

STATEMENT OF CHRIS OBERHOLSTER

DIRECTOR of CONSERVATION PROGRAMS, ALABAMA CHAPTER

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

Before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Committee on Resources

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate this opportunity to present The Nature Conservancy's testimony in support of H.R. 4947, legislation to expand the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama.

The Nature Conservancy is an international, nonprofit organization that preserves plants, animals and natural communities representing the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. To date, the Conservancy and its more than one million members have been responsible for the protection of more than 117 million acres and 5,000 miles of river around the world. We currently have programs in all 50 states and in 27 countries.

Alabama is a Global Hotspot for Biological Diversity

Recent analyses of the biological heritage of the United States reveal that Alabama is one of the richest states in the nation, ranking 5th in overall species diversity, and 1st in diversity of freshwater aquatic species. Unfortunately, Alabama is second only to Hawaii in number of extinct species among the 50 states, with some 98 species gone. The river systems of Alabama and the southeastern US are acknowledged by scientists as a global center of endemism and diversity for freshwater aquatic animals, including fish, mussels, snails and turtles.

The Cahaba River is a Unique Biological Resource

The Cahaba River remains Alabama's longest free-flowing river, and one of the most biologically rich in the Nation. The Cahaba River basin supports 69 rare and imperiled aquatic species, including twelve fish and mussel species that are listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. It has 131 fish species, more than any river its size in North America. One of these fish is the Cahaba shiner, which is found only in the mainstem of this river and the nearby Locust Fork.

The Cahaba River is a treasure trove of botanical life as well. It shelters the largest known stands in the world of the imperiled shoals spider lily, known locally as the Cahaba Lily, and is home to the Bibb County Glades, outcroppings of dolomite harboring more than 60 rare plant species, including 3 that are listed as Federal Threatened and at least 8 species recently described as new to science, and known from nowhere else on earth.

Partnerships are Important to Manage Threats to the Cahaba River

From the headwaters in urban Birmingham to the confluence with the Alabama River in Alabama's rural Black Belt near Selma, the Conservancy is working with many stakeholders to protect the plants, animals, and habitats of the Cahaba River and its surrounding uplands.

Along the first thirty miles of the Cahaba River downstream from the suburban edge of Birmingham, and upstream from the Refuge, there is strong interest from the State of Alabama in eventually acquiring lands currently leased on a short term basis to establish a permanent Cahaba State Wildlife Management Area for public hunting, fishing, and other outdoor opportunities.

In the lower eighty miles of the river in the Coastal Plain, partners are working with farmers and other private landowners to help them participate fully in the existing Farm Bill programs such as the Wetlands Reserve Program, Conservation Reserve Program and others.

The Conservancy is also working with many partners, with funding from Alabama Power Company, to develop a Cahaba

River Canoe Trail to boost local economies through land conservation and associated wildlife-related tourism and recreation activities.

Description of Wildlife Habitat Within the Expansion Area

The proposed expansion would double the mainstem of the Cahaba River from 4 miles to about 8 miles under direct protection. The section of river includes several additional large areas of shoals habitat with many Federally listed and globally imperiled species present, including the Cahaba lily, round rocksnail, goldline darter and others. The Cahaba pebblesnail, believed extinct, was recently rediscovered in the river on both in the Refuge and proposed expansion area. The uplands include extensive remnant and restorable hardwood and longleaf pine forests harboring breeding populations of many migratory songbirds. The federal/state/private Partners in Flight Partnership for North American bird conservation has ranked several of these birds to be declining and of conservation concern, including Kentucky Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Acadian Flycatcher, Swainson's Warbler and Worm-eating Warbler, amongst others.

