

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

H.R. 4318, The Red River National Wildlife Refuge Act

The Honorable Jim McCrery

Member of Congress

Fourth Congressional District, Louisiana

Testimony before the House Resources Committee's

Subcommittee of Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

May 11, 2000

Chairman Saxton and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify before you today regarding H.R. 4318, the Red River National Wildlife Refuge Act. This measure would establish the Red River National Wildlife Refuge in Caddo, Bossier, Red River, Natchitoches, and DeSoto Parishes in the Fourth Congressional District of Louisiana.

There are 20 national wildlife refuges in the state of Louisiana which host over 1.4 million visitors annually. However, as you can see from the map included in my written testimony, not a single national wildlife refuge has been created to fill a demonstrated environmental need in the Red River Valley of northwestern Louisiana.

The Red River Valley is an internationally significant environmental resource that has been neglected and requires active restoration and management to protect and enhance the value of the region as a habitat for fish and wildlife. The Red River Valley is part of a major continental migration corridor for migratory birds funneling through North America from as far north as the Arctic Circle to as far south as Tierra del Fuego in South America. This valley is of critical environmental importance to over 350 species of birds (including migratory and resident waterfowl, shore birds, and neotropical migratory birds), aquatic life, and a wide array of other species associated with river basin ecosystems. However, since the 1820s, the Red River Valley has been almost totally cleared of its forest cover, primarily due to agricultural production. The recent completion of the Red River Waterway project in Louisiana and the availability of marginal farmland in the area have enhanced opportunities for environmental restoration and management of fish and wildlife in the Red River Valley.

H.R. 4318 would authorize the acquisition of up to 50,000 acres of land, water, or interests therein in Caddo, Bossier, Red River, DeSoto, and Natchitoches Parishes for inclusion in the Red River National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is envisioned to take the form of several large tracts of refuge lands comprising several

thousand acres apiece, managed as a system to restore and preserve fish and wildlife habitat. The 50,000 acres authorized in the bill would represent the federal share of a unique federal, state, local and private partnership being proposed by local conservationists, including Mr. Paul Dickson (whom the Subcommittee will hear from later), to restore and manage approximately ten percent of the 800,000-acre Red River Valley in Louisiana. Funding for land acquisition would come from the Migratory Bird Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

H.R. 4318 calls for significant local public involvement in the designation of refuge boundaries and the formulation of a refuge management plan. The bill also provides for public use of refuge lands and environmental outreach programs and facilities, including the authorization of a wildlife interpretation and education center associated with the refuge.

There is overwhelming support for H.R. 4318 from the local community and national organizations. Several letters of support have been submitted to the Subcommittee for inclusion in today's record.

Two provisions of the bill were of particular importance in securing such unanimous support from the local community. The first provision, contained in Section 5 of the bill, mandates that land and water acquisition for inclusion in the refuge be only by donation, exchange, or purchase from a willing seller. I understand the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is opposed to this provision because it would impinge on the government's constitutional right of imminent domain. I also understand the Service does not presently have a policy of taking property for inclusion in national wildlife refuges. I would be willing to work with the Subcommittee and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to craft strong report language on this issue in place of this provision in the bill.

The second issue key to developing a bill with strong local support has been incorporated into Section 6 of the bill. This provision will ensure that the purposes set forth for the refuge will not interfere with critical public services at the local level. The language provides protections for: (1) commercial or recreational navigation on the Red River Waterway; (2) the construction, operation and maintenance of the Red River Waterway project; (3) public port or recreational facilities; and (4) railroads and interstate highways. These protections are important to ensure that current and future public infrastructure will not be adversely impacted by the establishment or operation of the refuge. It is my understanding that the Administration will take issue with this provision as well. I feel a compromise can be reached on this issue and would like to express my willingness to work with the Subcommittee and the Administration to see what can be done to resolve this and any other differences that may exist.

Again, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding the Red River National Wildlife Refuge Act. I look forward to working with all you toward passage of this important legislation for northwest Louisiana and the nation.

#####