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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

Opening Statement of
Chairman John Fleming

Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
On Thursday June 20, 2013

1324 Longworth House Office Building Subcommittee 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?

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Good morning, Today the Subcommittee will examine the Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to dramatically increase the size of the Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges in the State of Tennessee.

This hearing is in response to a request from the distinguished gentleman from Frog Jump, Tennessee, whose Congressional District contains the two wildlife refuges and the four counties that will be directly impacted by the federal government's proposed acquisition of 120,000 acres of private property.

There are currently seven national wildlife refuges in the State of Tennessee. Together, they comprise 120,959 acres of land. Unlike many states, each of these refuges is open to the public and thousands of Tennesseans enjoy the opportunity to hunt, fish and observe wildlife.

However, just like the rest of the refuge system, these refuges have not been properly maintained. In fact, based on the Service's own records, there are 437 deferred operations and maintenance projects that will cost \$98 million to fix. 49 of these projects are listed in the highest priority category of "mission critical" projects.

Despite this existing backlog, the Southeast Region of the Fish and Wildlife Service has decided that it wants to buy 70,116 acres of agricultural lands, 27,060 acres of bottomland hardwood forest and 9,307 acres of wooded swamp in Dyer, Haywood, Lauderdale and Tipton Counties.

While this acquisition process may take years to complete, we do know that the Service wants to buy this land using its fee title authority. These acquisitions will cost taxpayers tens of millions of dollars. Locally affected counties will not be justly compensated for the loss of their tax base, the number of backlog projects will increase, and when the process is completed, there will be a huge publicly owned land unit made up of three wildlife refuges, two state wildlife management areas, a state park and a state forest.

What we also know is that regardless of our national debt, the Obama Administration will not stop its insatiable obsession to acquire more and more private property, coupled with a lack of a comprehensive strategy to maintain those lands in the future. I reject the argument that only the federal government can ensure that these lands in Tennessee or anywhere else in the United States will be protected in the future.

During the course of this hearing, I want to find out whether the local communities have embraced this refuge expansion, what it will cost the taxpayers to buy 120,078 acres of private property, how long the acquisition process will take, why fee title and not conservation easements are being used, and how this will affect the economies of the four affected counties in Tennessee.

I am now pleased to recognize the Ranking Minority Member, Congressman Sablan, for any statement he would like to make.