

Testimony of Wanda J. Thornton Accomack County Board of Supervisors

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning. My name is Wanda Thornton and I serve as a member of the Accomack County Board of County Supervisors. My district is the Island District, which includes Chincoteague and Assateague Island in Virginia.

I am here today to talk to you about jobs and the apparent willingness of the Obama Administration and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to destroy hundreds of businesses and jobs in our community.

Our Island is seven miles long and 2 miles wide and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service owns 540 acres within our town limits and plan to purchase an additional 200 acres of business property. This business property generated significant revenue and jobs for our town and the county. This past Monday, the Refuge Manager, Lou Hines told our elected officials that he would purchase more land from any willing sellers in our town. This needs to stop.

I own a campground on Chincoteague and I have met visitors from all over the world who come to Chincoteague to fish, explore and go to the beach on Assateague Island, which is over a short causeway from Chincoteague Island.

We know these families, many of whom have visited our region for decades. We talk to them about their experiences and what they like and dislike about our beaches and our region's amenities.

I, along with my fellow elected officials and the business community, have shared what we've learned with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and in particular, Lou Hinds, the Refuge Manager who is responsible for developing the CCP.

I have participated in previous CCPs at the Chincoteague Wildlife Refuge. I have to say that the process we are going through now is by far the most divisive and infuriating process I have encountered in my more than twenty years of public service.

You will hear from the government that they have bent over backwards to hold public meetings and have invited stakeholders to meet on many occasions. This is true.

But what is also true is that our concerns have been ignored, we have been lied to, we have been told that no matter what we say the refuge manager has 51% of the vote, and this process underway at the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge holds the opinions of the local population in contempt.

People in the Town of Chincoteague are fearful for their jobs, they are fearful that their investments in local businesses or restaurants may be wiped out because a local refuge manager wants to shut down the current ocean-accessible beach and force tourists to ride into the refuge on a mass transit shuttle.

You may hear the witness from the Fish and Wildlife Service discuss plan to move the recreational beach further to the north from the current beach. This plan would require the destruction of more than ten acres of wetlands and negatively impacts the habitat of the Delmarva fox squirrel, an animal on the endangered species list. How exactly will the Fish and Wildlife Service get the approval from other federal government agencies to destroy these wetlands to create a parking lot when these same agencies protest decisions to impact wetlands throughout

our region of the country? Furthermore, our country is trillions of dollars in debt; where will the Fish and Wildlife Service get the millions of dollars it will take to implement this irresponsible plan?

You can easily see how we become skeptical of the Fish and Wildlife Service's claim that they are going to move the beach parking lot as they propose in Alternative B, which is their preferred alternative. Their real plan is to develop a transit parking lot, then claim they cannot build the new beach parking lot because of environmental and budget concerns. That leaves the Town right where the Refuge Manager wanted to go all along: Parking outside of the refuge and the permanent loss of beach parking.

We have asked our visitors what they think of this idea and more than 80% of them said they would not come back to Chincoteague if they were forced to use mass transit to get to the beach. They like being able to drive to the beach parking lot where they can easily unload their beach gear and spend the day with their family. Loading a family's beach gear onto a trolley is not an experience our visitors will sign up for. There are many other options and they just won't come to Chincoteague.

The Refuge Manager and the people at the Fish and Wildlife Service know all of this and they evidently don't care. They just secured a 1.5 million dollar grant from the Sarbanes Transit in Parks program to purchase property in the Town limits to develop a transit parking lot. We have made our objections to this purchase crystal clear. Accomack County opposes moving the parking off the refuge. The Town, State Tourism Commission, the Office of the Governor of Virginia and the Virginia House of Delegates have all gone on the record and made it clear that we oppose the Refuge's plan to purchase property in the Town limits.

Our country has a trillion dollar per year deficit but the Feds are going to buy a piece of property against the wishes of the local population for a service nobody wants to use. It's easy to see why so many Americans have lost faith in their federal government.

We are here today to ask you to help us stop this reckless agenda:

- We would like the Fish and Wildlife Service to immediately state that they are no longer planning to purchase property in our Town limits and abandon their plan to do so.
- We would like them to work with us to preserve the current beach parking system which has been in place over the past five decades. There is nothing wrong with the current system that can't easily be fixed.
- We would like them to stop proposing to thin the pony herd on the Refuge.
- We would like them to develop a cost-sharing plan for repairing the beach parking lot and stop using the modest amounts it takes to repair the beach parking lot as a red-herring for their argument to abandon the beach.

And finally, we would like the Fish and Wildlife Service to become true partners in the effort to bolster the local economy while preserving the unique habitat that exists on Assateague Island. I know it can be done because it has been done for the last fifty years. The plans contemplated today by the Fish and Wildlife Service are draconian and unnecessary, will destroy hundreds of jobs and threatens the very existence of Chincoteague, Virginia.

Thank you again for your time and thoughtful consideration.