

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

TESTIMONY OF DAN ASHE, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR REFUGES AND WILDLIFE, UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AND OCEANS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, REGARDING H.R. 3176, TO PROVIDE FOR A STUDY OF WETLAND RESTORATION AT KEALIA POND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE IN HAWAII, AND H.R. 3292, TO AUTHORIZE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CAT ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE IN LOUISIANA: MARCH 30, 2000

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate this opportunity to provide the Administration's views on H.R. 3292, to authorize the establishment of the Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana, and H.R. 3176, to provide a study of wetlands restoration at Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge in Hawaii. We support enactment of both bills with minor changes.

H.R. 3292 would authorize the establishment of a National Wildlife Refuge at the area known as Cat Island, Louisiana. Cat Island is a highly significant wildlife and natural area, and has the potential to become an exciting new National Wildlife Refuge. It is unleveed and one of the last remaining tracts in the lower Mississippi Valley that is still influenced by the natural dynamics of the river.

Cat Island is habitat for several declining species of neotropical migratory birds with a strong potential for swallow-tail kites, a species of special concern, and supports thousands of wintering waterfowl. Woodcock use the area as overwintering grounds, and bald eagles are regular visitors. In addition, Cat Island is considered to be prime habitat for the Louisiana black bear, a threatened species.

It supports one of the highest densities of virgin bald cypress trees in the Nation. Many of these trees are estimated to be between 500 and 1,000 years old, and they include the Nation's largest bald cypress tree, which is 17 feet in diameter and has a circumference of 53 feet. Overall, the forested wetlands typical of Cat Island represent one of the most valuable and productive wildlife habitat types in the United States. Adding it to the Refuge System would help meet the habitat protection goals of the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

In addition, Cat Island has extremely high recreational potential for hunters, anglers, birdwatchers, nature photographers, and others interested in the outdoors and wildlife. We also believe there are very real possibilities of working with the local communities to promote ecotourism, such as birding festivals, which would both promote awareness of our wildlife resources and provide economic benefits to local businesses and governments.

Title VI of last year's appropriation bill provided \$500,000 for land acquisition, and for the proposed Cat Island NWR. In support of the establishment of the refuge, the Administration has included an additional \$4,000,000 for land acquisition in the FY 2001 budget request. In addition, the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission has approved another \$500,000 for acquisition of a tract at Cat Island of particular importance

to migratory waterfowl. H.R. 3292 strengthens these efforts by providing express Congressional authorization to establish the refuge, creating a refuge acquisition boundary, and establishing refuge purposes.

However, we believe enactment of H.R. 3292 is still desirable. It would provide express Congressional authorization to establish the refuge, create a refuge acquisition boundary, and establish refuge purposes.

In that regard, we would recommend some technical revisions to clarify those purposes. We also recommend that the acreage referred to in the bill be revised from 9,477 acres to 36,500 acres, to reflect the evolution of the proposal since the bill was introduced in November. Both of these changes are highly likely to be reflected in the Senate version of this legislation that we understand will shortly be introduced by Senators Breaux and Landrieu.

We have discussed these with Congressman Baker's office and it is our understanding that all parties are in agreement on these changes. We will gladly work with the Subcommittee staff on this.

The second bill before the Subcommittee, H.R. 3176 directs the Secretary to conduct a study to determine ways to restore the natural wetland conditions at Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge in Hawaii.

This refuge consists of approximately 692 acres on the island of Maui, which the Service manages under a permanent conservation easement. It is home to several endangered native Hawaiian birds, including the black-crowned night heron, the Hawaiian coot, the Hawaiian duck, and the Hawaiian stilt, the conservation of which is the primary purpose of the refuge. It also hosts large numbers of other species of waterfowl and shorebirds during migrations. The primary feature of the refuge is Kealia Pond itself, a brackish pond with intermittent connection to the sea which seasonally varies in size from a few acres to over 350 acres. This is one of the largest wetland areas in the State.

The pond originally was between 6 to 8 feet deep, but has been largely filled in by run-off from agricultural areas, and is today only 1 to 2 feet in depth, when filled by winter rains. While the collection of silt in the pond has helped protect nearby reefs from themselves being silted over, it has caused serious disruption of the natural processes of the pond. To compound this problem, non-native fish, primarily tilapia from a failed aquacultural effort in the 1950s, and insects such as midges now predominate over native species. When the pond largely dries up in the summer, there can be massive fish die-offs, with resulting odors, along with midge swarms, and wind-blown dust.

None of this is well received by neighboring residents, who nevertheless support the refuge's conservation objectives. Restoration of the pond to something approximating its natural state would largely alleviate these conditions, as well as benefitting the endangered native birds.

We held a workshop last month (February 1-3) with participants from the Service, U.S. Geological Survey, the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources, and the University of Hawaii to discuss management of Kealia Pond. We were looking for advice on short- and long-term strategies for the health of the wetland and the endangered birds, as well as identifying what research and other information is needed to make biologically sound management decisions addressing the problems of wind-blown silt, swarming of midges, and die-offs of introduced fish species.

While the workshop did help identify short-term management actions to benefit the endangered birds and

somewhat limit the impacts of the fish die-offs, midges and dust, more research is needed before we can attempt permanent or even adequate solutions to these problems. The workshop did let us know what research is needed for the study called for in H.R. 3176. While it is our intention to move forward on this issue, we believe we cannot meet the bill's one-year deadline for completion of the study; and recommend a three year time period based on estimates from our refuge biologist familiar with the area and experienced in conducting such studies. In addition, because the workshop was concluded so recently, the research effort has not yet been entered into or ranked under our Refuge Operating Needs System (RONS). RONS helps the Service identify operational staffing and funding needs. RONS project priorities are determined through a rigorous national screening process to ensure that available funds are applied to the most critical needs. We anticipate entering this research effort into RONS in the near future.

That concludes my formal statement, and I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

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