

## CT lawmakers hoping federal study will block Plum Island sale

By: [ANA RADELAT](#) | March 25, 2016



### **An aerial view of Plum Island**

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**Washington** – Connecticut lawmakers are hoping a study they helped commission will stop the federal government from selling Plum Island, 840 acres of land in Long Island Sound where the federal government has long studied dangerous animal diseases.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture ran biological experiments for decades on the island, working on animal illnesses like swine flu and foot-and-mouth disease, a highly contagious livestock illness.

But the U.S. Department of Homeland Security is now in charge of the [National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility](#) on Plum Island and is shutting down operations there and moving the laboratory to Manhattan, Kansas. The General Services Administration has been tasked with selling the island to the highest bidder, and said Friday it is moving ahead with preparations.

A coalition of environmental groups, including Audubon Connecticut and Connecticut Fund for the Environment/Save the Sound, and lawmakers from Connecticut and New York are trying to stop that sale to developers. Saying it has unique flora and fauna because it has been kept from development and has had a limited human presence, environmentalists want the island, named for the beach plums that grow along its shores, to become a national park or wildlife sanctuary.

The two environmental groups and U.S. Sens. Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy held a press conference Friday in Old Saybrook to talk about a provision inserted in last year's budget bill requiring a study of the island.

“Plum Island is a Connecticut natural treasure – it should be preserved and permanently protected, not sold to the highest bidder,” Murphy said.

[Plum Island's](#) historic sites date back to the Spanish-American War. It is also home to the largest seal colony on Long Island Sound.

The GSA has said there is tremendous interest in Plum Island from potential buyers.

GSA spokesman Patrick J. Sclafani said the agency has engaged a national real estate consulting firm that will be holding focus groups sometime this year “that represent potential market sectors.”

To try to block a sale, Blumenthal and Murphy helped insert language last year in a huge budget bill requiring the Department of Homeland Security, the General Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of the Interior to report on the best alternatives for conserving Plum Island's natural and historic resources.

The report is due in June.

“I'm pressing them aggressively and strongly to reach the right conclusion and determine Plum Island should be a national park,” Blumenthal said.

He said Congress mandated the sale of Plum Island to help pay for construction of the new bio-lab in Kansas. But last year's budget bill included money for the lab, so the sale of the island is no longer needed, Blumenthal said.

He also said the budget-bill language ordering the multi-agency study on the island would make it difficult to sell Plum Island. "My view of the spirit and intent of the provision is that it can't be done," Blumenthal said.

But Sciafani said the GSA, in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security, is taking environmental and regulatory issues into consideration as they move forward on the sale.

He said the GSA "continues to engage in several regulatory compliance efforts to protect endangered and threatened species, list eligible historic resources on the National Register of Historic Places, assess and protect wetlands, consider effects on the coastal zone, and address the potential presence of residual contamination associated with past use."

He said the compliance efforts are being conducted through consultations with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Park Service, the New York State Historic Preservation Office, the New York State Department of Environment and Conservation "and other appropriate consulting parties."

There is also local resistance to the sale of Plum Island, which is part of the New York town of Southold.

Two years ago, Southold sought to safeguard Plum Island by rezoning it so only nature preserves, parks and museums would be allowed.