

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

TESTIMONY OF

PAUL M. DICKSON,

CHAIRMAN

FRIENDS OF THE RED RIVER REFUGES

IN SUPPORT OF

H.R. 4318

THE RED RIVER

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ACT

TO

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE, AND OCEANS

MAY 11, 2000

Gentlemen:

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak to you in support of the Red River and its wildlife through H.R. 4318, the Red River National Wildlife Refuge Act. I am chairman of Friends of the Red River Refuges, a non-profit group whose mission is to foster the restoration of wildlife habitat in the Red River Valley. Our mission and H.R. 4318 have the strong support of our entire community, business, industry, political and civic leaders as well as the people as a whole. We know of no opposition to our cause or to this bill in our region, rather Mr. McCrery's bill proposing this refuge enjoys widespread support. It was built upon a united foundation of eager and expectant local support. I am proud to say that I speak for more than the group that I chair; I speak in favor of the Red River National Wildlife Refuge on behalf of my entire community.

The Red River National Wildlife Refuge is not a new idea. The path to this authorization bill spans 10 years

and is a million words long. Legislation to form a planning group was proposed to Congress last year, without success. The U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service has begun its own Red River National Wildlife Refuge plan internally, but that plan falls short of our comprehensive partnering strategy and lacks the breadth of local support that we have been able to bring to this bill. Hundreds of people, not just from Louisiana but also from other parts of the nation have aided our cause so that we now find ourselves at your door to ask for authorization. We have laid the groundwork for this refuge. U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service staff has been to the proposed refuge sites. We have met with Secretary Babbitt and received his expressed support for the creation of this refuge. It is my hope that after hearing my testimony, you too will support the Red River's wildlife by recommending H.R. 4318.

It is my responsibility to make the case for this refuge. It is my duty to the cause and as a citizen to assure that dollars spent on this refuge produce their worth or more to the people of the United States of America. The U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service in their testimony has raised concerns about operation and management funding. We recognize this concern and have collected a host of local government partners, as well as industry and other private sector sponsors. Carbon sequestration credits, required of industry by the Clean Air Act can produce funds for restoration. Local efforts consistent with the goals of the Red River National Wildlife Refuge will magnify the benefits produced. Yes, additional O&M appropriation will be required and is well justified. But before I get dragged down in the details of funding, allow me to explain the compelling reason that I am here today.

Just last week, I spent eight days offshore in the Outer Continental Shelf area of the Gulf of Mexico on a Texaco oil and gas production platform. I was there as a volunteer researcher for Louisiana State University with the task of recording migration over the Gulf. What I witnessed over those deep waters on the night of Tuesday, May 2, 2000 compels me to see this refuge effort through. I do not know how many of you can picture a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a Magnolia Warbler, or a Yellow-billed Cuckoo just to name a few trans-gulf migrant birds. Certainly you are all familiar with the Baltimore Oriole and maybe the Scarlet Tanager, one of the world's most dazzling birds. We know these species as bright, colorful songbirds of spring and summer; as denizens of parks, gardens and lush forests. They are often enjoyed amongst apple blossoms in back yards, as treasured guests at bird feeders and as birdsong from high atop old shade trees in towns and countryside alike all over the Eastern and Central U.S. Imagine the drama, if you will, of the stunning and stark contrast of these same songbirds struggling over a storm-tossed sea in the black of night just ten days ago.

Indeed, ten days ago I stood on the plus-10 deck of Garden Banks-189 and by the soft glow of its floodlights witnessed the heretofore invisible trials that our migratory birds endure. With fifteen-foot seas and sustained easterly winds of thirty-five knots, I watched spellbound as thousands of neo-tropical migrants fought their way northward across the raging wind and into the face of a wall of thunderstorms. With spray leaping off the crests of the swells and lightening flashing, I watched as thousands of individual birds of forty-five different species fought their way home. It was near midnight, each had already flown at least four hundred miles and there were one hundred and sixty storm filled miles to go before any landfall could be made. Many did not make it. I have seen birds too exhausted to fight the wind any longer fall into the sea and perish. Those that did reach the Gulf's northern coast on Wednesday morning had critical needs to meet.

Birds fuel up before these long journeys, but they can only add about forty percent of their body weight in fat before being too heavy to fly. This fat is used up quickly during these long migratory flights and migrants must refuel several times on their continental journeys. The orioles and warblers that I saw that

night in the Gulf are the very same ones that fill the trees at Rock Creek Park right here in the District of Columbia, and on Elm Street in Anytown, U.S.A. One of the very same birds that I saw that night in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico may be singing in a tree within a couple of miles of Capitol Hill right now as I speak. Most of the neo-tropical migrant birds of Eastern and Central U.S. must migrate across the gulf. From there they spread out across the continent, feeding to "refuel" along the way. In doing so, they connect us. They connect the landmasses, this continent, and this country. But, they are in trouble. Migrant songbird numbers have been in a steep decline for the past ten years. If we are to help them, to arrest this decline we must recognize the connection. Migratory bird conservation must be viewed on a continental scale. Critical stopover links in the pathways of migratory birds, such as the Red River, must be restored for the sake of birds all over this continent.

