



# United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
Washington, DC 20240

**APR 14 2016**

The Honorable Rob Bishop  
Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House  
Washington, D.C. 20540

This letter provides the Administration's views on section 405 of H.R. 4900, the Puerto Rico Oversight Management, and Economic Stability Act. Section 405 would authorize the transfer of 3,100 acres of land within the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) from the Department to Puerto Rico without consideration. The Administration strongly opposes this section of the bill.

The purpose of H.R. 4900 is to address the escalating economic and fiscal crisis in Puerto Rico and create a path to recovery. The Administration is strongly committed to supporting legislation that provides Puerto Rico with the tools to resolve this crisis and establish a foundation for recovery. Section 405 does not advance these goals and does not belong in this bill. Instead, section 405 undermines our nation's resource protection laws and sets an unacceptable precedent of transferring federal lands out of the ownership of all Americans that would compromise the management and stewardship of our nation's public lands.

Congress created Vieques National Wildlife Refuge from former Navy managed lands through Public Law 106-398 in 2000. In this legislation, Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to manage these lands "to protect and preserve the natural resources of the lands in perpetuity." The Service upheld that charge and has developed a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) to guide long term management of the Refuge and has invested approximately \$15 million in conservation management and visitors services over the last 15 years.

Specifically, the CCP has addressed cleanup of large tracts of the Refuge and its surrounding waters were designated as a superfund site by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), with the U.S. Navy the Principal Responsible Party (PRP) for the cleanup of these lands. Since the time of legislated transfer, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), as the land manager, has worked, and continues to work, closely and cooperatively with the Navy, the EPA, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Municipality of Vieques and the community to ensure expedited and appropriate cleanup of the Refuge lands within the site. Significant progress has been made.

Today, the Refuge is the largest land National Wildlife Refuge in the Caribbean and is considered one of the most ecologically diverse wildlife refuges in the Caribbean. The Refuge, and the adjacent waters, provide habitat for 190 bird species, both migratory and resident; 22 species of amphibians and reptiles including the leatherback, green sea turtle, hawksbill, and the

loggerhead sea turtle; a number of marine mammals including the Antillean manatee, the blue whale, fin whale, humpback whale; and 9 species of bats.

The Refuge is also integral to the economy of Vieques, providing wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities to visitors and economic benefits to local businesses and communities. Since the creation of the Refuge, visitation has increased dramatically. In 2004, the refuge received just over 20,000 visits per year. Last year the refuge received more than 300,000 visitors as a result of the investments the FWS made in conserving these lands. The direct economic impact of the Refuge, based on FY 2015 visitation data, is estimated to be almost \$13 million. These direct expenditures result in associated employment of 300 jobs with annual income of more than \$8 million.

The Vieques National Wildlife Refuge is a vital piece of the National Wildlife Refuge System and the patchwork of protected conservation lands in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and across the Caribbean and should continue, as Congress intended, to be managed by the Service, to protect and preserve the natural resources of these special lands in perpetuity.

We welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee to provide additional information on this provision and assistance as you continue consideration of H.R. 4900.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael J. Bean".

Michael Bean  
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for  
Fish and Wildlife and Parks

cc: The Honorable Raúl Grijalva, Ranking Member  
cc: The Honorable Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House  
cc: The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader  
cc: The Honorable Pedro Pierluisi  
cc: The Honorable Luis V. Gutiérrez  
cc: The Honorable Nydia M. Velázquez  
cc: The Honorable José E. Serrano