

STATEMENT OF BUREAU REPRESENTATIVE

Ladies and Gentlemen: I am (name, title) of the Albuquerque, New Mexico, Regional Office of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. It is with a great deal of pleasure that I welcome you to this hearing today to consider a wilderness area on Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge.

As background, I should like to point out that the Wilderness Act of 1964, directed the Secretary of the Interior to review all roadless areas of 5,000 acres or more and every roadless island within the National Wildlife Refuge System to determine their suitability or non-suitability as wilderness.

Further, regulations of the Secretary of the Interior published on February 22, 1966, require this Bureau to review those areas qualifying for study under the Wilderness Act that are reasonably compact, undeveloped, possessing general characteristics of wilderness, and without improved roads suitable for public travel by conventional automobile.

There is at least one National Wildlife Refuge in each of the 17 major Life Zones of North America. The ecology of each refuge differs by at least some degree from any other refuge. Because of these ecological differences, management objectives of individual refuges are often quite different. About 90 National

Wildlife Refuges, in 32 states, qualify for study as wilderness.

As you can see, the wilderness review program in the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife encompasses a wide spectrum of lands within National Wildlife Refuges in the country. Only through careful study and analysis can a proper determination be made regarding whether a National Wildlife Refuge, or a portion of a refuge, qualifies for consideration as wilderness by the Secretary of the Interior. We are presenting the results of our study of Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge for your consideration today.

You have a copy of the brochure which summarizes the study we have made. Copies of the complete study report are available here on the first table for your scrutiny after the hearing. We ask you to please leave them in the hearing room after you have finished with them, because the number of copies is very limited. A copy of my statement also is available for your information and use.

(At this point remarks should be coordinated
with large map on display)

Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge is located in eastern Cameron and Willacy Counties. It is bounded on the north by the old Arroyo Colorado channel and the Laguna Madre, on the east by the Laguna Madre and a block of private lands, on the south by private holdings and the Cayo Atascoso, and on the west by private lands. The City of Harlingen is 27 miles by road

west of the refuge with San Benito about 25 miles and, to the south, Brownsville, about 25 miles.

(Refer to display map showing refuge and its various management units and coordinate the following comments)

The refuge is divided into eight management units and each of these units was examined for wilderness potential.

Unit I - totaling 1,385 acres, is separated from the rest of the refuge by the General Brandt Highway. This unit is small and contains a scenic walk-in trail. Under the refuge Master Plan, this unit will continue to serve this purpose.

Unit II - 5,250 acres, is dominated by Laguna Atascosa. A public tour road follows the length of this unit. It will continue this function under the Master Plan.

Unit III - 10,680 acres, borders the Laguna del Cayo from Unit II to the Harlingen Ship Channel. This unit and Unit II contain the bulk of the high-quality waterfowl habitat. An improved access road and an unimproved road penetrate this unit. These roads serve as the only access on the

refuge to the western portion of the Harlingen Ship Channel. Under the Master Plan, a 3-mile long dike will create a 1,680-acre impoundment inundating part of the northern portion of this unit. The improved road will be realigned and additional diking adjacent to the Cayo will create small impoundments.

Unit IV - 9,440 acres, is shown as North Island on the map. It is the only roadless, relatively undeveloped block of land exceeding 5,000 acres on the refuge. This unit qualifies for consideration as wilderness, but it also has development potential for waterfowl and other wildlife. Under the Master Plan, extensive low-level diking is planned in the numerous old channels of the Arroyo Colorado. The impoundments formed by this diking would be dependent on rainfall and subject to considerable fluctuation.

Unit V - 3,770 acres, fronts on the Laguna Madre and the Harlingen Ship Channel. An access road penetrates this area and activities along the ship channel are visible from most places in the unit. Future development includes a long dike bordering the ship channel and impounding a 1,600-acre brackish laguna.

- Unit VI - 2,720 acres, is mostly cropland and improved pasture and includes refuge headquarters. No significant changes are anticipated.
- Unit VII - 8,485 acres, was once part of a military gunnery range. It contains a tour road encircling the entire block. Some evidence of military occupancy still remains. Future development will include a large impoundment in the center of the unit and an improved tour road and related facilities.
- Unit VIII - 3,320 acres, borders the Laguna Atascosa and Laguna del Cayo. This unit is almost entirely croplands and improved pasture. No major changes in management are planned.