The Red River Valley is a crucial stopover area as it lies just north of the Gulf of Mexico. For millions of years it has provided critical stopover habitat for much of North America's birds. It lies along a continent-long chain of river valleys and is midway between the tropical rainforests of Central and South America and the northern breeding grounds of many birds. But in the last one hundred and fifty years, the riverside forests and tallgrass prairies have been converted to agriculture and urban use. Concrete, fallow agricultural land and cracked hydric soil pastures support these beloved songbirds no better than the dark waters of the Gulf did that night last week. For a migratory bird with critical caloric needs to meet, landing in such degraded habitat is like falling into the sea. It should be no surprise that neo-tropical birds are in such steep decline. Habitat is what migratory birds need and that is the most compelling reason that this bill is before you today.

Though of great concern, migratory songbird conservation is far from the sole purpose of the Red River National Wildlife Refuge. Waterfowl end their southbound journey in Louisiana. As the coastal wetlands are lost at an alarming rate, the Red River's historical role as a major wetland complex becomes ever more in need of restoration. Some have suggested that if the Great Raft of the Red River were present today as it was prior to 1837, it would rank with the Everglades as one of the world's great natural wetland wonders. Today, very few of these raft-induced wetlands remain. Waterfowl hunters crowd area waters each season, underscoring the need for more public waterfowl hunting opportunity. With the public waters unmanaged, there are few wetlands for waterfowl to rest on in the fall, causing them to move on to other regions. This degraded state of our once rich Red River backwaters has diminished the Valley's overall value to the continent's waterfowl as well as the quality of its waterfowl hunting. Agriculture leaves great stores of winter food for waterfowl, but in the Red River Valley it goes unutilized for lack of sufficient waterfowl rest areas. The Red River Valley is in dire need of a waterfowl refuge, and of the managed public hunting that the Red River National Wildlife Refuge would provide. With the provision of a significant refuge and with the landowner assistance and cooperation that typically follows, the waterfowl wintering capability of this area can multiply many times over. Development of waterfowl habitat along the Red would restore a wintering area that once richly served the continent's waterfowl as well as mitigate the continuing loss of coastal wetlands.

Endangered species are often key in the establishment of National Wildlife Refuges. Endangered species are often key in heated debates between economic and environmental forces. Endangered species are always a result of poor planning. Several endangered species use the Red River region. One, the Least Tern currently breeds there. Rather than whip up a fight that would serve no good end, Friends of the Red River Refuges built a unique coalition of business, agriculture, education, tourism, and conservation stakeholders around the idea that good planning eliminates the need to fight over endangered species. That coalition brought about this bill and with it a new model for dealing with wildlife and people.

The Red River National Wildlife Refuge when established will be tangible testimony to the value of cooperation. Endangered species will find their needs met. Barges will continue to haul cargo on the Red River; farmers will produce their crops unhindered; and local economies will feel the effects of eco-tourism and improved quality of life as a fresh wind under their sails.

Congressmen, this is admittedly long-winded testimony. But not a word has been frivolously spent. This is not just another proposed refuge. This is a multifaceted answer to many needs. It is the proper role of government to establish for the greater good. That is exactly what the Red River National Wildlife Refuge Act does. This refuge is not just a local issue. Its presence will be felt across a hemisphere in terms of the migrant birds that it saves. Its presence will be felt across this country in terms of wintering waterfowl and the great joy and recreation that they bring. Its presence will be felt by society in terms of the cooperative model that was its genesis. Its presence will be felt regionally through enhanced quality of life for each resident that visits on a Sunday afternoon and locally by every child that learns while there on a school field trip. These needs must be met.

The Red River National Wildlife Refuge has broad based support and will yield multiple benefits. It is justified by sound biological facts. This bill in parallel with the Senate version is a bipartisan effort. It is unopposed and strongly supported in the region that it will affect. I urge you to recommend this bill as it is written to the full House for approval and to thus authorize the Red River National Wildlife Refuge.

Thank you.

ADDENDUM

1. A Cooperative Initiative for Wildlife Conservation in the Red River Valley Including a Proposal for the Red River National Wildlife Refuge

2. Proposed Wildlife Conservation Areas in the Red River Valley

3. Red River National Wildlife Refuge Proposed Project Area

4. Interior North American Migration Routes

(ADDENDUM 1)

A Cooperative Initiative for

Wildlife Conservation in the Red River Valley

Including a proposal for the

Red River National Wildlife Refuge

This initiative deals with the creation of a complex of wildlife habitats to be located in the Red River flood plain between Alexandria, LA and the Arkansas-Louisiana state boundary. The many and diverse initiative partners would conserve and restore lands throughout this rich but degraded ecosystem. Partners would include: The Red River National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Wildlife

Management Areas, managed by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries, Parish and Municipal Nature Parks, and private lands managed for the benefit of wildlife. Each entity as an independent landowner will own and manage their lands to their own use requirements but concurrent with an overall ecosystem plan.

