



NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE ASSOCIATION

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**Testimony of the
National Estuarine Research Reserve Association**

**Submitted to the
Subcommittee on National Ocean Policy Study
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
U.S. Senate**

S. 1215, the *Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Act*

February 3, 2006

Introduction

An estimated 50 percent of the nation's population lives within 50 miles of the coast, and yet the coastal region represents only 10 percent of the land area of the contiguous United States. In addition, the coast is the fastest growing region in the country, with the coastal zone losing land to development at a pace faster than the rest of the country. This affects the quality of coastal watersheds and, as a result, the health of estuaries and the coast, and the character of coastal communities.

Coastal and estuarine areas provide vital nursery habitat for two-thirds of the commercial shellfish and finfish populations, habitat for nesting and foraging coastal birds, significant natural plant communities, and opportunities for people to recreate and to appreciate and learn about the natural environment. These valuable coastal areas are threatened by coastal sprawl, which seriously degrades coastal water quality, reduces access to coastal waters, mars the aesthetic beauty, increases flood control costs, eliminates recreation opportunities, and alters estuaries.

The Role of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System in Land Protection

Acquiring and protecting land along the nation's estuaries and coastline is a high priority for the National Estuarine Research Reserve Association (NERRA). NERRA's mission is to inspire the protection of our nation's estuaries and to promote conservation-based research, education, and stewardship through the National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERRS). The NERRS—a network of 26 (soon to be 27) protected areas—is designed to promote informed coastal decisions through site-based estuarine research, education, and stewardship. National Estuarine Research Reserves have been selected on the basis of biogeographic regions that share geophysical and biological characteristics. Coastal states are responsible for management of Reserves, in cooperation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Through this state-federal partnership codified in the Coastal Zone Management Act, the Reserve System has protected more than one million acres of estuarine land and water.

The conservation of land by the Reserves, or in tandem with its many partners, is central to the mission of the NERRS, which is to promote the stewardship of estuaries and coastal watersheds through research and education programs using a system of protected areas. The ecological integrity of Reserves is dependent on protection of open space and natural habitat in waters and lands in the surrounding watershed. As more land is developed in the coastal zone and near Reserves, coastal ecosystems are altered thus endangering rare plant and animal communities and reducing public access to the coast for recreation and enjoyment.

To prevent these threats from occurring, the NERRS needs to actively conserve lands within their boundaries and work with other national, state, and local conservation partners to protect other important lands in the coastal zone. This will enable the Reserve System to continue to serve as stable platforms for scientific research and education, and to help conserve the ecological, historic, aesthetic, and recreational values that are an integral part of coastal communities.

The Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Act

Authorize the Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Program

The Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Act will lend vital support to the NERRS and other conservation partners to secure the long-term protection of lands that have significant conservation, recreation, historic, economic, and aesthetic values to the residents of coastal communities. Protection of critical coastal and estuarine areas provides numerous public benefits by improving water quality, increasing access to shoreline areas, conserving wildlife habitat, and sustaining recreational and commercial fisheries.

NERRA strongly supports S. 1215 because it would provide much-needed federal funds for the purchase and protection of sensitive coastal ecosystems with the goal of better ensuring the ecological and economic health of our coastal communities. NERRA urges Congress to pass legislation to authorize the Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Program within NOAA's Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management, as provided in S. 1215.

Reservation of Funds for National Estuarine Research Reserves

While the NERRS protects more than one million acres of estuarine land and water, there are additional critical coastal and estuarine habitats that are in need of protection. In a recent survey NERRA conducted, nearly all of the Reserves indicated the need for additional land protection and have identified 85 project areas and nearly 475,000 priority acres for protection. Acquisition funds for the Reserve System have traditionally been available through the NOAA funding process to a Reserve, but *the Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Act* would provide an additional opportunity to help meet the acquisition needs of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, particularly those needs within the watersheds beyond the Reserve boundaries.

Because of the contribution National Estuarine Research Reserves make towards protecting coastal and estuarine land, NERRA strongly supports the reservation of at least 15 percent of the annual appropriation for the Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Program to acquire lands identified as priorities by National Estuarine Research Reserves, as included in S. 1215.

Working in Partnership towards Conservation

NERRA believes that passage of *the Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Act* is critical to enable coastal states and National Estuarine Research Reserves to leverage nonfederal funds and conservation opportunities through innovative partnerships with state, local, and private conservation organizations. NERRA strongly supports the match requirements on CELCP funds be at a Federal:Nonfederal rate of 75:25 as provided in S. 1215.

Adequate Competitive Federal Funding

The nation's coastal zone is under significant pressure from unplanned development. Given the economic importance of healthy, productive, and accessible coastal areas, a federal commitment to coastal protection is a sound investment. As intense development pressures are placed on the

coastal zone, the Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Program would provide coastal managers with a wider range of tools to protect and conserve critical coastal and estuarine areas. Protection of undeveloped coastal areas from a willing seller is a cost-effective way to protect invaluable coastal resources for future generations before they are lost forever.

NERRA supports an authorization level of \$60 million to carry out the purposes of this Act. Funds should be appropriated for competitive grants that will be made available to coastal states and National Estuarine Research Reserves. In addition, adequate funding should be provided for NOAA's Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management to administer the Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Program.

Conclusion

NERRA is very supportive of S. 1215 and appreciates the Subcommittee on National Ocean Policy Study's interest in authorizing the Coastal and Estuarine Land Protection Program. NERRA is ready to work with you in any way to support passage of S. 1215. We would be pleased to provide further information or answer any questions you may have. Please do not hesitate to contact the NERRA Executive Director, Angela Corridore (acorridore@sso.org or 202-508-3836), with any questions.