

Testimony of Mark Fox, Director of External Affairs
The Nature Conservancy, Hawai'i Chapter
Supporting H.R. 5380, Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act of 2010
U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans & Wildlife
Tuesday, July 27, 2010, 10:00am, 1324 LHOB

The Nature Conservancy is pleased to offer our strong support for H.R. 5380, which would authorize the expansion of the Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) to include important native Hawaiian forest areas on both the windward and leeward sides of the island of Hawai'i (maps attached). Protection of the areas identified in this bill will:

- ✓ eliminate a real risk of logging, subdivision and development;
- ✓ maintain important watershed areas;
- ✓ provide prime habitat for threatened and endangered native forest birds and plants;
- ✓ promote landscape-scale connections between neighboring preserves; and
- ✓ facilitate resilience and adaptation to the effects of climate change.

The Nature Conservancy is a non-profit conservation organization working on the ground and in the water in all 50 states and 30 foreign countries to protect ecologically important areas for nature and people. We are best known for our science-based, collaborative approach to developing solutions to conservation challenges. We have helped conserve nearly 15 million acres of land in the United States and Canada and more than 102 million acres with local partner organizations globally. The Conservancy in Hawai'i actively manages more than 34,000 acres in 10 nature preserves on the islands of Maui, Hawai'i, Moloka'i, Lāna'i, and Kaua'i. We also work closely with government agencies, private parties and communities on cooperative land and marine management projects that care for well over one million acres of watersheds and near shore areas. Our goal is that the unique biodiversity of the islands will be carried forward as an irreplaceable asset, meeting human needs and fulfilling ecosystem functions that serve all life in the Hawaiian islands.

The 13,000-acre windward project site, known as the Koa Forest property, was appraised in May 2010 at between \$9.4 million and \$12.2 million, which factors in timber values on the agricultural zoned portion of the property. This property is the subject of a bankruptcy sale and the Conservancy is in active discussions with the primary lien holder and the bankruptcy commissioner. The leeward McCandless Ranch property was appraised in 2007 at approximately \$10 million including timber values. McCandless Ranch is a willing seller. In the current Hawai'i real estate market and given the distressed nature of the Koa Forest property, we expect that these parcels can be secured for somewhat less than the prior appraisals. The State of Hawai'i is supportive of these additions to the refuge.

The Koa Forest property is adjacent to the refuge's existing Hakalau Forest Unit and is forested mainly by koa (*Acacia koa*) and 'ōhi'a (*Metrosideros polymorpha*), the dominant native tree species in the Hawaiian forest. The area includes a rich mid-canopy and understory of native vegetation and provides significant opportunity for recovery of listed plants and endangered forest birds. There are two high priority perennial streams and the site has important watershed values including groundwater recharge and preventing siltation of nearby marine environments. The site is bordered by forest and watershed reserves managed by the State of Hawai'i and is near the Laupāhoehoe State Natural Area Reserve that is part of the U.S. Forest Service's Hawai'i Experimental Tropical Forest; a partnership of the State Department of Land and Natural Resources and the U.S. Forest Service Institute of Pacific Islands Forestry. The Nature Conservancy is actively involved in the bankruptcy and foreclosure proceedings

related to the Koa Forest property and we are seeking to secure ownership until the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can purchase the property and take title.

McCandless Ranch is offering 2,600 acres of prime koa and 'ōhi'a forest near the existing Kona Forest Unit of the refuge. The property's intact and diverse rain forest supports important populations of rare native birds including 'akiapōlā'au, 'ākepa, 'io, and Hawai'i creeper, as well as abundant populations of native 'elepaio, 'i'iwi, 'amakihi, and 'apapane. This forest is also the last place the 'alalā (Hawaiian crow) existed in the wild and is a likely location for reintroduction of this bird, which now survives only in captivity. This expansion would support connectivity amongst surrounding parcels that are currently managed for conservation by the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the State of Hawai'i, as well as The Nature Conservancy and McCandless Ranch under very successful Forest Legacy conservation easements with the U.S. Forest Service. The Ranch is a willing seller at a time when land prices are more favorable to purchasers than in past years.

The proximity of these properties and the existing Hakalau and Kona Forest Units of the refuge to State Forest Reserves, State Natural Area Reserves, the USFS Experimental Tropical Forest, and private preserves provides large protected areas for bird migration and species habitat that will contribute to connectivity, resilience and adaptation to the effects of climate change. The 2009 U.S. State of the Birds report (www.stateofthebirds.org) called for particular attention to Hawai'i where more bird species are vulnerable to extinction than anywhere else in the United States.

