



May 4, 2016

Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the Natural Resources Committee Members,

As a coalition of National Wildlife Refuge Friends organizations, comprised of sportsmen, veterans, business, recreation, educators and conservation leaders concerned with America's wildlife conservation legacy, we urge Congress to reject any legislation that allows the Secretary of the Interior to convey portions of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. A proposal that would do just this, is currently included in the debt relief draft legislation for Puerto Rico.

The Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) protects over 17,000 acres of rare subtropical dry forest and mangrove habitat in Puerto Rico. Its beaches provide the most important nesting sites for endangered green sea turtles throughout the entire Puerto Rican archipelago, and its 300,000 annual visitors pump money into the local economy as they enjoy snorkeling, fishing, hiking, and other outdoor recreation activities.

Vieques NWR was established in 2001 from former Navy managed lands to conserve the island's incredible biodiversity. As the largest national wildlife refuge and most important conservation area in the Caribbean, Vieques is home to hundreds of species of birds, fish, and other marine life, including 14 endangered plant and animal species. Leatherback, hawksbill, and green sea turtles are among the most threatened of these endangered species and return to Vieques to nest at the same beaches year after year.

Despite its seemingly remote location, Vieques NWR is just 20 miles from a population center of 100,000 people. Hundreds of thousands of visitors bolster Puerto Rico's tourism sector as they travel to the refuge to enjoy its pristine natural beaches and the many outdoor recreation activities it offers. This refuge was recently voted the #4 national wildlife refuge in the nation by USA Today. Vieques NWR is also an important resource to local students, who participate in environmental education programs to learn about their local wildlife resources and enjoy the outdoors.

Vieques NWR was established with the explicit mandate to "protect and preserve the natural resources of the lands in perpetuity." The proposed legislation directly violates the founding purpose of Vieques National Wildlife Refuge. Divesting the Vieques NWR will set a dangerous precedent, and represents the first strike of many aimed at chipping

away at the bedrock of America's public lands. Our National Wildlife Refuge System is not for sale.

Recognizing the need for a solution to Puerto Rico's financial crisis, we strongly believe that turning over the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge is an unacceptable and unnecessary addition to this legislation. The refuge protects some of the most ecologically important habitat throughout the entire Caribbean and, like all public lands, belongs to all Americans. We urge you to reject any legislation that would result in the selling of any portion of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge.

Sincerely,

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