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Opening Statement by
Chairman John Fleming
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
At The Oversight Hearing on Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge
And the Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1171 and S. 363
December 15, 2011

Good morning, today, we are going to have both an oversight and legislative hearing. The first panel of witnesses will address a painful experience in our nation's history and I will reserve my comments on the legislative proposals until we conclude this portion of the hearing.

Our story begins in 1865 when at the end of the Civil War, Ms. Margret Ann Harris leaves 2,688 acres of land to Mr. Robert Dellagall, a former slave, and his heirs in her Final Will and Testament.

For the next 75 years, 75 African-American families lived on Harris Neck and they raised their families, their crops and invested their future in this land. In 1942, the federal government decided that they needed this exact land to build an Army Airfield and they use their condemnation authority to acquire it.

The residents who lived on Harris Neck were given two weeks to move themselves and all of their belongings. They were allegedly told that they could reclaim their property at the end of World War II and that they would be fairly compensated. Sadly, it appears that neither of these promises were ever kept.

It is now nearly 70 years since their property was condemned and since that time the 2,688 acres have been used as a failed county airport, for drug smuggling, illegal cattle grazing, gambling and as a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

While we are not going to solve this controversy today, I am holding this hearing at the request of Congressman Jack Kingston who represents this area and who believes, as I do, that the descendants of those who owned this property in 1942 should have this opportunity to tell their story before the House Natural Resources Committee.

Let me close by asking unanimous consent to submit for the hearing Record, the Last Will and Testament of Margret Ann Harris, a copy of the United States Court of Appeals case in 1982, the 1985 Report of the United States General Accounting Office, a letter from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to Reverend Robert Thorpe and a Resolution unanimously adopted by the

McIntosh County Board of Commissioners in 2007. The Resolution concludes with the assertion that: "Commissioners hereby recognizes the Harris Neck Land Trust and encourages and supports the Trust with its efforts to regain these 2,688 acres of Harris Neck from the Federal Government".

On our last panel today, we will hear testimony on H.R. 1171, the Marine Debris Act Reauthorization Amendments of 2011 and S. 363, a bill to authorize the Secretary of Commerce to convey property of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to the City of Pascagoula, Mississippi.

Marine debris is not a new problem facing our nation or any other coastal nation of the world. It is, however, very pervasive and very difficult to resolve. The pervasiveness of marine debris relates to the life span of the debris ranging from 2 weeks for some paper products to 450 years in the case of plastics. The potential adverse effect on marine organisms, ocean habitats, and human health is of major concern and the reason for our attention on this issue today.

There are many statutes guiding the various federal agencies in their efforts to address marine debris. In 2006, Congress passed the Marine Debris Research, Prevention and Reduction Act, which became Public Law 109-449. The law was intended to provide authorities for better federal coordination through an interagency marine debris committee. The legislation also authorized the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to develop a marine debris program to better understand the occurrences of marine debris, the impact it has on the environment, and ways to prevent and remove it.

NOAA has had some success with its program, with regard to research and cooperative efforts to understand and address marine debris, which we will hear about today. H.R. 1171, the Marine Debris Act Reauthorization Amendments of 2011, will reauthorize and change provisions of Public Law 109-449.

I am interested to hear from our witnesses today on why changes made by H.R. 1171 are needed and how NOAA is working with other federal agencies to address marine debris issues while reducing duplication in federal efforts. In addition, I am interested to hear about cooperative initiatives between NOAA and its partners, such as Mr. Gilman and his Covanta Energy Corporation, to support the Fishing for Energy program as well as the other initiatives supported by the NOAA program.

The final bill of today's hearing is S. 363 a land conveyance bill for NOAA and the City of Pascagoula, Mississippi. The legislation would allow NOAA to convey land to the City as long as fair market compensation is achieved.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on the legislation before us today.

I now recognize the Ranking Minority Member for any statement he would like to make at this time.