



United States Department of the Interior
ALLIGATOR RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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June 26, 2003

To the citizens of the Outer Banks:

Four and half million visitors flock to the Outer Banks each year for resting, feasting on the local delicacies, gathering with family and friends, and enjoying the wild, open spaces, whether catching a fish or a view of brown pelicans soaring and diving. Each season of the year thousands of migratory birds visit for similar purposes. Neither group would like to see their residences gone, favorite fishing spots diminished, favorite eatery empty, or the beauty of wild lands and waters vanished from view. Those that visit or live here, the people and the fish and wildlife, have always depended on one another. People are sustained in body and spirit by these wild things, and the wild things depend on us to be good stewards of their habitats and their populations. As good stewards, we must carefully consider the effects of a proposed Bonner Bridge replacement on our beautiful and sensitive wild lands.

In 1938, President Roosevelt recognized the importance of this area for wildlife and set aside land on the north end of Hatteras Island. The refuge land was purchased, and it was named for the once-abundant dune peas that attracted waterfowl. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) manages Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge. As a first priority, federal law and regulation require the refuge manager to ensure that any allowed use of the refuge be compatible with the mission and purpose of the refuge.

If a Bonner Bridge replacement is built on Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge in the area identified as Corridor 1, valuable wildlife habitat will be lost or severely impacted. The Bonner Bridge needs to be replaced, and the choices of location have been narrowed to two: (Corridor 1) a 6.2-mile long structure which makes landfall just south of North Pond on the north part of Pea Island Refuge; (Corridor 4) a 17-mile long structure that makes landfall south of the refuge in the town of Rodanthe. As the current refuge manager, I would recommend against permitting the replacement bridge making landfall on Pea Island Refuge. It would have too great an impact on the migratory birds and their habitats. As a member of the community, I think the building of the bridge that bypasses the refuge makes the best economic sense and will have the best long-term sustainability – making this a more reliable transportation corridor.

Hundreds of thousands of migratory birds depend on Pea Island Refuge. It is home to more than 379 species of birds, 25 species of mammals, and numerous terrestrial and aquatic animal and plant species. Some of these species include those listed as threatened, endangered or species of concern including loggerhead sea turtles and piping plover.

Migratory birds like tundra swan, snow geese, and a variety of ducks visit each winter to rest and fatten up on “seafood” not found on local restaurant menus. These waterfowl feed on aquatic vegetation and tiny aquatic animals found in the refuge’s wetlands and ponds. Rested and nourished, waterfowl make the long, arduous flight north in the spring to hatch and raise their young. In the fall, they and their young make their way back to the Outer Banks to a wintering ground that can sustain the next generation.

If wetland habitat were lost, numerous shorebirds, long-used to stopping to replenish their energy reserves on Pea Island during their spring and fall migrations, would find fewer places to rest and feed – on a wildlife refuge! Shorebirds feed on worms, insect larvae, and other tiny aquatic animals in the refuge's very shallow-water wetlands – found in abundance in the area identified as Corridor 1.

Other migratory birds, those that pass through and those that are year-round residents, nest, feed, rest, and seek shelter on Pea Island Refuge. Peregrine falcons pursue ducks and shorebirds in the winter, secretive sparrows make a living eating seeds and insects in the shrub thickets and marsh grasses, and snowy egrets and other elegant wading birds forage for fish in ponds. Pea Island Refuge plays a vital role in the world's ecosystem.

The refuge's mission is to conserve, manage, and restore fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats, but people, too, benefit. Though its primary purpose is to be a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife, Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge has been providing wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities for more than 65 years. It is a favorite destination for locals and visitors for fishing, birding, photography and environmental education.

Early in the 1950's, the USFWS permitted a specific right-of-way for hard-surfacing the state highway (NC 12) through Pea Island Refuge. In the 1960's the USFWS permitted the building of the original Bonner Bridge on the refuge. In 1989, to help protect the bridge, the USFWS permitted the NCDOT to build a 3,152-foot long mound of large rocks called a terminal groin. The USFWS staff continues to work with officials from the NCDOT to maintain the bridge and NC 12 - a road in constant peril. The earlier decisions were the right ones to make at the time. However, over the years, much has been learned about the environment's impact on the bridge and the road and their impact on the environment. Storms frequently flood parts of the road and cover them with sand and, at times, parts wash away. All of this maintenance and repair is costly – from 1987-1999 the bridge and road maintenance and storm repairs have cost as much as \$50 million dollars (figures provided by NCDOT). From now until 2010 when the replacement bridge needs to be completed, at least \$160,000 per year will be spent on bridge and road maintenance if there are no storms. A single storm can cost \$1 million or more in repairs to the road.

Once the final decision is made on the location of a replacement bridge, there will be other issues that need to be addressed:

- How will people visit Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge?
- What will happen to the current Bonner Bridge?
- What will become of the terminal groin on the north end of the refuge?
- What will happen to the former Coast Guard Station?

All of these questions and others will need to be studied. The new bridge will not be complete until 2010. We need to develop the same type of approach that is being taken in deciding on a replacement bridge. We need your continual involvement in our decision-making process.

I can assure you that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will continue to allow people to enjoy compatible, wildlife-dependent recreational uses on Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge. Together, we will develop a public use program to allow you to continue visiting the refuge and enjoying this beautiful and unique place. After all, the refuge is devoted to wildlife conservation and management for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans!

Sincerely,

Mike Bryant
Refuge Manager