

TESTIMONY OF WENDI WEBER, NORTHEAST REGIONAL DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS, REGARDING THE PROPOSED COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION PLAN FOR THE CHINCOTEAGUE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

FEBRUARY 17, 2012

Good morning Chairman Fleming and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Wendi Weber, Northeast Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). Thank you for the opportunity to testify about one of the most popular units of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) – Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, located on Assateague Island on the coast of Virginia.

My statement below describes the Service’s developing comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge, and how we are approaching future management given the effects of environmental change to this very dynamic barrier island ecosystem. Our goal is to manage the refuge in a way that ensures: (1) its conservation purpose is achieved and maintained over the long term; (2) the public continues to have reasonable, appropriate, and compatible access; and (3) we make responsible decisions about how we utilize taxpayer dollars. In making our management decisions we also recognize the important role of the refuge for local communities.

Background

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1943 for the protection and management of migratory birds, especially migrating and wintering waterfowl. Wildlife abounds at Chincoteague. Its barrier beaches, wetlands, and maritime forests provide habitat for more than 320 different species. The refuge is considered a birding hot spot by the Audubon Society and has been designated a globally important bird area by the American Bird Conservancy. The refuge supports Delmarva fox squirrel, piping plover, Atlantic loggerhead sea turtles, and seabeach amaranth, all of which are protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Chincoteague is one of the most visited national wildlife refuges in the nation. It draws as many as 1.4 million visitors each year, and this influx of people is enormously important to the local tourism economy. The refuge sits adjacent to Assateague Island National Seashore, managed by the National Parks Service (NPS). To help accommodate visitors to the refuge, the NPS, through a Memorandum of Understanding, manages public use along a one mile portion of the barrier beach at Tom’s Cove. The NPS maintains a visitor contact station, restrooms, bathhouses, showers, pedestrian trails, and a lifeguard-protected swimming beach.

Assateague Island, like all coastal barrier islands, is composed of unstable sediments that are vulnerable to storm damage and chronic erosion from wind and waves. Assateague Island is located at the interface of land and sea and serves as a first line of defense against the strong winds, huge waves, and powerful storm surges that accompany nor’easters and hurricanes. The

exposure to wind, wave, and tidal energy keeps this coastal barrier in a state of constant flux, losing sand in some places and gaining it in others. The current recreational beach and facilities of the refuge are located in one of the most dynamic areas of the island, which places them under constant threat of damage from flooding and erosion. The effects from environmental change on national wildlife refuges are not isolated to Chincoteague. The effects are being realized all along the Atlantic Coastline, including, for example, at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge, and Key Deer National Wildlife Refuge.

Over the years, storms and their accompanying extreme high tides have repeatedly washed out the recreational beach parking lots at the refuge. The Service and NPS have relocated the beach parking lots further to the west as they have been washed out. For example, the parking lots shown in the attached photo from 1990 (Exhibit A) were repeatedly overwhelmed by strong storms throughout the 1990s. They have since been relocated. Exhibit B shows the location of the current shoreline in relation to the parking lots from the 1990s. As you can see, those parking areas are now completely underwater.

In the early 1990s, the Service developed a Master Plan for the refuge that is comparable to the comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) being developed today. At that time, as today, the beach parking lots were a major issue and the Service foresaw the eventual total loss of the land base where these parking lots are presently located. Anticipated and predicted loss of beach parking was addressed in the Master Plan as follows:

[The Service will] continue private vehicle beach access as long as beach parking areas remain, and allow the National Park Service to maintain the existing number of parking spaces (961) as long as the land base directly behind the dunes remains, realizing that this area will eventually be lost due to the natural movement of the barrier island. As natural forces reduce the land base capable of supporting the current parking, the number of spaces will be reduced accordingly. As spaces are lost, an alternative means of transportation such as a shuttle system will need to be used in order to maintain beach use.