The only portion of the refuge qualifying for consideration under the Wilderness Act is the North Island Unit. This is a tract of about 9,440 acres separated from the remainder of the refuge by the Harlingen Ship Channel. It is an area of low ridges crossed by a number of old stream channels, broad flats with no natural drainage and coastal mud flats occasionally inundated by wind tides.

The area can be associated with the Gulf Coastal Plain, a recognized physiographic province extending north along the Gulf Coast. As a delta, North Island has undergone continued change; Gulf storms and floods as well as slower changes in stream channels all result in periodic disturbances. Old stream channels are particularly evident

and greatly influence topography and vegetation. Almost barren mud flats are contrasted with dense stands of low brush on the ridgetops. The vegetation is an amalgam of semiarid, tropical and seashore elements. Over 400 species of plants occur on the refuge.

In the last 60 years, the Lower Rio Grande Valley has been converted from a brush-covered delta into an area of intensive agriculture. Today, the trend is toward increased industrialization and urbanization.

Each winter, the Valley's resident population of about 400,000 is augmented by an ever-increasing flow of winter visitors. Accompanying these trends has been a steady downward spiral in the quantity and quality of wildlands and wildlife that depend on them. Today, people recognize the value of these lands. Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge is an irreplaceable asset to the community and to the Nation.

The primary purpose of the refuge is to provide migrating and wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl. Laguna Atascosa is a very important link in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Each year it provides the life needs of many thousands of birds. It is especially well-located on north-south migration routes and accommodates large numbers of birds passing through during the spring and fall. About 75 percent of the continent's redhead duck population winters on the Laguna Madre; a significant portion of these utilize the fresh water and related habitat supplied by the refuge. The peak redhead population on the refuge in 1968 exceeded 160,000 and accounted for about 50 percent of

the total duck use. A variety of other ducks and geese also make use of the refuge.

There are few places in the United States where bird variety of Laguna Atascosa Refuge can be rivaled. Almost half of the 725 bird species found in the contiguous 48 states have been seen on the refuge. A number of these are subtropical birds that make their only appearance in the United States in South Texas. Most of the species mentioned in the refuge bird list occur on North Island.

(copies of the bird list, as well as other refuge publications, are available at the first table for those who wish one)

The refuge offers a variety of wildlife-oriented recreation. In recent years, it has averaged about 19,000 visitors annually. Due principally to limited access, North Island accounts for virtually none of this use. The refuge has never been open to hunting. However, as a wintering area for waterfowl, it acts as a reservoir for hunting on surrounding areas. When consistent with objectives, the refuge, including North Island, may offer opportunity for "quality" hunting.

The refuge has been grazed since it was established in 1946. North Island currently carries 130 head of cattle on a year-long basis under one grazing permit. The County receives 3/4 of 1 percent of the land value each year in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge Sharing Act.

Surface rights on the refuge are in Federal ownership, but mineral rights are in private control. The North Island Unit is susceptible to private mineral development until 1979 when, if no discovery has been made, the last of these rights revert to the Federal Government. While gas or petroleum production would enhance the local economy, it would be accompanied by at least some disturbance of the natural landscape. Necessary access roads and/or channels and drilling and pumping installations would not be compatible with wilderness.

Increasing industrialization and urbanization along the Gulf Coast has resulted in substantial losses in coastal waterfowl habitat. As these trends continue, development and management efforts on the remaining waterfowl lands must become even more intensive. Along the Laguna Madre, the fresh-water sources so necessary to wintering birds are becoming scarce. North Island provides a number of sites suitable for fresh-water impoundments. More detail concerning these developments can be found in the refuge Master Plan. A copy is available at the first table for your examination.

While evidence of man on North Island is not great, there are several areas where his presence is obvious. Facilities for livestock management include one fenced, dugout-type stock pond, a loading chute and fenced runway along the Harlingen Ship Channel. Fishing shanties on the Intracoastal Waterway, while not on the area, are conspicuous.

My preceding remarks have summarized the findings of a wilderness area study conducted on Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. It was an in-depth examination of all factors mitigating for or against a wilderness area on the refuge. The study was conducted by a regional wilderness study team aided by refuge personnel and the staff of the Albuquerque Regional Office of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. We are indebted to a number of individuals and governmental agencies for information essential to the study.

Our recommendation to the Director, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Washington, D. C., will be as follows:

The only portion of the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge qualifying for consideration for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System is that area north of the Harlingen Ship Channel, an area which has significant potential for waterfowl development. In our view, it would be of more value serving the primary purpose of the refuge as migrating and wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl. We therefore recommend that no portion of the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge be included in the National Wilderness Preservation System.