

TESTIMONY OF DAVID M. RICHARD
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STREAM PROPERTY MANAGEMENT
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS
REGARDING IMPACTS TO NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

I was asked to testify before you with an assessment of the destruction and the type of damage that was inflicted upon National Wildlife Refuges by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I have spent 30 years of my professional career in coastal Louisiana working as a State Wildlife biologist and private land manager with emphasis in Southwestern Louisiana. I was a resident of Grand Chenier, located in lower Cameron Parish that was devastated by Hurricane Rita. My emphasis today will be on the impacts of Hurricane Rita on Sabine National Wildlife Refuge, Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge and Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge. These refuges comprise approximately 180,000 acres in Cameron Parish located in extreme Southwestern Louisiana. These refuges are intricately involved with the water management and resources management of Southwestern Louisiana. Southwestern Louisiana is home to some of the most diverse wetlands in the United States. This area comprises the Chenier Plain zone of Louisiana which extends from Vermilion Bay in Southwest Louisiana to Galveston Bay in Southeast Texas. Because of the geology and the topography of the area with extensive marshes and cheniers the wildlife and wetlands diversity is unparalleled. The wintering waterfowl, the stopover habitat for neotropical passerine birds and the wetland diversity is home to multitudes of species of wildlife.

The destruction that was wrought upon Southwest Louisiana by Hurricane Rita is unparalleled in our history. The hurricane struck this area with winds in excess of 120 miles per hour, with tidal storm surge up to 20 feet. In this low, flat wetland the damage that was inflicted was beyond comprehension to the coastal communities involved of Cameron, Grand Chenier, Creole, Holly Beach, Pecan Island and Vermilion Parish and the entire coast of Louisiana that was affected by excessive storm surge.

The damage inflicted upon National Wildlife Refuges in the area was serious and catastrophic to the infrastructure. This infrastructure includes levees, water control structures, headquarters facilities, visitor centers and public use trails and supporting facilities.

Sabine National Wildlife Refuge was particularly hard hit due to the storm surge. Major water control structures and levees that are used to combat salt water intrusion were severely damaged. Subsequent vegetative destruction and marsh deterioration are of immense proportion. These structures and levees are needed to maintain the historical wetland diversity of the area and thus its productivity. The diversity of the land and productivity are linked through habitat diversity. The needs of the Refuge include the rebuilding of these levees and the water control structures in the Cameron-Creole Watershed on the east side of Calcasieu Lake and the water control structures on the west side of Calcasieu Lake. These structures and levees have been built in coordination with the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, Restoration Act program (PL646), the Natural Resource Conservation Service Watershed program (PL566). These structures which are state-of-the-art water control structures impact not only National Wildlife Service lands but also private lands. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service have worked with the people of Southwestern Louisiana in constructing and maintaining these water control structures and levees to protect and maintain this historical diversity. The structures and levees are repairable and should be repaired at the earliest date possible. The infrastructure of Sabine National Wildlife Refuge which includes waterways, headquarters facilities, visitors = center, and support buildings were completely destroyed in Hurricane Rita. These facilities should be rebuilt to support the continuing management of over 100,000 acres of coastal wetlands as well as centers for outreach and education of the values of America' s Wetland.

Other types of damage that were inflicted upon Sabine National Wildlife Refuge was the deposition of debris fields. Over 1,700 acres of debris has been located and identified on the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge. The Sabine National Wildlife Refuge management conducted an assessment of hazardous materials and debris from Hurricane Rita in the months following the hurricane. This assessment is attached to my written testimony for your perusal. In essence this plan identifies 1,400 potential hazardous material items in the debris field. These items are estimated to contain between 115,000 and 350,000 gallons of hazardous liquids and gases. This hazardous waste came from offshore facilities, inshore facilities, and common household items. The hazardous waste on private lands in Southwestern Louisiana is progressing as planned and implemented by the Environmental Protection Agency. The Environmental Protection Agency has retrieved tens of thousands of containers from private lands in Southwest Louisiana and has done a commendable job. These containers and hazardous materials should be removed from Sabine National Wildlife Refuge to prevent present and future damage to that habitat. There are also no doubt some hazardous materials that have not been able to be identified due to the immensity of the project. These debris fields can be at depths and heights of 6-8 feet of vegetative, residential and hazardous materials. There is the distinct possibility that more than the estimated number of containers of hazardous waste is present on the Refuge. Every effort should be made to commence their removal from Sabine National Wildlife Refuge as is being done on private lands. There have been a number of procedures that have been used to cause the least damage to the wetland habitat that have been used in the hazardous material removal by

the Environmental Protection Agency that is on-going at this time.

