

Rep. Scott Rigell
Member of Congress
Virginia's 2nd Congressional District

Proposed Fish and Wildlife Service's Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Its
Potentially Devastating Impact on the Economy of the Town of Chincoteague

Opening Remarks

Chairman Fleming, members of the committee, thank you for holding this important oversight hearing today and for graciously inviting me to participate. It is an honor and privilege to represent the town of Chincoteague.

I would like to begin by recognizing and introducing our guests from Chincoteague.

Supervisor Wanda J. Thornton has called Chincoteague home since 1963. She joined the Chincoteague Town Council in 1990 and was elected to the Accomack County Board of Supervisors in 1996. She is the owner and operator of Pine Grove Campground in Chincoteague.

Mayor John H. "Jack" Tarr has been Mayor of the Town of Chincoteague since 1999 and previously served five years on the Town Council. Mayor Tarr was born and raised on Chincoteague. In addition to serving as Mayor, he owns and operates a local contracting business.

Scott Chesson has been a business owner in Chincoteague for 23 years. He owns and manages the Best Western Plus Chincoteague. His extensive knowledge of the local business community will be particularly relevant to the subject at hand today.

I respect the valuable service provided by the National Wildlife Refuge system. By setting aside lands for wildlife and providing public access and education, we preserve America's outdoor heritage for our own benefit and for that of future generations.

The Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge is one of the most visited sites in the refuge system. Visitors come from across the country to see the wild ponies and enjoy the beach.

The town of Chincoteague has a unique relationship with the Refuge. For more than a generation, the town's economy has become dependent on beach driven tourism. The beach hosts more than 5,000 people on peak days. Any change to the refuge management plan which diminishes beach access will have a detrimental effect on the local economy.

I have been disappointed in the Fish and Wildlife Service's approach to the conservation planning process in Chincoteague. Their approach has not appropriately recognized the balance between wildlife conservation and protecting jobs.

I call on the Refuge to adopt a "do no harm" policy that recognizes the direct link between beach access and local jobs.

I take it as a given that any conservation plan which makes the beach more difficult to access will drive tourists away. Businesses will suffer and jobs will be lost.

I have been assured numerous times that the Refuge's intention is not to replace the beach parking but to supplement it and provide emergency backup parking for those occasional times when the parking lot sustains storm damage.

However, it is clear to me that the Refuge is pursuing an agenda to replace, rather than supplement the parking lot. In their application for a \$3 million dollar grant to purchase an off-site parking location, refuge officials specifically described the purpose of the funding to "develop a park-and-ride facility to keep vehicles away from the vulnerable beachfront."

The town, the county, and the Virginia House of Delegates have all adopted resolutions disapproving any effort to expand the boundaries of the Refuge within the town for the purpose of establishing a transit system. It flies in the face of common sense that the Refuge would continue to pursue a plan that has drawn such deep objections.

Moving this project forward ahead of the CCP undermines the integrity of the public process. By moving ahead prematurely, the refuge is sending a clear signal that the public process is nothing more than a pro forma exercise with a foregone conclusion.

I see this as a classic example of a paternalistic federal government imposing its will without regard for the needs, desires, or economic well being of the people.

It is incumbent on us to ensure that the Fish and Wildlife service take no action to undermine the local economy or the people it serves.

Thank you, I yield back the balance of my time.