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Testimony for an Oversight Hearing on
OWNERSHIP RIGHTS CONCERNING HARRIS NECK
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
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My name is Dorothy Bambach. I represent the Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges, Inc. ("FSCWR") and also have the support of Georgia Ornithological Society, National Audubon and the National Wildlife Refuge Association. I appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony to the House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs.

FSCWR is a non-profit organization whose mission is to support and advocate for the seven refuges within the Savannah Coastal Refuge Complex (which includes Harris Neck NWR) and to promote public understanding of the need to protect and preserve wildlife and wildlife habitat. We fund special projects, provide volunteer labor, and conduct public outreach programs. We are proud to boast 281 dues-paying members after only 4 years of existence. Our membership is diverse and includes educators, hunters and fishermen, medical and business professionals, blue-collar workers, scientists, and retirees, among others. The one thing that all of us have in common is that we care about our local national wildlife refuges with sufficient passion to be willing to invest our time, money and sweat to maintain and protect them.

Visitors come to Harris Neck with a wide variety of interests. The refuge is used by hunters and fishers, crabbers and shrimpers, cyclists, paddlers, scout troops, birders, butterfly and garden clubs, photographers, nature- and wildlife-watchers, hikers and joggers, and school groups.

- The refuge's man-made Woody Pond is a particular favorite with birders, photographers and wildlife watchers; *wingsoverga.com* comments: "try not to let your jaw hit the ground at the sight you will behold...perhaps the most amazing wader rookery in the state."
- Local resident *Janet Ritter Yeager*, told me, "We decided to move to the Harris Neck area because of the opportunity to hike and ride bikes in the refuge's unique natural environment."
- Fisherman *Jim McMahan* says he visits the Harris Neck fishing docks at least once a week, because "the peace, quiet and wildlife are just unbelievable."
- "The refuge has been a source of beauty, family recreation, and outdoor education for us over the years." – *Jessica Aldridge, St. Marys, Georgia*
- "A highlight of any visit to Harris Neck is meeting people from all over the East Coast who have stopped in with their cameras, tripods and binoculars." – *Hunter Hurst, Shellman Bluff, Georgia*

Harris Neck NWR is located in McIntosh County on the Georgia coast, about 20 miles south of the city of Savannah. A brief summary of how Harris Neck came to be a refuge

is in order. Most of the land on which the Harris Neck refuge is situated was purchased by the military early in World War II for use as a pilot training facility by the Army Air Corps. I can understand why this particular location might have been attractive for an airbase. The site stood on a point of land that was surrounded on three sides by waterways and extensive, low-lying saltmarsh, thus giving unobstructed approach and take-off routes for pilot trainees. The property also contained a Civil Aeronautics Authority emergency airfield and a deep-water dock, which might have been considered helpful to transport men and supplies during construction of the base. And there was a 28-room mansion (the old Lorillard estate) on the property that could provide immediate shelter.

After the war ended, when the military decommissioned the base it was required, based on my understanding of federal surplus property disposal rules, to seek a viable public use for the site. The property was therefore conveyed in 1948 to McIntosh County for a municipal airport facility. When the county failed to fulfill its agreement to operate the airport, the property was taken back into federal custody in 1961 and once again designated as surplus property.

Federal rules for property disposal specify that surplus land be offered first for use by other federal executive agencies. The Department of the Interior expressed interest in acquiring the land as a wildlife refuge and the property was transferred for that purpose in 1962. It should also be noted that GSA Regulation §102-75.25 requires that a federal agency “fulfill its needs for real property so far as practicable by utilization of real property determined to be excess by other agencies...before it purchases non-Federal real property.” In other words, the refuge system should not purchase nearby privately held land for use as a refuge as long as surplus federal land is both available and suitable in the same general area, which it was in the case of Harris Neck.

Subsequent to 1962, The Nature Conservancy purchased and transferred several additional parcels of land to the refuge system, thus expanding the Harris Neck footprint to what it is today. Of course, the area looks very different today from its pre-war appearance: several docks have been added; six shallow ponds were constructed for use by waterfowl and wading birds; long-leaf pine and bald cypress have been planted; and areas once cleared have been allowed to re-forest.

I know Harris Neck well because I am a frequent volunteer there. After retiring from our work careers, my husband and I moved to Savannah, Georgia in 1999. I believe that everyone, especially those of us who have been fortunate in life, have an obligation to give back to their community in meaningful ways. That philosophy, combined with a lifelong interest in nature, led me to offer my services as a volunteer to our refuge complex. In the past eleven years I have accrued in excess of 3300 volunteer hours, most of them at Harris Neck, and have put over 30,000 miles on my car in service to the refuge. I have pruned shrubs, removed invasive plants, given presentations about the refuges to various groups, organized and conducted bird surveys, monitored nesting bird colonies, served as a docent in the visitor center, led field trips and tours, and interpreted the refuge for visiting groups of children and adults.