During the 20 years since the Master Plan was finalized, annual storm events and wave action impacted the man-made dune system between the parking lots and ocean. In the mid 1990s the NPS removed the dune system, which was restricting the growth of the beach and causing the swimming beach to become narrower. A rising ocean and coastal storms have contributed to the loss of parking lot areas and beach. The parking lots built as replacements have been repeatedly destroyed and the government has expended considerable funding to rebuild parking lots only to see them damaged again.

In 2009, the parking lots were totally destroyed by a November nor'easter and the area repeatedly over-washed that winter, preventing the NPS from rebuilding the parking lots until the spring. In 2011, Hurricane Irene totally destroyed the parking lots again, and they will be rebuilt again this spring. Repairing these parking lots costs taxpayers between \$200,000 and \$700,000 per event.

Continuing to invest in rebuilding parking lots in the same location only to watch them be destroyed and washed away raises a number of important questions, including: Is this good public policy and a responsible use of federal funds? Are these investments sustainable? Is there a better way to provide recreational beach opportunities to the public that is both fiscally-sound and provides longer-term viability? These are key questions that the Service has posed to the public and hopes to address through the current comprehensive conservation planning process for the refuge. We are confident that we can provide visitors with recreational beach access and provide sound public policy in the use of appropriated operational funding. It is our duty as public servants to be fiscally responsible in the management of these important conservation and wildlife areas.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, requires the Service to develop a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for each unit of the Refuge System by October 9, 2012. Each CCP is intended to describe desired future conditions of a refuge; provide long-range guidance and management direction to achieve the conservation purposes of the refuge, refuge policy requirements, and the mission of the Refuge System; and support compatible wildlife-dependent public uses on the refuge.

Beach parking and public access, and how they are affected by sea level rise and erosion, are some of the most important management issues being addressed in the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge CCP. In addition, the CCP is being developed through an open and transparent public process that provides extensive opportunity for input from the local community and the American public.

In 2010, the Service began a scoping process to gather public input and identify key issues and concerns to consider at the refuge as part of the CCP process. Since then, the Service has held nine public meetings or open houses. We also held four workshops with our state and municipal government agency partners, as well as other federal agencies. These included: April 2011, when we jointly developed CCP vision and goals; June 2011, when we jointly developed alternatives; and, December 2011, when we met to refine alternatives and resolve outstanding issues. Three planning update newsletters that requested public input and comments were published on the refuge's website. Refuge staff have given dozens of presentations to community groups, hosted tours, and given interviews to keep the public informed and to solicit public input throughout the CCP process. The opportunities for public input to help shape the refuge's CCP have been numerous, and we are committed to maintaining an open and transparent process as we move forward.

At the current stage in the process, we have not yet finalized a draft CCP, nor identified a preferred alternative. However, in August 2011, we released four potential alternatives for public consideration. These alternatives present different management scenarios that could be implemented to meet the purposes of the refuge. While it is unusual for the Service to seek public comment prior to development of a preferred alternative and draft CCP, we decided to do so because we anticipated an unusually high level of interest from the public.

In December 2011, the Service met with representatives from the town of Chincoteague, Accomack County, the National Park Service, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA's Wallops Flight Facility is located nearby at Wallops Island), the State of Virginia, the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission, and Volpe Transportation Center to review the comments received to date regarding the initial draft alternatives. As a group we revised the alternatives. We are now considering three alternatives, which are outlined in more detail in an addendum to this statement. Common parts of all three draft alternatives are: a recreational beach, parking adjacent to the beach, off-site parking to supplement adjacent beach parking and to serve as emergency back-up parking, and an alternative transportation system.

These three alternatives will be included in the forthcoming draft CCP and environmental impact statement, which the Service plans to release for public review and comment this year. The final CCP should be complete in the summer of 2013.

Offsite Parking and Alternative Transportation

Throughout the ongoing CCP process, and consistent with the direction given in the refuge's original Master Plan, the Service has pursued the acquisition of offsite parking at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. Offsite parking will ensure continued access to the refuge for the visiting public in case of short-term parking lot washout events, as well as potentially long-term flooding from sea level rise and inundation.

