



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
WICHITA MOUNTAINS WILDLIFE REFUGE
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EMERGENCY CLOSURE OF THE CHARONS GARDEN WILDERNESS AREA

Due to the hazardous conditions resulting from the extreme heat and persistent drought in this area, the Refuge Manager will temporarily close that portion of the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge within the Charons Garden Wilderness Area to public access and use effective July 29, 2011 until further notice. The extreme weather conditions has led to recurring incidents of people suffering from dehydration, heat exhaustion and heat stroke while hiking and climbing in the backcountry of the Refuge and required several search and rescue operations, most of them within or near the Charons Garden Wilderness Area. On Saturday, July 23, 2011, Refuge search and rescue teams and other local emergency service resources were called upon to rescue 10 hikers from three separate groups from within the Wilderness Area. The weather conditions, coupled with the rocky, rugged and remote terrain of this popular wilderness area not only increases the dangers for visitors, but also poses a high risk to Refuge and other emergency service personnel called upon for search and rescue operations during periods of the extreme heat.

Refuge regulations at 50 CFR § 25.21(e) allow refuge managers authority to close or curtail uses on refuge lands “in the event of a threat or emergency endangering the health and safety of the public or property...” Because of the conditions discussed above, the Refuge Manager is closing the Charons Garden Wilderness Area until relief from the extremely hot weather conditions alleviates the dangers associated with the backcountry public use and associated search and rescue operations. When relief in weather conditions no longer warrant the closure, the Refuge Manager will promptly announce termination of the closure. In an effort to minimize the impacts on refuge visitor use opportunities, the emergency closure is limited at this time only to the Wilderness Area where most problems have occurred. If necessary to protect the health and safety of visitors and search and rescue personnel, the closure may be expanded to other Refuge areas.