The Hakalau Forest NWR is specifically identified in Hawai'i's State Wildlife Action Plan (aka, Hawai'i Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy), which emphasizes the importance of current forest protection and restoration, fencing and non-native feral animal control, weed control, and propagation and out planting of understory and endangered plant species. The existing Kona Forest Unit of the NWR has been designated in the CWCS as "Key Habitat" and all forest birds found on this property are identified in the CWCS as Hawai'i's Species of Greatest Conservation Need. The proposed McCandless addition to the Kona Forest Unit is specifically identified as a Priority Designation in the CWCS. Such designation is reserved for areas where additional efforts are needed and would significantly benefit the long-term conservation of the native species.

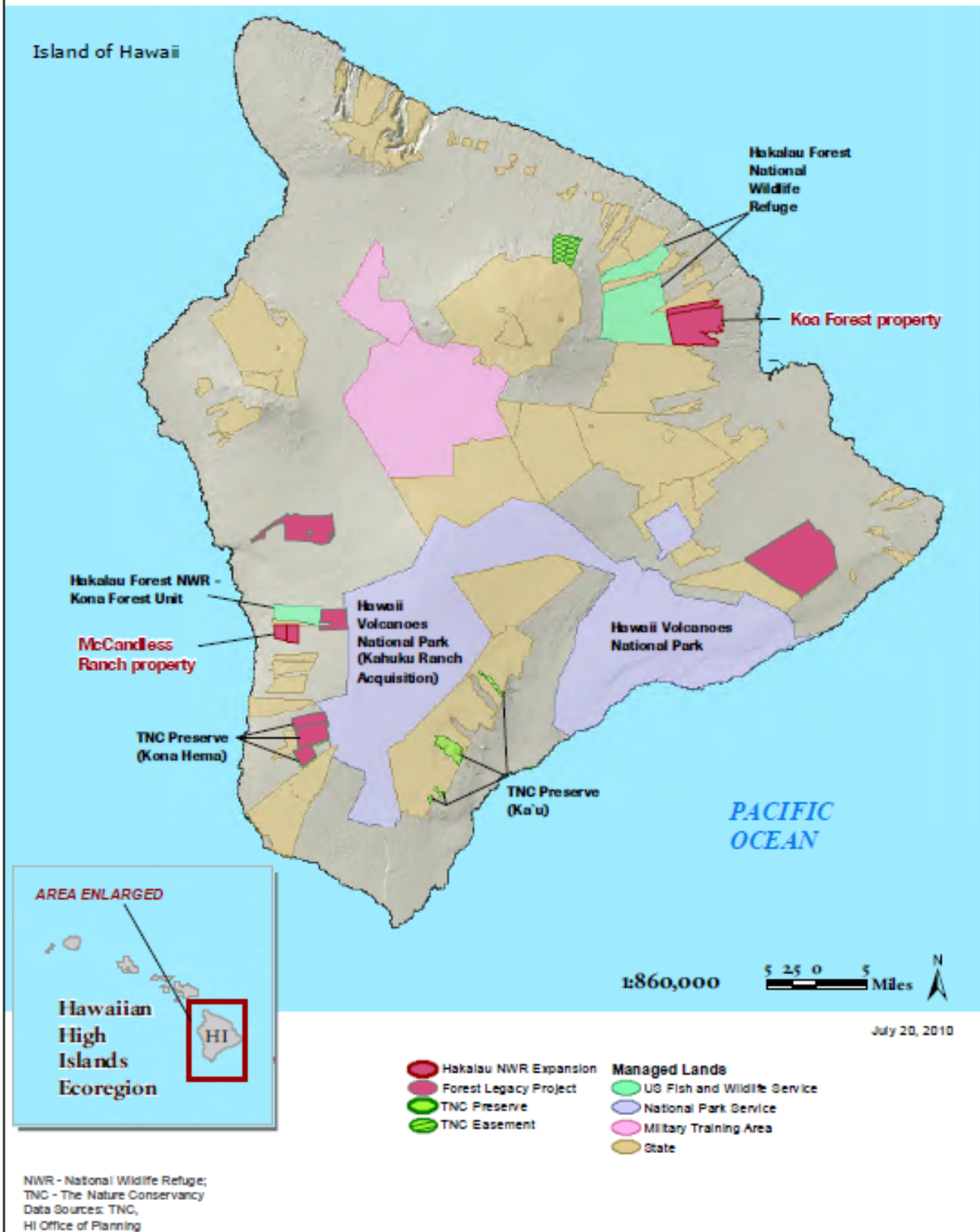
Both the Koa Forest and McCandless Ranch properties are at risk for commercial logging. There have been various attempts to cut trees on the Koa Forest property and potential investors continue to be interested in removing valuable native koa timber resources. A portion of the lower Koa Forest acreage and the entire McCandless property are zoned Agriculture, which allows for logging and subdivision into 20-acre lots for the Koa Forest property and 5-acre lots at McCandless. A number of the properties in the McCandless vicinity have indeed been commercially logged and subdivided over the years for "gentleman estates" resulting in habitat fragmentation and the loss of the ecological and watershed assets of the larger forest area.

