

Statement of Congressman Spencer Bachus

H.R. 4947

Mr. Chairman (Mr. Gilchrest),

I would like to thank you and the Ranking Member (Mr. Pallone) for holding this hearing today on H.R. 4947. This legislation represents a 2 nd major step in protecting and preserving one of the most biologically diverse areas of the United States.

In 2000, I introduced the legislation that created the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge. Through the expedited attention of this committee, that bill passed and was signed into law. Since that time, each year the Appropriations Committee has dedicated funding for land acquisition. The initial 3,500 acres authorized in that bill have been completely purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Because of the strong support of the local elected officials and property owners—as well as the dedicated work of many environmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, The Cahaba River Society and The Land Trust—we have been working on plans to expand the existing boundaries of The Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge.

It is the hard work of this diverse group of people that led me to introduce H.R. 4947.

Alabama is the 5 th most biologically diverse State in the Country, but it also has the unfortunate distinction of being the most extinction-prone State in the continental United States, with at least 98 species extinct. The Cahaba River basin alone supports 69 rare and imperiled species. The river is recognized nationally for its unique biological diversity; the Cahaba Shiner, a federally endangered species is just one of more than 131 species of fish that calls the Cahaba home. The Cahaba's wealth of fish species is greater than any other river of its size in North America.

The Cahaba River also harbors the world's largest population of the imperiled shoals lily, known locally as the "Cahaba Lily." Recently a population of Cahaba pebble-snails was discovered in the Refuge. Originally thought to be extinct, this marked the first time this species had been seen since the 1960's, an accomplishment that can be attributed to the protection offered by the Cahaba's designation as a Wildlife Refuge.

The legislation before you today—H.R. 4947—authorizes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to purchase up to an additional 3,600 acres of land and waters. This would double the number of protected acres of the Cahaba, all of which will be purchased from willing sellers. Protecting the land upstream from the original refuge will add to the buffer zone needed to protect this critical habitat and watershed.

As you may know, I came before this committee in the last Congress with a significantly larger proposed expansion to the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge. In working with Chairman Gilchrest and Chairman Pombo, I have attempted to pare-down the size of this proposal in order to assure that we can bring protection to the most pristine acreage currently outside the bounds of the Cahaba Refuge in the shortest amount of time.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you again for holding this important hearing today on what is one of the greatest natural treasures in my State of Alabama. I look forward to continuing to work with you and your staff to ensure that an expansion of the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge becomes a reality. Thank you.