The Lacassine Wildlife Refuge is also located in Southwestern Louisiana. The infrastructure of Lacassine Wildlife Refuge was also damaged by Hurricane Rita. Although Lacassine Wildlife Refuge is located 20 miles inland the storm surge and accompanying salt water intrusion damaged the levees that maintain diversity of this National Wildlife Refuge. The levees and water control structures damaged should be rebuilt and replaced as soon as possible. This Refuge maintains a pristine historical wetland in the Mermentau Basin in Southwest Louisiana as Sabine is used by thousands of people per year. The incidence of debris fields and hazardous waste on Lacassine Wildlife Refuge is not the scope that it is on Sabine National Wildlife Refuge but the infrastructure damage and removal of hazardous waste on Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge should be implemented as soon as possible.

Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge is located on the eastern side of Calcasieu Lake and also sustained heavy damage through Hurricane Rita. The debris fields and infrastructure damage on Cameron Prairie are similar to Sabine National Wildlife Refuge. The headquarters facilities and visitors = center were used as a temporary headquarters for the recovery of Cameron Parish. As a resident and citizen of Southwest Louisiana we commend the Fish and Wildlife Service for their willingness to house and coordinate the recovery activities through that office in the early period following Hurricane Rita. This area was used as a command center, as a staging area for troops and private personnel that were involved in live cattle rescue, damage assessment, road clearing, and as a support facility for hundreds of Cameron Parish residents. The headquarters building and visitors = center sustained damage due not only to the hurricane but to the number of people and equipment that used the headquarters after the hurricane.

The infrastructure on Cameron Prairie was also damaged in Hurricane Rita. There are waterways that need to be cleared of debris. There are hazardous materials that have been deposited. This infrastructure should be replaced as soon as possible.

One of the questions asked in your letter of invitation was if these Refuges were permanently changed. The incidence of hurricanes is a natural phenomenon along the Southeastern United States. These hurricanes have historically changed the landscape over centuries. The problem is that man has also changed the topography and hydrology of the lands. When the Mississippi River was harnessed the natural flow of the Mississippi with its nutrients and immense amount of wetland creation capabilities were diverted and have forever changed the landscape. We must now rely on man-made techniques to preserve the diversity and wetlands of Coastal Louisiana. The Refuges will recover if the existing infrastructure that was in place prior to the hurricane is replaced. This infrastructure, comprised of levees and water control structures maintain the historical diversity. There is going to be a succession period where the plants and animals must recover. This time frame is, hopefully, short. There are some areas that have been permanently changed in regard to the removal of vegetation from the marsh that created open water. These areas will take much longer to heal and will take management of those wetlands to achieve that goal.

How much money Congress needs to appropriate for the repair for these severely damaged Refuges in Southwestern Louisiana could range from \$20-50 million. The repair of the infrastructure alone is estimated to cost between \$10-20 million. The estimates regarding the removal of hazardous material from the Refuges could range from \$20-30 million. These heavily damaged Refuges in Southwest Louisiana are in need of rebuilding and re-establishing in infrastructure. The socioeconomic impacts of Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge, Sabine National Wildlife Refuge and Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge are important for the education and economy of Southwest Louisiana. These Refuges have in excess of one-half million visitors per year that learn and enjoy the ecology and natural resources of this productive area. I urge this Committee to appropriate those funds necessary to rebuild the levees, water control structures, headquarters buildings, visitor centers and support facilities that have made Southwestern Louisiana and National Wildlife Refuges so productive and so unique and so important to the people of Southwestern Louisiana.