



Committee on Natural Resources

U.S. House of Representatives

Opening Statement of

Chairman John Fleming

Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans & Insular Affairs

Thursday, November 20, 2014

1334 Longworth House Office Building Subcommittee Oversight Hearing on
"Is the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Being Properly Managed?"

Good morning, today we will hear testimony on whether the Fish and Wildlife Service is properly managing this unique but isolated refuge which is more than 1,200 miles northwest of Honolulu, Hawaii.

As a former naval officer who was stationed in the Pacific, I have a great appreciation and recognition of the fact that the Battle of Midway was a pivotal battle in World War II and one of the most decisive naval events in world history.

Once the fighting stopped, it was clear that the efforts of the Japanese navy to control the Pacific had been halted and they were forced in the words of Admiral Samuel Elliott Morison to "An unexpected, unwelcomed, and defensive role". During the battle, 349 Americans, including 49 men on Midway Island, made the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms that we all cherish.

In 1997, the U. S. Navy transferred title to the Midway Island to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and it was established as national wildlife refuge. The purpose of the refuge was to "Maintain and restore its natural biological diversity; to provide for the conservation and management of fish and wildlife and their habitat within the refuge boundaries; and to recognize and maintain the historic significance of Midway Atoll".

Two years later, the Congress approved and President Clinton signed into law a bill that designated the entire Island as the National Memorial to the Battle of Midway. Section 116 of Public Law 106-113 stipulates that "The Secretary shall consult on a regular basis with such organizations, including the International Midway Memorial Foundation, on the management of the National Memorial".

It is now 15 years since the National Memorial has been established and it is appropriate for the Congress to inquire whether the purposes of the refuge and Public Law 106-113 are being fulfilled.

For instance, has the Service consulted with the International Midway Memorial Foundation on a regular basis, has the refuge been open to the public, does the refuge have

an organized visitors program and has the Service properly maintained the various historic structures they are entrusted to protect?

Based on our investigation, it is clear that the Service has experienced a number of challenges in managing the Midway Island refuge and objective observers can certainly question whether it was a mistake to transfer this sacred ground to an agency that is far better equipped to manage birds than visitors.

It is distressing to learn that the Service does not regularly consult with the International Midway Memorial Foundation, that the private company that operated the visitors program left the island more than 12 years ago, that a number of historic structures have been either destroyed or are marked for demolition, that the refuge has been entirely closed to the public for more than 2 years and that according to the Service it would cost \$1.5 million to operate a six month visitors program.

Finally, in July of this year, Congressman John Duncan and I requested that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a comprehensive analysis and report to the Congress on the management of the financial and historic aspects of the Midway Atoll. I am pleased that GAO has accepted our request. I am looking for answers from our witnesses today and from GAO in the not too distant future.