

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR CONGRESSIONAL AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS, CONCERNING H.R. 1584, A BILL TO ESTABLISH PLUM ISLAND, NEW YORK, AS A NATIONAL MONUMENT.**

**March 7, 2024**

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of the Interior (Department) on H.R. 1584, a bill to establish Plum Island, New York, as a National Monument.

The Department appreciates the bill's intent to increase public access to and to protect Plum Island's natural and cultural heritage, and we support that goal. However, given the multiple hazards to human health and safety that may exist, we have serious concerns about the bill's requirement that the Department assume administrative jurisdiction over the island.

H.R. 1584 would establish Plum Island, NY, as a national monument for the purpose of "ecological conservation, historical preservation, and the discovery and celebration of our shared cultural heritage." The bill requires the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) to establish administrative jurisdiction over portions of Plum Island through memoranda of understanding with the head of each Federal department or agency with current administrative jurisdiction. It further requires the Secretary to develop a general management plan for the national monument and submit the plan to Congress no later than three years after funds are first made available for that purpose.

Plum Island is an 840-acre island located 1.5 miles northeast of Orient Point in Suffolk County, New York, within Long Island Sound. The island has been in federal government ownership since 1899, when it was purchased for the purposes of a coastal artillery post, later known as Fort Terry. In 1954, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) established the Plum Island Animal Disease Center (PIADC) to conduct research on animal pathogens to protect farmers, ranchers, and the national food supply. Because of the nature of the research and hazards presented, access to the island and the research facility was restricted.

In 2003, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) assumed jurisdiction over the island and its facilities. The USDA continued its long-running science mission at PIADC jointly with DHS, which was charged with the safe and secure operation of the facility.

In 2008, Congress approved legislation requiring that Plum Island be sold to help fund the new DHS National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility in Manhattan, Kansas. However, in response to sustained advocacy from community and environmental organizations to preserve Plum Island for public purposes, Congress approved legislation in 2020 preventing the sale of the island to a private party.

The Department recognizes Plum Island’s tremendous biodiversity and wildlife habitats, as well as its rich cultural and historic assets. Notably, Plum Island provides a critical stopover habitat for migrating birds protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and is home to one of New York’s largest seal haul-out sites. Researchers have identified over 200 species of birds, over 200 species of moths, 9 mammals, and 5 reptiles inhabiting Plum Island. Several federal or state-listed threatened or endangered species can be found on the island, including the piping plover (federally threatened) and the monarch butterfly (federal candidate species).

A number of historic buildings exist from the island’s years as a military fort, including a fire station and Fort Terry, a National Register Historic Site, which was in use from 1897 until after World War II. The Plum Island Lighthouse, also a National Register Historic Site, was built in 1869 to help ships navigate near the entrance to Long Island Sound. In addition, several buildings of the PIADC research facility have been determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Plum Island’s long history of serving as a site for military operations and animal pathogen research has led to a series of ongoing environmental challenges. The DHS 2023 environmental assessment (EA) for the closure of the PIADC cites four categories of environmental concern that require remediation or preventative steps:

1. The PIADC biocontainment facilities must be decontaminated. The EA recommends that a decontamination process, complete validation testing, and soil testing be conducted at the three biocontainment facilities. Decontamination will include methods such as scrubbing, liquid cleaning, thermal disinfection via autoclaves, chemical disinfection, and fumigation. As a result of the use of cleaning chemicals such as formaldehyde and the thermal disinfection of nearly all equipment within the facility, once usable infrastructure at PIADC will be rendered unsafe for human occupation until this costly decontamination work can be completed.
2. A number of waste management areas must be remediated. The EA notes that DHS has worked closely with state and local health departments over the past three decades to investigate and successfully remediate numerous sites of concern, including removing buried waste, capping contaminated areas, and conducting soil and groundwater monitoring. However, 10 additional sites of concern require further action.
3. The EA recommends testing and remediation of subsurface oil contamination in and around the PIADC facilities.
4. Actions must be taken to prevent future environmental issues involving long-term storage of assets, including emergency generators, boilers, chillers, and, potentially, the island’s Major Oil Storage Facility.

