

September 29, 2011

The Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Comprehensive Conservation Plan. This plan requires serious consideration of public concerns because of the major impact it will have on the environment and the economy. Our mission is to attract visitors, stimulate economic development and protect the region's unspoiled ecosystems and local communities. Based upon our mission, we offer the following comment.

The proposed plan provides some details on protecting the environment but lacks any economic analysis and the economic effects on the community and region. The Eastern Shore of Virginia is an economically challenged region but the tourism industry here is a success story. As a major revenue generator tourists brought \$194 million into the local economy in 2009 alone. At least half that figure can be contributed to tourists' dollars coming into Chincoteague Island.

Tourism success in Chincoteague is dependent upon a combination of a recreational beach, famous ponies and wildlife. This combination makes Chincoteague a major tourism destination resort. A disruption of any one of these three attractions would be extremely detrimental to the local and regional economy. If this plan is properly structured both the environment and the economy can benefit.

Our research shows that the Eastern Shore's economic strength is dependent upon the beach access at Chincoteague. The Tourism Commission opposes any reduction in the number of parking spaces at any location selected along the beach or any change of location that would not allow direct and hassle-free access to the beach.

We recognize a need for a shuttle service for emergency and overflow situations. However, the Commission does not support a shuttle service for off-site parking because of the hassle it creates for visitors to load and unload their gear repeatedly. It would be detrimental to tourism and diminish the appeal of the recreation beach which is an essential attraction. We expect a decline in visitors if a shuttle service is implemented and an adverse effect on the economy.

The Commission strongly encourages the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service to explore more long-range permanent solutions to this problem. New beach technologies should be explored to protect both the beach and Chincoteague's town infrastructure. Alternatives should have both economic and environmental analysis and the estimated cost of implementing each alternative should be shown.

The Pony Herd is a vital tourist attraction. The ponies are a major reason that visitors even know of our remote peninsula. We do not support the idea of corralling the ponies out of sight of tourists or reducing the numbers where they are not readily visible to tourists in their natural habitat.

The Commission would oppose Wilderness Designation for Toms Hook or Assateague Island because of the severe restrictions it places on public use. We strongly believe that reasonable solutions are available to accommodate both man and nature.

The Eastern Shore Tourism Commission is committed to working with the Town of Chincoteague, US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service and all our federal, state and local partners and representatives to seek a long-term solution to this problem and insure that the objectives of our mission are met. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the plan.

Godspeed,

Donna Bozza, Director

Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission

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