Regardless of the alternative selected in the CCP process, the Service believes it is prudent to provide offsite parking at the refuge in case the current beach parking is completely destroyed by an intense storm. This scenario was realized just before the busy 2011 Labor Day holiday, when Hurricane Irene swept up the coast of Virginia the week before one of the busiest tourist days of the year. While Service and NPS staff worked tirelessly to restore as much parking as possible, only one-third (350 spaces) of the parking could be restored in time for the holiday. Thankfully, a local non-profit group scrambled to create a shuttle system for visitors. Providing parking for these emergency situations is a priority for the Refuge.

To address the long-term sustainability of parking as well as emergency needs, in the 1990s the Service attempted to negotiate the purchase of 200 acres of land owned by the Maddox family in the town of Chincoteague near the refuge's entrance. While that effort was unsuccessful, the refuge has maintained its interest in purchasing this land since that time.

In 2008 and 2009, the Service, with the Assateague Island National Seashore, the town of Chincoteague, and Accomack County, worked with the U.S. Department of Transportation's Volpe Center on an alternative transportation study at the refuge. The study objectively analyzed different ways to address transportation-related problems, including beach access, traffic, and parking. Key planning documents for the town of Chincoteague and Accomack County specify similar transportation planning objectives, such as reducing traffic congestion, facilitating forming and operating alternative transportation, and improving emergency management and transportation safety.

Independent of, but coincidental to, the ongoing development of the refuge's CCP, in 2010 the Maddox family approached the Service to express their interest in selling the property. The Service recognized the need to move quickly to take advantage of the important opportunity. Based upon the analysis in the alternative transportation study, and the direction given in the refuge's 1992 Master Plan, the Service entered into an agreement to purchase the property in May 2011. Also in May 2011, the Service applied for a Federal Transportation Administration Sarbanes Transit in the Parks grant to help fund acquisition of a portion of the land. The Federal Transportation Administration announced an award for \$1.5 million toward purchase of the property on January 17, 2012. The Service has applied for additional grants to help secure the total cost of \$7.5 million for the property.

Although the Service considered acquisition of the Maddox family property in the 1992 Master Plan, the Service believes additional review of the acquisition is appropriate under the National Environmental Policy Act. Acquiring this land was not initially intended to be part of the CCP process; however, the Service will evaluate acquisition of offsite parking with the environmental impact statement for the CCP.

Conclusion

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service remains committed to an open and transparent public process as we continue to develop the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge CCP. We will continue to have a healthy dialogue with the public about the future management of the refuge, and be responsive to the needs and interests of the local community.

As we continue our discussions with the public, we believe it will become even more apparent that the Service and the local community share the same values – conservation of the species and habitat at Chincoteague, safe and sustainable public recreational opportunities, and a vibrant and healthy local economy. As the refuge and the community are impacted by sea level rise, beach erosion, and the effects of continued storm damage, it is imperative that we work closely together to plan for the continued management of the refuge, for the benefit of both wildlife and people.

ADDENDUM

As part of the process of developing a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) released four proposed alternatives for public input and comments. Upon receiving much interest and many comments, on December 21, 2011, the Service met with the town of Chincoteague, Accomack County, National Park Service, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the state of Virginia, the Accomack-Northampton Planning District Commission, and Volpe Transportation Center and refined the alternatives, eliminating the third, alternative C. The remaining three alternatives will be analyzed during the CCP process.

The alternatives address a number of elements important to refuge management. The information provided here is not comprehensive; it does not discuss all aspects within each alternative. However it includes information relevant to the Subcommittee's February 6, 2012, letter of invitation to the Service.

Elements Common to All Alternatives

- A one-mile recreational beach will be maintained.
- Some level of parking in the vicinity of the recreational beach will be maintained.
- An alternative transportation system will be developed.
- Suitable offsite parking will be developed.

