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## Obama Administration Comprehensive Conservation Plan Threatens Chincoteague Jobs, Economy

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** – Today, the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs held an [oversight hearing](#) on, “*Fish and Wildlife Service’s Proposed Comprehensive Conservation Plan and its Potential Devastating Impact on the Economy of the Town of Chincoteague, Virginia.*”

The Town of Chincoteague attracts approximately 1.4 million people annually because of the Island’s beautiful beaches, world famous Chincoteague ponies and access to other wildlife at the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. Tourism is the most important economic activity in the Town with nearly 30 percent of Chincoteague workers directly dependent on tourism-related industries.

By law, the Secretary of the Interior must prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge to determine future management of the site. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has outlined three potential management alternatives, one of which includes demolishing the current beach front parking lot and replacing it with an off-site transit system for public access to the beach. This proposal would have drastic economic ramifications on the heavily tourist-reliant town which could cost hundreds of jobs and undercut Chincoteague’s economy.

*“The fact that the Fish and Wildlife Service is moving forward with one option, while at the same time telling the public that they are reviewing all options, is certainly contrary to at least the spirit of the National Environmental Policy Act. This process lacks transparency and indicates an unwillingness to work with either small businesses or the local Chincoteague community and begs the question as to when this Administration will stop placing the welfare of its bureaucracy over the welfare of the citizenry,”* said [Subcommittee Chairman John Fleming \(LA-04\)](#).

During the course of the hearing, it became clear that the USFWS applied for Department of Transportation money to buy the Maddox Family Campground which implements one of the CCP alternatives.

*“This is a classic example of an over reaching paternalistic federal government imposing its will without regard for the needs, desires, or economic well being of the people. The town, the county, and the Virginia House of Delegates have all adopted resolutions disapproving of any effort to expand the boundaries of the Refuge within the town to establish a Disney-like*

*transit system. It is unacceptable that the Refuge would continue to pursue a plan that has drawn such deep objections. Moving this project forward ahead undermines the integrity of the public process. The refuge is sending a clear signal that the public process is nothing more than a pro forma exercise with a foregone conclusion," said [Congressman Scott Rigell \(VA-02\)](#).*

Last month, Rep. Scott Rigell sent a letter to Director Dan Ashe expressing frustration over the surprise announcement of Federal Grant Money awarded to the USFWS for the development of a Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge 'Park-and-Ride.' Read the letter [here](#).

According to [Chincoteague's Mayor John Tarr](#), the USFWS's proposed CCP disregards the unique character of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and its invaluable economic significance to the town. *"The Virginia portion of Assateague Island is a Wildlife Refuge inside a National Seashore Park. This is different than any other Wildlife Refuge in the country, but the proposed CCP doesn't even recognize public beach recreation at all."* The most worrisome aspect of the USFWS's recent actions is their effort to replace Chincoteague's current beach front parking lot with a trolley system, a proposal the local community adamantly opposes. *"Their policy of implementing transit in parks and purchasing property in our town limits – both ideas that we oppose because they are completely unnecessary - is one that will kill jobs, crush investment and create economic uncertainty in our Town."*

[Ms. Wanda Thornton](#), a member of the Accomack County Board of County Supervisors, voiced the outrage of the local community regarding USFWS' decision-making process. *"Our concerns have been ignored, we have been lied to, we have been told that no matter what we say the refuge manager has 51% of the vote, and this process underway at the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge holds the opinions of the local population in contempt. People in the Town of Chincoteague are fearful for their jobs, they are fearful that their investments in local businesses or restaurants may be wiped out because a local refuge manager wants to shut down the current ocean-accessible beach and force tourists to ride into the refuge on a mass transit shuttle."*

[Local business owner Scott Chesson](#) spoke of the importance direct access to Chincoteague's beaches brings to local businesses, and the potential job and economic losses Chincoteague will suffer if USFWS proceeds with the development of offsite parking. *"Once a small seaside fishing village, our Island has turned into a tourist destination and a revenue generator for Accomack County and the State of Virginia. Our Town now boasts a total of 962 Hotel rooms, 1143 camp sites and 670 rental homes and cottages. Most, if not all of these accommodations have an occupancy rate of 90+ % during the summer beach season. AOL Travel named our Island the #1 Beach Town in the entire country in 2011. The beach at the Assateague National Seashore has established our Island as a premier vacation destination for millions of people all over our country. A reduction or elimination of parking at the beach will change all that. Jobs will be lost, businesses will close and real-estate investments on the Island of Chincoteague will be worth next to nothing."*

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