

May 16, 2012

The Hon. Jack Kingston
1st District of Georgia
U.S. House of Representatives
1 Diamond Causeway
Savannah, Georgia 31406

Dear Representative Kingston:

The hearing held December 15, 2011 by the U. S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans, and Insular Affairs to review claims for land within Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge (McIntosh County, Georgia) has alarmed a broad base of refuge supporters. During the hearing, at which five spokesmen from the Harris Neck Land Trust, LLC (HN-LLC) were invited to testify, many pertinent facts were not presented. Some of these facts have been summarized in the briefing document which follows this letter. This document, prepared by Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges, is endorsed by the Blue Goose Alliance, the Georgia Ornithological Society, and coastal Georgia's two National Audubon Society chapters. These non-profit organizations share a deep concern for threats to the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the natural resources they manage.

We also share the concern that you and all Americans have with regard to racial justice and equitable treatment of all citizens by our government. At the same time, in reviewing any claim, it is important that actions be based on facts. Congressional action authorizing transfer of any acreage within Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) from federal to private ownership would set a dangerous precedent that is simply not justified by the facts. In addition to the factual discrepancies with regard to the Harris Neck acquisition, consider the consequences of returning all or part of this refuge to descendants (HN-LLC) of those who owned less than half of the land purchased by the Department of Defense to create Harris Neck Army Airfield: no government-owned land in this country will be safe from similar claims. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service alone manages over 250,000 acres of refuge land acquired by condemnation—25,000 additional acres were acquired specifically for military purposes and later transferred to the Service. The implications of the precedent are clear: national parks, national forests, and other public lands--including military lands--will be vulnerable.

Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges, and the allied organizations joining us to defend Harris Neck NWR from claimants to refuge land, urge you to review our briefing document and facts available in the 1985 GAO Report (GAO/RCED-85-76) before considering any congressional action.

Sincerely,

Richard O. Shields, Jr., President
Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges