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Resources Agency Oversight Hearing on: "Why Does the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Want to Expand the Boundaries of the Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges in Tennessee and at What Cost?"

Thursday, June 20, 2013

Thank You Chairman, Fleming for the opportunity to address the subcommittee.

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the Draft Land Protection Plan for the proposed expansion of the acquisition boundaries for Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges. This expansion will create the opportunity to conserve valuable riverine and wetland habitats.

The establishment of these boundaries will address the conservation of fish and wildlife in an area identified by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency as "Important Wildlife Lands in Tennessee". The collaboration on the draft plan allows for the strategic focus of both TWRA and USFWS on lands that are important for conservation without duplication of effort.

The Hatchie River is the only river system in West Tennessee that is not impacted by impoundment or channelization. The protection of this river and the adjacent property will benefit numerous mammals, fish, and mussel species. Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges are north and south of our J.M. Tully Wildlife Management Area and could provide a significant ecosystem where fish and wildlife would have corridors and connected habitats to facilitate migration and genetic interchange of those species, enabling them to adapt to future environmental changes.

If some of the projections for urban growth by 2060 come about, the conservation of these habitats will be critical. Tipton County could add 22,000 acres of urban lands and become 14% urban. Lauderdale County could add 16,000 acres of urban land and become 10% urban and Dyer County could add 37,000 acres of urban land becoming 15% urban. Urbanization at this scale will lead to fragmentation or loss of critical wildlife habitats and agricultural lands.

As urbanization of the rural Counties of Tipton, Lauderdale, Dyer changes the landscape of those counties, the continued urbanization of Shelby County will cause even more unknown pressures to be exerted on the landscape of this area.

One thing we do know is that as the urban populations grow, the demand for outdoor recreation grows. Wildlife recreation in Tennessee generates over 2.9 billion dollars. 2.6 million people, residents and nonresidents participated in hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing in 2011. Having areas like the Chickasaw NWR, Lower Hatchie NWR and J.M. Tully WMA will attract people who are interested in outdoor recreation. Outdoor recreation can have a meaningful economic impact in these counties.

The expansion of the acquisition boundaries does not obligate any landowner to change their current or long term goals for their property. It in fact expands their options. For those who are not interested in changing what they doing on the land, nothing changes. For those current landowners or future land owners who are interested in making changes they will have the option of selling their property to anyone they choose, entering into a conservation easement and continuing to work some of the land or selling the land to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The important part of this is that without the expansion of the boundaries, two of these options do not exist for the landowner who would like to see their property fill a conservation need. The Fish and Wildlife Service could not entertain an offer by a willing seller if that property were outside the acquisition boundary.

Given the many positive aspects of the Fish and Wildlife land acquisition process of offer fair market value, revenue sharing payments and continued working landscapes the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency the long term results of this expansion of the land acquisition boundaries will be beneficial.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this proposal with the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs.