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TESTIMONY
BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON
FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS

H.R. 2866, THE JAMES CAMPBELL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE EXPANSION ACT OF 2005

December 6, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Evan Hirsche, and I am the president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). On behalf of the NWRA and its membership comprised of current and former refuge professionals, nearly 100 refuge "Friends" Affiliate organizations and interested citizens throughout the United States, thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 2866, the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act of 2005. This bill will expand the boundary of the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Honolulu County, Hawaii.

The NWRA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, national membership organization, established in 1975. The NWRA's mission is to protect, enhance and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), lands and waters set aside by the American people to conserve our country's diverse wildlife heritage. Over the years we have worked on behalf of our membership to make the Refuge System stronger and better able to address the growing challenges of conserving wildlife in our country.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is the only network of Federal lands managed first and foremost for the conservation of fish, wildlife, plants and their habitat. President Theodore Roosevelt created the first national wildlife refuge in 1903 on Florida's Pelican Island to protect brown pelicans as well as egrets and herons from commercial hunting. Today, the Refuge System, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), consists of 545 refuges in all 50 states and most U. S. territories. With a mission "to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans," the National Wildlife Refuge System is the crown jewel of wildlife conservation in America.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association fully endorses the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act of 2005. This legislation authorizes expansion of the James Campbell refuge boundary to include approximately 1,100 total acres. The proposed expansion area includes high-value wetlands, coastal dunes, and other habitats important to native wildlife, including endangered species.

The James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1976, is made up of two wetland units (Kii Unit and Punamano Unit) on the northeastern shore of the island of Oahu in Hawaii. The refuge was established for endangered species, and is home to Hawaii's four endemic water birds: the Hawaiian stilt; Hawaiian moorhen; Hawaiian coot; and Hawaiian duck. It also provides essential habitat for wintering migratory birds from as far away as New Zealand and Asia. A total of 117 bird species have been documented on the Refuge since its inception. The refuge consists of naturally occurring wetlands,

spring-fed marsh and man-made ponds and impoundments. The James Campbell NWR is among the foremost wetland sites in the Hawaiian Islands.

All of the proposed refuge expansion lands are located in the Kahuku coastal flood plain and are all part of an ecologically important area for the protection, management and recovery of endangered Hawaiian waterbirds.

The land authorized for acquisition in H.R. 2866 will facilitate linking together the two units currently comprising the James Campbell NWR that are separated by approximately one mile of open space used for agricultural purposes. In addition, expansion of the acquisition boundaries will allow for the inclusion of additional uplands, transitional wetlands and coastal dune habitats, managed for a greater diversity of natural resources, including seabirds, marine animals and native strand plants. As stated in the bill, this legislation “will create a single, large, manageable and ecologically-intact unit that includes sufficient buffer land to reduce impacts on the Refuge.” The Refuge Association believes the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act is a perfect example of looking “beyond the boundaries” of national wildlife refuges to ensure the biological integrity of existing refuge habitat.

In August of this year, the NWRA issued a report titled “2005 State of the System: Beyond the Boundaries.” Illustrated in the report is the urgent need to conserve lands outside national wildlife refuge boundaries. The report found that lands and waters surrounding refuges actually have more agriculture, subdivision and other human activity than the national average. Refuges protect habitats that are crucially important, but many are just too small even for the home ranges of the species they were established to protect. In addition to working with landowners, the report recommended five solutions to threats beyond refuge boundaries—conserving more land through acquisition and easements was one of these.

The NWRA believes the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act represents a unique opportunity for the FWS to acquire vital habitat that could be permanently lost if action isn’t taken soon. The lands proposed for acquisition belong to a single landowner who is a willing seller. The habitats of the Kahuku coast are highly valuable to wildlife. While other coastal habitats in Hawaii have already been lost to urbanization and development, the lands sought for expansion of the James Campbell NWR are among the largest and last contiguous coastal areas in the Hawaiian Islands.

One of the chief advantages of expanding the refuge is the likelihood it could better fulfill its mission to conserve endangered birds. For example, the expanded refuge areas would provide protected water habitats for overwintering waterfowl, shorebirds and seabirds consistent with endangered species objectives. The additional lands would also benefit the rare bristle-thighed curlew and numerous species of more common Pacific migratory birds that use the shallow wetlands and adjacent uplands during the winter season.

With a current size of approximately 350 acres, the approved refuge boundary is too small to meet fundamental endangered species conservation and recovery efforts. In addition to adding to the overall size of the refuge, expansion of the refuge will help decrease habitat fragmentation—a major impediment to successful wildlife management.

Management of the strand—made up of open beach and dune systems—by the FWS will help to reduce dune erosion and promote healthy growth of native dune and strand plant communities, habitat types that have been decimated around Oahu due to coastal land development. Protection of these areas will also help secure essential nesting areas for the threatened green sea turtle and may promote use of the coastal areas by endangered monk seals, which currently haul out on nearby beaches to the north and south of Kahuku. With the purchase of these lands, the FWS can protect a larger area of the flood plain, thus bringing this land back to a more naturally functioning wetland.

In addition to its wildlife benefits, the expanded area can also be expected to benefit the public as an important site for wildlife-dependent public use, including wildlife observation and photography and environmental education and interpretation.

Another public benefit of expanding the refuge is the alleviation of flooding in the town of Kahuku, located just outside of the refuge. Refuge staff have been actively working with the community and local and federal partners on a project to abate flood damage caused by heavy rainstorms. The proposed flood control project involving the Army Corps of Engineers coincides with the long-term interest of the FWS to manage wildlife habitat in the coastal area.

For these reasons, the NWRA encourages passage of the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge Expansion Act of 2005. The lands in question are high-value wetlands and strand habitats important to native wildlife and the endangered species the James Campbell NWR was originally established to protect. This bill represents a unique opportunity for the FWS to acquire vital habitat that could be lost forever and will benefit the public by enhancing compatible wildlife-dependent public use and alleviating the flooding problems for Kahuku.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on

this important piece of legislation.