

CFE/Save the Sound applauds plan for Plum Island study

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Save the Sound, a bi-state program of Connecticut Fund for the Environment, applauded Friday as federal legislators announced agency plans for a study that could advance efforts to protect Plum Island. The island, a federally-owned 840-acre property at the eastern end of Long Island Sound that hosts endangered species, is at risk of being auctioned off and its fragile habitats lost.

The Congressional Appropriations subcommittee on Homeland Security has directed the Department of Homeland Security to work with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Interior, and the General Services Administration on a study of options for long-term use of the island. Most importantly, they are directed to consider environmental and historic resources, among other factors, in analyzing conservation options. It also requires that the agency identify any needed legislative changes, costs, and revenues to accomplish that goal.

“This action demonstrates that the ‘Save Plum Island’ mantra offered by thousands of citizens is being heard loud and clear, from the tip of Long Island to the halls of Congress. The development of a study to consider conservation alternatives is significant progress in the fight to protect Plum Island from the auction block,” said Leah Lopez Schmalz, program director for CFE/Save the Sound. “Given that Plum Island is a significant environmental and cultural asset and developing a pathway for its conservation is essential, we are encouraged to see that the Department of Homeland Security will be involving EPA and the Department of the Interior to ensure rare birds, seals, wetland and bluff habitats, and historic Fort Terry are fully evaluated. We expect to see achievable conservation solutions—such as making the undeveloped portions of the island into a federal wildlife refuge—when the final report is released in June.”

Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut announced the study Friday at an Old Saybrook press conference with CFE/Save the Sound and other members of the Preserve Plum Island Coalition. “This study is a strong step toward saving a precious, irreplaceable national treasure from developers and polluters,” said Blumenthal. “It will provide the science and fact based evidence to make our case for stopping the current Congressional plan to sell Plum Island to the highest bidder. The stark truth is the sale of Plum Island is no longer necessary to build a new bio-research facility because Congress has fully appropriated the funds. There is now no need for this sale—and in fact Congress needs to rescind the sale.”

CFE/Save the Sound and fellow members of the Preserve Plum Island Coalition have advocated for years that the federal government develop a conservation review and plan for Plum Island. Advocates ramped up their efforts exponentially after the Department of Homeland Security failed to consider such alternatives during its 2010 – 2013 initial environmental review.

Senator Chris Murphy said, “Plum Island is a Connecticut natural treasure—it should be preserved and permanently protected, not sold to the highest bidder. Long Island Sound is surrounded by big cities, so we must work to preserve and protect the few remaining natural habitats along its shoreline. That’s why, as a member of the Appropriations Committee, I was proud to fight on behalf of the thousands of

Connecticut residents who came together to fight for this study and determine the best course of action to protect Plum Island.”

“Situated between the Long Island Sound and Peconic Bay, Plum Island is cherished by the local community. The island offers our region a unique research and environmental resource that should be preserved for generations to come,” commented Congressman Lee Zeldin (NY-01). “I am proud to be leading the effort in the House with H.R. 1887, legislation to protect Plum Island and prevent a sale by the federal government to the highest bidder, which has the support of the entire Long Island and Connecticut delegation. I thank Senator Blumenthal for his leadership on this issue, and look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues from across the aisle, especially here in the tristate area, as well as local environmental groups, to protect Plum Island.”

“As the largest area in southern New England where seals can rest on dry land, a home to two threatened bird species, and a refuge for wildlife and native plants, the environmental importance of Plum Island cannot be overstated,” said Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (CT-03). “These waters are a national treasure, and we have responsibility to ensure their protection and preservation. Plum Island should be a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System, a course of action that would safeguard the island’s sensitive wildlife and ecological value for future generations.”

Congressman Joe Courtney (CT-02) said, “Plum Island is a treasure trove of biological diversity right in the heart of Long Island Sound. With so much development along both coasts surrounding the island, we need to do everything we can to protect this rare natural sanctuary. I have been a longtime supporter of Federal legislation to repeal the government requirement to sell Plum Island as a means to finance a new research facility in Manhattan, Kansas. To that end, I will continue to work with preservation advocates to prevail on Congress to secure Plum Island for future generations.”

Plum Island has long been home to a federal animal disease research facility that restricts human presence. As a result the island’s diverse array of habitats has become a de facto wildlife refuge. Shore-nesting birds like the federally endangered Roseate Tern and the federally threatened Piping Plover use its shores, and threatened plants and insects populate the island. The waters around the island are probable habitat for five species of threatened or endangered sea turtles, and its rocks are one of the most important seal haul-out areas in southern New England. The federal government has been preparing to close the facility and sell the island since 2009.

Stewart Hudson, executive director of Audubon Connecticut, commented, “Audubon members across the country are fully committed to the preservation of Plum Island, given its role as vital nesting and critical stopover habitat for various rare, threatened, and endangered bird species. The conservation study announced today should highlight that conservation of the island’s natural resources is a matter of not just local, but of national importance. We applaud Senator Blumenthal’s leadership and believe this deserves additional bipartisan support in Congress.”

“Normally when a property like Plum Island, full of cultural, historic, and natural significance, comes on the market, the Federal government goes to great lengths to purchase and protect it. The hard work is done—we already own it. Now is the time to determine the best course of action and work with the right agencies for the future protection of Plum Island,” said Aaron Virgin, vice president, Group for the East End. “This study does just that and we applaud the efforts of Senator Blumenthal, Congressman Zeldin, and the other members of the Connecticut and New York congressional delegations.”

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