

JODEY C. ARRINGTON  
19TH DISTRICT, TEXAS

HOUSE BUDGET COMMITTEE  
CHAIRMAN

COMMITTEE ON  
WAYS AND MEANS  
SUBCOMMITTEES  
TAX  
TRADE

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515-4319

1107 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
(202) 225-4005  
FAX: (202) 225-9615

LUBBOCK OFFICE  
1312 TEXAS AVENUE, SUITE 219  
LUBBOCK, TX 79401  
(806) 763-1611  
FAX: (806) 767-9168

ABILENE OFFICE  
500 CHESTNUT STREET, SUITE 819  
ABILENE, TX 79602  
(325) 675-9779  
FAX: (325) 675-5038

July 1, 2024

The Honorable Martha Williams  
Director  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Williams,

I write today to express concern about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "Final Land Protection Plan & Environmental Assessment" for the Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge. It is my understanding that the ultimate goal of this plan is to expand federal land in my district from 6,400 acres to 700,000 acres for the purpose of preserving sandhill crane, pronghorn, and lesser prairie-chicken habitats without Congressional approval or appropriate engagement with local stakeholders. While the plan states that federal land purchases and conservation easement partnerships are "voluntary" for landowners to enter into, I am concerned that this plan to expand the Muleshoe Wildlife Refuge could have negative effects that will reverberate throughout West Texas.

The land included in USFWS's Conservation Partnership Area (CPA) – like much of rural America – is critical to our nation's supply of agriculture and energy. When the federal government enacts policies that could interfere with the day-to-day lives of the hard-working farmers, ranchers, and energy producers who depend on this land for their livelihoods and on whom we depend for our nation's food security and energy independence, my first instinct will always be to defend their rights, their way of life, and the future of rural America.

My constituents have concerns about several aspects of this plan, including how it will affect property values and taxes, if landowners will be coerced into selling their properties or enter a conservation easement, if this plan will restrict economic growth, and what the oversight process of this plan will look like. While USFWS did put out a detailed plan and environmental assessment, direct communication between the Service and county governments in my district has been lacking.

Therefore, I would like to seek answers in writing on the following questions and request a response by July 11:

- Can USFWS provide county-level data on how average property values and taxes changed in the first 10 years after counties were included in a CPA?
- If USFWS achieves its goal of acquiring or issuing conservation easements for 700,000 acres of private land, what would the estimated cost be to the federal government?
- How long does USFWS anticipate that it will take to acquire or obtain conservation easements for 700,000 acres of land?
- Does USFWS plan on providing any oversight to ensure that the landowners aren't pressured or coerced into selling their properties or entering conservation easements?
- If a developer would like to engage in new commercial, recreational, or research activities in the Conservation Partnership Areas, which special permits would the developer be required to acquire?
- The Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment claims that the proposed action would "have a negligible effect on future oil and gas development within the CPA" but makes no such claim about farming and ranching in the area. Can USFWS expand on the impacts that this plan will have on agricultural producers in the CPA?
- The global population of Sandhill Cranes is 1.45 million<sup>1</sup> and the population of Pronghorns in North America is approximately 1 million<sup>2</sup>. Since there is no obvious threat of extinction for these animals, why are these animals used for justifying the expansion of this wildlife refuge?

Sincerely,



Jodey Arrington  
Member of Congress

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<sup>1</sup> Caven, Andrew J., An Updated Minimum Estimate of the Global Sandhill Crane Population (February 28, 2023). Platte River Natural Resource Reports Forthcoming, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4373522> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4373522>

<sup>2</sup> O'Gara & Yoakum (2004) <https://ielc.libguides.com/sdzc/factsheets/pronghorn/population>