Alternative A

Alternative A is the status quo (current management) alternative as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. This alternative continues current management strategies as established by the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge Master Plan approved in 1992. Under this alternative, the refuge would protect and maintain all lands it administers, primarily focusing on the needs of threatened and endangered species, with additional emphasis on the needs of migratory birds and resident wildlife. The refuge would continue to preserve approximately 2,650 acres of wetland impoundments based on priority species needs. Natural coastal processes would continue to be the primary force that shapes habitat on the southern barrier islands. The refuge would continue to protect and enhance the wilderness character of the proposed area through actions to eliminate incompatible features and activities. There would be no change in the size or location of the proposed 1,300-acre wilderness area within the refuge.

Consistent with the 1992 Master Plan, the refuge and National Park Service will continue to allow and maintain 961 automobile parking spaces (8.5 acres) at the recreational beach. As sea level rise and natural forces reduce the land base capable of supporting current parking, the refuge would identify and pursue alternative Chincoteague Island parking opportunities and

institute a shuttle service with stowing capacity for beach cargo to the current recreational beach for use after a storm, high tide or similar event reduces parking capacity and repairs have not been done, and for long-term use.

The refuge would allow grazing of the current pony population, with a maximum pony herd size of 150 ponies, consistent with the pony management agreement with the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department.

Existing public uses, including wildlife observation, environmental education, walking and bicycling access, fishing, wildlife photography, and hunting of sika elk, white-tailed deer, and off-island migratory birds, would continue with the current facilities, programs, and policies. The off-road vehicle closure schedule and vehicle limits would continue as in current management practices. The refuge would continue to manage opportunities for recreational shellfish and crab harvest.

Alternative B

Alternative B would continue established habitat and wildlife management strategies but focus them in light of the new goals and vision established by this CCP and pursue additional management activities of resources and public use.

Beach access and parking

The refuge and National Park Service would continue to allow and maintain 961 automobile parking spaces (8.5 acres) at the recreational beach. In recognition of the vulnerability of the current parking, the refuge would develop and implement a site design plan for parking and access to a new beach location, approximately 1.5 miles north of the existing beach. The new recreational beach would offer accessible parking, pedestrian and bicycle connections, and safe shelters for visitors in close proximity to the beach. In addition, the refuge would identify and pursue alternative Chincoteague Island parking opportunities and institute a voluntary shuttle service with stowing capacity for beach cargo to supplement the beach parking and provide the convenience and opportunity to go to the recreational beach and Assateague Island facilities. The voluntary shuttle will also be available for use in emergencies, transition to the new parking lot, and especially during specific times of the year (Memorial Day through Labor Day) to supplement beach parking.

The refuge would provide management strategies for maintaining the current beach in the interim until the newly located recreational beach is ready for visitor use. The refuge would provide a transition plan from the current beach location to the new beach location, including proposed processes and management strategies to ensure that a recreational beach, parking areas, and visitor use facilities are intact for visitors at all times.

Visitor use and experience

Existing public uses would continue with some exceptions. All public access on the Service Road north of the new recreational beach parking would be restricted unless authorized under

permit. A joint National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service visitor contact station would be developed near the new recreational beach. The Beach Road causeway across Toms Cove would eventually be demolished, with the intent of restoring a natural marsh system. Until the Beach Road causeway across Toms Cove is demolished, it would be gated for refuge and National Park Service access only; public access to Toms Hook would be restricted only when other equivalent public access to the beach is provided. The refuge would continue to allow vehicular access along Beach Road to its new terminus to provide multi-habitat viewing, access to trails, and viewing of ponies and wildlife. A vehicle turn-around area and launch point for non-motorized boats would be constructed at the new terminus of Beach Road. Assawoman Island would be completely closed to all forms of public use during the breeding season, consistent with the closure on Toms Hook. Swans Cove Bicycle Trail would be replaced by an alternative bicycle trail from Wildlife Loop north to the south end of the relocated recreational beach, near the off-road vehicle zone entrance.

The refuge would maintain and, where possible, expand, current hunting opportunities by including additional species, extending hours and opportunities, and providing special events.

