

Hartford Courant

Momentum To Preserve The Sound's Plum Island Grows



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Should Congress repeal the sale of Plum Island?

OLD SAYBROOK — Congressional support for blocking the federal sale of Plum Island and for turning the undeveloped Long Island Sound property into a wildlife refuge is gaining momentum, members of Connecticut's congressional delegation said Friday.

U.S. Sen. [Richard Blumenthal](#) said he has received assurances from officials at the Department of Homeland Security that a new study of the best way to conserve and protect the island's wildlife and unique habitat will be done by June.

According to U.S. Rep. [Rosa DeLauro](#), D-3rd District, a key House subcommittee is expected to vote in April on a measure to block the sale of the 840-acre island, which lies just off the tip of Long Island and 10 miles from Old Saybrook.

"We're not yet at the mission-accomplished point," Blumenthal said at a news conference filled with environmental activists, "but we're closer than ever to preserving Plum Island for generations to come."

"I'm cautiously optimistic ... that we're going to win the fight," DeLauro said.

U.S. Rep. [Joe Courtney](#), D-2nd District, said there appears to be good bipartisan support for the measure to prevent the island's sale.



A view of Plum Island.

(STEPHEN DUNN / Hartford Courant)

The island is currently home to the controversial federal Plum Island Animal Disease Center, a laboratory that studies infectious animal viruses and pathogens. The facility has been a favorite target of conspiracy theorists, and the focus of tales of everything from Nazi scientists to captured aliens.

Plum Island has been off limits to the public and protected from development for more than 60 years.

Five years ago, Congress voted to move the research laboratory to Kansas and sell Plum Island to help cover the costs.

Environmentalists and officials in New York and Connecticut have been protesting the sale ever since, arguing that most of the island and its surrounding waters have become a wildlife sanctuary for birds, marine mammals and fish and should be preserved.

Blumenthal said Congress approved a federal budget plan last fall that provides initial funding for the new Kansas research lab, making the sale of Plum Island unnecessary. "I believe we have a politically critical mass now," he said. "We have law on our side that we didn't have before."

Included in the federal budget was a provision requiring the Department of Homeland Security, the Environmental Protection Agency and the federal General Services Administration to conduct a study to determine the best ways to conserve Plum Island if it isn't sold.

Blumenthal said options will include turning the island into a national park. "I'm going to be hammering them every step of the way," Blumenthal said, promising to ensure the study is completed by June.

Earlier this week, New York U.S. Sens. Charles E. Schumer and [Kirsten Gillibrand](#) called on the Senate appropriations committee to block the congressionally mandated sale of the island.

"The focus has to be on being aggressive," DeLauro told the more than 40 environmental activists, local and state officials who attended the news conference Friday. "The way Congress moves is with external pressure."

DeLauro, who is a member of the House appropriations panel, said the chamber's subcommittee on natural resources is expecting to vote in April on legislation to block the Plum Island sale. She said a strong subcommittee vote in support of the bill would allow Connecticut's delegation to push to get it to the floor of the House for a vote.

"We have a real chance of success," DeLauro insisted.

Stewart Hudson, executive director of Audubon Connecticut, called the bid to protect the island "a once-in-many-lifetimes opportunity." Hudson said preserving the island, which is a key stopover point for thousands of migrating birds, is "a national issue" that should concern anyone in the U.S. concerned about the environment.

"I don't think anyone wants to see Plum Island developed," said Old Saybrook First Selectman Carl Fortuna. He noted that the town of Southold, N.Y., which will have authority over the island once federal control is relinquished, has

already put zoning regulations in place blocking large-scale development on the island.

Fortuna, a Republican, said he is worried about what could happen "if somebody with a lot of money came in and convinced the town [of Southold] to change its zoning laws." In 2013, Donald Trump apparently explored purchasing the island to develop a golf course.

Construction has already begun in Kansas on the \$1.25 billion replacement for the Plum Island research facility. The new lab is scheduled to be ready by 2024.

Blumenthal said there is no danger of a quick sale of Plum Island. Courtney said the congressional sale legislation was based on the "flawed" idea that the island could be quickly sold, and that the new federal budget measure was "a final blow to that concept."