In addition to the issues outlined above, the Department foresees budgetary challenges—and potentially further environmental concerns—involved with rehabilitating or demolishing aging buildings, managing a costly marine transportation system, and upgrading island infrastructure to accommodate use in a manner that is safe and accessible for employees and the public. The

island contains dozens of buildings and structures, water and power distribution systems, wastewater and sewage treatment plants, an emergency power plant, and electrical substations, and additional infrastructure. Significant funding would be required to adequately remediate, maintain, or remove this infrastructure, particularly if the Department were to open the island to public access. These costs would far exceed the Department's available resources. Another concern, as noted in a letter submitted during the EA from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, is the need for shoreline mitigation, which is particularly important given the vulnerability of Plum Island to sea level rise.

We share the bill sponsor's commitment to the preservation of Plum Island's unique wildlife habitat and its abundant historic resources. Through the America the Beautiful initiative, the Biden-Harris Administration has made a national commitment to support local efforts to conserve and restore America's natural areas for the many benefits they provide, including supporting biodiversity, providing safe spaces for outdoor recreation, and helping stem the climate crisis. The Department has numerous tools at its disposal to support locally-led conservation and restoration efforts, and we are committed to collaborating with the Subcommittee, the bill sponsor, and the many Plum Island stakeholders, as we explore ways to protect the island's valuable assets and address its many challenging environmental issues.

Chairman Tiffany, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR CONGRESSIONAL AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS, REGARDING H.R. 1647 TO REDESIGNATE THE SALEM NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE AS THE “SALEM MARITIME NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK”, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES**

**March 7, 2024**

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the U.S. Department of the Interior (Department) on H.R.1647, to redesignate the Salem Maritime National Historic Site as the “Salem Maritime National Historical Park”, and for other purposes.

The Department supports H.R. 1647.

H.R. 1647 would redesignate Salem Maritime National Historic Site as “Salem Maritime National Historical Park”. The bill would also direct the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a boundary study to evaluate any sites and resources located within the city of Salem, Massachusetts that are associated with Salem’s maritime history, coastal defenses, or military history, including National Guard and militia activity. This would include the Salem Armory Visitor Center and the Salem Armory Park. The bill provides for the boundary study to be completed within three years of funding being made available for the study.

Designated by Secretarial Order in 1938, Salem Maritime National Historic Site was the first designated national historic site. The park preserves and interprets America’s and New England’s maritime history and the important role that Salem played in the development of international maritime trade from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the park was originally limited to interpreting the theme of maritime trade through the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, subsequent legislation broadened the park’s focus to include the domestic life of colonial Salem, and immigration and industrial history of the city in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Currently, the park is an 8.93-acre historic district containing ten historic buildings, nine archeological sites, four historic wharfs, and a historic light station, dating between 1675 and 1944. The *Friendship of Salem*, a replica late-18<sup>th</sup> century tall ship owned and operated by the National Park Service, reflects Salem’s economic heyday from the 1790’s through the 1830’s. The diverse historic resources and replica tall ship provide living classrooms within which visitors can consider the ways that tall ships and the rise of global maritime trade networks in New England contributed to the American Revolution and helped shape modern socioeconomic and political development in the United States.

The park is also responsible for managing and operating the Salem Regional Visitor Center in downtown Salem at the Salem Armory in which the National Park Service has an ownership interest. The Salem Regional Visitor Center serves as the primary Salem Maritime National Historic Site visitor center, provides community spaces to explore the park unit’s interpretive

themes in modern contexts, and supports the Essex National Heritage Area. The park is a key site and gateway to the national heritage area.

The Department believes that the redesignation of Salem Maritime National Historic Site as a national historical park, as provided by H.R. 1647, is appropriate. Generally, National Park System units designated as “national historical parks” have a greater diversity of historical resources and interpretive themes than those designated as “historic sites” and may be spread out over non- contiguous lands. As is reflected in its long history, Salem Maritime National Historic Site has expanded in the scope of its resources and its interpretation. The deeper and broader experience it now offers to visitors supports the basis for redesignation of this park as a national historical park.

