

# Newsday

## EPA, Homeland Security to weigh in on new Plum Island study

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An undated aerial photo provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture of Plum Island. Officials are trying to preserve the island, a mile off Orient Point. Photo Credit: AP

- Supporters tout island's natural and historic resources

U.S. lawmakers on Friday announced a study of Plum Island's natural and historic resources, calling it an important step in halting the sale of the island to the highest bidder.

Representatives from New York and Connecticut said four agencies would weigh options for preserving the island as officials work to close a government laboratory specializing in livestock diseases.

Leah Schmalz, program director for the advocacy group Connecticut Fund for the Environment, called the study a turning point for the federal government, which she said must now consider protecting the island after years spent trying to sell it.

“I think it represents the moment that we set foot on a different path,” she said.

Federal officials announced in 2009 that they would shutter the federal Plum Island Animal Disease Center and auction off the island to help fund the construction of a replacement laboratory in Kansas, set to open in 2022.

Environmentalists and lawmakers from the region have fought the possibility of a developer buying the island, located a mile off Orient Point with pristine habitats and fortifications from the Spanish-American War.

Donald Trump expressed interest in developing a golf course on the island in 2013. Southold Town officials that year passed zoning rules preventing homes from being built on the island.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut) said in a news release Friday that the study will “provide the science and fact-based evidence to make our case” to stop any sale and called the island an “irreplaceable national treasure.”



Blumenthal's announcement came one day after he and other U.S. senators from New York and Connecticut called on the federal government to turn the island into a national park or wildlife refuge. They said funding was already in place for the Kansas laboratory, making the sale of Plum Island unnecessary.

Lawmakers have directed the Department of Homeland Security, which operates the laboratory, to work on the study with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Interior and the agency in charge of selling the island, the General Services Administration.

Schmalz said it's the first time the EPA and Department of the Interior, whose officials have expressed reservations about the sale impacting wildlife, are directly involved in Plum Island's fate.

She said she hopes the report results in "an actual pathway to conservation," including information about funds and legislation needed to make it happen, and expects the report to be submitted to Congress by June.

Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-Shirley) said the island "offers our region a unique research and environmental resource that should be preserved for generations to come."