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Opening Statement by
Chairman John Fleming
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
At the Oversight Hearing on
"Florida Everglades Restoration: What Are The Priorities"
November 3, 2011

Good morning. Today, the Subcommittee will be holding an oversight hearing on the Florida Everglades Restoration and the proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area at the request of several members of the Florida Congressional Delegation.

Since 2001, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District have dedicated themselves to the Comprehensive Everglades Management Plan. This project, which is the largest in our history, is designed to restore the Florida Everglades by improving water quality, removing phosphorus and other contaminants and "getting the water right." Together, the federal government and the State of Florida have pledged some \$14 billion to complete 68 projects - the vast majority of which are occurring south of Lake Okeechobee.

It is in this context that earlier this year, the Secretary of the Interior announced his intention to establish a 150,000 acre National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area north of Lake Okeechobee. A fundamental purpose of this hearing is to examine whether this refuge and conservation area will assist in the restoration of the Everglades or is simply an unnecessary side-show and diversion of badly needed federal funds.

Let me say that I remain disappointed that the Service has been unwilling to support the need for a Congressional authorization of new national wildlife refuges. The proposed Everglades Headwaters refuge is a classic example of where an authorization is badly needed and may, in fact, increase public support for this proposal.

In fact, I now have a better understanding of why the Service wants to act quickly. Despite the fact that this project was not included in either their budget submission or their Land Acquisition Priority List, the Service quickly recognized that falling land prices in Central Florida presented an irresistible opportunity to acquire thousands of new acres of private property in Florida at a fraction of what it would have cost them three years ago.

In addition to the more than \$700 million it will cost our taxpayers to buy these Florida lands and easements, there are additional consequences. For instance, the Service has freely admitted that there are at least sixty major development projects in the Everglades Landscape that are either in

initial stages or have been approved. When the economy improves, those projects are likely to proceed. What the Service fails to tell the American people is how many thousands of new jobs will be lost by locking up this land to no development in the future.

At the same time, it was distressing to hear that representatives of the Service were telling Florida residents that their lost county tax revenues would be offset through the Refuge Revenue Sharing Program at almost the exact time the Obama Administration was submitting a budget requesting no appropriated funds for this program in FY'12. Let me repeat that: This Administration requested zero dollars for the promise of lost revenues to Florida. I hope the Florida communities heard this.

We will also hear testimony today and I will submit letters from various conservation organizations expressing their concerns that legitimate recreational opportunities will be denied once this refuge is established.

Let's look at the record. There are 28 national wildlife refuges located entirely within the State of Florida and only seven refuges are open to hunting. This represents less than 30 percent of all refuge acreage in the State. More importantly, the Service has made promises in the past to allow hunting in certain new units like the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, only to find the door slammed in the sportsmen's faces when it was established. It is my hope that the Service will provide us with assurances, if not a guarantee, that wildlife dependent recreation will be permitted within the entire Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge if it is created.

In the final analysis, I am looking forward to hearing the Service's justification to this proposal; how they intend to compensate locally affected counties; how they intend to treat Florida sportsmen; and how they intend to make this project instrumental in the restoration of the Florida Everglades. It really is a question of has the Service overreached and over promised.

I now recognize the gentle lady from Hawaii, Congresswoman Colleen Hanabusa, who is serving as the Ranking Minority Member of the Subcommittee for today's hearing.