The Department also believes that the boundary study provided by H.R. 1647 could be very beneficial. The study would be useful in identifying important maritime and coastal defense-related resources in the vicinity of Salem that should be preserved and protected to enhance our understanding of the significant contributions of this area to our nation’s history.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer questions that you or other members of the Committee might have.

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR CONGRESSIONAL AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS, REGARDING H.R. 6852 TO DESIGNATE HOLCOMBE RUCKER PARK, IN HARLEM, NEW YORK, AS A NATIONAL COMMEMORATIVE SITE, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.**

**March 7, 2024**

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 6852, to designate Holcombe Rucker Park, in Harlem, New York, as a National Commemorative Site, and for other purposes.

The Department supports bringing greater recognition to the achievements and legacy of Holcombe Rucker, but we have concerns about the use of the “national commemorative site.” We would be happy to discuss alternative ways to commemorate Holcombe Rucker, the person, and the Holcombe Rucker Park, the site.

H.R. 6852 would designate Holcombe Rucker Park in New York City, New York as a National Commemorative Site. The bill specifies that the site would not be a unit of the National Park System. There are no provisions in the bill that would provide any relationship to the National Park Service for the site, such as authority to provide financial or technical assistance.

Holcombe Rucker Park is a playground owned and operated by New York City Parks in the Harlem neighborhood of the New York City borough of Manhattan. In 1974, the park was renamed in honor of Holcombe Rucker, the Playground Director for a number of sites across Harlem from 1948 to 1964. The park’s outdoor basketball court has become well known as a venue for a creative and competitive form of basketball referred to as streetball and has been the subject of three films about the sport: Above the Rim, On Hallowed Ground, and The Real: Rucker Pro Legends and Fathers of the Sport.

Holcombe Rucker Park was among the sites inventoried in the National Park Service’s 2023 African American Outdoor Recreation National Historic Landmark Theme Study. The study highlighted Holcombe Rucker as an educator and a playground director who believed that education and supervised recreation could help troubled Black youth in urban neighborhoods. In the 1940’s, Rucker started a small outdoor basketball tournament for Black youth. Despite limited support from the city park management, Rucker’s summer tournaments grew in popularity and, by 1965, the tournaments were relocated to the more suitable facility that would eventually bear his name – Holcombe Rucker Park.

Holcombe Rucker Park would eventually become a magnet for the city’s most talented young basketball players, and it played host to pickup games and tournaments where future professional basketball stars such as Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Nate Archibald, Wilt Chamberlain, Julius Erving

and other streetball legends honed their craft. Rucker's philosophy of education and supervised recreation, put into practice through his successful outdoor basketball tournaments, contributed in the 1960's to the city's efforts to construct other recreational facilities in several predominantly Black neighborhoods.

Designating Holcombe Rucker Park as a National Commemorative Site could create confusion among the general public about the significance of the title and the site's relationship to the National Park Service. The term "National Commemorative Site" has no definition by law or custom. The National Park Service is aware of two examples where Congress has used this designation: for the Quindaro Townsite National Commemorative Site in Kansas, and the Charleston High School National Commemorative Site in Arkansas. In both instances, designation has included a role for the National Park Service, either as a provider of financial and technical assistance, or as a provider of a commemorative monument and interpretive exhibit. Designating Holcombe Rucker Park as a National Commemorative Site, without any provisions tying it to the National Park Service, would bring further uncertainty regarding the significance of this designation.

Rather than moving forward with H.R. 6852, the Department would encourage the proponents of providing greater recognition for Holcombe Rucker Park to explore alternative ways to honor and interpret the site's history and the contributions of Holcombe Rucker to outdoor recreation in urban America. The Department would be pleased to work with the sponsor and their constituents to explore other options.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer questions that you or other members of the Committee might have.