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Conservation Groups Oppose Vieques Land Transfer in Debt Deal

Provision Would Allow Puerto Rico to Sell Off Irreplaceable Wildlife Habitat

(WASHINGTON, DC) – National Wildlife Refuge Friends organizations, citizen organizations that support the purpose of National Wildlife Refuges and others groups are urging Congress to reject legislation that would allow the Secretary of the Interior to convey portions of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico as part of a debt-relief package, called the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (H.R. 4900).

A section of the bill contains a provision authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to transfer portions of Vieques National Wildlife Refuge to Puerto Rico opening the door to potential development.

The proposed legislation directly violates the founding purpose of Vieques National Wildlife Refuge. Divesting the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge will set a dangerous precedent, and represents the first strike of many aimed at chipping away at the bedrock of all of America's public lands.

“Our National Wildlife Refuge System is not for sale,” said National Wildlife Refuge Association president David Houghton in a letter signed by 122 Refuge Friends groups from across the nation.

The [letter](#) adds to the growing list of groups opposed to the deal. In Puerto Rico, the [Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust spoke out strongly against the legislation](#).

“We have spoken with many friends, neighbors and Trust members over the last month, and it can be fairly stated that we have found no one on Vieques who is in favor of Section 405 – not the political leadership, not the business community, not those of us who are concerned with the environmental health of the island, not even those here who might be in favor of some form of local ownership,” said the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust in a letter to House Speaker Paul Ryan. “No one supports the turnover of Vieques land to a remote developer who will have



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unregulated carte-blanc to destroy the fragile environment. This is the intention of Section 405, and we have found no one here who favors it.”

TITACOVE, Inc., the local non-profit that supports and promotes the natural resources on Vieques National Wildlife Refuge, also [expressed “severe” concern over the proposal.](#)

“Vieques is an attraction and travel worthy destination for people from all over the world, due to its’ natural and protected areas. Giving these lands away will not be the solution to the economic crisis in Puerto Rico,” wrote the board members of TITACOVE, Inc. in a letter to House leaders.

And another Vieques conservation non-profit organization, Caballos Bieke, Inc., [expressed their objection to the transfer proposal directly to Congress.](#)

“Your proposal to give away the western area of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge to the Government of Puerto will not be of any help to the financial crisis that our Commonwealth is currently experiencing. We think that is not a favorable option for the people of Vieques nor is it for our natural resources, wrote Kimberly Rosas, President of Caballos Bieke, Inc. “Assisting our Commonwealth with our current financial crisis is very much appreciated, but there is no link between helping us out and giving away our protected lands. We are under no assumption that anyone other than the Department of the Interior will continue to find a balance between protecting our natural resources and assisting the community NGOs, small business and Municipal Government.”

According to a recent report by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, Vieques is considered one of the ‘Wholly Irreplaceable Sites in the Caribbean Islands Hotspot’ and is considered extremely important for conservation efforts in the Archipelago of Puerto Rico.

The Vieques National Wildlife Refuge protects over 17,000 acres of rare habitat including the Refuge System’s only subtropical moist forest in the entire Refuge System. Its beaches provide the most important nesting sites for threatened and endangered sea turtles throughout the entire Puerto Rican archipelago, including leatherback, loggerhead, hawsbill and green, and its 300,000 annual visitors pump money into the local economy as they enjoy snorkeling, fishing, swimming, hiking, and other outdoor recreation activities.

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The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America’s wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries.