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TESTIMONY

BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

H.R. 5094, THE LAKE MATTAMUSKEET LODGE PRESERVATION ACT

H.R. 4947, THE CAHABA RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE EXPANSION ACT

H.R. 5232, THE CHERRY VALLEY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE STUDY ACT

May 10, 2006

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Michael Woodbridge, and I am the Director of Government Affairs for the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). On behalf of the NWRA and its membership comprised of current and former refuge professionals, more than 110 refuge "Friends" Affiliate organizations and interested citizens throughout the United States, thank you for the opportunity to testify on three bills before the Committee: H.R. 5094, the Mattamuskeet Lodge Preservation Act; H.R. 4947, the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act; and H.R. 5232, the Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge Study Act.

The NWRA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, national membership organization, established in 1975. The NWRA's mission is to protect, enhance and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), lands and waters set aside by the American people to conserve our country's diverse wildlife heritage. Over the years we have worked on behalf of our membership to make the Refuge System stronger and better able to address the growing challenges of conserving wildlife in our country.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the only network of Federal lands managed first and foremost for the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitat. President Theodore Roosevelt created the first national wildlife refuge (NWR) in 1903 on Florida's Pelican Island to protect brown pelicans as well as egrets and herons from commercial hunting. Today, the Refuge System, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), consists of 545 refuges in all 50 states and most U. S. territories. With a mission "to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans," the National Wildlife Refuge System is the crown jewel of wildlife conservation in America.

Mattamuskeet Lodge Preservation Act

The National Wildlife Refuge Association supports the Mattamuskeet Lodge Preservation Act . This legislation authorizes the transfer of Mattamuskeet Lodge and surrounding property to the State of North Carolina for use as a public facility dedicated to the conservation of the natural and cultural resources of North Carolina.

Mattamuskeet NWR, located in eastern North Carolina's Hyde County, provides more than 50,000 acres of wildlife habitat in the form of water, marsh, timber and crop lands. Lake Mattamuskeet, the largest natural lake in the state of North Carolina, and the lands surrounding it provide valuable migration and wintering habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds, along with a whole host of other diverse wildlife. Set in the middle of the Atlantic Flyway, the refuge hosts waterfowl numbers exceeding 100,000 each winter.

The 91-year-old Mattamuskeet Lodge, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, initially operated as a pumping station intended to drain Lake Mattamuskeet. After serving for approximately forty years as a hunting lodge, the old building became Hyde County's only community center in the 1990s, where weddings and other events were held. On

November 12, 2000, the deteriorating building was closed by FWS engineers due to significant structural defects and was deemed too unsafe to remain open.

The State of North Carolina is proposing to fully restore the lodge under the management of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. The estimated costs for full restoration are \$12 million: approximately \$6.25 million to stabilize the building and another \$6.25 million to renovate it. The lodge is an important part of history for the people of Hyde County. While transferring the building to North Carolina will give the State the opportunity to restore this historic structure, it will also offer the Mattamuskeet Refuge the prospect of increased visitation and opportunities for graduate research projects in conjunction with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

It is important to note, in August 2005 the NWRA Board of Directors approved a divestment policy for the Refuge System. According to the policy, the Association “recognizes that carefully designed and planned adjustments in a refuge unit’s pattern of land ownership may be beneficial to the purposes of the refuge and contributing to the mission of the System.” We believe any such adjustments should receive proper public review. At Mattamuskeet, there is substantial public awareness of the proposed transfer, with input from citizens, the local Chamber of Commerce and city, county and state officials.

For these reasons, the NWRA encourages passage of the Mattamuskeet Lodge Preservation Act . We appreciate that the bill allows for wildlife- and conservation-based uses, and believe the transfer would have a positive outcome for all parties.

Cahaba River NWR Expansion Act

The National Wildlife Refuge Association fully endorses the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act . This legislation authorizes expansion of the Cahaba River refuge boundary to include approximately 3600 additional acres along the Cahaba River. The proposed expansion area includes high-value river and forest habitats important to native wildlife, including a number of threatened and endangered species.

The Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge, established in 2002, currently includes 3.5 miles of the Cahaba River and approximately 3500 acres. The refuge was established for the purpose of protecting and managing a unique section of the Cahaba River and adjacent lands. It also provides essential habitat for 15 federally listed species, including the Cahaba shiner, goldline darter, round rock snail, and cylindrical lioplax snail. The Cahaba River stretches almost 200 miles and is Alabama’s longest free-flowing stream. The river supports 64 rare and imperiled plant and animal species, 13 of which are found nowhere else in the world. With 131 fish species, the river has more types of fish than any other river its size in North America. The largest known stand of the imperiled shoals lily also occurs within the Refuge.

