

Congressional Testimony  
By S. Scott Chesson  
Chincoteague, Virginia

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee:

I am here to represent the business community on Chincoteague Island and share my views on how the reduction or the elimination of beach parking on Assateague Island will affect businesses and the residents of Chincoteague Island.

I have been active in our community and a business owner and employer on our Island for 23 years and I am well connected with the business community.

Our Island's employers, employees and residents are angry and scared.

We are angry because our Federal Government seems to be on a course to turn Chincoteague Island into a ghost town. We are angry because it seems that the current management of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge has been less than honest and forthcoming with us during the ongoing CCP. There have been opportunities for our voice to be heard but it would appear our words have fallen on deaf ears.

This is demonstrated by the fact that our Town's leaders were unaware the Fish and Wildlife Service had applied for a grant to purchase part of a campground to serve as a staging area for bussing visitors to the Assateague beach. The grant award of 1.5 million dollars came as a shock to us all since we had the assurance that the FWS had no intentions of reducing or eliminating parking at the beach.

Unfortunately, the business people of Chincoteague Island no longer view the Fish and Wildlife as our partner – they have become an impediment and a threat to our livelihood.

We are scared because a future with limited access to the beach on Assateague Island via a bus service will destroy jobs, diminish property values and close the doors of family owned and operated businesses.

Our town's people have mortgages on their homes, business loans and children to feed and educate. It seems unconscionable that the FWS would even consider reducing or eliminating parking on Assateague beach given the number of lives it will destroy.

A survey by the Town of Chincoteague conducted with our Island visitors during the 2010 tourist season asked: Do you come to Chincoteague primarily to go to Assateague Beach? 82 % answered "yes."

Another question was: If Assateague Beach parking was replaced by a trolley / bus system, do you believe it would have a negative impact on local business or the length of your vacation in Chincoteague? 90.7 % answered "yes."

Our economy was transformed when the bridge to Assateague from Chincoteague was built in the 1950s.

Once a small seaside fishing village, our Island has turned into a tourist destination and a revenue generator for Accomack County and the State of Virginia. Our Town now boasts a total of 962 Hotel

rooms, 1143 camp sites and 670 rental homes and cottages. Most, if not all of these accommodations have an occupancy rate of 90+ % during the summer beach season.

AOL Travel named our Island the #1 Beach Town in the entire country in 2011. The beach at the Assateague National Seashore has established our Island as a premier vacation destination for millions of people all over our country. A reduction or elimination of parking at the beach will change all that.

Jobs will be lost, businesses will close and real-estate investments on the Island of Chincoteague will be worth next to nothing. In recent days, after it was disclosed that the Fish and Wildlife Service received 1.5 million dollars to purchase part of the Maddox Campground, our local Chamber of Commerce began receiving calls from concerned patrons of Chincoteague asking if the beach was going to be open this coming summer. One lady stated she would immediately put her house on the market because "once they get rid of parking at the beach, my home will not be worth anything." The negative impact of off-site parking has begun and it is real.

My daughter Hillary and I assisted the US Fish and Wildlife Service to procure the funding necessary to build the Herbert H. Bateman Educational and Administrative Center about 10 years ago. The building was named for former Congressman Herb Bateman from Virginia who was a tremendous supporter of the Refuge and the Town.

The Center is a state of the art facility that provides the Fish and Wildlife Service the opportunity to educate the approximate 1.5 million visitors to Assateague Island each year. With the help from the citizens of Chincoteague, the FWS was awarded a grant of 12 million dollars and the Herbert H. Bateman Educational and Administrative Center became a reality.

The reduction or elimination of beach parking on Assateague and the resulting diminished visitation, is squandering an effort, begun a few short years ago, to educate the general public about the sensitive nature of our environment.

The Committee asked me my opinion of the Alternatives proposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service. I don't support any of them and here is why: if it's not broke don't fix it! From a business man's standpoint, the cost associated with repairing the beach parking in the next 15 – 20 years is just a cost of doing business for the National Park Service. Furthermore, the cost is miniscule and is covered by the fees charged to cars entering the Refuge. The cost of maintaining the beach parking is less than the FWS would spend purchasing land for a transit staging area, and the associated and ongoing cost of staffing and maintaining a bus system.

Regarding off-beach parking, how will 2 or 3,000 people take refuge when an unexpected storm blows up in the middle of the afternoon and they need to take shelter? What if mom forgets the sunscreen for her little ones or her child gets sick the needs to return to their hotel room. Putting ones children in jeopardy like that is not an option. Common sense dictates that our guests will choose other destinations for their beach experience if their mobility is put in jeopardy.

Here is my alternative. Since we currently experience 5 – 10 parking lot closures each summer season because the parking lots are full, let's put an additional 200 parking spots there so this doesn't happen again. From a business man's standpoint, if you don't give people what they want or expect, they will find it somewhere else. Let's also give our guests a couple of new concession stands where they can

purchase food and drinks. The profits from this operation can be used to offset the cost of repairing the parking lots if there is ever storm damage or used to finance some new beach replenishment efforts.

The National Park Service manages the recreational beach area. If the FWS and the NPS work with the Town we can get all of this worked out and it won't cost the federal government anything. Where there is a will there is a way.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's so called Alternative B plan to move the current beach is a classic bait and switch. They'll tell us they're going to move the beach but it just won't happen because of environmental concerns and a lack of federal funds. Then we'll be stuck with no beach parking and a transit system people just won't use. And the architect of this effort, Refuge Manager Lou Hinds, will be long gone.

In closing, please let me share the response I received when I asked the owners and operators of several larger hotels that operate on our Island of Chincoteague: how would the reduction or elimination of parking at the beach on Assateague affect your business?

Ms. Jane Wolfe – Owner and Operator of the Refuge Inn

“a reduction of 20 % of our customers would force us to close. 35 jobs would be lost!”

Reggie Stubbs – Owner of the Island Resort

“Eliminating or reducing parking would devastate my business. Busses would be an inconvenience to people that they wouldn't experience at other places. It wouldn't work. It would put me out of business.”

Jeanie Rose – Manager of Comfort Suites

“People have said they would stop coming. We are the only beach on the Eastern Shore. All of our employees are locals and I would have to eliminate jobs according to the loss of business.”

Tom Derrickson – Owner and Manager of the Hampton Inn

“It would be devastating to our Island, County and the whole Eastern Shore. People don't realize how it would affect them. Numerous jobs would be lost.

Many believe – and their actions make it hard not to believe – that the ultimate goal of the Fish and Wildlife Service is to eliminate any human and pony presence on Assateague Island and to gain control of Assateague Channel as well... as demonstrated by the recent grant award. We are all wondering where all this will lead and why our way of life is under attack from our own government.

Please do not allow Chincoteague Island to become a ghost town!

Please exercise your responsibilities as an oversight committee and help the Town of Chincoteague, Virginia.

S. Scott Chesson

Owner / Manager

Best Western Plus Chincoteague Island