Off-road vehicle use would be permitted for fishing and hunting. The off-road vehicle zone would be expanded from the new recreational beach to Toms Cove, and would be open from approximately September 1 to March 14. The zone would be closed to public access March 15 through August 31, or until the last shorebird fledges. There would be a designated, year-round area for fishing from south of the recreational beach to the point of closure that would include off-road vehicle parking. The refuge would allow recreational horseback riding in the off-road vehicle zone from approximately September 1 to March 14. The refuge would allow visitor access by foot to the off-road vehicle zone from approximately September 1 to March 14.

The refuge would implement a pony management plan that meets multiple objectives: visitor viewing, habitat management, and pony health. The refuge would allow grazing of the current pony population, with a maximum pony herd size of 150, per the management agreement with the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company.

Alternative D

Alternative D would direct staffing and funding toward maximizing habitat and wildlife management strategies. As a result of prioritizing habitat and wildlife management, public use activities and access may be reduced.

Beach access and parking

The refuge would work with National Park Service to relocate the recreational beach, as indicated in alternative B. The refuge and National Park Service would allow and maintain 480 automobile parking spaces (4 acres) at the recreational beach. The new recreational beach would offer accessible parking, pedestrian and bicycle connections, and safe shelters for visitors in close proximity to the beach. The refuge would pursue alternative Chincoteague Island parking opportunities and a shuttle service with stowing capacity for beach cargo to supplement the beach parking. The shuttle would also provide access to Assateague Island facilities.

The refuge would provide management strategies for maintaining the current beach in the interim until the newly located recreational beach is ready for visitor use. The refuge would provide a transition plan from the current beach location to the new beach location, including proposed processes and management strategies to ensure that a recreational beach is intact for visitors at all times.

Visitor use and experience

Existing public uses would continue but with several exceptions. All public access on the Service Road north of the new recreational beach parking would be restricted unless under authorized permit, and public access to the beach south of the new recreational beach would be allowed from approximately September 1 to March 14. A joint National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service visitor contact station would be developed near the new recreational beach. The Beach Road causeway across Toms Cove would be demolished, restricting public access to Toms Hook. Assawoman Island would completely close to all forms of public use during the breeding season, consistent with the closure on Toms Hook.

The refuge would eliminate recreational horseback riding. The refuge would phase out all off-road vehicle use over time. The refuge would prohibit smoking on the recreational beach. These actions are intended to reduce adverse impacts on wildlife.

The refuge would maintain recreational hunting opportunities with a focus on local, regional, and state wildlife priorities like sika elk, light goose, and non-migrant Canada goose. The refuge would work to eliminate the sika elk population through continued recreational hunt and professional contracts within five years. The refuge would expand non-migrant Canada goose and light goose hunting opportunities to other refuge properties where feasible and work to reduce the populations. The refuge would continue to manage opportunities for recreational shellfish and crab harvest.

The refuge would limit the number of ponies allowed to graze on the refuge within 15 years to no more than 125 ponies.

The refuge would continue to protect and enhance the wilderness character of the proposed area through actions to eliminate incompatible features and activities. The refuge would pursue wilderness designation for the proposed 1,300-acre wilderness area and for Toms Cove and Assawoman Island within the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

Executive Summary

Please provide an executive summary that is no more than one page in length. This should introduce the public land unit and/or applicant, summarize the need for the proposed alternative transportation project, highlight the findings of previous planning studies, provide a description of the proposed project, and include any other information essential to the application.

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), primarily located on the Virginia portion of Assateague Island, consists of more than 14,000 acres of beach, dunes, marsh and maritime forest. The Refuge was established in 1943 with the purpose of maintaining and improving wintering grounds for migratory birds, primarily the greater snow goose. Today the Refuge provides habitat for waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds and songbirds, as well as the threatened and endangered Piping Plover, Delmarva Peninsula Fox Squirrel, Sea Beach Amaranth and Loggerhead Sea Turtle. With approximately 1.4 million visits a year, Chincoteague NWR is one of the most visited Refuges in the nation.