My experience as a volunteer has allowed me to see first-hand what a valuable and enduring asset Harris Neck is for the local community and the nation. While I empathize with the families of the Harris Neck Land Trust for the sacrifices they made during this country's World War II efforts, I strongly support the refuge and do not wish to see it diminished by converting any part of it to residential or commercial use.

Let me explain why Harris Neck NWR is a valuable asset worth retaining under the ownership and control of the federal refuge system.

- Harris Neck is a superb oasis for wildlife and natural habitat within a geographic area that has undergone a very high rate of development in the past decade. It offers a great variety of habitat types for a relatively small refuge: weedy fields, shrub/scrub, shallow freshwater ponds, mudflats, saltmarsh, bottomland woods, pinewoods, and maritime forest. As a result, it boasts an impressive list of mammals, birds, reptiles and insects that use the refuge, including such charismatic species as bobcat, white-tailed deer, bald eagle, wood stork, painted bunting, gopher tortoise and swallowtail butterfly. The refuge has been designated as an Important Bird Area by National Audubon and is one of only 18 sites on Georgia's Colonial Coast Birding Trail.
- The refuge has contributed a great deal of data and insights to the scientific community through the staff's work with nesting wood storks, painted buntings and loggerhead sea turtles. For example, Harris Neck pioneered the use of artificial platforms and water level management to provide nesting habitat for wood storks. The refuge's wood stork colony is now the largest and most productive in Georgia and the most consistently and intensively monitored in the nation. The data gathered (entirely by volunteers and interns) from the wood stork colony is used to document the recovery of the species, which was once critically endangered and now appears to be on a stable path toward de-listing.
- Refuges are economic engines in local communities; when people visit Harris Neck, they buy gas, stay at local hotels, eat at local restaurants and frequent area tourism facilities. For every \$1 appropriated by Congress to run our national refuges, they return on average \$4 in economic activity to the local economy. The numbers are probably even more impressive in coastal Georgia refuges; for example, the not-too-distant Okefenokee NWR has been found to generate over \$34 for every \$1 appropriated.
- Although the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service was not involved in the original condemnation of the land in 1943, it has demonstrated excellent stewardship of the property since taking possession in 1962. A staff of only four employees delivers a big bang for each tax buck by managing three national wildlife refuges comprising nearly 14,000 acres in three discrete locations: Harris Neck, Blackbeard Island, and Wolf Island. With the help of volunteers, staff maintain roads and trails, control invasive species, manage water levels, provide interpretation to the visiting public, conduct wildlife surveys and studies, operate

bird banding programs, organize hunts, and research and document historical and archaeological artifacts.

- Harris Neck hosts between 85,000 and 90,000 visitors per year, demonstrating sustained usage by both local residents and a large number of out-of-state visitors (of the visitors who sign in at the refuge office, 60% are from out-of-state or a foreign country). The web site *Listasaur.com*, which publishes “top five” lists on a variety of topics, mentions Harris Neck as “a location worth stopping to enjoy for a few days.”
- The refuge is noted for its ease of access. It is located only 7 miles from Interstate I-95 and has a paved 4-mile Wildlife Drive that winds through the refuge. Interpretive panels have been installed at key locations along the drive. Woody Pond and the remnants of the airfield runways are wheelchair accessible. And short walks off the main drive lead to other scenic and wildlife-rich observation areas.
- Harris Neck protects a number of historic and archaeological sites and traditions, including Native American villages and burial grounds, remnants of the Peru Plantation, vestiges of the Lorillard estate and the Gullah-Geechee culture and, of course, the World War II airfield. Descendants from all of those eras – Native Americans, local families, and military veterans – can be assured that future generations will be able to experience and gain understanding of the land and natural environment on which their ancestors once lived.

My greatest concern is that the introduction of private residences to Harris Neck will damage or destroy what has been accomplished there over the past 50 years. For example, the refuge is closed entirely at night to avoid disturbance to the many nocturnal species that flourish there. During spring and summer, the public is kept at a safe distance from the nesting colony so that birds are not startled into abandoning their nests. Pets are prohibited, as are livestock. Freshwater resources, which are limited, are carefully marshaled to where they are most needed. Wastewater generation is kept to a minimum. Trash and litter are removed daily. And prescribed fire is used every few years to maintain desirable habitats. Private residential use is completely incompatible with all of these protections.

In closing, I'd like to emphasize that losing Harris Neck NWR to development would be an economic, cultural and environmental tragedy. It would also establish a troubling precedent regarding the sanctity of federal lands held in trust for the millions of citizens who use and enjoy them. We ask this subcommittee to ensure that this trust is not violated and that Harris Neck remain intact, undisturbed, and under its current ownership and control by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I invite each of you to come for a visit to Harris Neck to experience first-hand the rich natural environment that it offers. You will be most welcome and amazed by what you see.