The proposed refuge expansion lands are located in Bibb County, Alabama, and would vastly expand and enhance the list of biological resources protected. The expansion would provide an improved opportunity to protect and recover populations of many federally listed species on public land. Population growth and corresponding development is fast encroaching on the Cahaba watershed, resulting in increased stormwater runoff, sedimentation, and municipal wastewater discharges. With more than one million people living within a one-hour drive of the Cahaba River NWR, protecting this vital natural corridor from fast-approaching development is essential.

The Refuge Association believes the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act is a perfect example of looking “beyond the boundaries” of national wildlife refuges to ensure the biological integrity of existing refuge habitat.

In August 2005, the NWRA issued a report titled *2005 State of the System: Beyond the Boundaries*. Illustrated in the report is the urgent need to conserve lands outside national wildlife refuge boundaries. The report found that lands and waters surrounding refuges actually have more agriculture, subdivision and other human activity than the national average. Refuges protect habitats that are crucially important, but many are just too small even for the home ranges of the species they were established to protect. In addition to working with landowners, the report recommended five solutions to threats beyond refuge boundaries—conserving more land through acquisition and easements was one of these.

The NWRA believes the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act represents a unique opportunity for the FWS to acquire vital habitat that could be permanently lost if action isn’t taken soon. The refuge expansion authorized in H.R. 4947 has significant local support from diverse constituencies. In addition to its wildlife benefits, the expanded area can also be expected to benefit the public as an important site for wildlife-dependent public use, including wildlife observation and photography, hunting and fishing, and environmental education and interpretation.

With a current size of approximately 3500 acres, the approved refuge boundary is too small to meet fundamental endangered species conservation and recovery efforts. In addition to adding to the overall size of the refuge, expansion of

the refuge will help decrease habitat fragmentation—a major impediment to successful wildlife management.

For these reasons, the NWRA encourages passage of the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act. The lands in question are high-value wildlife habitat important to threatened and endangered species. This bill represents a unique opportunity for the FWS to acquire vital habitat that could be lost forever and will benefit the public by enhancing compatible wildlife-dependent public use.

Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge Study Act

The National Wildlife Refuge Association supports the Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge Study Act . This legislation authorizes a biological evaluation of lands and waters in Northeast Pennsylvania for inclusion in the National Wildlife Refuge System as the Cherry Valley NWR. The proposed refuge area includes 30,000 acres of outstanding wildlife habitats important to native wildlife, including an impressive presence of threatened and endangered species.

The proposed Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge is home to 80 species and natural communities of conservation concern, including six species that are listed as threatened or endangered. Most notably, Cherry Valley holds possibly the largest functioning population of bog turtles within the species' range. Ensuring the integrity of the Cherry Valley watershed would provide protection for migratory birds; raptors that use the Kittatinny migration corridor during fall migrations; Indiana bats; dwarf wedge mussel; three anadromous fish (striped bass, American Eel and the American shad); bald eagles; and waterfowl, among others.

The proposed refuge will connect important wildlife habitats and migration corridors in the Delaware River/Delmarva Coastal Ecosystem with its location adjacent to the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area and Appalachian Trail. As mentioned above, the NWRA supports efforts to decrease habitat fragmentation, and the proposed Cherry Valley NWR would play a key role in connecting these biologically rich habitats.

The local community has expressed strong support for establishing the Cherry Valley refuge to complement existing local conservation efforts. An amazingly diverse array of organizations, businesses, and state and local entities support the establishment of the Cherry Valley NWR. Notably, builders and developers have given endorsements to the refuge, as well as over 1,400 citizen-signed petitions.

Monroe County, Pennsylvania, where Cherry Valley refuge is proposed, is the second-fastest growing county in Pennsylvania. Cherry Valley is located less than two hours away from both New York City and Philadelphia. Time is of the essence if we are to protect this special wildlife and plant habitat.

The NWRA encourages passage of the Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge Study Act. However, while we do support this legislation and its authorization for further study, the Refuge Association believes preliminary studies by the FWS and others on the Cherry Valley ecosystem already demonstrate the unique and valuable qualities that warrant establishment of the Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the NWRA supports these three bills affecting the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Association strongly supports expanding the Cahaba River NWR and establishing the Cherry Valley NWR. While we fully understand the operations and maintenance shortfalls plaguing the National Wildlife Refuge System, we do see a tremendous need for the expansion of some existing refuges or the establishment of new refuges. Therefore, we recommend that the FWS develop a strategic growth plan for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge Association feels that in places like Cahaba River and Cherry Valley, where local support for refuges is strong and widespread, willing sellers are standing by to work with the Service, and the biological resources are so unique, important and threatened or endangered, the National Wildlife Refuge System can play a key role in conservation.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on these important pieces of legislation and would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.