For both additions, the areas offer opportunities to mitigate climate change by protecting and improving habitat over a wider elevation gradient on both windward and leeward sides of the island to accommodate future movement and establishment of native species. Acquisition of these areas would also prevent the loss of sequestered carbon by protecting existing forest stands from harvesting or conversion to agricultural uses. The Koa Forest property also offers protection of high quality perennial streams, supporting aquatic fauna that migrate up and down these corridors.

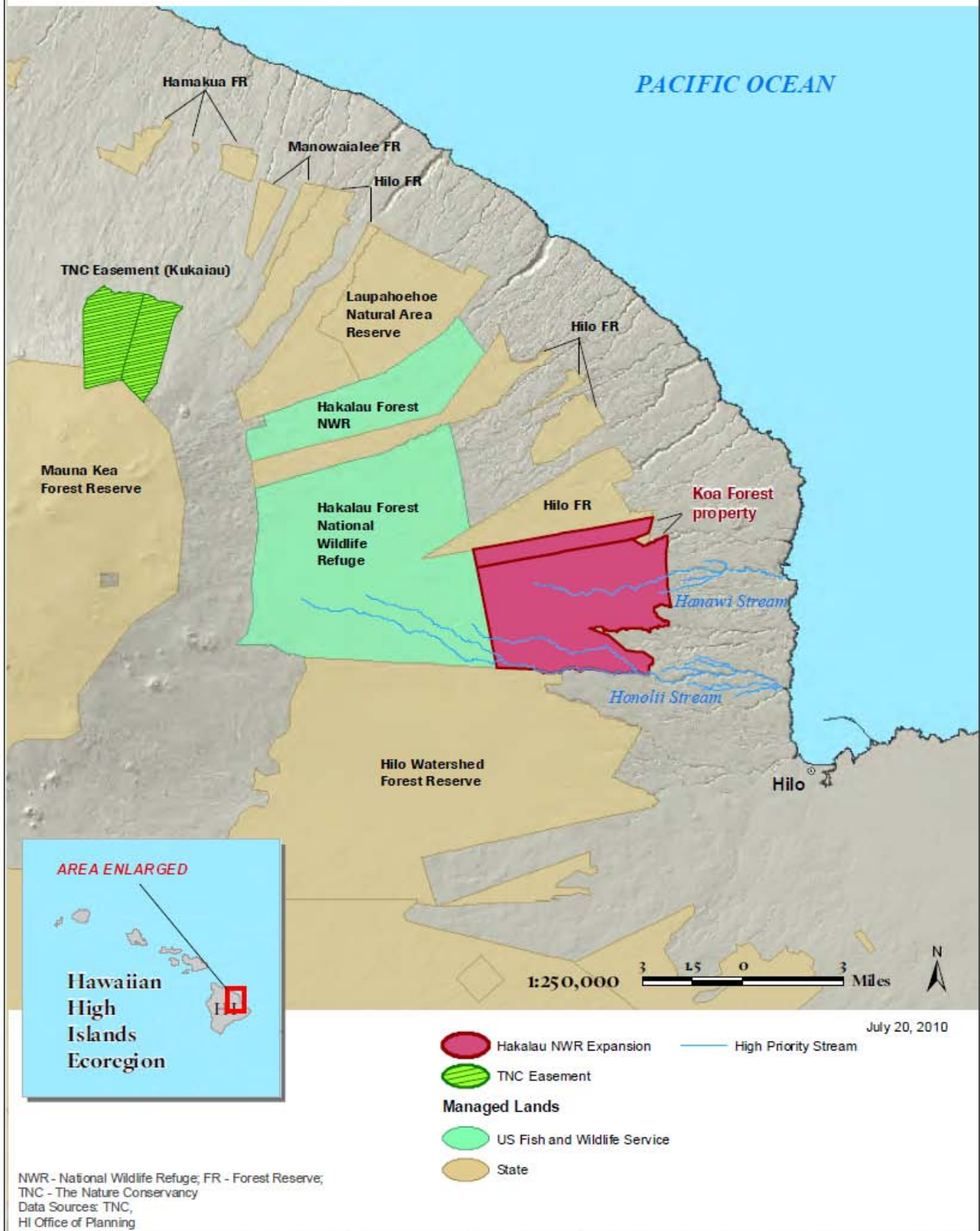
Thank you very much for this opportunity to express The Nature Conservancy's strong support for the proposed expansion of the Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge. I am pleased to answer any questions from the Subcommittee.



Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Hakalau Forest Unit and Kona Forest Unit Additions, HI



Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Hakalau Forest Unit Addition, HI



Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Kona Forest Unit Addition, HI

