

**The Hon. Wanda Thornton
Member, County Board of Supervisors
County of Accomack, Virginia**

**Testimony on H. Res. 2087 (Rigell)
September 15, 2011**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Grijalva, members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you on House Resolution 2087.

My name is Wanda Thornton and since 1996, I have served as a member of the Accomack County, Virginia Board of Supervisors. Accomack County is the northernmost county on Virginia's Eastern Shore.

I am here to represent the county Board of Supervisors. We have come to Congress because only a legislative remedy can remove a federal deed restriction on county-owned land in a fiscally responsible manner.

Thirty-five years ago, in 1976, the United States government granted Accomack County approximately 32 acres of land adjacent to the NASA Wallops Flight Facility. The 32 acres had been deemed excess federal property and the land was given to Accomack County under the auspices of the Federal Land to Parks Program, which is administered by the National Park Service.

The land was given to Accomack County with a deed restriction that required the land to be used only for recreational purposes. When this transaction occurred in 1976, the property had essentially no value and no one could have foreseen the tremendous economic development opportunity we have before us today. Consistent with the program parameters, Accomack County placed a softball field on the property and called the property Wallops Park.

Federal initiatives to privatize elements of America's Space Program and the retirement of the Space Shuttle program have brought profound changes to NASA – including a surge of commercial investment and activity in and around NASA/Wallops Flight Facility in Accomack County.

The County has responded pro-actively to these challenges. Accomack County has negotiated a Space Act Agreement and a ground lease with NASA to gain direct access to a NASA/Wallops Flight Facility runway.

NASA is cooperating with Accomack County in order to accommodate private aerospace businesses that will support NASA's emerging privatization model. The land leased from NASA and to be sub-leased for private business development is fully one-third of the development to be known as Wallops Research Park.

The only way for Wallops Research Park to be developed is for the county to get clear title to Wallops Park - the recreation area with the federal deed restriction.

Due to its location adjacent to NASA's property, the Wallops Park property is now appraised at a value of \$815,000.00, or more than \$25,000 per acre. This is on the order of five times (5x) the value of other land in our county that would be generally suitable for recreational use.

Federal law requires the appraiser to appraise the value of the property at its "highest and best use." Because the appraiser knew of our plans for the development of Wallops Research Park, the property was assessed at this amount.

After extensive discussion and negotiation with the NPS Lands to Parks Program, we were told that their policy requires Accomack County to acquire another recreational property to serve as its replacement. We were willing to pursue this route until we were told that National Park Service program administration and the Department of Interior's "no net loss" policy requires Accomack County to replace Wallops Park with new land at least equal in *monetary value* - as opposed to simply *recreational value*.

We have tried repeatedly to convince the National Park Service to allow us to replace the recreational value of the property rather than the monetary value. They have told Accomack County and Rep. Rigell that they cannot change their policy. This is why we need legislative relief.

Accomack County is one of Virginia's poorest. We certainly do not have a million dollars or more to spend on the purchase of land and construction of a new park. The taxpayers of Accomack do not support this unnecessary expenditure as we already have numerous park facilities in the county and as elected officials we could not pursue this course of action knowing full well that this would be a poor use of taxpayer funds.

We are pursuing the development of Wallops Research Park in coordination with NASA. Numerous commercial interests have expressed strong interest in locating adjacent to NASA's facilities. Wallops Research Park will create several hundred good paying jobs in the space and aerospace industry. We want to move forward but we cannot until this deed restriction is removed.

House Resolution 2087 will remove the deed restriction and allow us to proceed with our goals of creating new jobs and keeping our community at the forefront of America's space and aerospace research and commercialization.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration and support for this legislation. I would be happy to answer your questions.