This unique, ecosystem-based plan seeks to take advantage of existing habitat created by the lock and dam system and to augment it with a habitat restoration program that involves a host of private and public partners. Funding and support for this plan would come from the Migratory Bird Fund, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Red River Waterway mitigation funds through the USACE, the State of Louisiana, private sector conservation initiatives, USDA land reserve programs, municipal funding for parks, and research and educational support by the Louisiana State University system.

The proposed Red River National Wildlife Refuge is the cornerstone of the Red River Valley Conservation Plan and will spearhead the restoration of this critical ecosystem.

HISTORY

The Red River flood plain represents a historic migration corridor for migratory birds funneling out of the northern reaches of this continent to the Gulf Coast and as far south as Tierra del Fuego in South America. It also represents the most degraded watershed in the region. The Valley was almost totally cleared of its forest cover beginning in the 1820s, primarily for cotton production. The Red is a disjunct tributary of the Mississippi River, which was heavily degraded beginning in the 1800s and continuing on through the soybean boom of the late 1960s.

The Red has a much narrower flood plain than the Mississippi, averaging 6-8 miles in width from its origin in Oklahoma to its junction with the Atchafalaya River. The portion of its valley lying in Louisiana covers approximately 800,000 acres. Completion of the lock and dam system up to Shreveport, LA has done much to stabilize water levels and to produce an abundance of new waterfowl, wading bird, and fisheries habitat.

No national wildlife refuge presently exists along the Red River north of Alexandria, LA to Texarkana, AR. Wildlife Management Areas in this area of Louisiana are the only public, protected wetlands and lie on the margins of the Red River alluvium. No public wildlife area exists near the Red River north of Alexandria. In recent times and even under existing improved waterfowl habitat conditions, there is limited resting habitat for birds on this 330-mile stretch of the Red.

PURPOSE of the RRNWR

The creation of a string of National Wildlife Refuge units throughout the Red River Valley in northwest Louisiana would serve as a cornerstone for the restoration of fish and wildlife habitat in this unique ecosystem. The Refuge and its staff provides the building blocks for the restoration of both migratory and resident fish and wildlife resources on private as well as public land. Privately owned agricultural land, as well as federal and state refuges will play an important role in the restoration of the subject habitat.

The proposed refuge complex will be designed to compliment the Red River lock and dam system, recognizing navigation as the primary function of the waterway, but seeking to expand and improve its fish and wildlife resources.

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES of the RRNWR

1. Provide habitat and sanctuary for migratory birds.

a. Waterfowl - No significant public sanctuary presently exists for over 300 miles of this historic migration corridor. In addition, very little public lands presently actively manage for waterfowl. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan has not focused attention on this area. A mix of moist soil, flooded timber, and agricultural crops should be managed to benefit waterfowl. A basin-wide wood duck box program should be encouraged, especially on Waterway and private lands. Migratory waterfowl will be encouraged to visit and remain in the Red River Valley during the migration and wintering seasons. Public hunting and viewing opportunities will be enhanced.

b. Shorebirds - Opportunities are again present for enhanced management, particularly for the endangered Least Tern which nests in the project area. Migration habitat, especially late summer habitat should be managed for shorebirds. Public viewing opportunities will be enhanced.

c. Neotropical and other songbirds - Reforestation and the establishment of non-agricultural habitat will greatly benefit a host of species utilizing this habitat during the migration and breeding seasons. Reforestation will benefit existing patches of upland habitat by combining their core areas and reducing existing fragmentation. Restoration of native Red River Valley ecotypes will be stressed. The goal of this habitat restoration will be the return of native songbirds and other wildlife to these areas.

2. Provide for enhanced recreational fishing opportunities on the Red River

a. The Natchitoches National Fish Hatchery will play an integrated role with the proposed refuge in delivering this assistance.

b. The refuges and their support systems, where feasible will also provide additional river access for boating.

c. The goal of fisheries work will be improvements in access and recreational quality to this great fishery.

3. Encourage and facilitate private wildlife areas through USFWS programs

a. RRNWR staff will be used to provide technical assistance to local USDA offices in the administration of the WRP and CRP programs.

b. RRNWR staff will work with the private sector in delivering the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program.

4. Provide environmental education outreach through the RRNWR

a. Creation of an environmental learning center near Shreveport/Bossier in conjunction with a visitor center will serve as both a training center and a laboratory facility for this important program. In addition, the local school systems and other natural resource partners will also use this facility.

b. Refuge Field Classrooms will be established in each of the Refuge's units providing educational access to all citizens of the Red River region. Educational staff based at the central learning center in Shreveport will provide outreach to communities near these refuge units from Alexandria to Texarkana.

3. Provide for public access to wildlife including hunting, fishing, photography, and wildlife observation.

- a. The majority of the habitat acquired will be agricultural land or recently enrolled WRP lands so there will be minimal impact on traditional recreational use. Refuge recreation programs will emphasize youth and handicapped hunting, fishing, and nature related opportunities.
- b. The refuges should contain both wildlife sanctuary and public use areas maximizing both wildlife abundance and public access and recreation.
- c. Public hunting and fishing access will be emphasized.

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