

Statement of The Hon. John H. Tarr Mayor, Town of Chincoteague, Virginia

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Jack Tarr and I am the Mayor of the Town of Chincoteague. On behalf of our full time residents and seasonal visitors, I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (CNWR) and the planning process that is underway and its impacts on our Town.

I also want to single out for special thanks Representative Scott Rigell and his staff who have been our champion here in Washington and has stood by us during this process.

If I may Mr. Chairman, please let me give you a brief history for how we got to this point...

The Town of Chincoteague has a 50 year history of support for the Refuge and the Assateague Island National Seashore. Our Town has worked hard to build an international reputation for the Chincoteague wild ponies, and a gateway community that supports over 1.5 million visitors to the Refuge each year.

The Virginia portion of Assateague Island is a Wildlife Refuge inside a National Seashore Park. This is different than any other Wildlife Refuge in the country, but the proposed CCP doesn't even recognize public beach recreation at all.

The CCP should address the relationship or agreement that the US Fish and Wildlife Service has with the National Park Service. The question of who is tasked with managing and maintaining the recreational beach is very important.

The Chincoteague Bridge and Beach Authority build the first bridge and roadway system to the Beach in the 1962 with the blessing of Congress to promote economic development on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

These valuable public assets were sold to the National Park Service in 1966 to operate and maintain over 4 miles of seashore at the south end of Assateague Island as a public recreational beach.

I am here today to tell you that I feel we are being railroaded into less or no parking at the Beach, and forced to ride a trolley system in the future. Before the CCP process, US FWS began an Alternative Transportation Study that the community thought was to promote walking trails and bicycling.

I remember the first slide that Refuge Manager Lou Hinds presented that day. A crowded roadway going to the Beach, and his comment was "the American People have become too dependent on their vehicles."

The Volpe Transportation Center was the contractor that put together the Alternative Transportation Plan, and now is the contractor selected to prepare the CCP and Environmental Impact Statement. We know why – it's all about public transportation.

With the grant application award of 1.5 million dollars for a 'park and ride' facility on Chincoteague Island, how can we trust anything in the CCP process?

Based on the ideas presented by Refuge Manager Lou Hinds during the last 2 years, the Town of Chincoteague completed a questionnaire of our visitors in 2010 that indicated these changes would have a dramatic negative effect on our economy.

Over 82% indicated they would not return if a transit shuttle replaced convenient beach parking. In response to the CCP proposals, the Town Council has resolved:

- No expansion of the Refuge or Seashore should occur on Chincoteague Island
- No transit shuttle system should be proposed that reduces convenient beach parking at the Seashore to less than 1,000 existing spaces
- Alternative B to relocate the recreational beach cannot be supported at this time.
- The CCP should include an alternative C that allows the recreational beach to remain at Toms Cove by maintaining or restoring the 'land base' (123 Common Sense Plan)
- The CCP should include alternatives that continue the current exceptional visitor experience for another 15 years (150 ponies, 360 degree beach experience, 1000 car parking are examples)
- The CCP should include beach nourishment or other methods to restore the sheltering effect of the barrier island.

You have asked about my opinion of the four proposed alternatives in the CCP. We have been informed by Refuge staff that this may now be three choices because they would like to eliminate alternative C.

I think that the CCP should have looked at what has been working for the past 20 years under the old Master Plan. This is the one we have built our community around. Unfortunately, alternative A except that the 'status quo' option is never selected. We need to address how we can improve on that.

The problem is that every time we suggest how the plan that provides 1.5 million visitors a year and the #1 Beach Town in 2011 could be improved we are told that it is 'against our policy'.

1. Sand fencing to prevent beach erosion – 'against our policy'
2. Christmas Trees to prevent beach erosion – 'against our policy'
3. Dune maintenance and planting – 'against our policy'
4. Beach nourishment – 'against our policy'

The 7.5 million dollars that is proposed for a mass transit parking lot would go a long way to take care of the visitor facilities that we already have.

Fifty years of experience and public trust should not be abandoned in a rush to change everything and still meet a 2012 CCP deadline.

Mr. Chairman, the Town of Chincoteague is under siege by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Their policy of implementing transit in parks and purchasing property in our town limits – both ideas that we oppose because they are completely unnecessary - is one that will kill jobs, crush investment and create economic uncertainty in our Town.

We are here to ask this Committee to exercise its oversight capabilities and help put a stop to the massive over-reach of the Fish and Wildlife Service.