



Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges

P.O. Box 16841
Savannah, Georgia 31416
(912) 335-5085

July 1, 2010

Dear Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges

Recent news reports have retold the story of the acquisition of land on Harris Neck in McIntosh County by the Department of Defense for a World War II pilot training base. After the war, that property was contracted to McIntosh County for use as a public airport. After well documented misuse of the property by McIntosh County, the property was transferred to the Department of the Interior in 1962 for establishment of the Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. These facts are not disputed by anyone.

In 1979 and 1984 there were well publicized efforts by descendants of the original owners of the property to regain possession and use of the land. In response to a Congressional inquiry, the General Accounting Office issued a report asserting that the owners had been fairly compensated for their land and that other aspects of the acquisition were legal and consistent with practices around the country in acquisition of land by the Department of Defense and subsequent use for other public purposes.

There is once again an effort to regain use of that land by those descendents, via an organization known as the "Harris Neck Land Trust". They have met and attempted negotiation with the Department of the Interior and have involved a number of elected officials. The Department has consistently asserted the position that the land was acquired legally and that its continued use as the Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge is the best and most appropriate use.

The Board of Directors of Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges has monitored this activity closely. In careful deliberation in our board meeting of May 26, 2010 we decided upon this position and these actions:

Position: The legal issues and historical transactions are beyond the scope of our group. The Fish and Wildlife Service is fully engaged in representing its position legally and in response to public inquiries and we trust that process. However, it is very appropriate for the Friends group to assert the many values of the Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge into the public discourse, and to advocate for its continued operation and success.

Actions: 1) Letters to the editors of regional newspapers will be sent by the board leadership to inform the press and the public of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge's value for wildlife habitat, field research, and recreation for more than 90,000 visitors a

year. Reminders of the economic impact of those visitors and of the revenue sharing payments to McIntosh County will be included.

- 2) Your board is asking the members of the Friends organization to write your Congressmen and other appropriate elected officials and inform them that the preservation of the Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge is important to you.

Harris Neck is in the 1st Congressional District of Georgia, served by Rep. Jack Kingston. Rep. Kingston has been asked by the Harris Neck Land Trust to initiate Congressional action to reestablish their ownership. It is critical, whether you live in the 1st District or not, that Rep. Kingston hear from Friends of the Refuges soon. A short letter or phone call to his local office is appropriate, with a message in your own words. Let him know how much you and the 90,000 visitors each year from all over the country value that refuge. Tell him, if you visit, about the significance of the refuge as a critical wood stork rookery; tell him you are a birder, a cyclist, a hiker, a boater, etc., and that the refuge matters personally to you and your family. Be sure to fully identify yourself with address and contact information. Let us know via e-mail when you have sent that message, or copy it to us. We would also appreciate copies of any responses you receive.

The Hon. Jack Kingston (Dear Rep. Kingston)
1st District of Georgia, US House of Representatives
1 Diamond Causeway, Savannah GA 31406
Phone 912-352-0101 or 202-226-2269 Fax 912-352-0105
<http://kingston.house.gov>

Congressman John Barrow of the 12th District of Georgia has participated in some of the discussions about Harris Neck and is the only member of our Coastal Georgia and South Carolina House delegation to routinely support appropriations for refuges. He needs to hear from you and particularly if you live in the 12th District.

The Hon. John Barrow (Dear Rep. Barrow)
12th District of Georgia, US House of Representatives
450 Mall Blvd. Savannah, GA 31406
Phone 202-225-2823 Fax 912-354-7782
<http://barrow.house.gov>

Congressman Joe Wilson of the 2nd District of South Carolina is a colleague of Rep. Kingston and his support would be useful as Rep. Kingston determines a position on this issue. Relate that the refuge in question is in Rep. Jack Kingston's district and that it is a "sister" refuge of Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge.

The Hon. Joe Wilson (Dear Rep. Wilson)
2nd District of South Carolina, US House of Representatives
903 Port Republic Street
Beaufort, SC 29901
Phone 202-225-2452 Fax 202-225-2455
<http://joewilson.house.gov>

For those of you who live in McIntosh County, County Commission Chairman Boyd Gault needs to hear from you. He has been supportive of the Harris Neck Land Trust and needs to know that he has some constituents with another perspective.

Please forward any copies of correspondence or responses received from Congressional contacts by email or U.S. mail:

Please take a few minutes to assist us with this critical communication. Each of the Congressmen also has a web site that includes a "contact" link for email messages. Phone calls and letters to local offices are compiled in an "issue" file and they are probably the best way to make the greatest impact.

Thank you for your support on this issue and for your continued support of our National Wildlife Refuge System.

Sincerely,

Rick Shields
President, Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges