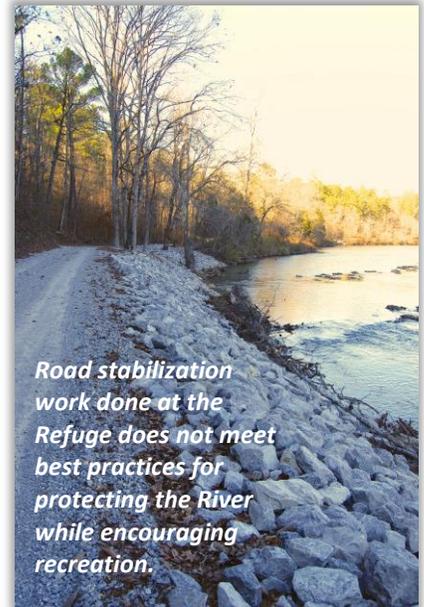


Changes at the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge

May 13, 2015

Many of you will attend this year's Lily Festival on May 16 or make other trips to the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge in the coming months. CRS wants to let you know about work done at the Refuge by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). USFWS has been a key partner for Cahaba conservation. The agency's responsibilities include managing and maintaining all federal wildlife refuges, and this work was done in an attempt to stabilize the Refuge access road.

CRS believes that the measures USFWS took to remedy a limited erosion problem, while well-intentioned, were out-of-proportion and damaged the landscape at one of the State of Alabama's natural wonders. We believe this work **does not meet best practices for encouraging recreational access while also protecting the values of the River, and should not set precedent for future Refuge projects or work done by others elsewhere on the River.** We have expressed our concerns to USFSW about the road project and also about **potential impacts on the ecology of the Cahaba and recreational/tourism use of the Refuge.**



Road stabilization work done at the Refuge does not meet best practices for protecting the River while encouraging recreation.



Before – spring 2014



After – winter 2015

Healthy riverbank forest that was the backdrop to the Cahaba lilies was cut down and replaced by riprap stone

In line with our CRS Collaboration Policies and Process, we are working with USFWS to discuss and evaluate remediation options. CRS and other conservation groups have been meeting with Refuge management staff to explore how to mitigate the impact and improve planning guidelines and processes for the Refuge to ensure better outcomes for future projects there. Together we have already done a pilot streambank replanting project. **Moving forward, we plan to work with USFWS, local officials, and volunteers in efforts to speed restoration.**

What was done?

The road stabilization work, which resulted in such a significant degradation to the Refuge, was not preceded by a formal process to involve the public. When CRS learned about the proposed project from Refuge staff, we asked for more information and a chance to comment on the proposed plans. CRS Field Director Dr. Randy Haddock was invited to tour the Refuge with USFWS personnel and was given a verbal description of the proposed project's scope. We wrote USFWS a letter urging a different method – for example, using native stone rather than riprap, in much more limited locations, and avoiding removal of trees and vegetation as much as possible. Our recommendations were not incorporated, and the completed project has a substantially larger footprint than what USFWS described to us during our field visit.

As part of this project, USFWS:

- Cleared swaths of trees and vegetation from both sides of the riverside road and covered the natural stream bank with layers of riprap (8" to 12" diameter stone used to control erosion) in several locations, which altogether impact about 1,500 feet of the riverbank. For long stretches this stone fills the entire area of the riverbank between the water's edge and the road. As a result, the approach route and backdrop to the shoals where the lilies bloom have been significantly altered.
- Used concrete to pave several short sections of the road at drainage crossings. Excess concrete was dumped between the road and riverbank rather than being properly disposed of offsite.
- Removed and damaged trees and native plants along the riverbank and on both sides of the road to provide heavy equipment access for the project. Trees that were not cut down entirely were severely pruned to the point that many may not survive. Riprap was piled against trunks and over roots of the few remaining riverbank trees.



Remaining trees may not survive due to stone on roots & against trunks

What are our concerns

- This project has significantly and negatively changed the natural beauty of the Refuge.
- The roadwork has had, or will have, negative impacts along the riverbank and, ultimately, negative impacts to the river itself. Riverbank vegetation is essential to stable riverbanks, and to the diversity of water and land habitats and wildlife at the river's edge.
- USFWS briefly evaluated the potential impacts of the project on federally listed species and concluded there should have been no impacts. However, it is our understanding that USFWS assumed no riprap would be allowed to be in the river. We believe riprap did end up on the river bed beyond the previous toe of the stream bank.
- The work also does not seem to have solved the erosion problems along the access road.
- It has become clear that the Refuge budget lacks the financial and personnel resources to perform remediation of the project, such as replanting the native streambank forest and preventing takeover by invasive plants like privet.



Rock in the riverbed

What can you do?

CRS will continue to advocate for adequate resources for remediation efforts. **For now, this work needs to be performed by volunteers**, and we appreciate that USFWS is supporting those efforts. Here's how you can help:

- Contact CRS if you are interested in volunteering for future replanting and invasive species removal projects. We are planning a major replanting project in the fall. <https://cahabariversociety.wufoo.com/forms/how-you-can-help-save-the-cahaba/>



So far, tree seedlings replanted by volunteers are surviving. Join CRS & partners for a large replanting project in the fall.

- Be careful when driving or walking the Refuge Road. The riprap and concrete could be hazardous.
- Support volunteer efforts of the Friends of the Cahaba National Wildlife Refuge group at **www.CahabaFriends.com**
- As CRS develops opportunities for you to help advocate for more resources and better outcomes for this important refuge and global treasure, we will reach out to you ~ please stay tuned.

As part of an ongoing dialogue with USFWS, CRS is working to be part of partnerships and public engagement to ensure that future work will be planned and undertaken in ways that protect the Cahaba's values for recreation, biodiversity, and natural beauty that are the reason the Refuge was created. We will provide you updates and opportunities along the way. In the meantime, if you have questions or concerns, please send them to BethS@cahabariversociety.org.

Thanks for your support of the Cahaba River Society and our mission to restore and protect the Cahaba River watershed and its rich diversity of life.

Sincerely yours,

Beth Stewart
Executive Director
Cahaba River Society