Chincoteague NWR provides visitors with extraordinary educational and recreational opportunities, including a visitor center, trails, an interpreted wildlife drive, and a historic operational lighthouse. In addition, a special partnership exists with the National Park Service (NPS) which allows Assateague Island National Seashore to administer recreational activities on a portion of the Refuge beach. This beach is undeveloped, unlike most other public Atlantic beaches, providing a more natural, family-friendly atmosphere. Parking for the beach is provided on eight acres of crushed clamshell parking lots with a stated capacity of 961 vehicles. Parking at the beach lots is sufficient except for peak visitation days during the summer (approximately 10-20, depending on weather) and except for when storms result in closure due to overwash and subsequent restoration efforts. (See Figures 1-2). Visitation to the refuge and tourism to the adjacent Town of Chincoteague are dependent on the access currently provided by the beach parking lots.

The Refuge is currently operating under a 1992 Master Plan, the long range planning and management document that is a precursor to the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).³ Under the Master Plan and accompanying Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), the preferred alternative recognizes that the land base for the parking lots may eventually be lost to natural forces and that when that occurs, off-site beach parking should be identified and a shuttle transit system should be developed. At that time, FWS pursued that option and attempted to negotiate the purchase of land but was unsuccessful. Since 1992, NPS has repeatedly repaired and shifted the parking lots westward. The Refuge is currently in the midst of updating its Master Plan by developing a CCP and an accompanying EIS. To inform the CCP, the Refuge has completed a sea level rise model analysis⁴ to assess impacts on habitat and facilities and an Alternative Transportation Study (ATS)⁵ funded by TRIP. The ATS considered various alternatives for beach parking and access and considered both long term and short term needs for satellite parking. Short term, storms can and have eliminated or severely reduced parking at the beach (see Figures 3-5). Long term, the current beach parking is vulnerable to erosion, sea level rise, and storm damage and it may not be technically feasible or financially sustainable to continue to rebuild (see Figure 6). The CCP will consider several alternatives including relocating the beach parking further north and reducing parking at the beach, to be replaced by satellite parking and a shuttle service during peak visitation.

In order to fulfill its current Master Plan, best prepare itself for anticipated short and long term parking needs due to storm damage and climate change, and anticipate considerations made during the CCP process, the Refuge proposes acquiring land on Chincoteague Island, near the entrance to the Refuge, for the development of a parking facility to be served by a shuttle service to the beach.

³ US Fish & Wildlife Service Refuge Planning: Northeast Region. What are CCP's? <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/planning/whatareccps.html>

⁴ Nieves, Delissa Padilla. Application of the Sea-Level Affecting Marshes Model (SLAMM 5.0.2) in the Lower Delmarva Peninsula (Northampton and Accomack counties, VA / Somerset and Worcester counties, MD). National Wildlife Refuge System Conservation Biology Program. Arlington, VA. August 26, 2009.

⁵ US DOT Volpe Center. Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge Alternative Transportation Study. April 2010.

Figure 1. Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and Town of Chincoteague.



Source: ASIS, Tennessee Valley Authority, and Volpe Center staff using NPS and Virginia GIS data

Figure 2. CNWR Beach Parking Lot.



Source: Volpe Center, photograph, July 2009.

Figure 3. Turn Circle at CNWR Beach Post-Storm, November 2009.



Source: CNWR website; photo credit: James Fair; November 2009.

Figure 4. Post-Storm Beach Road, which provides access to the beach parking lots, November 2009.



