



National  
**Wildlife Refuge**  
Association

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## **Vieques Land Transfer Removed From Debt Deal**

*Pressure from Conservation Groups Wins the Day*

(WASHINGTON, DC) – A provision to allow the Secretary of the Interior to convey portions of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico as part of a debt-relief package was stripped from the bill after local and national conservation and Hispanic groups sharply opposed the deal.

National Wildlife Refuge Friends organizations from across the U.S. joined local Puerto Rico conservation groups to urge Congress to reject the legislation, contained in the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act.

“Irreplaceable wildlife habitat would have been lost had this reckless provision been approved,” said David Houghton, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. “Vieques National Wildlife Refuge is an invaluable asset to Puerto Rico that provides excellent local eco-tourism employment opportunities while also providing priceless wildlife habitat for threatened and endangered sea turtles throughout the entire Puerto Rican archipelago.”

Groups expressed grave concern that not only could the bill allow outside developers to buy up public beachfront property and harm sensitive wildlife habitat, it could also open the door to other efforts to remove national wildlife refuges, parks or forest lands from the public estate.

“We want to thank House leaders for listening to the public and acting in the best interest of Puerto Rico and the nation,” Houghton said. “And we owe great thanks to leaders of TICATOVE, Inc., Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust and Caballos Bieke, Inc. for speaking out in support of Vieques National Wildlife Refuge. This change of events would not have happened without their swift action.”

Vieques National Wildlife Refuge contains more than 17,000 acres of rare habitat including the only subtropical moist forest in the entire Refuge System. Its beaches provide the most important nesting sites for leatherback, hawksbill and green sea turtles, and its 300,000 annual visitors pump money into the local economy as they enjoy snorkeling, fishing, swimming, hiking, and other outdoor recreation activities.



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According to a recent report by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, Vieques is considered one of the ‘Wholly Irreplaceable Sites in the Caribbean Islands Hotspot’ and is considered extremely important for conservation efforts in the Archipelago of Puerto Rico.

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*The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America’s wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries.*