

Representative Lane:

Misty was most generous with her time yesterday as I discoursed on my concerns with HR-610 which is now in the legislative committee. She asked that I summarize my comments for your review.

As a resident of McIntosh County, and a board member of the non-profit Friends of the Savannah Coastal Wildlife Refuges, I am always alert to actions by the Harris Neck Land Trust to reclaim land now managed as Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). However, this latest action to ram a resolution through the Georgia General Assembly was a stealth maneuver which only came to my attention via Google. I understand HR 610 has passed a second review and is now under consideration in your legislative committee. Since the Trust's claims are most definitely controversial, will a public hearing be called before a vote on this bill?

You should be aware that HR-610 is fraught with misinformation. I'm attaching a copy of the information sheet I helped the refuge develop in 2010, in response to mounting public inquiries about the Trust's proposal to reclaim the NWR--at the time I had just retired as the supervisory refuge ranger for the Savannah Coastal Refuges (a complex of NWRs which includes Blackbeard Island, Harris Neck and Wolf Island, all in McIntosh County). Also attached is a copy of the GAO report requested by U. S. senators Sam Nunn and Mack Mattingly, and U. S. representative Lindsay Thomas to determine if claims by former owners of the Harris Neck NWR lands had any merit. These documents present facts which refute Trust claims that the federal government's acquisition of the Harris Neck land was illegal.

You should also know that:

- The U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service has invested well over one million tax payer dollars in construction and maintenance of a deep water dock for the exclusive use by the Watermen's Association (WA). The intent of this facility was to insure that the shellfishing-dependent livelihood of the displaced African American Harris Neck community would not be jeopardized by existence of the refuge. It is interesting to note that less than a half dozen WA permits are even requested today--in fact, I believe there are now only two active permits.
- Less than 50% of the Harris Neck NWR land was ever owned by African Americans, yet the Trust's plans for the property include lots on deep water which they NEVER owned (e.g. the Lily Livingston and Nellie Clapp--white women--lots were located on a high bluff of the South Newport River)
- Maintenance of the freshwater ponds on the refuge requires a substantial annual budget and a highly specialized staff. The U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service can provide you a summary of costs to manage Harris Neck NWR--electrical costs alone for pumping water into the ponds are significant--but I can assure you that McIntosh County could not afford to cover these costs. The idea that a new Harris Neck Community could take on this type of wildlife management is ludicrous. Not to mention that strict federal guidelines will dictate if public activities and development can be permitted in zones set aside for the endangered wood storks which nest, roost and forage on the refuge.

I have additional comments on every "WHEREAS" comment listed in HR-610, but will not present them unless requested. Please feel free to call me at home (912.832.3615) or on my cell phone (912.704.4384) if you have questions regarding my concerns over this issue. I sincerely hope you will not endorse the resolution which will only serve to perpetuate the ill-conceived plans proposed by the Trust. They succeeded in persuading the McIntosh County Board of Commissioners to recognize their limited liability corporation as the legal entity seeking to reclaim lands now managed as Harris Neck NWR. This action does little more than provide former Harris Neck land owners will the false hope that they will someday return to their old homesteads. If the Georgia General Assembly follows with their approval of HR-610, their action will only extend a lost cause which now span six decades.

Patricia E. Metz