

STATEMENT OF DAN ASHE, DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS, AND INSULAR AFFAIRS, REGARDING THE DRAFT LAND PROTECTION PLAN AND DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR THE PROPOSED EXPANSION OF CHICKASAW AND LOWER HATCHIE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

JUNE 20, 2013

Good morning Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Dan Ashe, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) within the Department of the Interior. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the proposed expansion of Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges in the state of Tennessee.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is 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. Encompassing more than 150 million acres of land and water, the Refuge System is the world's premier network of public lands devoted solely to the conservation of wildlife and habitat. The Refuge System preserves a diverse array of land, wetland, and ocean ecosystems—from Guam, American Samoa, and other remote Pacific islands, north to the high arctic of northern Alaska, east to the rugged coastline of Maine and south to the tropical U.S. Virgin Islands. National wildlife refuges are found in every U.S. state. In total, the Refuge System now contains 561 refuges.

The Refuge System offers about 47 million visitors per year the opportunity to fish, hunt, observe and photograph wildlife, as well as learn about nature through environmental education and interpretation. With its widespread presence and history of working with partners, the Refuge System also plays a key role in supporting innovative, community-level efforts to conserve outdoor spaces and connect people with nature.

In addition to conserving America's great wildlife heritage, the Refuge System is an important part of local economies. The presence of a national wildlife refuge in a community often offers significant economic benefits in the form of jobs and visitor spending in local stores, hotels, and service stations. As noted in a resolution supporting National Wildlife Refuge Week passed by the Senate in September 2012, for each dollar appropriated to the Refuge System, national wildlife refuges generate about \$4 in economic activity, totaling nearly \$1.7 billion and helping sustain 27,000 jobs in local communities.

Land Protection Process

The Service uses land protection planning to study opportunities to conserve land, including by adding it to the Refuge System. This process is mandated by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Sect 4 (4)(C)), which directs the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Service, to “plan and direct the continued growth of the System in a manner

that is best designed to accomplish the mission of the System, to contribute to the conservation of the ecosystems of the United States, to complement efforts of States and other federal agencies to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats, and to increase support for the System and participation from conservation partners and the public.”

If a Land Protection Plan is approved, there is an authorized acquisition boundary for the refuge. This public process applies to newly authorized refuges as well as to expanded acquisition boundaries for existing refuges. It is important to be clear about the effect of an authorized acquisition boundary: it authorizes the Service to purchase fee title or conservation easements within that boundary. It is our policy and our practice to acquire land from willing sellers. Further, such purchases can be made only if funding is available through Congressional appropriations or through the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, providing direct mechanisms for accountability and control. Inclusion within an approved refuge boundary confers no federal authority or regulatory requirements on the landowner. It does provide landowners within the boundary another option for how they use their land (i.e., they can sell to the Government to have it become part of the Refuge System).

Conserving wildlife through land protection is a transparent, public, and participatory process, founded on scientific data, driven by our mission to conserve habitat and ecosystems. We use the best scientific processes and data to identify gaps in the conservation estate—which we define as lands that are protected at local or landscape scales by private, state, or federal partners. Once a conservation need is identified, a preliminary proposal is submitted to the Service’s Director for approval to develop a detailed Land Protection Plan. Development of a Land Protection Plan is a public planning process, during which we reach out to state agencies, local communities, Congressional offices, recreation, conservation and environmental groups to inform and help shape the plan. The Service uses the best available scientific information to analyze the effects of the Land Protection Plan and alternatives on the physical, biological, social and economic environment. After a rigorous review process, the completed Land Protection Plan is submitted to the Director, who approves, requests modification, or rejects the proposal.

Public Involvement in the Planning Process

A fundamental value of the Service’s planning process in the management of the Refuge System is public involvement. As such, we base our decision-making on understanding and in consideration of public interests. As part of our public planning process, the Service typically collects hundreds of comments from individuals and organizations. This feedback – ranging from comments addressing broad and long-term issues to specific and detailed strategies that could be used to achieve biological or public use objectives – is critical to the Service’s development, evaluation and comparison of management alternatives.

For example, public input shaped the establishment of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. When the Service engaged the public during the planning process, the River Ranch Property Owners Association, a group of local landowners, opposed the establishment of the refuge and conservation area, envisioning that the Service would close access to any purchased lands as other federal agencies had done elsewhere in Florida. We actively engaged with the River Ranch community and established a level of trust

and understanding after multiple meetings over the course of a year. The Service listened to their concerns and, as a result, reevaluated our initial proposal. Ultimately, we removed the River Ranch landholdings from the proposal while maintaining the conservation integrity of the project. The overall outcome of the discussions between the Service and the River Ranch community has led to understanding and support for the Everglades Headwaters project.

