

Town of Chincoteague, Inc.
Office of the Mayor
December 7, 2010

Louis Hinds, Refuge Manager
Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 62
Chincoteague Island, Virginia 23336

Thomas Bonetti, Refuge Planner
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 5
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035-9589

RE: Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge
Comprehensive Conservation Plan
Public Scoping Comments

Dear Mr. Hinds and Mr. Bonetti:

On behalf of the Town of Chincoteague, I am submitting for the public record the following comments in conformance with the Federal Register notice dated September 17, 2010. The issues, concerns and ideas that are contained in this letter have been considered by the Town's appointed Chincoteague to Assateague Beach Access Committee and have been approved by the Town Council at its regular meeting on December 6, 2010.

In addition to this letter, a Town of Chincoteague Questionnaire has produced 1,281 comments in response to the refuge planning issues that you presented at several public meetings this year. These comments are attached as unfiltered data and will also be forwarded to you by email for consolidation into common issues. We hope you will recognize that each comment represents an average family/group size of 6 persons identified in a current year survey of over 13,000 visitors from across the country.

Support for the Refuge

It is understood and appreciated that the Federal Register notice for Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge describes more than the core mission of migratory bird and wildlife conservation for this unique location. Joint management of the Seashore resource with the National Park Service supports recreational use in addition to wildlife dependent recreation that is vital to the tourism economy in the Town of Chincoteague and Accomack County.

Our community of residents, business owners and seasonal visitors has expressed concern over potential changes to the Refuge CCP. At the same time, the Town Questionnaire has documented strong support for the Refuge and Seashore under current operational plans. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this planning process, and hope that all of the unique characteristics of this Refuge continue to be supported by the CCP.

Public Scoping Comments

1. Maintain and Restore the existing recreational beach access at Tom's Cove, with 961 direct access automobile parking spaces, as a community resource that honors over 40 years of negotiated management decisions. The 'no-action' alternative should be considered as a viable and mandated option. 961 spaces should be provided in all alternatives.
2. Manage the recreational beach area as a significant cultural and economic resource that is closely connected to the Town's economy. Take immediate/short term actions to protect public investment at the beach (see issue paper #1). Include techniques such as beach replenishment, construction and maintenance of medium sized dunes, and installation of snow fence to protect the beach and parking areas from storm damage. This alternative would propose to update and enhance the current management plan as the baseline with new projects and goals.
3. A 'shoreline management' alternative is requested to include a deliberate review of the coastal change of Assateague Island and the cumulative effects of beach nourishment plans to the north in Delaware and Maryland, and to the south at Wallops Island/NASA and Virginia Beach. The impact of a policy to allow barrier island migration should be compared to recreational beach replenishment thru expansion of the Wallops Island and/or Ocean City Inlet Project.
4. Include a viable option for long term reserve areas to relocate the recreational beach and direct access parking for 961 spaces to the north approximately 1 mile with access from the 'Wildlife Loop'. Any acceptable alternative to relocate the recreational beach use and private vehicle parking must include direct beach access for a minimum of 961 parking spaces.
5. Do not limit or reduce the grazing permit for up to 150 Chincoteague Ponies. Include public viewing as a priority along with other management considerations.
6. An Emergency Plan for the short term management of public beach access during a poststorm restoration period is necessary, including options for interim use of Refuge land areas for parking. Large remote parking areas within Town limits are not a reasonable or cost effective solution and are not recommended.
7. Use of transit (trolley/bus/shuttle systems) to access the beach is not a decision that supports the family values of, or meets the needs of, visitors to the Refuge. This does not seem to be a financially responsible option. The Alternative Transportation Study prepared by the Volpe Center has not been accepted or approved by the Town of Chincoteague and should not be used to guide the CCP process.
8. All alternatives must be evaluated for their socio-economic impact on the local economy, cultural heritage and regional tourism with recommendations to minimize or mitigate impacts to the human environment.
9. Continue the current OSV/ORV access to Tom's Cove Hook. Access has already been restricted in the past from March 15th to September 1st which has had an economic impact to the Town. Further reduction is not necessary based on the success of this shared use plan.

10. The Town of Chincoteague Questionnaire has provided useful information about visitors to the Refuge and the recreational beach area. The exceptional value placed on the current balance of wildlife/natural land management and recreational beach use is documented in the attached comments.

These comments are largely provided in response to CNWR presentations in 2010 (4/6, 5/24, 8/25, 9/21) and summarize the ideas described in more detail on the attached issue papers #1 through #10. Additional thought and suggestions have been taking shape within the Beach Access Committee which will likely result in further support for the successful management objectives of the 1992 EIS, and comments on any other scoping information that is shared by the USFWS staff.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues for both the Town of Chincoteague and the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

Sincerely,
John H. Tarr
Mayor

cc. Chincoteague Beach Access Committee
Elected Representatives
National Park Service