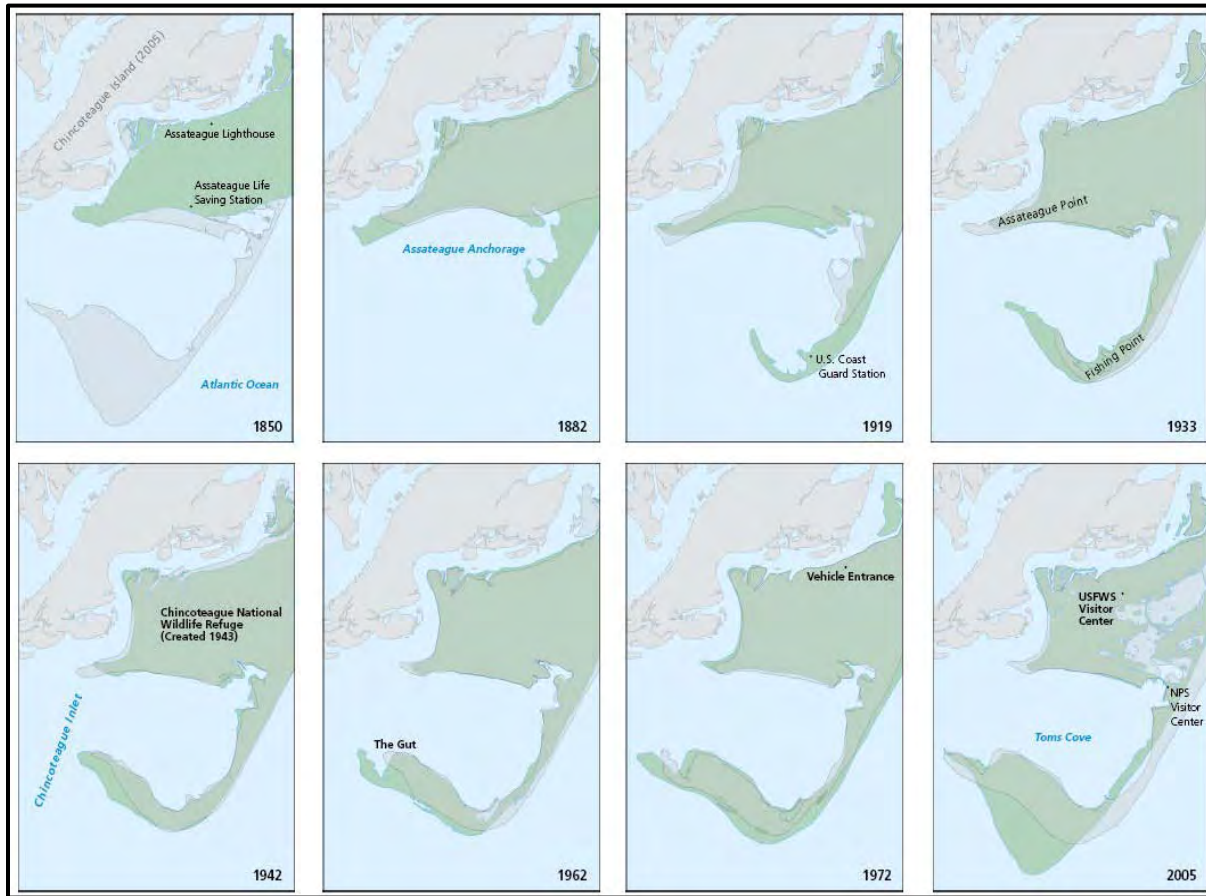
Source: CNWR website; photo credit: James Fair; November 2009.

Figure 5. Damage and Clean-up of Parking Areas 2-4.



Source: Patrick J. Hendrickson, Highcamera.com (9-30-08). Provided by CNWR staff.

Figure 6. Shoreline Change for Toms Cove, Assateague Island, from 1850 to 2005.



Current Island
 Previous Island

*With one exception: the 2005 condition is represented in the 1850 image.

Source: ASIS/NPS.

Project Description

Please provide a detailed description of the proposed activities that would be funded with a Transit in Parks grant in no more than two pages. You may attach additional maps or illustrations that do not count towards the page limit.

The project proposes the acquisition of land on Chincoteague Island, near the entrance to the Refuge, for use as a park and ride facility. The land to be acquired consists of approximately 65 acres of uplands, suitable for use as parking and currently occupied by a camping grounds for RVs and tents. The land is accessible from Beach Road at the traffic circle, 0.6 miles from the Refuge entrance and 3.5 miles from the recreational beach. In addition, 135 acres of adjacent marshland, with very little assessment value, will be included in the land transfer, providing a positive unintended consequence of preserving habitat. (See Figure 7).