Chickasaw, Lower Hatchie and Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges and Their Benefits

The Chickasaw, Lower Hatchie, and Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges are located in west Tennessee's portion of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley and are part of the West Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge Complex. They welcomed over 500,000 visitors in 2012 alone. Chickasaw National Wildlife Refuge is located in Lauderdale County, Tennessee, adjacent to the Mississippi River. Of the 73,480 acres within the approved acquisition boundary for Chickasaw National Wildlife Refuge, the Service has purchased fee title in approximately 20,914 acres and manages an additional 5,388 acres of contiguous lands under a no-fee lease from the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA), which brings the current total to 26,008 acres. Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge is located approximately 18 miles west of Henning, Tennessee, at the confluence of the Hatchie and Mississippi Rivers in Lauderdale and Tipton Counties. Of the 12,270 acre acquisition boundary, the Service has purchased fee title in approximately 11,883 acres while an additional 1,873 acres of lands (Sunk Lake Public Use Natural Area) is managed under a no-fee lease from the Tennessee Department of Environmental Conservation. Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge is located in Haywood County, Tennessee, adjacent to the Hatchie River. The refuge owns all 11,556 acres within its current acquisition boundary.

All three refuges were established under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission to protect bottomland hardwood forests and adjacent habitats for migratory and wintering waterfowl. The bottomland hardwood forests of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley serve as important habitat for breeding landbirds and migratory birds in the spring and fall, and the Lower Mississippi Valley serves as the primary wintering ground for mid-continental waterfowl populations. Together, Chickasaw, Lower Hatchie, and Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges support wintering waterfowl population numbers exceeding 300,000 dabbling ducks each year.

Proposed Boundary Expansion at Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges

The Service is considering a proposal to expand the acquisition boundaries for Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuges to protect and restore high-quality bottomland hardwood forest habitat for waterfowl, deer, turkey, and many nongame species as well as places where the public can hunt, fish, and observe wildlife. The preliminary proposal encompasses approximately 120,078 acres of mostly un-leveed bottomlands of the Mississippi and Hatchie Rivers in Lauderdale, Tipton, Haywood, and Dyer Counties, Tennessee.

Land acquisition remains a critical tool in safeguarding wildlife and habitat while providing opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation. It is long-standing Service policy and practice to

acquire lands from willing sellers. As a result, the Service enjoys generally exceptional community relations, and landowner support for refuge acquisitions.

Consistent with the Service's commitment to decision-making rooted in consideration of public interests, the public process for this proposal began in December 2012 when the Service initiated a two-month public scoping effort to seek broader input in shaping the proposal. The Service held public scoping meetings in Ripley, Tennessee on December 11, 2012 and in Brownsville on December 12, 2012. After fully considering public input the Service developed a draft land protection plan and provided it to the public for review and comment on February 7, 2013. As part of this comment period, the Service held a public meeting on February 19, 2013 in Ripley, Tennessee.

Operations and Maintenance Costs

The Service, as part of its official charge from Congress to manage the Refuge System, has a mandate to "...conserve fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats...." One of the most effective ways to do this is to protect areas that hold the greatest value for wildlife. Investment in newly conserved properties provides more access for hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers; creates jobs and economic benefits for local communities; increases survival of wildlife; and helps private landowners preserve their family lands and lifestyle, such as ranching, in perpetuity. Furthermore, consolidating fragmented lands often reduces operations and maintenance needs, thereby saving taxpayer dollars.

Many new fee title or conservation easements acquired by the Refuge System are private inholdings within or immediately adjacent to an existing refuge parcel. These scattered and sometimes small inholdings can have a disproportionate and often adverse effect on the ability of a refuge to achieve its purpose. Strategic acquisitions of fee title or easements can significantly simplify management and reduce expenses related to signage, fencing, law enforcement patrols, legal permits, rights-of-way conflicts, fire-fighting, road maintenance, habitat management and restoration, and invasive species management. Such strategic acquisitions help the Service meet important conservation objectives.

The Service is diligently working to put available funding for operation and maintenance of the Refuge System to its best use. We will apply available funds by setting priorities, and continuing to collaborate with state, federal, and private partners and volunteers to maximize shared conservation benefits. The Refuge System continues to effectively manage its deferred maintenance backlog by continuing to refine its condition assessment process, using maintenance action teams, actively pursuing local partnerships, carefully prioritizing budgets, and disposing of unneeded assets. As a result, the backlog declined by \$300 million from Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 to 2012, totaling \$2.4 billion at the end of FY 2012 for a \$26.5 billion portfolio of constructed assets on Refuge System lands totaling 150 million acres. The condition of the overall portfolio has improved while mission critical needs are being met.

The six refuges in Tennessee compete for the annual funding that Congress provides to rehabilitate or replace the highest priority maintenance or operational needs on each refuge. Many of those projects that are funded are completed by refuge staff to minimize costs and

others are contracted out to the lowest bidder. As these projects are completed, they are reducing the operations and maintenance backlogs on these six refuges.

Land acquisition associated with the proposed expansion of the Chickasaw and Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge would be expected to occur slowly due to limited funding and competing needs for other priority land acquisition throughout the Nation. Over the next 10 years, the projected increase from lands acquired in this proposed 120,000 acre expansion area would likely be less than 10,000 acres and have minimal impacts to current operational or maintenance backlogs. There are three staffed refuges within this proposed area and they would assume the management oversight of these additional lands with minimal costs.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today, and for your continued support of the National Wildlife Refuge System. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.