Justification for the Proposed Expansion of the Cahaba Refuge

1. The area under discussion is of National significance with respect to wildlife resources. If expanded, the Refuge would host at least 40 rare plant and 30 rare animal species, including at least 5 species listed as Threatened or Endangered under the US Endangered Species Act, and many others which are regarded as globally imperiled.
2. The expansion area would improve viability of the wildlife populations and Federal Trust resources present, for example declining migratory songbirds and several T&E species. This proposal would not only protect more habitat directly, but would also serve as a connection to other protected lands.
3. The proposed expansion would improve the ease of management of Refuge lands by setting paved roads, streams and other features as boundaries. This is particularly important for implementing the prescribed burning needed for ecological management of some of the habitats.
4. There is very strong local and regional support for the expansion from a wide array of stakeholders, including local elected officials (for example the Mayor & City Council of West Blocton, and the Bibb County Commission) and the business community (for example Alabama Power Company, Wadsworth Oil and others). The proposal also has received strong support from a wide array of environmental and outdoor recreational groups.
5. Willing sellers. The landowners of the parcels in the expansion area have all indicated they are willing sellers. The largest owner (with about 2,137 acres) is US Steel Corporation, who have submitted a letter of support for the proposed expansion. The other large owner is Forest Investment Associates, a timber investment company with about 1,177 acres, also a willing seller. The Nature Conservancy owns a parcel of about 163 acres which is available to the Refuge. The Service already owns the 123 acre Hazard Stay parcel, which was purchased as part of a larger tract.
6. There are strong partnerships in place to assist the Service in management of the Refuge. TNC, Bibb County and other organizations have provided direct funding over the past few years toward Refuge Operations and Maintenance. The Conservancy has pledged \$150,000 toward Refuge operations, and Bibb County has provided almost \$68,000 of funding. These non-Federal funds have been used by the Service over the past 2 years to secure additional funds for various Cahaba Refuge projects including road improvements, building a handicapped-accessible boat launch, and developing a handicapped-accessible scenic hiking trail. Some the funds were also used as non-Federal match to secure Southern Company funding through the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation to replant almost 165 acres of mountain longleaf pine forest on the Refuge in the past year. Conservancy staff also contributed hundreds of hours of time each year providing management and other assistance to Service staff on the Refuge, including the development of the Public Use and Habitat Management Plans for the Refuge. The Alabama Dept of Conservation & Natural Resources has agreed to manage the hunting on the Refuge, and their staff provide a law enforcement presence.
7. Threats to the area are increasing in the form of greater pressure for development. In a recent study by the National Wildlife Federation and NatureServe, Bibb and Shelby counties in Alabama were ranked among the top 20 counties in the US for number of species at threat of extinction due to urban sprawl. Among the 35 fastest growing cities in the US, Birmingham trailed only Los Angeles, Las Vegas, San Francisco and San Diego in the number of species at risk of extinction.
8. This proposed expansion is modest in scope, and is part of a larger, coordinated public/private effort to conserve a much larger landscape. Other efforts in the vicinity include providing private landowners with information and other assistance to manage their own lands more sustainably for wildlife and water quality, and potential acquisition of large areas by the State of Alabama as conservation lands.
9. The expansion would improve wildlife-related recreational and educational opportunities. Only about 3% of land in Alabama is publicly owned. Tremendous support exists from people who want additional public recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, and canoeing. More than one million people -- a quarter of Alabama's population -- live within a one-hour drive of the Refuge. As proposed for expansion, the Refuge is clearly one of the best areas for an increasingly urban population to maintain their links with their natural heritage, and of critical importance for citizens' quality of life.

Status of Acquisition Efforts

All parcels in the original Refuge boundaries have been acquired with funds appropriated within the two federal fiscal years after establishment. The Service now owns 3,414 acres. The Service subsequently expanded the Refuge by 10%, so less than 426 acres remain to be acquired within the current boundary.

Strong Public Support

In addition to the Bibb County Commission, other supporters include the City of West Blocton, Alabama Power Company, Cahaba River Society, Cahaba River Authority, Cahaba Trace Commission, Black Warrior-Cahaba Rivers Land Trust, Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, Alabama Rivers Alliance, and Alabama Environmental Council, amongst others.

Members of the Congressional delegation for Alabama have demonstrated strong support for the Refuge. US Representative Spencer Bachus and Governor (then US Representative) Bob Riley co-sponsored the legislation to establish the Refuge in 2000, and both US Senators Richard Shelby and Jeff Sessions have shown strong support for both establishment and subsequent appropriation of funding for land acquisition.

Since the very beginning of this partnership, The Nature Conservancy has been working very closely with the USFWS on the establishment and subsequent management planning and implementation steps. In light of the significant additional biological resource and other public trust values outlined here, and the strong collaborative partnerships that are developing to assist the agency with operations and management, we strongly support this proposed expansion.

We feel that the Service should not completely halt the expansion of existing Refuges or the creation of new refuges while it develops a strategic vision for the System. We encourage the Service to support limited growth of the system in areas that would contribute significantly to protection of federal trust resources and that enjoy broad public support. The Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge is one of these places.

The proposed expansion of the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge represents an outstanding opportunity to protect a large number of some of the rarest species and habitats in the Nation via a remarkable public-private partnership. The Nature Conservancy respectfully urges Committee support of H.R. 4947.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.