

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

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Testimony for:
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
March 30, 2000
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, my name is Robert (Robby) Toombs, and I am East Central Region Manager with The Timber Company. The East Central Region is comprised of The Timber Company land and timber in Southeast Louisiana, Mississippi and western Alabama. The Timber Company is a separate operating group of Georgia-Pacific Corporation and manages 4.7 million acres of commercial timberlands across the United States, including 121,000 acres in the state of Louisiana.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to testify in support of House bill 3292, which would establish the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge in West Feliciana Parish in Louisiana. I have had some form of responsibility for The Timber Company's property in the Cat Island area since 1988 and had visited the area prior to that.

It is my opinion -- both as a representative of The Timber Company and as a U.S. citizen -- that the effort that has gone into helping establish the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge is a prime example of what can happen when all sides are working together. This project has involvement and support from the private sector, conservation organizations, the local community, public officials and government agencies. We are presenting you with a solution, not a problem.

Let me state up front that The Timber Company has an agreement with The Nature Conservancy of Louisiana to sell them more than 9,000 acres of land that would become part of the proposed wildlife refuge.

I am here today because my company fully supports and appreciates the role of facilitator that The Nature Conservancy plays in the establishment of refuges such as this one. We at The Timber Company truly believe that the establishment of the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge is the best way to ensure the protection of a very special part of our national heritage.

Since my company began managing timberlands in the 1950s, we have always recognized that we have a responsibility to be good stewards of the land. Our forests supply the essential raw materials to help meet society's needs for housing, paper and thousands of other products we use every day.

But we also recognize that a forest is much more than trees. That's why The Timber Company is committed to protecting wildlife habitat and water quality in forested areas, and why we conserve special areas on our

timberlands.

Cat Island is just such a special place. It's one of the largest tracts of unleveed, forested floodplain on the Mississippi River. It's also home to many species of wildlife and plants. On any given day you can visit this property and see deer, otters, beavers, egrets, herons and a variety of other animals, birds and fish enjoying the rich habitat in this area. In fact it's even home to the Louisiana black bear, which is listed as a threatened species in the state.

However, Cat Island is probably best known as the home of the world champion bald cypress tree. Georgia-Pacific employees discovered the tree in 1980. At 53 feet in circumference, this bald cypress is the largest tree of any species east of the Rocky Mountains. As a result, we have visitors not only from the surrounding parish but also from across the country and all over the world who come to see this magnificent tree.

Around 1990, The Nature Conservancy of Louisiana contacted us about a means of protecting the champion cypress tree. This ultimately resulted in the signing of a Natural Area Registry agreement with The Nature Conservancy of Louisiana to protect the tree and 40 acres around it. In working with The Nature Conservancy and working on the Cat Island property, I became even more educated about the uniqueness of it. I also came to realize that The Timber Company has one of the largest ownerships in this area.

While The Timber Company understands our responsibility to protect and care for this living legacy and the rest of the lands we own in this area, we believe that an ecosystem this important should be part of the national trust, not under the auspices of a private company. This will enable the citizens of Louisiana, the rest of the country and even the world to enjoy and appreciate this area for a long time to come.

Recently, I told my wife that if the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge is established it will be one of the high points of my career no matter how long my career lasts. As a nation, we frequently discuss issues like wetland restoration and re-establishment of bottomland hardwood habitat. By establishing the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge, we will protect just such an area and not have to restore it. And, we will be able to share its special qualities with the people of the United States.

We are proud to have been part of the effort that has gone into this proposal to create a national wildlife refuge. Through the initiative and leadership of The Nature Conservancy, and the interest and support of the Louisiana congressional delegation and the Department of the Interior, Cat Island is one step closer to taking its rightful place in our national heritage. The Timber Company believes that public-private efforts such as this one are critical to helping ensure that special places like Cat Island are protected for future generations.

Once again, thank you for the invitation to testify before this subcommittee today. After considering all the testimony, I hope you will take the final step and add Cat Island to our national wildlife refuge system.

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