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Opening Statement By
The Honorable John Fleming
Chairman, Subcommittee on Fisheries, Oceans, Wildlife and Insular Affairs
At the Oversight Hearing on
The Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge
February 17, 2012

Good morning. Today, the Subcommittee will conduct an oversight hearing on the proposed Comprehensive Conservation Plan or CCP for the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia.

During the past year, we have heard repeatedly from the Fish and Wildlife Service that the reason they recommend no funding for the Refuge Revenue Sharing Program is because refuges are economic engines for their local communities.

In this particular case, there is no question that the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and the 1.4 million people who visit it each year are critical to the economic vitality of the Town of Chincoteague. Each summer, families travel to Chincoteague to enjoy its beautiful beaches and to gaze upon some 125 descendants of Spanish mustangs, which have lived on the Island for some 400 years. These are ponies that were memorialized in Marguerite Henry's 1947 book "Misty of Chincoteague."

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Congressman who represents this community, the Town Council of Chincoteague, the local Chamber of Commerce and I am told the overwhelming majority of residents, were aghast to learn that the Fish and Wildlife Service is considering management alternatives which they believe will have a devastating economic impact on their town.

Among the proposals being considered is closing the existing recreational beach, building new parking facilities and establishing a shuttle service from a remote location miles from the existing beach, and reducing the size of the pony herd.

From my perspective, what is most disturbing is that despite the fact that the CCP will not be completed until at least 2013, the Service has already started to implement their changes. They have telegraphed their intentions by seeking up to \$7 million in federal grants from the Paul Sarbanes Transit in the Parks Program, by indicating their desire to reduce the size of the pony herd, and by signing a contract to purchase the Maddox Family Campground.

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. At a minimum the public must be given an opportunity to comment on the proposed Draft Environment Impact Statement before and not after the agency implements its preference. To do otherwise is simply unacceptable and will prompt further Congressional inquiries.