

Neutralizing Nutria

By Marilyn Barrett

Since they first escaped from fur farms in the 1930s, nutria have contributed to the nation's annual loss of coastal wetlands. These South American rodents graze on wetland plants, eating until only weakened roots are left. Without strong plant roots to trap silt and secure the marsh's foundation, the marsh erodes. Nutria wear away the marsh through all seasons. Females can have up to five litters (averaging three to five young) every two years, and the youngsters begin feeding on marsh plants within hours of birth. Alligators are their primary predators.

Because of their large litters and ability to survive in fresh and brackish waters,



This is a nutria eat-out. Nutria generally feed heavily on plants in an area, leaving the fragile marsh soil susceptible to erosion. Although scientists have tested many types of barriers to protect marsh grass from nutria, none has been successful. In this photo, a small patch of weakened grass remains within the test barrier of a nutria-degraded marsh.

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nutria provided an abundant supply of marketable soft, dark brown fur to commercial trappers. The rodent accounted for \$15 million of the total \$25 million contributed to Louisiana's economy by the fur industry in the mid- to late 1970s. However, as fur markets declined throughout the world in the late 1980s, the number of trappers and fur producers in Louisiana also decreased.

The nutria population in Louisiana actually peaked at 20 million in the 1950s, according to Ted O'Neil, former chief of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) Fur and Refuge Division. However, nutria density remains a problem. When the population exceeds the carrying capacity of the marsh, erosion and marsh degradation result, according to Greg Linscombe of the same division. "Pockets" of nutria threaten portions of the state's three million acres of marsh. The animals are a major threat to the coastal restoration efforts in Louisiana of many state and federal agencies.

Over the years, a variety of attempts have been made to reduce nutria populations. The Fur and Alligator Council, created by the state legislature in 1986, sought new international markets and developed new products. To stimulate interest in nutria meat among the general public, LDWF administers an incentive program for the restaurant industry, processors, and trappers. It is not uncommon to see nutria on restaurant menus or featured at cook-offs during public events.

Researchers have studied several kinds of barriers for blocking nutria from marsh grasses. A contractor, hired by LDWF to look at population control methods ranging

from killing to sterilization concluded that the number of animals in these areas must be reduced. The contractor identified an EPA-approved chemical to poison them. Although LDWF accepted the conclusion that some nutria must be killed, the agency rejected the use of poison, which might also kill other local wildlife. Instead, several agencies together devised a new, five-year program to neutralize the nutria, the Louisiana Coastwide Nutria Control Program.

"This is an unusual CWPPRA project," Linscombe said. The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) of 1990 ordered federal agencies to develop comprehensive plans to restore and prevent loss of coastal wetlands in Louisiana, which has about 40 percent of the nation's wetlands. Many of CWPPRA's projects have focused on wetland restoration. CWPPRA partners include the Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, US Army Corps of Engineers, National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (LDNR). LDWF administers the program with assistance from NRCS and LDNR. Louisiana Sea Grant extension agents, associated with the LSU AgCenter, arranged six public meetings in local communities last summer during which representatives of LDWF and NRCS explained this program to trappers.

The Nutria Control Program 2002 is designed to stop the threat to new as well as existing wetlands in the state's coastal areas (south of I-10 and I-12). The goal of the \$12 million project is to reduce Louisiana's coastal nutria population by 400,000.

The five-year time period and the focused harvest area give this program a better opportunity for success, Linscombe explained. The harvest target number is not dramatically higher than the total number of nutria trapped last year. Besides the fact that Louisiana sold and shipped all pelts from last year's trapping season, new markets are opening up in Russia, Ukraine, and China, and the number of Argentine nutria pelts coming to market may be declining. "We'll be hunting and trapping now with no pelts on hand," Linscombe says.

This program increases the value of nutria for the trappers. Besides revenue and possible incentives trappers can receive from meat processors and fur dealers, trappers will receive \$4 for each nutria tail turned in at designated collection centers close to the harvest areas. The application process is similar to those for alligator hunting without quotas, Linscombe said. With written permission from a landowner or manager of specific public and private lands, trappers will receive a Nutria Control Program Registration Number, allowing them to set traps or shoot nutria and receive payment for each tail.

If the program is successful, LDWF and NRCS may extend it, Linscombe said. Time will tell. But for now, he is just hoping to neutralize the nutria population by harvesting 400,000 annually for the next five years, and in the process, to see a significant reduction in marsh degradation in the target areas. For more information on the program, contact the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Fur and Refuge Division in New Iberia (337-373-0032). 