

April 7, 2025

The Honorable Harriet Hageman
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife,
and Fisheries
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
1127 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20515

The Honorable Val Hoyle
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife,
and Fisheries
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
1620 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20515

Dear Chair Hageman and Ranking Member Hoyle,

On behalf of our 37 organizations and our combined millions of members and supporters, we write to express our strong opposition to H.R. 839, a bill introduced by Rep. Arrington that would prohibit the implementation of the Land Protection Plan for Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge. This damaging bill will be the subject of a House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries hearing on April 8, 2025. We request this letter be included in the hearing record.

The Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge protects important habitats in the Southern High Plains, including grasslands, playa wetlands, and saline lakes. The oldest national wildlife refuge in Texas, Muleshoe was established on October 24, 1935, by Executive Order No. 7214, “for the use... as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife...” The refuge is home to a population of lesser prairie-chicken listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), as well as sandhill crane, pronghorn, and hundreds of other species. Protecting and expanding Muleshoe is crucial to help combat the growing biodiversity crisis.

The Land Protection Plan targeted by H.R. 839 is a comprehensive document developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to guide the growth of the Refuge within an approved acquisition boundary. It was finalized in April 2024 after 15 years of research, cooperation, and planning. In this document, FWS proposed to establish a voluntary land acquisition program to better protect the vulnerable species of Muleshoe. Up to 700,000 acres of wildlife habitat could be added to the Refuge, although progress toward that total is expected to proceed slowly over many years.

Expansion of Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge is important for the recovery of the lesser prairie-chicken, whose survival depends on protection of its habitat. The species was once common throughout the region. Today, however, 92% of its natural habitat has been lost and its population has declined by 97%. Lesser prairie-chicken require large, unfragmented areas of native grasslands to thrive. Each breeding site, called a lek, encompasses up to 50,000 acres and must be connected to other leks by intact habitat to maintain a healthy population. The species faces extirpation in the region without adequate conservation

measures. Preventing further habitat loss and fragmentation is key to eventually removing lesser prairie-chicken from the endangered species list.

Rep. Arrington bases his opposition to the expansion of Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge on concerns that private landowners will be forced to sell their property, face new regulations and that property tax revenue for local communities will be reduced. Exploring these concerns reveals that opposition to the expansion of the Refuge is largely based on misinformation. Under the express terms of the Plan, FWS will “acquir[e] lands only from willing sellers”, so no landowner is ever forced or pressured to sell. In any event, any such force or pressure would be in violation of longstanding FWS land acquisition policy and practice, see 341 FW 1 (Feb. 26, 1996) (“Policy and Responsibilities - Land Acquisition”). Next, being within the acquisition boundary imposes no new regulations on landowners and does not restrict their property rights. Rather, it offers greater flexibility, providing landowners with an opportunity to sell their land at market value and permanently protect it as part of the Refuge System. Finally, while FWS does not pay property taxes on refuge land, lost revenue is offset through payments under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act and by the boost in local economic activity generated by ecotourism.

If Rep. Arrington’s bill becomes law, it could have long-lasting consequences that undermine science-based management of our public lands, the ability of the Refuge System to fulfill its statutory mandate for strategic growth, and the recovery of ESA-listed species. For these reasons, our organizations strongly oppose H.R. 839 and urge you to do the same.

Sincerely,

American Bird Conservancy
Born Free USA
Californians for Western Wilderness
Center for Biological Diversity
Christian Council of Delmarva
Coast Range Association
Creating Common Ground
Defenders of Wildlife
Endangered Habitats League
Endangered Species Coalition
Environment America
Environment Texas
Environmental Protection Information Center – EPIC
Fin and Fur Films
FOUR PAWS USA
Friends of the Earth
Friends of the Sonoran Desert
Heartwood
International Crane Foundation
Large Carnivore Fund

Los Angeles Audubon Society
National Wildlife Refuge Association
New Hampshire Audubon
NY4WHALES
Orleans Audubon Society
REI
Resource Renewal Institute
Save the Manatee Club
Species Unite
The Urban Wildlands Group
Turtle Island Restoration Network
Voice for Animals
Western Nebraska Resources Council
Western Watersheds Project
Wray-Todd Ranch
Wyoming Untrapped
Yaak Valley Forest Council