Following the completion of the EIS for the 1992 Master Plan, FWS recognized the value of this parcel of land even then for the purposes laid out in the Master Plan regarding the need for off-site parking and pursued acquiring it. At the time, the land owners were unwilling sellers and the project was dropped. In the past year, however, the land owners have approached FWS and are now willing sellers but desire the land to be sold as a whole. Given the scarcity of non-developed land on Chincoteague Island, especially that would be appropriate for parking in terms of location, previous disturbance, and topography, the availability of this land parcel provides a rare opportunity to act to make a difference for future generations in terms of ensuring access in the case of both the sudden catastrophic loss of beach parking and the long-term inability to maintain parking at the beach.

The Alternative Transportation Study (2010) looked at possibilities for the location of satellite parking, including using existing public parking within the Town of Chincoteague and expanding the capacity of existing parking within the Refuge. The Town of Chincoteague is willing to provide short-term parking, recognizing the need after catastrophic storm events in which the beach parking is destroyed, but is not able to provide long-term parking in its existing facilities, which have other competing uses and are not located very close to the refuge entrance. For Refuge parking, expanded surface parking is not an option because of the negative impact on important habitat. The Wildlife Loop parking and FWS Visitor Center parking lots on the Refuge could accommodate a two-bay parking garage but capacity would be limited because of the footprint. In addition, such a facility would have a significant negative visual impact and habitat impact.

As mentioned above, the CCP will consider both relocation of the beach parking to a site further north and reduction in the beach parking and provision of an alternative transportation system. To inform these decisions, the Refuge has begun a structured decision-making process to consider the best location for the relocation of the recreational beach based on habitat, coastal geology, and visitor experience and convenience.

In addition to providing a parking facility for a transit shuttle system, this site will provide connections to the bicycle trail currently under construction to connect the traffic circle with the bicycle trail leading on to the refuge and will provide a potential site for the terminus of the proposed backcountry canoe trail from Ocean City, providing an alternative way for visitors to travel from Ocean City to the refuge.

This proposal is for funding for the purchase of the land; subsequent funding proposals will request funding for the development of the parking facility and institution of the shuttle system, which are described briefly below to provide context for the importance of the land acquisition. These projects will be considered in more depth through the CCP process and the

Parking facility. The proposed parking facility will be constructed of porous, environmentally-friendly material, most likely crushed shell similar to the existing beach parking lots or porous pavement. The land to be acquired has the capacity to accommodate all of the current beach parking as well as additional parking for the unmet peak demand and for staff vehicles as necessary. This capacity ensures that short-term parking could be provided in the event of a catastrophic loss of the beach

parking lots and that the unmet demand in July and August could be accommodated. Having an alternative to the beach parking lots is essential in the event of a catastrophic event to prevent the collapse of the town's economy, which is highly dependent on tourism, and to ensure continuous access to the refuge. Long-term, it is not assumed that the parking lot would replace all 961 beach parking spaces but would instead augment a reduced number of spaces at the beach. The desired and necessary capacity of the parking lot will be determined through the CCP process and informed by parking data that will be collected over the summer season of 2011 using traffic counters that are currently being acquired through a FY08 TRIP grant with technical assistance from a Federal Land Highways Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) pilot project. For purposes of a cost estimate for this proposal, it is assumed that 400 spaces will be provided on the land being acquired.

Transit shuttle service. The shuttle service would provide beach-friendly vehicle service, with luggage and bicycle accommodation and audio interpretation, between the parking lot and recreational beach (as well as potentially other refuge sites). The service characteristics in terms of number of vehicles and frequency will be dependent on the capacity of the parking facility above and the parking capacity maintained on the refuge at the beach. For purposes of a cost estimate for this proposal, and reflecting considerations made in the ATS, the shuttle is assumed to run daily from Memorial Day (May) through Labor Day (September) (90 days). In coordination with local hotels, the Town of Chincoteague, Accomack County, and the regional transit agency, STAR Transit, the refuge will work to designate this site as a transfer station to connect regional and local shuttle services with shuttle service to the refuge and beach.

Toms Cove Beach Parking, 1990



Toms Cove, post-Hurricane Irene (Sept. 2011)



2011 Parking Area
1994 Parking Area